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"To Set Himself in Glory Above His Peers": Milton, Petrarch, and the Angst of the Christian Poet

Ashley Denham Busse
“TO SET HIMSELF IN GLORY ABOVE HIS PEERS”: MILTON, PETRARCH, AND THE ANGST OF THE CHRISTIAN POET

By

ASHLEY DENHAM BUSSE

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The members of the Committee approve the THESIS of ASHLEY DENHAM BUSSE defended on JULY 20, 2005.

BRUCE BOEHRER  
Professor Directing THESIS

DANIEL VITKUS  
Committee Member

R.M. BERRY  
Committee Member

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Anne & Dixon Bridgers, for inspiring and encouraging me, and to my husband, Mark, for his unfailing support and love.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... Page v  

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... Page 1  

Chapter One: “Shares of the God”: Milton’s Shorter Poems ........................................ Page 11  

Chapter Two: “Strictly Meditate the Thankles Muse:” *Lycidas* ................................. Page 24  

Chapter Three: “With Gods to Sit the Highest”: *Paradise Lost* ............................... Page 33  

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... Page 48  

Works Cited ......................................................................................................................... Page 50  

Works Consulted .................................................................................................................. Page 53  

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ................................................................................................. Page 54
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ways that Augustinian and Petrarchan poetics and philosophy both influenced and frustrated the author of *Paradise Lost*, for John Milton’s works in many ways represent a culmination of the linguistic and moral angst of Augustine and Petrarch, especially in their obsession with the power of rhetoric, a desire for linguistic permanency and power, and the divided consciousness of Western male subjectivity. Indeed, the enduring rhetorical command of Milton’s Satan in particular, 350 years after his literary creation, attests to the cultural and psychological potency of the model of suffering masculinity. The first chapter locates both Augustinian and Petrarchan influence and religious anxiety in Milton’s shorter, earlier poems including his Italian sonnets; the second chapter explores the ways that Milton’s elegy, *Lycidas*, both imitates and rejects Petrarchan and classical tropes; the third chapter explores these ideas in *Paradise Lost*, especially the ways that the character of Satan embodies Milton’s views on rhetoric and poetry. The end result will be a fuller appreciation of the anxiety that a modern, Christian poet, heir of Augustinian and Petrarchan poetics, displays through his art, especially the conflict between the desire for linguistic glory and permanency and a conviction that such ambition is inherently sinful according to Christian morality.
INTRODUCTION

[An] individual’s public life, signaled by the roles that he plays in relation to others in accordance with certain social norms, complicates his character . . . No single role ever fully represents or covers his entire fictive nature. He plays instead many roles, some complementary, others contrasting, though even their totality fails to express completely his moral essence. The rhetorical act thus generates a dramatic interest in how the speaker clings to a certain role, shifts to another, moves through a succession of them, or enacts two or more opposing ones simultaneously, and how he squares or fails to square these roles with his moral selfhood. (5) William J. Kennedy, *Rhetorical Norms in Renaissance Literature*

I wish to examine the ways that Augustinian and Petrarchan poetics and philosophy both influenced and frustrated the author of *Paradise Lost*, for Milton’s works in many ways represent a culmination of the linguistic and moral angst of Augustine and Petrarch, especially in their obsession with the power of rhetoric, a desire for linguistic permanency and power, and the divided consciousness of an independent, self-focused male subject. Indeed, the enduring rhetorical command of Milton’s Satan in particular, 350 years after his literary creation, attests to the cultural and psychological potency of the Western model of suffering masculinity.

As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo struggled to reconcile the desire for linguistic power and permanency on earth with a conviction that such ambition was sinful, hubristic. The result of his moral and existential angst was his theory of the Word. As Robert Entzminger explains:

> In much of his most influential work Augustine was concerned to establish a link between his Christianity and his training in Ciceronian rhetoric. . . [D]iscovering [in St. Ambrose] an example for employing his profession in the service of his faith, he sought to justify this resolution by developing an epistemology and a theory of language based upon the concept of the Word. (8-9)

Augustine’s logocentrism in turn became the justification for Catholic, and later Protestant, theologians and writers in their respective vocations; followers of Augustine believed that “words provide the best medium for approaching God as well as an especially apt way to serve him” (Entzminger 10). Conversely, the misuse of one’s linguistic abilities was one of the most common and pervasive sins against God, as in Augustine’s case: “From the very beginning of the *Confessions*, Augustine interprets his moral and intellectual failings in terms of the misuse of his linguistic faculties” (Colish 18). Thus, one’s use of language and one’s godliness become inextricably linked, and anxiety about the use of one’s words for good or for evil is evident in
debates on the virtues and role of rhetoric for the next thousand years. In the fourteenth century, for example, Francesco Petrarch wrote in a letter to a friend:

. . . I should think that the study of eloquence is the best and most beneficial thing for us ourselves, not something to be held in the lowest esteem. Others may decide for themselves, but I cannot possibly tell you what value certain familiar and famous words have had for me in my solitude, words which I not only conceived in my mind, but spoke aloud, and which I have been accustomed to use to rouse my sleeping spirit. . . I could never really achieve this relief if these salutary words did not caress my ears and gradually flow into me, stimulating me through the force of their innate sweetness to reread them repeatedly, and with their hidden barbs transfiguring me deep within.

(Rebhorn 6)

In turn, Coluccio Salutati wrote of Petrarch in 1374:

. . .how greatly did he excel in philosophy, which is recognized as a divine gift, the guide of all the virtues, and, to make use of a phrase from Cicero, “she who drives out vice,” as well as being the empress and teacher of all the arts and sciences! I do not mean that kind of philosophy that our modern sophists, with their empty, windy boasting and shameless chattering, make a fuss about in their schools, but that other kind that refines souls, plants virtues, washes away the filth of vice, and, having removed the obscurities in disputations, causes the truth in all things to shine. (Rebhorn 10)

Conversely, William Kennedy discusses the medieval distrust of rhetoric, noting that theorists such as John of Salisbury, Matthew of Vendome, and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, viewed rhetoric “almost exclusively as an art of ornamentation” (“Norms” 13), not one of persuasion to virtue. Even Dante Alighieri, in the Inferno, places Ulysses in the eighth bolgia, with the “counselors of fraud,” for the poet considers Ulysses’ great orations to have been responsible for many deaths (including, indirectly, that of Achilles) in the Trojan War and after (Durling “Divine Comedy” 399).

Charles Trinkaus and other scholars have noted Petrarch’s unique position as a Christian poet experiencing the beginnings of humanism in Italy; Trinkaus sees Petrarch as the “first Italian humanist” to attempt to “reconcile an expanded and secularized sense of human achievement with traditional religion and ecclesiastical institutions” (Witt 73). Similarly, Heather Dubrow argues that Petrarch’s “poetic gifts are as much a source and symptom of his problems
as a solution to them” (19). Much of his love poetry manifests internalized or externalized guilt over his art; the *Secretum*, the fictional dialogue Petrarch composed, featuring an exchange between his persona and an interlocutor he calls Augustinus, enacts this psychomachia.

Perhaps the most cogent summation of Petrarch’s revision of Augustinian poetics was put forth by John Freccero, who, like Trinkaus, identifies Francesco Petrarch as the first humanist and the *Canzoniere* as the precursor of modern poetry in that both poet and work establish a new sense of subjectivity and self-creation through literature (34). Contrasting Petrarch’s view of poetics with that of St. Augustine, and using the fig tree and the laurel as visual symbols of each man’s moment of spiritual conversion, Freccero argues that whereas Augustine’s narrative of moral conversion (*The Confessions*) was divinely inspired (under a fig tree), Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* was a secular reformulation of Augustine’s narrative, with the inspiration being corporeal and temporal (the laurels of poetic achievement/Laura as female object of desire). The result was a new model of male self-creation: “[Petrarch] uses Augustinian principles in order to create a *totally autonomous* portrait of the artist, devoid of any ontological claim” (34; emphasis added). Further, whereas Augustine’s “theology of the Word binds together language and desire by ordering both to God, in Whom they are grounded” (35), the poet in Petrarch’s paradigm looks earthward or inward for inspiration and fulfillment, with the ultimate ambition being to create an autonomous poetic identity rather than to restore a connection with the divine. Freccero explains:

> Augustine used the image [of the fig tree] in his *Confessions* to represent the manifestation of the pattern of universal history in his own life. Petrarch’s laurel, on the other hand, has no such moral dimension of meaning. It stands for a poetry whose real subject matter is its own act and whose creation is its own author. (34)

In her reading of Milton’s *Nativity Ode*, Catherine Belsey highlights a similar ambition in Milton’s work; in his desire to recreate the presence of the Incarnate Christ through the words of the poem, it becomes obvious that the subject of the poem is the poet’s work itself, not the event of Christ’s nativity:

> The still centre of the poem, the smiling child, is at the moment of the Incarnation both transcendental signified, the meaning which holds all other meanings in place (God), and absolute signifier, meaning undivided from itself (God made visible). . . The project of
such poetry is to inscribe the Word in the word: not merely to represent meaning but to make it present, to realize presence in its plenitude and its magnificence. (20)

However, as Belsey notes, there are inherent linguistic difficulties with this poetic objective. Exacerbating this predicament are the moral impediments for a Christian poet undertaking this sort of linguistic project. Petrarch was unable, in many ways, to counterbalance his humanist ambition of linguistic autonomy with his religious belief in humility and dependence on God alone and the ambivalent, changeable, and dissatisfied poet-lover born of this dilemma becomes the model for Petrarch’s literary heirs.

John Milton’s work displays these ambiguities, this vacillation, as well; it seems that he, too, is unable to fix himself upon a single tree, the fig or the laurel. Milton struggles to reconcile these “two poles of [his] verbal universe” (Freccero 35), ultimately creating Satan in Petrarch’s likeness, as the diabolical incarnation of a consciousness turned away from God. Milton at times appears uncomfortable with romantic/erotic Petrarchan verse, especially in his early sonnets, but often does adopt the Petrarchan discourse of poetic autoreferentiality. Moreover, whereas Laura is Petrarch’s ostensible object of desire, Milton directs his self-professed longing to God, which leads to further masculine and religious anxiety.

In his psychoanalytic study of Milton’s Satan, R.J. Zwi Werblowsky argues that the devil embodies the poet’s obsession with hubris, both moral and intellectual—that “sense of trespass and sin inherent in the dynamism of human life” (xviii). Werblowsky attributes Milton’s inner conflict between ambition and humility to “the dichotomy of Christian civilization in general”: that is, the Old Testament, Hebraic sense of being chosen by God for greatness in contrast to the Greek obsession with hubris (xviii). Werblowsky explains,

Both [Milton’s] biography and his poems bear witness to the extent to which he was obsessed by *hubris*: intellectually and morally. As is to be expected, the shadow of *hubris*, excessive sensuality, is not far away either. But equally marked was his sincere and profound Hebraism, or rather Old Testament-Christianity. In addition to this, his immense learning, classical, theological, and rabbinical, made him the predestined battling-ground for these contradictory forces. (xix)

However, Werblowsky also argues, “Against his pride, I am afraid, [Milton] did not struggle at all” (38). I believe he did, precisely for the aforementioned reasons; I see a long and ultimately inconclusive struggle throughout the poet’s career with a desire to achieve poetic fame and
permanency and a conviction that it is sinful—Satanic, in fact—to “set himself in Glory above his peers” (*PL* I.39-40).

Ilona Bell argues that *Paradise Lost*, as what Barbara Lewalski calls a “compendium of literary forms,” is partly a reformulation of the Petrarchan lyric, with the ultimate purpose being to denounce the “Petrarchan ideology of desire” in favor of Protestant marriage as spiritual conversation between equals (Bell 93, 91). To my knowledge, however, there has not been much critical inquiry into Milton’s fascination with the Petrarchan poet as a figure in and of itself. In other words, whereas Bell sees Petrarchism as a discourse of romantic love and thus Milton’s work as a defense of Christian marriage, I see Petrarchism as a discourse in self-creation and preservation for the speaker primarily as poet, not lover or mate. One of the reasons that Milton’s Satan resonates with readers is that he represents the suffering, self-obsessed love poet of the Western tradition, a figure for whom Milton demonstrates both sympathy and revulsion.

This thesis will consider the ways in which Milton’s devotional, romantic, and epic poetry display both Augustinian and Petrarchan influence and religious anxiety, and explore the ways that Milton used his poetry both to imitate and to reject Petrarchan tropes, specifically in relation to the figure of the poet himself. First, however, the nature of Milton’s literary and religious inheritance requires some consideration of the effects that Renaissance humanism and Protestant Reformation theology had in shaping the poet’s beliefs and informing his anxiety.

The Renaissance periods on the Continent and in England have become increasingly the foci of studies on the formation of “modern” consciousness and notions of identity. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt articulates his now-famous theory about the development of self-conscious subjectivity, which grew out of increased social mobility and displacement, “a series of shifting, unstable pressures”, or feelings of alienation from one form of the reigning establishment or another during the Renaissance (8). Often, Greenblatt argues, the impetus toward self-fashioning involved “some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self” (9).

Similarly, Hugh Richmond argues that the Reformation’s “intersection” with the Renaissance resulted in “the creation of new psychological possibilities”, in that, as he puts it, “private personality was fostered by a growing revulsion from orthodox public roles and services, above all in the ecclesiastical hierarchy to which politics remained nominally
subordinated throughout the Renaissance” (216, 210). Protestant theology demanded an interior, subjective search for truth rather than wholehearted reliance on institutional guidance. Writing that came out of this exploration of oneself and one’s personal relation to the divine was necessarily more introspective. In many ways personal writing, such as diaries and autobiographies, became more common as a way to practice contrition in the absence of the institutional ritual of confession with a priest; poetry, for Milton and his Anglican contemporaries such as John Donne and George Herbert, seems to have served a similar function.

David Mikics summarizes the irreconcilable difficulties brought out by the Reformation: “The intense, introspective Pauline-Augustinian vision of spirituality contrasts with an opposing side of Christianity, one equally crucial to the Reformation: the [Calvinist] impulse to subordinate the self to the plot of sacred history” (3). Further, as the independent, self-searching Protestant began to rely more on his own subjective responses to faith, the Church lost much of its interpretive (in terms of the language of Scripture) and dogmatic authority. Catherine Belsey explains:

[T]he unforeseen price of Reformation was also the decentring of the Church as an institution. Protestant truth found its differentiating, defining others not only in popery, but also in the array of separatist sects, which challenged the power of the sovereign over their consciences, their religious and social practices and ultimately, if they still refused to conform, their bodies. (9)

With the extrication of Truth from the authority of the Church came uncertainty and an anxiety about the ultimate meaning behind words, as logocentrism by its nature depends on the conviction of ultimate signification. In a “theology of the Word,” such as Augustine’s, “as all desire is ultimately a desire for God, so all signs point ultimately to the Word” (Freccero 35). When signs cease to point to a transcendent meaning outside the realm of signification, meaning becomes infinitely referential (Freccero 35). Thus, for a poet like Petrarch to grant autonomy to the “poetic event” removes God from the center and thus renders meaning indeterminate, as Marguerite Waller has argued (9). However, as Stephen Greenblatt contends,

Protestantism obviously did not spring up from nowhere in 1517; Luther’s crisis of guilt was symptomatic of a far broader cultural crisis, as the events of the 1520s and ’30s make abundantly clear. Again and again we encounter the same pattern: grave spiritual
anxiety, an intense feeling of being in a false or sinful relationship to God, a despairing sense of the impossibility of redemption despite scrupulous ritual observance, suddenly transformed into inner conviction of salvation through faith in God’s love. (52)

Hugh Richmond posits a correlation between religious controversy, political alienation, and the drive toward self-justification and the public presentation of an individualized private persona; he sees evidence of this phenomenon in the lives and writing of such various figures as Dante, Petrarch, Donne, Montaigne, Clement Marot, Ronsard, and Milton (212). Just as Petrarch’s literary career was “largely determined by alienation from the religious establishment of his time that was centered in Avignon”, so Milton’s “formulation of a persona for himself in his prose pamphlets” was spurred by criticism from his political and religious opponents (Richmond 212). For example, the *Reason of Church-Government* displays both Milton’s rhetorical self-justification and a developing sense of his calling as poet-preacher:

And if any man incline to thinke I undertake a taske too difficult for my yeares, I trust through the supreme inlightning assistance farre otherwise; for my yeares, be they few or many, what imports it? so they bring reason, let that be lookt on: and for the task, from hence that the question in hand is so needful to be known at this time chiefly by every meaner capacity, and containes in it the explication of many admirable and heavenly privileges reacht out to us by the Gospell, I conclude the task must be easie. . . Let others therefore dread and shun the Scriptures for their darknesse, I shall wish I may deserve to be reckon’d among those who admire and dwell upon them for their clearnesse. (I: 749-750)

Significantly, however, Richmond allows that as far back as Augustine and even St. Paul, religious controversy spawned private self-awareness and public justification through literature. Thus, the Protestant Reformation was only one historical manifestation of deeper religious anxieties on the part of Christian writers.

A similar trend with repercussions for individual subjectivity was, of course, humanism, which many scholars link with the development of Protestantism. As Belsey observes, “The questions humanism raises recur throughout Milton’s work: what are the limits of human autonomy and human obligation? what is the place of human beings in the world and in history? and what, beyond all history and all locality, does it mean to be human?” (18) Entwined in the cultural and psychological project of humanism is a desire for immortality and autonomy, which
make Christianity and humanism uncomfortable bedfellows. Similar anxieties are present at the late-medieval beginnings of humanism; Robert Durling notes of the Canzoniere:

If on the one hand Petrarch subscribes to—even in a sense almost singlehandedly founds—the humanistic cult of literary immortality and glory, on the other hand he has an acute awareness that writing poetry involves a kind of death. This recognition has something very modern about it... Petrarch is always calling attention to the psychologically relative, even suspect, origin of individual poems and thus of writing itself. His hope is that ultimately the great theme of praise will redeem even the egotism of the celebrant. (“Petrarch” 33)

Herein lies the root of Petrarchan dualism and the basis of its paradoxes: the poet is aware that his art attempts to restore language to its prelapsarian state in which there is no lack and thus no difference between the two halves of the sign, while simultaneously depending upon the differance of postlapsarian language to achieve his art. Also present is the painful awareness that to atone is to eliminate the need for the poet’s art; though Paradise represents unity, it also removes the impetus for poetic creation. So to succeed in one’s linguistic project means to annihilate oneself as poet—as Durling says, “writing poetry involves a kind of death” (33). Catherine Belsey argues, “The result is a hesitaton of the tenses, a reluctance to claim authority, which indicate that the project of the text, the inscription of the undifferentiated Word in a system of differences, defies the nature of language itself” (20). Thus, the poet’s aim is always already both unsuccessful and self-sacrificing. Lynn Enterline explains the paradox of Petrarchist representation thus:

[T]he logic of [Petrarchism] requires that the poet as lover add the representation of [the lady’s] presence to the representation of [the poet’s] own if he seeks to present his voice to himself, to realize his nature as author. She becomes representable, in fact, to the extent to which she eludes him. Her absent presence and her difference mark the space that generates desire and the struggle for poetic self-representation. . .[H]er very distance allows him, by means of representation, to fill a lack in himself he could not fill on his own. (34)

Accordingly, the object of desire must remain only an object of unfulfilled desire in order for the poet to establish himself and his art; further, the objective of linguistic atonement must also remaine unachieved in order for the poet to maintain his vocation.
I believe that the greatest anxiety of the post-Petrarchan Christian poet comes from an unconscious awareness of one’s inextricable relationship to the Petrarchan tradition and its idolatrous self-love, for as Ilona Bell argues, love poets after Petrarch “could be Petrarchan or anti-Petrarchan or pseudo-Petrarchan...but not a-Petrarchan” (91). As Freccero puts it,

[I]n order to create an autonomous universe of autoreflexive signs without reference to an anterior Logos—the dream of almost every poet since Petrarch—it is necessary that the thematic of such poetry be equally autoreflexive and self-contained, which is to say, that it be idolatrous in the Augustinian sense. (38)

This idolatry is inherently irreconcilable with Christian ideals of humility and the injunction against “storing up treasures on earth” (Matthew 6:19-21)—whether those treasures be in the form of monetary reward or simply the approval of one’s peers.

Similarly, the Renaissance poet’s classical and pagan inheritance causes an anxiety about the ways that both sacred and profane literatures, metaphors, and language may (or may not) coexist. In her introduction to a collection of essays on this topic, Helen Wilcox considers the ways that early modern British poets made use of both “the life of the resurrected Christ on whom the ‘New Covenant’ was founded and who gives textual and spiritual inspiration” and “the life of the natural world outside the ‘temple’, the potentially pagan energies of the natural cycle of birth, growth and death” (xi). For as Wilcox acknowledges, these two traditions “are inevitably interconnected as part of human culture and experience, even at times sharing the very same vocabulary” (xii). We can see this interplay of sacred and profane, Christian and pagan, in Milton’s works and in his negotiation of the role of the poet who is heir, on the one hand, to the Augustinian, Christian tradition for which the end of all things is the Word, and on the other hand, to the classical or secular poetic tradition in which any ambitious poet must situate himself, but where meaning (and by extension the self) is infinitely indeterminate.

One of the problems complicating any examination of Petrarch’s influence on any poet is defining what exactly characterizes Petrarchism. Notions of who Petrarch the poet was, and what Petrarchism signifies both within and outside the text, are just as variable and shifty as the signs within this system, especially as Petrarch’s ideology of desire is reinterpreted and appropriated in the centuries after its establishment. As Ilona Bell argues, “it is important to consider how the Petrarchan convention adjusted as it passed from fourteenth-century Catholic Italy to seventeenth-century Protestant England” (92). Through his investigation of the ways Petrarch
was “authorized” and reinterpreted throughout the Renaissance, William Kennedy notices that “[d]iverse and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the *Rime Sparse* propel its readership into a series of ongoing and unresolved encounters with the text” (27). Due to the iconoclastic and critical nature of textual interpretation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, each new reader of Petrarch would “unapologetically substitute a new reading” of the *Canzoniere* (25). Thus, an attempt to definitively categorize and characterize Petrarchanism would be unsuccessful at worst and pluralist at best; moreover, since Milton left very little written commentary of his own on Petrarchan poetry, we cannot know what Petrarch meant to Milton and thus what Milton meant for Petrarchism. We can, however, notice parallels between the personae of the *Canzoniere* and those of Milton’s poetry and, when we notice them, interrogate the ways that they reveal Milton’s negotiation of his role as Christian poet in the Petrarchan-humanist tradition.

It is important here to reiterate Catherine Belsey’s argument, however, that access to Milton’s “intended meaning died in the moment that the text came into being” (6). My reading of Milton’s poetry also does not claim to any “ultimate explanation of his writing”; rather, like Belsey I see a rereading of his texts as “attend[ing] to an appearance, the signifying surface of the text, not an essence concealed by the words, but the textuality of the words themselves”—“not necessarily [a reading] that John Milton would have recognized or acknowledged” (5-6). For, as Robert Durling argues, the poet’s “work reveals the author even in ways of which he is unaware, for it dramatizes or projects the structure of his consciousness through his most sensitive tool, his linguistic activity” (2). It is in this very linguistic activity that anxieties about postlapsarian existence and the role of the poet are expressed.
CHAPTER ONE
“SHARES OF THE GOD”: MILTON’S SHORTER POEMS

In his analysis of Francesco Petrarch’s poetic self-presentation, Giuseppe Mazzotta argues:

The very first sonnet of the *Canzoniere* comes forth as a palinode, a deliberate self-staging in which the poet, on the face of it, speaks with a voice of moral authority, the voice of a public self who finally confesses his past errors and disavows them. . . The moral claim is the ambiguous expedient by which the poet attempts to constitute his own self as an “authority.” (272)

Likewise, Louis Martz characterizes Milton’s *1645 Poems* as “striv[ing] to create a tribute to a youthful era now past” (33). In many ways, the poems are, as Mark Berge puts it, “carefully planned to give the reader a sense of the poet’s rising powers” (260) as well as his moral authority. However, in the midst of these poems we can see already the tension in the poet’s mind between pagan and Christian modes of poetic discourse; Barbara Kiefer Lewalski explains the larger societal concern about the perversion of poetry during this period:

…Protestant Englishmen of the [sixteenth century] testified in some numbers to the need to create a biblically inspired substitute for the supposedly licentious or scandalous or worldly poetry of their contemporaries, rallying to the standard of Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas’ new muse for Christian poetry—the erstwhile muse of Astronomy, Urania. In a dream-vision poem, Du Bartas recounted Urania’s visit to him, urging him to reclaim for God the noble gift of poetry which had originated in the Bible, but was then perverted to idolatrous and immoral uses. (“Protestant” 9)

Such a holy mission as the above perhaps served as moral justification for Christian poets whose consciences plagued them over their worldly ambitions to gain poetic stature. Milton was a follower of this trend, as is evident in his invocation of Urania in *Paradise Lost*. Even as early as the *1645 Poems*, however, we see Milton’s insistence on morality and on the virtue of the poet/lover, often while he is drawing upon the Petrarchan tradition.

Milton both read and quoted from Petrarch’s poems and probably had his own Italian copy of the *Canzoniere* (Bell 92-93). In his early sonnets, in fact, Milton appropriates Italian tropes and the language itself in order to write his first love poems in true Petrarchan style, ostensibly glorifying a lady and humbling himself. As Lynn Enterline suggests, “Milton chose to
imitate and to modify the Petrarchan love sonnet as a way of defining his poetic voice” (32). In many instances the young poet betrays a desire to purify Petrarchan eroticism. Lines such as “where a good man might sometimes be entangled” (Sonnet IV, l.4), and (of his heart) “I have found it to be faithful, fearless, constant, pure in thought, gracious, circumspect, good” (Sonnet VI, ll.5-6), and “Grace alone is what would prevent love’s desire from fixing itself in his heart permanently” (Sonnet II, ll.13-14) show the poet’s moral anxiety over Petrarchan desire.

Sonnet II, Milton’s first Italian sonnet, begins by addressing the nameless woman, “Donna leggiadra” but, true to the homosocial Petrarchan tradition, the poet ends by speaking for and about other men: “When you speak... every unworthy man should guard his eyes and ears” (l.7-11). As Lynn Enterline notes, “Contrary to each new love poet’s announced role as servant and celebrant of his particular lady, the Petrarchan tradition became a canon of poetry in which men represented women for other men” (33). In this way, the woman in Sonnet II serves to reflect the poet’s “worthiness,” for he has recognized her nobility and celebrates it in his verse. Ironically, the woman becomes a tool for recognizing virtuous men, and virtuous men are those who admire her but are not captured by Cupid’s bows and arrows. Thus, a poem that on the surface compliments the woman’s beauty and voice actually cautions other men against succumbing to her siren’s charms; though the poet credits “heavenly grace” with protecting the virtuous man, his poem is meant to serve the same purpose, to prevent the need for such grace.

The woman’s voice, moreover, is only a potentiality, for her singing is phrased in the subjunctive:

Quando tu vaga parli, o lieta canti
Che mover possa duro alpestre legno,
Guardi ciascun a gli occhi, gli orecchi. . . (ll.9-11)

(“When you speak or sing, fortunate lady (your singing would invoke love in rough trees and bring them off the mountains), every unworthy man should hide his ears”; emphasis added). The woman is praised for her beauty, but her “soft looks and graces” are the only gifts she would bestow on a man, thus cursing him with “love’s desire... fixing itself in his heart permanently” (ll.5, 14). Already, then, we see anxiety about the power of lovers’ rhetoric to trap men within an unceasing pattern of unfulfilled desire. Petrarch, in the Secretum, argues this point with Augustinus; the latter says,

12
When all these passions are extinguished, then, and not till then, will desire be full and free. For when the soul is uplifted on one side to heaven by its own nobility, and on the other dragged down to earth by the weight of the flesh and the seductions of the world, so that it both desires to rise and also to sink at one and the same time, then, drawn contrary ways, you find you arrive no whither.

The poet’s role is to warn his fellow man with his poetry. What presents itself as an homage to a beautiful woman, in true Petrarchan fashion merely reflects the poet and his art, but in a way that highlights the poet’s piety, for the poet subjugates “Cupid’s bows and arrows” to Heavenly grace” (ll.7, 13). The poet himself partakes of neither, for he disdains Cupid and provides his own grace.

These early Petrarchan sonnets also display Milton’s discomfort with the tradition of erotic, passionate verse. As F.T. Prince notes,

The poems in Italian are less love-poems than slightly amorous compliments. Milton could scarcely lose self-consciousness in a passion so largely literary in nature. The greater part of the little group of poems is concerned with the oddity of his writing poetry in a foreign language: this oddity is explained by the further oddity of his finding himself in love. (98)

The sense of foreignness that Milton feels in navigating the erotic tradition, in other words, is reflected in the self-consciousness with which he employs the Italian language. His proleptic Canzone anticipates the doubt and criticism of his readers in an openly self-conscious way, in much the same manner as his polemical tracts and his later poems will attempt to win the support of his readers. The “laughing ladies and young lovers,” from whom the poet feels alienated ask the poet, “perche scrivi/ Perche tu scrivi” (why do you write/ Why do you write” [ll.2-3]) in such a way as to emphasize the two-fold nature of the challenge: first, the young people ask why the poet writes; not until the next line is the question clarified—why do you write love poetry? Thus the poem will address not only the poet’s reasons for writing love poetry, but the reasons he writes at all. The poet’s insecurity, his feeling surrounded by yet separated from ladies and young lovers, is evident in his use of “m’accostandosi attorno” (l.2) and in his need for the Canzone’s assistance. It seems, from the commiato in lines 13 – 15, that the poet writes so that his song can serve as his emissary, his go-between, allowing him to keep his distance from the lovers and from love itself; he writes in Italian simply because that is what a poet does, for
Italian “é lingua di cui si vanta Amore” (l. 15). Perhaps, as F.T. Prince argues, “he was reluctant to be distracted from his studies by seriously falling in love” (99). More probable is that the young poet’s struggles with temptation were less those of sensual, worldly pleasures, and more with pride: “He expresses himself far more effectively in the conscious nobility, the bold self-righteousness, of Sonnet VI” (Prince 99), to which we now turn.

The poet in Sonnet VI addresses the lady, “Madonna” (a name which carries with it not only a romantic, courtly resonance but an association with the Virgin Mary), and dedicates his heart to her. The ambiguous name with which he addresses her, however, suggests that instead of dedicating himself to a mortal woman, the poet offers his tried and tested, noble heart to a higher service, that of the Madonna. In this way he can devote himself to God while keeping the Petrarchan conceit of service to a virtuous woman and prayer to the Virgin.

In the uncertainty of a foreign ground or with the vagaries of existence, the poet claims to cling to this woman; be she mortal or heavenly is inconsequential, however, for in actuality, the poet clings to his own heart and to his art, represented by the lyre and the Muses: “Quando rugge il gran mondo, e scocca il tuono,/ S’arma di se, e d’interno diamante” (“When the whole earth shakes and lightning strikes, my heart arms itself with internal adamant”\(^2\); ll.7-8). The reflexive verb in line eight demonstrates the self-enclosure of the poet’s heart: “S’arma di se.” As Prince contends, “This self-portrait is of the true Miltonic temper, and anticipates the ‘self-esteem, grounded on just and right’ of many of the English sonnets” (100). The poet calls himself “artless” when in fact the poem demonstrates an artful rhetoric, celebrating the poet’s goodness and purity, and elevating him above “ordinary men” (ll.1, 10). In this way, the poet attempts to negate any intimations of sinfulness or premeditation in his art, while also demonstrating that “reluctance to claim authority” which Belsey finds in the Nativity Ode (20).

As a poem celebrating Christmas, Milton’s *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* is ostensibly inspired by and written as a gift to God, such that the poet and his personal desires seem secondary to his holy purpose, which is to honor God’s Incarnation. However, Milton declares in *Elegia Sexta*, “This song I offered as a gift on the birthday of Christ; the first light, as the dawn drew near, gave me this song” (Diekhoff 109-110). According to this statement, then,

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2 Interestingly, Milton also uses adamantine material to describe the chains holding Satan in Hell (I.48) and Satan’s armor (VI.110).
the speaker merely passes on to this day (not to the Child himself) a gift that was “given” to the poet by the dawn’s light. Berge observes, “The image of an offering, a sacrifice, occurs prominently in The Nativity Ode and highlights the ill-masked ambition of the poet” (261) to be, like Orpheus, in control of nature, only for Milton the control will be over the mystery of Christ’s birth. Furthermore, the poet believes that he will succeed where Orpheus had failed. However, Berge notes that in “The Passion . . . [Milton] discover[ed] that his classical influences fundamentally betrayed his Christian faith” (272). Moreover, Thomas Corns argues that “the impact of the incarnation of Christ is to eject false gods from their holy places, among them the classical pantheon as well as the false gods of ancient Israel” (275). I would argue that, in this poem, it is the impact of the poet’s linguistic power that is supposed to eject gods such as Orpheus from his universe. Referring to the following passage from the poem, Berge observes that “[f]ar from being humble, the poet’s ode embodies the manner in which he would outdo ‘the star-led Wizards’ in his quest for poetic control” (262):

The star-led Wizards haste with odors sweet
O run, prevent them with thy humble Ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet,
Have thou the honour first, thy Lord to greet. (ll. 23-26)

Thomas N. Corns remarks,

It is easy to find. . . cases of the appropriation of profane (in the sense of pagan) mythologies into Christian discourse. . . in the Nativity Ode and in Milton’s poems of the 1630s. Thus, Christ is perceived somewhat improbably by Hebrew shepherds as ‘the mighty Pan’ (Nativity Ode, 9; it was a familiar identification with Spenserian analogues and a very early source). In Comus he is ‘[c]elestial Cupid’ embracing his ‘Psyche’ in the environs of ‘Jove’s court’ (1003-1004, 1). In ‘Lycidas’ ‘all-judging Jove’ rubs alongside St Peter, and the grim Fury keeps company with Neptune, Orpheus and Camus, the allegorized figure of English higher education. (276)

However, Corns argues, Milton as Christian iconoclast later seems to reject the syncretism of his earlier approach:

[H]is oeuvre hinges on the shift from a cultural ideology which incorporates paganism and pagan idioms into Christian celebration to a cultural ideology, much closer to the exclusion implicit at the level of theory in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, an ideology
which asserts the primacy of Christian and especially sacred discourse and which
devalues and relegates profane literary traditions to a place beneath the Christian
hierarchy of literary idioms. (277)

Though Milton seems to embrace a theology that rejects all other pagan traditions and gods, his
discomfort in doing so is reflected in the ways in which he still uses pagan symbols as literary
touchstones from which to differentiate himself or to establish his authority.

In the same way that the poet struggles to reconcile traditional, pagan elements with his
Christian theme, he also shows Petrarchan tendencies in his depiction of both nature and women
in the ode. Though Milton obviously feels that, as a Christian poet, he must write a devotional
poem, his use of Petrarchism betrays an insecurity of sorts, which compels him to appropriate
established forms in order to prove his facility as poet. For example, both the natural world and
the feminine are silent, subordinate, much as they are in the Petrarchan tradition, where they
serve only to reflect the poet’s power. God, as both Father and Son, is relegated to the silent
margins as well. By first challenging the “Heavenly Muse” to “prevent” the Wise Men with her
“humble ode,” however, the poet can project his own desires onto the Muse, who by her name
seems safe from any accusation of sinful ambition. True to the homosocial bent of Petrarchism,
in a letter to his friend Charles Diodati, Milton writes, “For you also these modest thoughts have
been piped out in my native tongue, and you will be, when I recite them, the judge of them”—
not God, but Charles Diodati, is the man to whom the lines are “piped” (much like the songs of a
pastoral swain) for approval and appreciation (qtd. in Flannagan 33). In this way, any homage
paid to Christ’s nativity is undermined by the redirection of its address to Diodati.

Nature is anthropomorphized in the opening lines of the Hymn, especially in her
“wooing” (l.36) of the masculine Air with “speeches fair,” (l.37) so that she resembles the object
of desire in a Petrarchan poem, such as the lady in Poem 30 of the Canzoniere, whose “speech”
and “lovely face” and “locks/ pleased me so” (ll.4-5). Contrasted with fallen Nature is another
feminine presence, the one the poet should admire, “meek-eyd Peace” (l. 45). However, this
feminine presence, though she brings calm, cannot bring the “harmony alone/ [which] could hold
all Heav’n and Earth in happier union” (ll.107-108)—the masculine Word, “meaning undivided
from itself” (Belsey 19).

When the cherubim and seraphim arrive on earth to sing the coming of the Incarnate God,
their song is “unexpressive” (l. 116). As Belsey argues, “unexpressive” signifies not only
“inexpressible” but “also not expressive, not, that is, a sign of a presence which is elsewhere” (4). The poet’s use of this word in *Lycidas* to describe the angels’ singing in heaven will imply this meaning also, as well as the notion that in heaven there is no need for language as sound to be “expressed” from the mouth, for there is no lack, no need for human sound. In the *Nativity Ode*, however, the angels have come to earth, and so, like the inspired poet, must use earthly language and sound in order to communicate with fallen humankind; what they sing still is inexpressible, however, though somehow it communicates with the shepherds. As if to acknowledge the irony of this situation, the poet, in a further sign of reluctance to claim authority (in the Latin sense of “author” or “originator”) admits that, though he is inspired by the Heavenly Muse, he cannot speak the language of heaven. Lynn Enterline has argued that “a Petrarchan love poet tries to present himself to himself and to the world by re-presenting a figure that is already a representation of a representation from the poetry of his male predecessors” (35). In the same way, as a devotional poet, the speaker in the *Nativity Ode* in his inadequacy must simply refer to what “as ’tis said” was sung before by immortal beings (l.117), though ironically he will attempt in *At a Solemn Musick* to achieve this very same “music of the spheres” (Flannagan 42). The purpose of recreating, reauthoring, this song is to recall the prelapsarian state, a feat which the poet knows is humanly impossible. However, at one point in the poem he speaks in a voice of certainty that this exact event will occur:

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Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,
And speckl’d vanity
Will sicken and soon die,
And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould,
And Hell it self will pass away. . . (ll.134-139)
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The paradox here is that the poet is aware that his poem cannot achieve this state and yet he speaks as though it could. As Belsey notes,

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The song is able to make time run back to the golden age, which is also, it seems, to make it run forward to the Second Coming, when Truth and Justice will appear in glory, throned on a rainbow, and the gates of heaven will be flung wide open. But then the text returns sharply to the present tense and to the moment in the stable… (2)
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It seems as though God/Fate should be held responsible for the poet’s failure to recreate and sustain a redeemed universe through his language, for “wisest Fate sayes no/ This must not yet
be so” (ll.149-150). Ultimately, it appears that the poet is trapped between linguistic ambition and knowledge of his mortal inadequacy, limited as he is by space, time, and fallen language. As Roland Greene has pointed out, “In the Renaissance, Roman Catholic and Protestant writers of all sects struggle with the paradoxical relation of the timeless deity and its unavoidably serial representation” (116).

Two shorter poems in Milton’s book of Latin poetry show Milton struggling to establish himself as poet and to reconcile his Christian beliefs with the various pagan, poetic traditions he inherited. Milton’s poem for his father, *Ad Patrem*, ostensibly honors John Milton, Sr. for his support of his son’s pursuits and shows “his need to identify his gifts with the Puritan idea of a spiritual vocation” (Fixler 180). However, Petrarchan pride is evident here as well, for the poem serves to glorify not father but son; further, it exhibits that “paralyzing self-consciousness of the masculine speaker in the Petrarchan tradition” (Mikics 88). Milton again demonstrates a reluctance to claim total authority over the poem, placing responsibility for its success on his muse: “Whether or not it is welcome, it is for you, my worthy father, that my Muse is working at this small offering” (ll.6-7). Next, he begs his audience (ostensibly his father) in a very Augustinian manner: “Do not despise divine poetry, creation of the prophetic bard: nothing better shows our heavenly origins, our divine seed, our human intellect, those holy traces of Promethean fire” (ll.17-20). Here is one of the most explicit justifications Milton will make for his vocation and for his ambition; like Augustine, who believed that one’s language was one of the best ways to serve God, the young poet, in the guise of humility, claims that his art merely makes use of his divine spark. However, his reference to Prometheus undermines this claim of piety, for though Prometheus was associated often with Christ, his cultural and literary resonance smacked of Satanic pride and ambition as well. In *Prolusions*, in fact, Milton explicitly compares Prometheus to Satan:

The fact that we are unable to hear [the music of the spheres] seems certainly to be due to the presumption of that thief Prometheus, which brought so many evils upon men, and robbed us of that happiness which we can never again enjoy so long as we remain buried in sin and degraded by brutish desires. (qtd. in Lewis 55)

Linda Lewis explores the dualistic role that Prometheus played for Milton and other poets, but without offering any substantive explanation or consideration of the shiftiness of this character’s significance, other than acknowledging that Milton “explores the whole interrelated pattern of
[the Prometheus] myth” in his writings (56). In *Ad Patrem*, Milton uses the persuasive, deceptive rhetoric that he will later demonize Satan for employing; Milton justifies his poetic vocation to his father by calling only on the positive associations one would have with the figure of Prometheus, without acknowledging that Prometheanism also leads to/led to the Fall. Perhaps Milton already is aware of the paradoxical nature of his calling, that his art laments and tries to atone for the Fall, all the while knowing that the Fall was necessary to/for his art’s existence.

Continuing his defense of “divine poetry,” Milton cites mythological (not Christian) occasions of its use, invoking names he will, in *Paradise Lost*, disavow: “The gods love poetry, and song has power to stir the depths of quaking Tartarus, to seize the gods of the underworld; song binds unfeeling ghosts with triple bands of steel. In poetry the secrets of the far-distant future are revealed by the daughters of Apollo, and by ecstatic, pale-lipped Sibyl. . .” (ll.21-25) It seems, then, that the poet is not completely comfortable as a poet in his own right, and so must compare himself with ancient, pagan bards in order to win approval and credibility from his audience. He calls Heaven by the name of Olympus and “elevates himself to the position of the elders before the throne of God in Revelation 4.4” (Flannagan 225). As in the *Nativity Ode*, he claims that through his poetry “time stands immovable” and *at the same time* “endlessly delayed” (l. 31). Contrary to the abject humility of the beginning of this poem, when the poet is not even certain that he and his muse can offer a worthy gift to his father, the poet now declares with absolute assurance that his poetry, along with the unexpressive song of the “fiery spirit” (l. 35), makes “the glittering Serpent stop hissing, and savage Orion lower his sword and turn gentle;” and “Mauretanian Atlas no longer feels the weight on his shoulders” (ll. 38-40). No small task for a poet of “empty words” (l.11). This scenario, moreover, began in the future tense (“I will go through”) but ends in the present: “sings. . .stays. . .feels”. Thus, the poet has created a reality at which he first only hints.

After the poet paints a picture of the golden age of bards, he makes one of his most humanist comments: “What pleasure after all will there be in music well attuned if it is empty of the human voice, or empty of words and their meanings, or of rhythms of speech?” (ll.50-53) Not only does this statement undermine the vocation of his father, the composer, but it undermines the ultimate ambition of the poet, which is to reattain that heavenly state where words are not necessary.
The rest of the poem continues in a similar vein, comparing the poet and his art to images of classical antiquity, with the poet making a self-conscious effort to place himself among the “the troop of learned people. . .who wear crowns of ivy and of laurel” (l. 103-104). He again takes on a Petrarchan tone with a “picture of an erotic relationship with a naked goddess” who signifies “experience” or “knowledge,” as Flannagan explains (227). In this stanza, the poet speaks with a sort of stilted bravado, one man bragging to another of his conquest, “If I should want it” (l.86). He pictures “naked science” giving him “her bright face to kiss, unless I would run from her” (90-92). In this instance, then, the pursuer is not the Petrarchan male but the amorous female. Milton turns the traditional relationship on its head, again seeming uncomfortable with such intimacy as the Petrarchan poet would have, but also placing himself in the position of power.

The poet ends by reassuming a tone of deep humility, reiterating that his words cannot balance his father’s gifts to him, then undermining his own statement by addressing his verses directly, commanding them to “hope for immortality” (l.18). Just as he projected ambition onto his muse in the Nativity Ode to escape any hint of hubris, his verses now bear the weight of his desire. This device of apostrophe is true of Petrarchism as well, as Lynn Enterline has observed, for “direct addresses by the poet to the poem itself in the last stanza pervade the Canzoniere.” She notes that scholars investigating the nature of the apostrophe “suggest that this figure attempts to project a face capable of hearing and speaking onto the inanimate world and, by implication, onto the poetic text” (“Gender” 35). Enterline argues that for Petrarch, apostrophes “also project the capacity for hearing and speaking, but without imagining a detour into the world: he gives a responsive face directly to his own visible text” (35). The end result for both Petrarch and Milton is an elision of the “voice and the materiality of the written word” (36).

When Milton was in Italy in 1638, he met and befriended Torquato Tasso’s patron, Giovanni Baptista Manso. To a young, ambitious poet like Milton, the opportunity to associate with a venerable patron such as the Marquis of Villa would have inspired a sort of hero-worship, along with, perhaps, the need to “assert. . .the supremacy of English religion and poetry over that represented by Manso’s patronage” (Flannagan 231). Here again we see the intersection of religious controversy, even on such a subtle level, contributing to Milton’s desire to establish himself as a poet both of the world of Rome and above it. By associating himself with Manso, and then wishing to have his own personal Manso someday, the poet subtly elevates himself, at
least in the future, to the status of Tasso and Marini: “May my fate give me a friend so fine, one who knows if I ever recall in my poetry the kings of my native land . . .” (ll.77-78) The poem ends in a Petrarchan manner, focusing on Milton himself, and only on Manso as far as what his English counterpart will be able to do to preserve Milton’s memory. Tasso’s influence on Milton is evident in this poem, as the young poet begins to imagine the great epic he will write for the British to equal Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata. F. T. Prince notes a similar dynamic between Tasso and Milton that I see between Petrarch and the latter:

There is both a contrast and a certain affinity between Tasso’s religious mood, dominated by the intellectual revolution of the Counter-Reformation, and Milton’s much bolder, narrower, and more personal, religious opinions. Tasso, if not so learned as Milton, must be reckoned a learned poet; they both attempt a synthesis between Renaissance philosophy and Christian tradition. (34)

Sonnet XIX, “On His Blindness,” is famous for its discussion of the poet’s calling as god-given gift, but it, too, is ultimately ambivalent in its attitude toward humility. The poet compares his literary gift to one of the “talents” of biblical parable (Matthew 25:14-30), complaining that his blindness keeps him from capitalizing on this ability; however, the poem is rife with Petrarchan-style paradoxes. The Petrarchan lover laments the lady’s cold, loveless cruelty which drives him to write while he reaps the laurels that result from such suffering; likewise, the poet in “On His Blindness” displays successful employment of his gift in a poem that complains of inability or handicap. An examination of Poem 182 of the Canzoniere helps to elucidate these paradoxes:

Love inflames my heart with ardent zeal
and makes it shrink with icy fear;
and he makes my mind uncertain which is greater,
the hope or the fear, the flame or the frost.

I tremble under the hottest sky, burn under the coldest,
always full of desire and fear
at a lady’s hiding the wisdom of a living man
within her trim garment or under a little veil.
Of these pains, my very own is the first,
to burn day and night; and how great the sweet illness
is no thought can grasp, not to mention verses or rhyme;

The other pain I suffer less, for my flame is such
that all men are equal before her, and he who thinks to fly as high
as her light, he spreads his wings in vain. 3

While the poet speaks of suffering such paradoxical sensations as trembling under a hot sky and
burning under a cold one, such that he seems unable to act at all, he writes a sonnet. Moreover,
though he says his suffering is inexpressible, he attempts to write about it all the same. While at
first he claims to fear that the lady’s power will keep him from exhibiting his wisdom, by the end
of the poem he declares that such a fear is groundless; furthermore, he has shown his wisdom in
the writing of this poem. Finally, of course, the poem is more about the poet and his relation to
other men than it is about the nameless woman.

Many of these contradictions are evident in Milton’s sonnet as well. The poet employs
the Italian sonnet form to write not about his emotions in a romantic relationship, but about the
relation between his gift for poetry and his divine calling. Similarly, the poet’s “Talent” seems
to be linked to his manhood by the use of such words as “spent,” “useless,” and “more bent”
(ll.1,4). Instead of a love sonnet, though, the poet offers an apparent devotion to God and His
self-sufficiency. The speaker in this poem claims to be as impotent as the one in the Canzoniere,
all the while producing a poem demonstrating his poetic prowess. Patience’s preventive reply to
the poet’s insecurity is itself paradoxical, for a reply by nature is belated. Moreover, God is
silent in this sonnet as the lady is silent in the Petrarchan relationship. “Patience” addresses the
poet’s concerns and speaks about God, for God, but only secondhand at that, through the poet’s
telling of the story. The poem ends with the poet’s work being compared obliquely to the
seraphim’s praises as they stand around God’s throne.

By presenting his poetic talent as something God as Lord and Master has given him to
make use of, the poet may escape any accusations of self-service or -seeking. Like the spiritual

torment that Petrarch used as a poetic strategy in the *Canzoniere*, Milton uses his suffering as the vehicle for self-promotion. Though confessing ignorance and weakness, the poet achieves what he claims he cannot; his success is meant to garner the reader’s admiration for a poet who overcomes such obstacles.

Sonnet XIX mirrors an aspect of Petrarchan rhetoric that William Kennedy describes as its most characteristic, that of asking the reader to play the same role as the addressee of the poem. He argues that, in the *Canzoniere*,

Laura is an audience who dominates the entire sequence, even when not directly evoked. She is critic and judge presiding over the speaker’s performance. But if the speaker assigns her these roles, the author assigns the actual reader coextensive ones. Early in the sequence he enjoins the reader to gauge Laura’s sentiments, indeed even to adopt them outright in the poems addressed to her as fictive audience. He also enjoins the reader to share her moral perspicacity by judging the speaker explicitly as she does implicitly. . .

[Laura’s] viewpoint moreover is fully congruous with the author’s. (“Norms” 38-39) Similarly, the audience in Sonnet XIX is assigned the role of judge as God and the author are. In many of Milton’s poems, God is the unnamed judge and object of desire, but by presenting a separate persona that he judges along with God and with the audience, the poet can distance himself from his human failings.

Stephen Wigler has observed that the character of the self-pitying poet in this sonnet closely resembles that of Satan in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*, and that the message of both poems is “that confusion of the individual voice or word with God’s sovereign voice or Word is an important aspect of the satanic personality” (155). As Wigler notes, “the protagonist’s problem is that he exaggerates the importance of his human works to his ‘Maker’. . .he rather resembles Satan, whose overweening pride blinds him to the Messiah’s supremacy” (156). This, I believe, is the nature of the poet’s dilemma: he is aware, at least subconsciously, that his work is inadequate compared to God’s, but he also continually strives to disprove this conviction.
CHAPTER TWO

“STRICTLY MEDITATE THE THANKLESS MUSE”: LYCIDAS’ UNCOUTH SWAIN

Lycidas, Milton’s pastoral monody on the death of Edward King, is one of the strongest manifestations, among the shorter poems, of Milton’s religious and literary angst. Though the pastoral was “often an impersonal genre,” Milton made it “almost confessional” in Lycidas (Flannagan 94), and through the poem he wrestles with his dualistic heritage. As R. L. Brett observes, “The poem is concerned. . .with the battle between the reason and the senses; between humanism and Puritanism; between the Renaissance and the Reformation conceptions of poetry” (47). Likewise, Stella Revard notes that “while adopting for himself the voice of a simple shepherd swain, he includes within ‘Lycidas’ [both] the solemn tones of classical authority and the thunder of biblical prophecy” (“Lycidas” 246-247). This chapter will consider the linguistic anxiety and ambition the young poet exhibits as he attempts to reconcile these two heritages, pagan and sacred. For although the poem features an ultimate rejection of the pagan pastoral mode in favor of Christian redemption, it also presents “a series of soul-searching conversations. . .about the artist’s immortality” on earth, an idea directly opposed to Christian teaching (Flannagan 96). Furthermore, the poem arises not only out of the young poet’s close encounter with death but out of his discontent with the English clergy as well; thus Lycidas offers a view of the product of institutional religious anxiety as well as personal. Ultimately, as Flannagan notes, “the poet . . . claims a Puritan inner light and prophetic power” (96).

The poem opens with the poet expressing regret for his “forc’d fingers” in the sense that he does not feel that he has aged enough as a poet to meet the challenge set before him, which is to memorialize Edward King. What is interesting to note is that this poem was part of a larger collection put together by King’s friends at Cambridge, and that Milton “volunteered or was asked to write a poem for the volume” (Flannagan 94). Thus, the poet’s traditional claim that he has been compelled to write this poem to “sing for Lycidas” is not entirely accurate. If the poet felt truly inadequate he could have declined the task; thus, the poet’s excuse of prematurity comes forth as another sign of his professed insecurity being in conflict with his presumption, much the same as the rhetorical appeals to his audience he employs in his religious polemics. Further, at the end of the poem the audience realizes that they have been duped—they have not been listening to Milton, friend of King, but to another voice entirely, a maneuver which further
distances the poet from any accusation of ambition or presumption. By powerfully commanding the reader’s attention to an act about to be performed by an unripe poet, Milton sets us up at the end to be admirers of the way that, unpremeditated, the poet has composed a prophetic elegy, that he was inspired by (Christian) heaven when he neither asked nor intended to be. As Kevin Dunn notes, “Portraying oneself as an inexperienced youth has some obvious advantages; it reduces the audience’s expectations and as a corollary demonstrates the virtuosity of the young orator, creating obstacles . . . that he can then surmount in a kind of Burkean ‘self-interference’” (55). Another advantage, as Isabel McCaffrey has observed, is that the reader feels that he is discovering, along with the poet, the poet’s gifts: “We are related to this poem’s action as eavesdroppers, ignorant, like the speaker, of where we shall finally emerge” (248). Like Augustine’s Confessions and Petrarch’s Canzoniere, we as readers are overhearing a conversation or confession which thereby denies any claim that it is trying to tell us as observers anything about that man or to defend him to us.

The poet, by claiming that he is unqualified for the job of elegist, displays uncertainty about what it is that constitutes authority. Donald M. Friedman argues,

We cannot help noting that the thoroughly conventional disclaimer of the traditional elegist—the pretense that he is unqualified to praise the subject of his elegy adequately—is here transformed into a trope that is both wider in reference and more intensely—almost crudely—personal than the tradition would seem to allow. The poet is unready, not because King’s virtues are beyond his powers to celebrate . . ., but because he has not yet arrived at a desired state of “ripeness.” We are made to feel the force of his desire for that ripeness without being told in what it consists or how it will be recognized. (283)

Friedman’s observation is an important one because it demonstrates the poet’s ambiguity in defining just what would make him ready to declare himself a poet; perhaps the disclaimer simply reflects the fact that the poet himself is reluctant to claim authority because he is not sure what constitutes authority on earth: is it God’s place to judge, or that of the poet’s audience or peers’, or can the poet ever know when he is ripe enough? Furthermore, as Friedman notes, the poet’s exclamation that King “hath not left his peer” is “strangely ambiguous in context” (283). It seems that the poet celebrating King is not willing to admit exactly where in the hierarchy of poets he places Lycidas, perhaps because the poet sees himself as superior.
After the speaker has submitted his rhetorical appeal, he belatedly invokes the “Sisters of the sacred well” (l.15) to sing their song and make their music for King. The poet will not allow them any “denial vain” or “coy excuse” (l. 18) just as he supposedly would not allow it of himself, though the Muses would have no reason to feel they should decline the task with excuses. The real reason behind the poem is then revealed, as many critics since E.M.W. Tillyard have agreed: to promote the poet-speaker more than to commemorate the death of King. Petrarch’s sonnets often serve a similar function. Sonnet 292, in particular, ostensibly commemorates Laura’s death, but in actuality glorifies the poet’s abilities:

Those eyes of which I spoke so warmly, and the arms and the hands and the feet and the face that had so estranged me from myself and isolated me from other people,

the curling locks of pure shining gold, and the lightning of the angelic smile that used to make paradise on earth, all are a bit of dust that feels nothing.

And I still live, at which I am sorrowful and angry, left without the light I loved so, in a great tempest and a dismasted ship.

Now here let there be an end to my song of love; dry is the vein Of my accustomed wit, and my lyre is turned to weeping.

Again, the focus of this poem is less the lost loved one and more the poet and his trade. As William Kennedy notes, the “topoi [of the woman’s body parts] function less as attributes of the beloved than as objects of the speaker’s discourse. . . The nature of discourse itself furnishes the poem’s topic as Laura drops out of the action” (13). So also the swain of Lycidas focuses more on his discourse, and his dead friend becomes simply the object whereby he questions this discourse.

The paradox for the God-praising poet lies in his desire to master language and his knowledge that this is an impossible task unless one is God. “Although it suffers aphasia on the subject of God, language is simultaneously the indispensable but incomplete instrument of communication, of praise, and of prayer,” argues Alexandre Leupin (58). And God’s language
is silence as we would understand it, but silence to a poet is death. Leupin explains Augustine’s theory: “Divine language is opposed to human language in each of its characteristics. Being without history (having no crime or desire), it goes inhumanly beyond the signifier, beyond difference, and beyond the sign. It is the language without language, because a timeless, eternal language could only be a silent one” (59). As Augustine himself writes:

> It is in this way, then, that you mean us to understand your Word, who is God with you, God with God, your Word uttered eternally in whom all things are uttered eternally. For your word is not speech in which each part comes to an end when it has been spoken, giving place to the next, so that finally the whole may be uttered. In your word all is uttered at one and the same time, yet eternally. If it were not so, your Word would be subject to time and change, and therefore would be neither truly eternal nor truly immortal. (qtd. in Leupin 59-60)

Though the speaker in *Lycidas* may feel himself to be a superior poet to his dead friend, he does seem to have found a comrade in the pious King, as neither partook in the dancing and revelry of the “Rough Satyrs” (l.34), their classmates at Cambridge. Just as the poet feels insecure and excluded from the lovers and ladies in his *Canzone*, Milton must have found comfort in the companionship of a young man who sought a holy life as well.

Another benefit of chaste piety for the poet is a sense of martyrdom and safety from the messiness of erotic consummation. As the poet asks in the sixth verse paragraph, “What boots it with uncessant care / To tend the homely slighted Sheperds trade, And strictly meditate the thankless Muse” (ll. 64-66)? Just as the Petrarchan lover bemoans his unrequited love, the “uncouth swain” laments the bootless labor of the chaste shepherd for the “thankless Muse,” thereby martyring himself and releasing himself from any claim that he seeks self-fulfillment through his art: he simply serves a heartless, ungrateful and unrepentant woman. This muse, furthermore, will always remain distant and unenjoyed, thereby securing the poet’s future as bard.

While all the other young men seem to be having fun with Amaryllis or Neaera, the chaste Shepherd must “scorn delights, and live laborious days” (l. 71); he is stuck guarding his sheep, which represent alternately either his verses or the readers his verse serves, as, like the Good Shepherd, he seeks to save people from themselves. To add insult to injury, just when the poet thinks he has achieved fame, “Comes the blind Fury with th’abhorred shears, / And slits the
thin-spun life” (ll. 74-75). However, similar to Patience’s prevenient grace in Sonnet XIX, Apollo, god of poetry, quickly interjects to comfort the poet that, though life may be lost, “not the praise” (l. 76):

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
Nor in the glistering foil
Set off to th’world, nor in broad rumour lies,
But lives and spreds aloft by those pure eyes,
And perfet witness of all judging Jove;
As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
Of so much fame in Heav’n expect thy meed. (ll.78-84)

Much as the prophet is never respected in his own country (Luke 4:24), the poet is told that fame will be his reward in Heaven. Thus, the poet martyrs himself again to his cause, saying that, though until this point in the poem he has sought earthly fame, now he is told that his fame will come after death, as the poet claims to hope that Edward King’s will. In this way, the poet also releases himself from dependence on worldly affirmation, much as the Petrarchan poet, who prefers to address God rather than rely on the judgment of his peers.

Donald Friedman has observed that a large focus of the poem is on righteous or justified poetry versus erotic or sinful poetry. “In short,” he argues, “the pastoral pretense begins to dissolve into a discussion of what it means to be a poet in England in 1637” (287). By comparing his “homely slighted Shepherds trade” to the eroticism of his peers who “sport with Amaryllis . . ./ Or with the tangles of Neaera’s hair” he attributes moral value to the former, turpitude to the latter. Moreover, the poet’s reference to the fate of Orpheus, Friedman says, “reflects. . .the swain’s changing awareness” of contemporary reception of poetry.

As Catherine Belsey has noted, “Throughout Milton’s poetry there is a parallel between . . . bad poets and bad clergy” (29). By having St. Peter interject with his condemnation of corrupt clergy, the poet subtly blurs the distinction between the religious vocation of (“good”) clergy and his own vocation as poet, thus cementing in readers’ minds the value of the poet-qua-shepherd’s contribution to the deliverance of humankind. As noted in the introduction, often self-awareness resulted from the writer’s need to disengage himself from the religious establishment of the time. The denunciation of the Anglican clergy in this poem, then, has led the poet to a firmer awareness of his identity as poet and also to the need to justify his calling in light of
contemporary abuses of religious or linguistic power. But he wonders about the rewards of such a calling: “[t]he question he asks himself is not simply whether one kind of poetry is better than another, but whether the kind of poetry he knows to be better is worth pursuing if his labors and his achieved excellence are never to be given due praise” (Friedman 288).

Many critics have discussed the textual significance of the shift in voice at line 165, in which the poet steps back from his personal involvement in the poem and speaks to, not for, the “woful Shepherds” with whom he has associated himself until now. It seems that the force of divine revelation has chosen him, set him apart, inspired him and lifted him above the earthly sorrow of his fellow shepherds (perhaps the other poets at Cambridge who were composing verses in memory of King). Thus the poet elevates himself to the level of biblical prophet, taking on the omniscient tone of a preacher. He has left the hills and valleys for a moment and has been “mounted high” (l. 172) himself, made privy to the celestial scene so that he may show us where Lycidas has gone and what he is doing:

So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walk’d the waves:
Where other groves, and other streams along,
With Nectar pure his oozy Lock’s he laves,
And hears the unexpressive nuptial Song,
In the blest Kingdom meek of joy and love.
There entertain him all the Saints above,
In solemn troops, and sweet Societies
That sing, and singing in their glory move,
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes. (ll.172-180)

The poet himself has been given a vision of Heaven and hears the nuptial song, though he (unlike King) does not have to die to receive the gift. Moreover, his poem accomplishes the same feat that the song of the angels does, in that its “glory move[s]” the mortal shepherds to cease their grieving: “Now Lycidas the Shepherds weep no more./ Hence forth thou art the Genius of the shore. . .” (ll. 181-182) The poet’s inspired song even has the power to make Lycidas henceforth the “Genius of the shore.” It is (purposefully) unclear, then, whether Lycidas’ “recompense,” his heavenly reward, is given by God or by the poet.
It is clear, however, that the linguistic project is Petrarchan in that the poet desires to be autonomous creator, master of language and meaning. We see this in Petrarch’s poetry as well. For example, William J. Kennedy, in his discussion of Sonnet 354 in the *Canzoniere*, argues that “its speaker frames the issue [of the poem] as a literary problem. . .His problem is specifically one of speaking about Laura. . .and of hitting the mark with his words” (12):

Ah, reach your hand to my weary mind, Love, and to my tired frail style, to speak of her who has become immortal and a citizen of the heavenly kingdom;

grant, Lord, that my speech may hit the target of her praises, where by itself it cannot rise, since virtue and beauty equal to hers were never in the world, which was not worthy to have her.

He replies: “All that Heaven and I can do, and good counsel and virtuous life, all was in her whom Death has taken from us;

“there has never been a form equal to hers, not since the day when Adam first opened his eyes; and let this now suffice: weeping I say it, and do you weeping write.”

The same linguistic aim of this poet was recognized by sixteenth-century commentator Andrea Gesualdo as well, who noted that Petrarch’s use of the word “segno” for “target” in “target of her praises” also meant “sign”. Gesualdo writes, “*segno*, as I remember having said elsewhere, is that place where our thoughts and all our purposes terminate, by analogy with that target where all arrows aim to strike” (qtd. in Kennedy 12). As Kennedy argues, “Petrarch’s speaker wills that his discourse might approximate and then become one with the *segno* of Laura. . . Laura may be a moving target, and death may have stolen her from sight, but love continues to motivate the speaker to track her intelligibility in poetic language” (12-13). Whether the poet is motivated by love or simply poetic ambition, it is evident that his aim and the aim of the Miltonic speaker are the same: to become one with the object of desire through the use of one’s language.

Donald Friedman notes the anxiety that the poet must feel in taking on such power, but does not acknowledge that in fact the poet glories in taking on such a “burden” and will continue his attempt to recreate the music of heaven:
The poet knows that the “solemn troops, and sweet Societies” to which Lycidas has been assimilated “sing, and singing in their glory move,” but the song itself is beyond his powers to imitate. Nevertheless, he accepts the burden, which must have been deeply vexing for Milton, of sustaining both the memory and the prophetic vision of that song in poetry which he knows to be only a shadow of its harmonious source. (298)

By switching abruptly to a third-person omniscient narrator in line 185, the poet again quickly distances himself from the claims of the ambitious poet. He also is able to revel in our surprise at seeing his omniscience and the way, as readers, we have been mistaken about the identity of the speaker. The Petrarchan lover in Sonnet 16 achieves a similar linguistic coup; he presents a sacred pilgrimage only to undermine its piety by comparing it to his search for Laura:

The little white-haired pale old man leaves the sweet place where he has filled out his age and his fear-stricken little family, who watch their dear father disappear;

thence dragging his ancient flanks through the last days of his life, as much as he can he helps himself with good will, broken by the years and tired by the road;

and he comes to Rome, following his desire, to gaze on the likeness of Him whom he hopes to see again up there in Heaven.

Thus, alas, at times I go searching in others, Lady, as much as is Possible, for your longed-for true form.

Just as the mention of the uncouth swain surprises the reader at the end of Lycidas, in a sense negating the sacred image of Heaven that his words presented, so does the Petrarchan lover switch tones from presenting a pious old man on a pilgrimage to St. Peter’s basilica to a lover who unceasingly attempts to create or represent his “longed-for true form” through formless words. The end result of both poems is to undermine the reader’s sense of moral certainty by juxtaposing the sacred and the profane. R.L. Brett notes,

Yet we see in these final lines the paradox that underlies the whole poem. The poet dismisses the pastoral, but he does it while playing the part of the shepherd, just as the poem repudiates pastoralism while remaining formally within this genre. This may be
because the conflict in Milton’s mind was not fully resolved, or because he was still uncertain of how to reconcile his poetic vocation with his Christian belief. (47) Catherine Belsey observes anxiety within the entire poem about the “power of poetry” to make any difference. She notes that the reference to Calliope and her helplessness regarding her son Orpheus’ death demonstrates Milton’s knowledge that in some cases, not even the muse herself can control or eliminate death. Just as the *Canzoniere* revisits the theme of the efficacy of poetry in healing wounds, *Lycidas* is obsessed with just how far poetry can go to preserve one’s life. In fact, as I have acknowledged, poetry can serve as a fetish or an idol. Even the poet in *Lycidas* recognizes that his poetry can be merely a way to “dally with false surmise” (l. 153). Whereas in *The Nativity Ode*, Belsey argues, presence is re-presented, in *Lycidas* the “unexpressive nuptiall Song” remains in heaven. . .[and thus demonstrates that] Presence has left the earth. There remains in this world only a textuality from which the certainty of truth has fled, enchantment which may prove to be a ‘false surmise’” (31).
CHAPTER THREE

“WITH GODS TO SIT THE HIGHEST”: PARADISE LOST AND THE SATANIC POET

In *God, Man, and Satan* Roland Frye writes that “the purpose of the Satanic symbol, as developed in Christianity and as projected by Milton, is an interpretation of a certain type of life, a type which is always present as an open alternative for man, and of the relation which it produces between Creator and creature on one level, and between creature and creature on another” (25). I would like to examine the ways that, in *Paradise Lost*, Satan reifies and ennobles the self-obsessed suffering poet of the Petrarchan tradition, as well as the ways that by both identifying with and differentiating himself from this figure, Milton the poet negotiates his role as ambitious Christian poet.

Perhaps one of Milton’s most recognizable qualities is his ambivalence. As Ilona Bell has pointed out, Milton rejects Petrarchan love poetry (of the kind he wrote in the *1645 Poems*) in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*: the “Serenate, which the starv’d Lover sings/ To his proud fair, best quitted with disdain” (ll. 769-770). However, though Milton the Christian can feel righteous in denouncing such a relationship, in his work the poet tends to subscribe to the underlying idolatrous, linguistic paradigm that Petrarchism established. While Milton may not write love poetry to a cruel woman, he sees himself as the suffering, unrequited servant of the Muse, whether he calls her Urania, the Spirit, or God. Thus, though he openly criticizes Satan’s self-pity, much of his work exhibits the same self-indulgent attitude in the name of God. There is a sense in which, in Christian morality, humility and the kind of poetic aspiration professed in the opening of this epic are mutually exclusive.

David Mikics argues that Milton’s anxiety was the result of incomplete internalization of Lacan’s Symbolic social responsibility, that his Imaginary existed “in antagonism to the social forces that argue against it and attempt to construct it as a responsible entity.” As a result, Mikics contends, “even in his striving for the chaste inwardness of moral autonomy, [Milton] knows that the superego remains to some degree an alien presence. . .[Thus,] Milton’s poetry, with its emphasis on the tragic situation of a separated or discontinuous self, dramatizes the strife between the superego’s authority and a resistant subjectivity” (5-6). This battle between the moralizing superego and Milton’s interior drive toward autonomy culminates most powerfully in *Paradise Lost*’s antihero. A closer investigation of Satan and his relationship to the rest of the
characters, including the narrator, reveals the many ways Milton both identified with and feared the Christian adversary. As it would be impossible in one chapter to exhaust this subject, I have chosen key moments in the text which I believe to be most clearly suggestive of Milton’s interior struggles as poet and Christian.

Milton’s relationship to Urania, his Muse, conveys much of the insecurity and division evident in his early romantic sonnets. Scholars have noted Milton’s awareness that “Urania was to be approached with fervor, and at the same time with an awareness of the spiritual danger attending to the flight into her realm” (Fixler 184). In addition, “his simultaneous attraction toward and fear of Urania” has been noted (Flinker 90), as well as the sexual connotations of both poetic generation and the creation of the universe. I see in the poet’s relationship to the muse a need to displace much of the narrator’s insecurity about his poetry and his ambition, a self-consciousness we have seen often in the works examined thus far.

The epic invocation of *Paradise Lost*, though it follows the tradition of Homer and Virgil in calling on the assistance of a Muse, diverges from the tradition in one key aspect: unlike classical epics, this poem will not celebrate the pagan gods and heroes of antiquity nor seek to establish their values in the minds of the epic’s readers; rather, it will seek, by exposing the sins of Satan and Man, to discourage pride, ambition and sinfulness while justifying the ways of God to men. This major difference in epic thrust creates problems for the epic poet who also calls himself a Christian, for the purposes of the epic poet are vastly different from those of a Christian preacher who seeks to glorify God and only God and to teach mankind humility. As we witnessed in *Lycidas*, in many ways Milton saw his role as poet-prophet as analogous to that of Christian clergy. Thus, while a preacher can cling to the idea of a tragic hero and, like Homer, warn his readers against Achillean behavior, he cannot fully embrace the pagan, humanistic conventions associated with epic poetry. This is why a Christian poet, who claims to be writing a poem to defend God and his actions, does not actually speak to God as “God” until the seventeenth line. Though nominally invoking a “Heav’nly Muse”, the poem opens much more like an actual Greek epic than an epic seeking to, as the poet claims, “soar / Above th’ Aonian Mount” (l.15; emphasis added). The poet commands the Heavenly Muse (only later called the Holy Spirit), to “Sing”—he does not pray as a supplicant that the Holy Spirit might grant him his request; rather, he commands the Spirit to sing as if it were a lesser goddess. In fact, as Barbara Lewalski notes, “he explicitly dissociates her from DuBartas’ ‘heedful Muse’—restricted to the
‘Middle Region’ of God’s created universe lest she sin by presumption” (“Rhetoric” 30). Milton’s muse then is divorced, from the beginning, from Christian theology and humility.

Harry Berger explores the question of Milton’s satanic tendencies, especially in relation to the poet’s invocation of Urania:

If the muse descends [as the poet requests], then the poem may be a symbol of what is substantially real, more real than itself; it will be, for all its size, like a sacramental ark.

If the muse does not descend, the poem may be a vast and glittering Pandemonium, an externalization of the satanic forces within the poet’s soul. (492)

While the poet claims that his ambition is to teach humanity as Moses had, the key difference is that Moses was, in Christian teaching, chosen by God—he did not volunteer himself. Thus, what seems a prayer of humble access is in reality a great ambition “To set himself in Glory above his Peers” (l.39). As Robert McMahon has noted, “The Bard’s epic aspirations...frequently conflict with his Christianity in Books I and II... What is more, neither the poet nor we ourselves can tell to what extent Books I and II represent his prophetic vision of Hell or his epic ambitions projected through the demons” (63-64). Just as the Petrarchan poet is often ambiguous in his attitude toward his own sin, what may seem initially Milton’s prayer of humble access becomes a wish to soar above heaven. Moreover, though he also invokes the aid of the Holy Spirit, the poet cannot truly desire what he prays for, that “the Spirit will reorder his chaos and raise his lowness, creating in him a new nature able to produce the universe of his poem” (Lewalski “Rhetoric” 30-31), because to accomplish his goal means self-annihilation.

By acknowledging his human sinfulness and aligning himself with fallen mankind at the poem’s opening, the narrator achieves the sympathy of his “fit though few” Christian readers. Milton, an expert rhetorician, channels Cicero when he professes to justify the ways of God to men: “Love is won if you are thought to be upholding the interests of your audience, or to be working for good men, or at any rate for such as that audience deems good and useful” (Cicero, qtd. in Kennedy “Norms” 10). The use of the word “our” in describing mankind’s “woe” in a very real way engages the sympathy of the reader, as all humankind suffers as a result of the fall; the poet also openly acknowledges his own fallenness. Moreover, Kevin Dunn argues that in fact Milton “reject[s] the modesty topos” and contends that “[b]y 1665, Milton’s sense of his own election had made any pretense of modesty seem a slight to God’s plan” (51). Perhaps the
sense of one’s election to greatness so vital to Calvinism allowed Milton then to justify his own ambition.

In Book I, Satan daydreams about his future battles with God:

Fall’n Cherube, to be weak is miserable
Doing or Suffering: but of this be sure,
To do aught good will never be our task,
But ever to do ill our sole delight,
As being the contrary to his high will
Whom we resist. If then his Providence
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
Our labour must be to pervert that end,
And out of good still to find means of evil;
Which oft times may succeed, so as perhaps
Shall grieve him, if I fail not, and disturb
His inmost counsels from thir destind aim. (ll.157-168)

Most critics read this passage as the narrator cleverly portraying Satan’s self-delusion or doubt, as Flannagan has: “The four qualifying words or phrases, ‘If then,’ ‘may,’ ‘perhaps,’ and ‘if I fail not,’ betray the fact that Satan is again expressing only self-doubt, not conviction” (359). However, I propose the opposite: though Satan cannot be sure that his daydream will become reality, since he is not omniscient, what he dreams would have been, to any Puritan of Milton’s time, a fairly accurate picture of reality, which is to say that the devil and his party (including the unelect) were constantly on the lookout for ways to make evil out of good, or to pervert God’s will and draw God’s people away from the righteous life. As Joseph Bentham, a Puritan vicar and royalist, wrote in *Christian Conflict*: “There have been and while the world stands there will be two sides in the church militant, the seed of the woman and the serpent’s, twixt which there is constant enmity. . . And the true church upon earth hath always had and shall always have adversaries and enemies” (qtd. in Lake 152). Though the elect had been saved by Christ, they “remained. . . subject both to the demands of the moral law and to sin, in the sense that they, along with the rest of fallen humanity, would remain prone to disobey God until they died” (Lake 172). In this way, rather than depict Satan as delusional, Milton shows how powerful and real the spiritual battle between good and evil still was to contemporary Christians.
Robert McMahon notes another aspect in Book I of the poet’s satanic leanings; he tracks the shifts of verb tense and point of view for traces of the poet’s sympathy:

In *Paradise Lost*, where an oral Bard is composing his poem in an ongoing present, the poet’s shift to the historic present represents his own, as well as our “tracking forward” [in the sense of a cinematic close-up] into the action. This shift suggests his greater sympathy with his characters or his involvement in their actions, which is then communicated to us. In other words, the Bard is not a writer who can manipulate the perspective and point of view of his audience from a contemplative distance that allows for the reconsideration and revision of what he has written. Rather, he is envisioning his characters and action now, and his tracking forward and backward imply the flow and ebb of his own sympathy and involvement. (64-65)

In order for this observation to be accurate, one must agree with McMahon and Anne Ferry that Milton is the author *behind* the poem and that the narrator of *Paradise Lost* is a different subject, the Bard, who exists in the present and is even now composing the epic. Milton in fact may be consciously portraying his narrator as sympathetic to Satan (as Dante often does in the *Inferno* by having Dante the pilgrim sympathize with sinners he encounters) in order to highlight his metatextual awareness of the sinful tendencies of both his persona and his audience. According to the verb tense shifts in Books I and II, then, Milton the Bard must be deeply invested in the action of Satan, which explains why he tells so much of Satan’s story in an epic supposedly about *Man’s* first disobedience.

It is not only Satan who displays Petrarchan tendencies in the poem, however. Mammon, a lesser demon who appears during the Council of Hell, represents the fetishization of worldly rewards, especially in the sense of Petrarchan laurels, for he proposes that the fallen angels use their powers to create “great things” (l. 268) out of the surroundings to which they have been exiled:

Let us . . ./ seek
Our own good from our selves, and from our own
Live to our selves, though in this vast recess,
Free, and to none accountable, preferring
Hard liberty before the easie yoke
Of servile Pomp. Our greatness will appeer
Then most conspicuous, when great things of small,
Useful of hurtful, prosperous of adverse
We can create. . . (ll.249, 252-260)

Here, stated succinctly by a fallen angel, is the hope and the purpose of the most narcissistic
tendencies in Petrarchism and its ideal of self-differentiation: to live for oneself, accountable to
no higher authority but that which one deems deserving, and to make out of small worldly things
or of (self-imposed) suffering “great things”—for the Petrarchan poet, this will be a self or
“selves” and a body of written work which describes that self. 4

For Satan, the body which comes out of self-imposed suffering is literally the body of
Sin, whose account of her birth and rape occurs in Book II (ll. 648-849). At the very moment
that Satan first decides to rebel against God, Sin says, she springs from the devil’s head, the site
of his intellect. She says to Satan, who does not recognize her upon meeting her again:

Has thou forgot me then, and do I seem
Now in thine eye so foul, once deemd so fair
In Heav’n, when at th’ Assembly, and in sight
Of all the Seraphim with thee combin’d
In bold conspiracy against Heav’ns King,
All on a sudden miserable pain
Surpris’d thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzie swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side op’n ing wide,
Likest to thee in shape and count’ nance bright. . . (ll. 746-755)

Not only is Sin the physical embodiment of the result of separation from God, she is also the
lady once desired, then obtained, who loses all desirability. Her speech here is full of ambiguity,
which further highlights the indeterminateness of fallen language. Though the lines “in sight/ Of
all the Seraphim with thee combin’d/ In bold conspiracy against Heav’ns King” are meant to

4 Incidentally, the “easie yoke” of which Mammon speaks is all the more ironic because he anticipates Matthew
11:30, “for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” before he should be able to, as a fallen angel.
portray Satan with his fellow rebels, the syntax of the sentence also suggests the active role Sin could have taken, while still inside Satan’s head, in “bold conspiracy” against God; perhaps it is she who “combin’d” with Satan in sight of the other rebels. Very often in Petrarchism, woman is both the compulsion and occasion to sin. In the poet’s case, woman leads him to suffering, which leads him to create poetry from that suffering out of his intellect. Sin here is simply the physical embodiment of this self-generative process, for the fault lies within the poet’s own mind.

Likewise, Noam Flinker points out that “Satan’s incestuous affair with his daughter Sin provides the most striking instance of manipulative masculinity based upon Petrarchan rhetoric” (86). Though Flinker argues, convincingly, that Satan in these lines “oozes with the self-centeredness of the courtly lover paying false compliments to his lady for his own selfish purposes”, he neglects to observe that Sin, in this paradigm, is a powerful figure of what consummation of desire ultimately entails (86). As William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden have pointed out, in Renaissance antifruition poetry, “sexual consummation is short, depleting, dulling” (34). Thus, death (or alternately, le petit mort of sexual release) is the natural consequence of the object of desire having been enjoyed: the fruit of the union of Petrarchan lover and lady would be death. By extension, then, as in the story of Narcissus, “the coincidence of self and self’s image is nothing less than . . . death”; for the poet truly to “represent” his self, to eliminate the distance, the difference, between words and things, between the image of himself that he creates and his actual self, would be to see the emptiness that Narcissus saw (Mazzotta 280). Alternately, for the poet to truly “realize” his self is to annihilate the need for his vocation. Sin even describes herself as “Likest to thee [Satan] in shape and count’nance bright” (l. 755). Thus, as Flannagan puts it, “In becoming enamored of her, or lusting after her, Satan loves himself” (403). In Paradise Lost, the fruit of the “coincidence of self [Satan] and self’s image [Sin]” (to use Mazzotta’s phrase), is literally Death. And it is in the moment that Satan turns away from God and begins his rebellion that Sin springs from his head, just as the Petrarchan poet comes into being when he turns his focus inward.

Like Satan, the Petrarchan poet at his most self-obsessed fears little because his overweening pride does not allow him to imagine that anything could injure him, for he values nothing outside of himself. Even in moments where he seems to grant power to the lady, the fear
he has of her ability to wound him is merely a rhetorical device for highlighting his poetic power or his pitiable suffering. Anger and indignation take the place of fear:

Th’undaunted Fiend what this might be admir’d,

Admir’d, not fear’d; God and his Son except,

Created thing naught valu’d he nor shun’d;

And with disdainful look thus first began. . .

Incenst with indignation Satan stood

Unterrifi’d. . .(II. ll. 676-679, 707-708)

Instead of fear, which acknowledges weakness, the proud figure feels only indignation, for his life is a study in injured pride, a feeling of having been slighted or injured by someone else, whether it be God or, for the Petrarchan poet, a lady, or both; in Poem 236 of the Canzoniere, the poet demands, “make her pardon herself for my transgressions”, or (in Poem 239) he laments the “cruel fortune” which forces the poet to “woo a deaf and rigid soul/ who esteems neither the power of Love nor his notes”. Similarly, as Satan places the blame on others besides himself (and fallen Adam and Eve will do the same), the Petrarchan lover blames Laura for his suffering:

. . .if to love another more than oneself—if to be always sighing and

weeping, feeding on sorrow and anger and trouble—

if to burn from afar and freeze close by—if these are the causes

that I untune myself with love, yours will be the blame, Lady,

mine the loss. (Sonnet 224; ll.9-14)

The beginning of Book III, as Barbara Lewalski notes, features “the narrative. . .personal myth of the Bard’s own ‘heroic’ poetic journey” (“Rhetoric” 31-32). However, she argues, Milton is careful to dissociate his “dark descent” from those of Orpheus and Satan, “for he has not sought love or esoteric knowledge in the dark places. . . He resembles instead the pilgrim-poet Dante, who also undertook his journey under the guidance of a heavenly lady-muse. . .” (32). Simply dissociating himself from the first two and aligning himself with Dante, though, does not guarantee that the poet’s motives are pure and selfless, for Dante has been accused of
just as much hubris and self-seeking in the composition of his epic and in the praises he grants himself as poet therein. Instead, this part of the proem displays just as much anxiety on the part of the Christian poet who, it seems, protests too much.

In Book III we also witness another instance of the poet attempting to re-present heavenly language and song:

Thee Father first they sung Omnipotent,
Immutable, Immortal, Infinite,
Eternal King; thee Author of all being,
Fountain of Light, thy self invisible. . .
Thee next they sang of all Creation first,
Begotten Son, Divine Similitude,
In whose conspicuous count’rance, without cloud
Made visible, th’Almighty Father shines,
Whom else no Creature can behold. . . (ll. 371-374, 382-386)

Several aspects of this paean reflect the poet’s aspiration, much as in Lycidas, to express the unexpressive in fallen language; again, the angels do not sing about, they merely sing. The epithets that the poet chooses to represent God are themselves intangible and abstract, inexpressible, paradoxical. By line 410 the poet has joined with the singing choirs of angels (“O unexampl’d love”), and with a passion that seems unbounded the poet renews an inclination that we were not aware had waned, that of praising the Lord without ceasing. Such is the power of his own rhetoric, the poet demonstrates, that he has overwhelmed himself by the picture his own song has presented.

Ironically, just a few lines later the poet describes the result of vain strivings with language after the fall (incidentally, the time in which the actual narrator of Paradise Lost is writing):

. . .when Sin
With vanity had filld the works of men:
Both all things vain, and all who in vain things
Built their fond hopes of Glorie or lasting fame,
Or happiness in this or th’other life;
All who have thir reward on Earth, the fruits
Of painful Superstition and blind Zeal

Naught seeking but the praise of men. . . (ll. 447-452)

What is the poet’s desire but this “fond” (echoing the use of the word in Sonnet XIX) ambition for worldly fame? Is the Canzoniere then just another Tower of Babel? If so, then what is this epic? Should we read anything into the use of the phrase “blind Zeal” after we have just witnessed a zealous hymn by a blind bard?

In Book IV Satan, in a very physical way, transgresses the bounds of the sacred space of Eden, and looks on the naked Adam and Eve as a desire-filled voyeur much like the Petrarchan poet; for example, in his analysis of the 52nd poem of Petrarch’s Canzoniere, Giuseppe Mazzotta argues that Actaeon “is the metaphor for the [Petrarchan] poet, the voyeur who sees unseen Diana’s nakedness and transgresses the bounds of the sacred space that must remain inaccessible to him” (283). Milton presents Satan similarly as he spies on Adam and Eve:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native Honour clad
In naked Majestie seemd Lords of all,
And worthie seemd, for in thir looks Divine
The image of thir glorious Maker shon. . .
His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar’d
Absolute rule; and Hyacinthin Locks
Round from his parted forelock manly hung
Clustring, but not beneath his shoulders broad:
Shee as a vail down to the slender waste
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Disheveld, but in wanton ringlets wav’d

As the Vine curles her tendrils. . .(288-292, 300-307)

Satan, as the fallen, internally-divided Petrarchan lover, presents us with a fragmented view of the Garden and of its inhabitants. Nancy J. Vickers and Elizabeth Cropper have explored at length the Petrarchan mode of fragmentation: “Laura is always presented as a part or parts of a woman. When more than one part figures in a single poem, a sequential, inclusive ordering is never stressed. Her textures are those of metals and stones; her image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful disassociated objects” (Abel 96). Likewise, the narrator, through Satan’s
eyes, dismembers Adam and Eve and presents us only with the parts of each that he deems important; whereas Adam warrants a description of his “fair large Front” and “Eye sublime” and “Hyacinthin Locks” and “shoulders broad”, Eve is merely a vision of golden, “wanton ringlets” to a “slender waste”, much like those of Petrarch’s Laura, as Ilona Bell has observed.

Much Milton criticism over the last fifteen years has focused on Milton’s attitude towards women and sexuality. Regardless of whether or not Milton was a misogynist, it becomes clear that in his Petrarchan struggle with desire and ambition, any “other” (whether it be a woman, another man, or God) can serve as his object of desire-cum-mirror of self-reflection/differentiation. The important thing here is that his vision of Adam and Eve serves only to highlight Satan’s misery, as he sees “undelighted all delight” (l. 286), another Petrarchan-style paradox.

Once he recovers his senses, Satan curses his state much like the Petrarchan poet, speaking to Adam and Eve without directly addressing them. As Roy Flannagan notes about Satan’s “Hell shall unfold” speech: “Even in soliloquy, Satan lies utterly about his own motives, in this imaginary discussion with Adam and Eve, since he claims he is corrupting them out of ‘public reason’ . . . which only covers his base motives of envy and revenge” (454). However, this sort of self-serving justification is not unlike the various excuses Milton the poet has given in and for his own poetry and prose.

After Eve tells her creation story and she and Adam embrace, Satan makes a speech which seems to be the diabolical, fully-realized echo of the sense of envy and self-loathing that the young Milton expressed in his Canzone, which is just as much a poem defending his right to write about love as it is to write in Italian, the language of love. Satan is truly Petrarchan in his awareness of his unfulfilled desire, his jealousy and his self-pity:

Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two
Imparadis’t in one anothers arms
The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill
Of bliss on bliss, while I to Hell am thrust
Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,
Among our other torments not the least,
Still unfulfill’d with pain of longing pines. . . (ll. 505-511)
This complaint that Satan voices echoes that of the Petrarchan lover in Poem 251: “O wretched, horrible vision!” and in Poem 57: “my desire mounts and grows” and in Poem 50: “Miserable me!” When Satan realizes “Myself am Hell” he realizes, like the Petrarchan lover, that “one can be miserable in a pleasant place” (Poem 105).

After his Petrarchan complaint, Satan then says to Adam and Eve, “enjoy, till I return, / Short pleasures, for long woes are to succeed” (ll.534-535). Ilona Bell argues, . . .at this very moment active resistance to Petrarchism is urgently required for the first time in the poem; for as the lovers are falling asleep, Satan is plotting to transform their fill of “bliss on bliss” into the endless frustrations of Petrarchism. . .trying to insinuate “distemper’d, discontented thoughts, / Vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires / Blown up with high conceits ingend’ring pride” (IV, 807-09), echoing the vain hopes and vain sorrows. . .that Petrarch immortalizes in his opening sonnet. (109)

However, the narrator of Paradise Lost may be accounted just as eager to see the lovers fall, because his poem obsessively recreates and retells its occurrence with all the longing of the Petrachan lover. Perhaps, like Satan, the narrator feels alone and envious of their prelapsarian love, but he attempts to speak through a character so demonic that he as Christian could never be associated with him (though sentiments of later critics such as Blake would prove otherwise). Though the narrator may disavow Satan’s “Petrarchan idolatry [which] violates the woman it so mystically exalts by subjecting . . .[her] . . .to the admiring male gaze” (Bell 110), this is exactly what the narrator does in the poem, though, instead of taking responsibility he projects onto Satan as he earlier had the Muse.

In Book V, the poet turns to Adam and Eve, describing the ways that they praise their Maker:

. . .each Morning duly paid
In various style, for neither various style
Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise
Thir Maker, in fit strains pronounc’t or sung
Unmeditated, such prompt eloquence
Flow’d from their lips, in Prose of numerous Verse
More tuneable then needed Lute or Harp
To add more sweetness. . . (ll. 145-152)
The admiration in the poet’s voice for the skill of Adam and Eve is evident; it is the kind of skill that every poetic virtuoso aspires to: an eloquence that requires no premeditation, no revision or accompaniment. The “various style,” a phrase also immortalized in the *Canzoniere* (cf. Poem 1: “del vario stile in ch’io piango”) seems to be a facility with different genres that Milton hoped he too had achieved. The paradox is, though, that in trying to reproduce their song, the poet must use words like “Unspeakable” because he has not their eloquence or their unfallen language at his disposal, though as Roy Flannagan contends, in this passage the poet does correlate “Adam and Eve’s method of spontaneous prayer with his own method of composing poetry in the epic” (480). However, I believe Milton acknowledged the fact that his poetry was not always spontaneous, for he seems uncomfortable with the similarity between his careful rhetoric and the deceptive rhetoric of the satanic-Petrarchan poet. For as Robert Entzminger notes, A part of the innocence, surely, of Eve’s behavior just prior to the Fall, as well as with the “curiosity” and “uxoriousness” Adam betrays in his conversation with Raphael, is the absence of calculation. There is no attempt to manipulate the auditor or to deceive, but only to reveal one’s thoughts more fully. (25)

An ambitious poet would never subscribe to this sort of innocence, for his fame comes from his ability to manipulate language and the reader’s perceptions. Thus, Milton the poet, while admiring the verbal facility of Adam and Eve, on earth must depend on the distance between words and their meanings. Entzminger says of Satan’s lieutenant in Book V that he “begins to use words more for their effect than for their ability to reveal the self” and of Satan himself that he “[m]anipulat[es] diction and syntax” (46). Is not this the goal of the accomplished poet? Milton has shown himself to be aware of this in his expert exploitation of the sonnet form in the *1645 Poems*. The key difference between Adam and Eve and Milton seems to be that, as Entzminger puts it, their “ability to confess the limits of their perception to see, of their speech to express, the extent of God’s goodness. . .that the Creator is at best ‘dimly seen’ in his works, that in himself his wonder is ‘Unspeakable’” (26). The poet does not recognize such limits, or if he does recognize them, refuses to accept them.

Book VII’s account of the Creation, as Stephen Wigler proves, “clearly demonstrates the synonymity of the Son’s articulation and of Creation. His language is powerful because it is the truth. His words are what they signify. . .” (158). Thus, Satan’s challenging of God is really a challenge to God’s rhetorical and linguistic power. For Milton the bookish poet, who hopes that
the pen is indeed mightier than the sword, God’s praise of Abdiel, which identifies “truth with honestly articulated language and falsehood with inarticulate brute force” would be a welcome affirmation of his lifework (Wigler 158). Wigler argues that “in his depravity, noise is all Satan seems to hear, and noise is certainly all that he is able to produce” (159); however, Satan proves to be much more powerful, rhetorically, in later books.

Many scholars have explored Satan’s temptation of Eve in terms of the devil’s artful and seductive use of duplicitous rhetoric, even acknowledging his Petrarchanism in Book IX. He observes her, hidden, as she works in the garden. Having seen her with Adam and having been overcome himself by her beauty, he knows that to seduce her he must make her think more highly of herself; moreover, just as the Petrarchan poet appears to compliment a woman out of the goodness of his heart but for the ulterior motive of poetic self-glorification, Satan uses Eve to advance his own revenge on God. Andrea Gesualdo, a sixteenth-century commentator on the Canzoniere, seems to foreshadow Milton’s Satan as he remarks of the Petrarchan poet in Poem 140, “He took care to learn how to overcome her, just as previously he had been overcome by her” (qtd. in Kennedy 9). Robert Entzminger suggests that “Satan’s primary method of persuasion is thus to redefine concepts, making them amenable to more convenient interpretation, but he increases his chance of success by employing the rhetorical device of repetition” (65)—a rhetorical device rampant in the poems of the Canzoniere. As a Petrarchan flatterer, Satan speaks repetitively when he tempts Eve:

Wonder not, sovran Mistress, if perhaps
Thou canst, who art sole Wonder, much less arm
Thy looks, the Heav’n of mildness, with disdain,
Displeas’d that I approach thee thus, and gaze
Insatiate, I thus single, nor have feared
Thy awful brow, more awful thus retir’d.
Fairest resemblance of thy Maker faire,
Thee all things living gaze on, all things thine
By gift, and thy Celestial Beauty adore
With ravishment beheld. . . (ll. 532-541)

He attempts, through his words, to create for Eve an alternate reality, to make her forget her place in the universe. Robert Entzminger concludes that “in order to believe Satan’s argument,
Eve must forget what she knows from past experience, preferring instead of that reality the illusory present Satan’s words create” (66). In many cases, the ambition of the poet is the same; he uses his words to create an atemporal reality, to take the listener/reader where he wants him or her to go. Eve is Satan’s Laura, the object of desire whose existence provides him with a means to his own ends. Eve’s fall results from her acquiescence to the lure of Petrarchism, that “fateful inability to recognize distinctions, notably the one between real saints and angels and their metaphoric realization in the mistress,” as Heather Dubrow characterizes it (270).

For Milton the poet, Satan’s seduction of Eve enacts much of his anxiety over the use of words to persuade and to create. Milton’s desire to achieve linguistic mastery conflicts with Christian teachings against the very sort of language Satan uses to tempt Eve. “In Paradise Lost, then, Petrarchism represents a whole range of dangers, notably the misuse of rhetoric, idolatry and the perils of certain types of song. Here... it bodies forth some of the issues that arouse the most intense and overt anxiety in the poet and his culture” (Dubrow 270).
CONCLUSION

In Satan, Milton does not merely exemplify false rhetoric; he professes to have traced its etiology. Milton derives Satan’s systematic abuse of signs from a deformation of subjectivity: failing to acknowledge the creaturely self as a sign that points beyond itself to the Creator, Satan erects the self as an idol to ambition. Attempting through rebellion to obliterate or obscure his own referential status, he retreats into the realm of learned and willful narcissism, the realm, as C.S. Lewis once remarked, of “incessant autobiography.” (199)

Linda Gregerson, The Reformation of the Subject: Spenser, Milton, and the English Protestant Epic

This “incessant autobiography” of which Lewis spoke is not only the state of Milton’s Satan but of every Christian poet since Augustine who attempts to eradicate altero-referentiality through his work, to close the gap between sign and signified, to recreate paradise through words, all the while knowing that such ambition is impossible. In order to highlight the poet’s gifts, all reference must lead back to the poet himself. Thus, the love poet who writes to God or to an object of desire merely uses the other to create the occasion for his self-glorification.

Whether or not Milton the poet consciously sympathized with Satan, the (anti-)hero of Paradise Lost comes across the centuries as a powerful symbol of a rational being turned inward, whose unrelenting desire and “willful narcissism” drive him to diabolical self-obsession. Readers’ attraction to Satan proves that it is perhaps easier to identify with an evil figure, whose thoughts and desires somehow seem more profound, more interesting to other, fallen creatures. Catherine Belsey notes that somehow “God and the Son appear ‘flat’ to a humanist reading: they inhabit no secret inner world of anxiety or anguish” (89). The enduring prevalence of the long-suffering male poet-figure cemented by Petrarch also attests to the power of narcissism and self-obsession in and through literature.

In his examination of the “just” and “unjust” discourses of Satan, John M. Steadman poses the following questions:

How can we ascertain a literary character’s “real” intent? What is to be our standard in attempting to relate his true motives to the arguments he makes in any given speech?
How and when should we distinguish between “real” and “apparent” ethos, between the character that the poet consciously ascribes to a particular persona and the specious character that the latter may assume in discourse or action as a means of ethical proof?

(121-122)
Such are the conundra complicating any search for the “authentic” Milton behind the text of his poetry and prose, as well as the characters and personae within them. For, as the passage by William Kerrigan that opened this study demonstrates, the divided consciousness of the Western tradition makes it impossible to determine definitively a writer’s true selfhood; indeed, the ambiguity of the language the poet himself uses makes any attempt at defining him always already inaccurate. Herein lies the power of the poet to achieve immortality, for the shifting nature of his rhetorical stance ensures that readers and critics will never be satisfied in their search for textual meaning. Though the poet may seem to struggle, as Petrarch does in the *Canzoniere*, “weeping for [his] past time, which [he] spent loving a mortal thing without lifting [himself] in flight” (Bell 96), his poetry becomes the thing which lifts him above his peers.

By examining a canonical Christian poet’s struggles to reconcile his literary ambition with his religious inheritance, we see the powerful rhetoric of self-obsession so integral to the Western model of masculinity. John Milton’s poetry illustrates linguistic and theological negotiations of the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between Christian teachings (humility, dependence on God, a theology of the Word) and Renaissance humanism, especially as the latter is appropriated by Francesco Petrarch in his attempt to create a system of signification which leads back to the poet, not to God. *Paradise Lost*’s Satan is the most enduring textual embodiment of suffering masculinity which finds its power in discourses of auto-referentiality. In many ways, Milton’s poetry is a compelling reformulation of Augustinian and Petrarchan poetics which brought these models into early modernity.
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Ashley Denham Busse received her B.A. in Literature from the University of the South (Sewanee) in 1999. Currently, she is pursuing a PhD in English Literature at the George Washington University. Her interests include English, French, and Italian Renaissance poetry, as well as psychoanalytical and feminist criticism.