"Say First What Cause": Ricoeur and the Etiology of Evil in *Paradise Lost*

I N THE TRADITION of Homer and Vergil, the first question Milton asks his muse is etiological: "what cause / Mov'd our Grand Parents . . . to fall off[?]" (1.28–30). The answer, again as in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, attributes human misery to the meddling of a superhuman agent: "Th' infernal Serpent: hee it was . . . deceiv'd / the Mother of Mankind" (34–36). Milton uses this characteristic epic strategy to particular effect in *Paradise Lost*, where etiological issues are of far greater moment than they are in the poem’s pagan predecessors. Upon the poet’s explanation hangs the success or failure of his avowed intent to “assert Eternal Providence / And justify the ways of God to men” (25–26). The narrator exploits his epic privilege of attributing human misfortune to divine sources and of beginning in medias res in order to obscure and attenuate the etiology of evil. He deliberately layers the text to complicate inquiry into causes: cause leads to prior causes; stories of inception enclose yet other stories of origin. To the question “Whence cometh evil?” the muse supplies, in effect, the entire complex poem as answer.¹

Yet, for all its complexity, *Paradise Lost* does trace the origin of human iniquity through three distinct outbreaks of sin, which I label “Satanic evil,” “Adamic evil,” and “historical evil.” The first occurs in heaven among Satan and his followers; the second transpires in Eden and involves Adam and Eve; and the third is foreseen among the descendants of Adam and Eve. Each outbreak forms an integral part of Milton’s epic inquiry into the causes of “all our woe”; yet each inception appears to envision quite dissimilar etiologies of evil.

On the whole, the poem seems to move from schemes of causation that are internal, moral, and individual to those that are external, physical, and communal. In the first manifestation, Satan’s evil erupts in a vacuum, as it were, in a moment of radical self-determination. Sin is born the instant Lucifer (“light bearer”), created good but free, posits a new, starkly incommensurable identity, Satan (“adversary”). In that moment, Sin leaps full grown out of Satan’s head. This story drives the explanation of sin deep into the radical freedom of the will. In the middle manifestation, evil emerges not in a vacuum but under the active pressure of seduction. An agent provocateur entices Eve; she in turn seduces her husband. Evil assaults both sinners from the outside, but they succumb in moments of inward collapse. By consenting to temptation, both choose evil as they are chosen by it. This account attributes evil simultaneously to internal and external causes. In the last manifestation, evil appears to be biologically determined before it can be chosen. The whole human family seems blighted by contamination from its founders. Here explanation attaches to exterior forces larger than the individual—to history, to race, to fate. Thus, in Milton’s etiology, the earlier that evil occurs in real time (not narrative sequence), the more spontaneous it seems—as if due to an act of free choice alone. By contrast, the later evil arises, the more substantial it seems—as if due to unavoidable physical contamination.²

Regarded thus schematically, Milton’s etiology of evil may seem merely inconsistent: sin commences as spontaneous individual action and ends as necessary racial corruption. I argue, however, that as one penetrates its symbolism Milton’s etiological discourse reveals itself to be remarkably coherent and adroit. His double designation of evil as voluntary and inherited evinces deft handling of scriptural imagery and its exegetical tradition. In its totality, *Paradise Lost* preserves within its etiology of evil a complementarity comparable to but more elaborate than that of Genesis, which also depicts evil as at once beginning anew with Adam and Eve and deriving from the corrosive influence of the serpent. I further argue that the poem’s complex both-and etiology of evil pertains not only to the entire epic but to each origin in the poem. Despite superficial appearances, each of the three outbreaks of evil (in
heaven, Eden, and history) retains residual traces of contrasting modalities. Every welling up of evil in *Paradise Lost*, no matter how ontological or existential, includes something of the opposite schema.

I

To analyze Milton’s complex symbolism of evil, I avail myself of Paul Ricoeur’s remarkable expositions of the “Adamic Myth” and original sin.3 In his seminal *Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur attempts to “saturate” symbols of evil with “intelligibility” (355). To do so, he differentiates three levels of discourse about evil: confession, myth, and speculation. The language of confession—“the most primitive and least mythical language,” he avers—“is already symbolic.” That is, to confess “I am impure” or “I have transgressed” is already to encode sin in symbol: “defilement is spoken of under the symbol of a stain or blemish, sin under the symbol of missing the mark, of a tortuous road, of trespass, etc.” (9). At the next level, confession is elaborated into myth. Myth fashions narrative out of intentionalities embedded in the primary confession of sin. Hence, for example, primary symbols such as transgression and defilement find expression in stories about sin as a straying or as an infection brought on by contact with the impure. Finally, at the most abstract level lies speculation, that is, dogma, theology, creed, and so on. Though less symbolic than the other two, speculation in fact evolves from them, according to Ricoeur’s oft repeated maxim “the symbol gives rise to thought.” Ricoeur thus hypothesizes an evolution of symbolic discourse, from confession to myth to theology.

But whereas in biological evolution the progression is from the simple to the more intricate, Ricoeur sees primitive symbols of evil as more complex than subsequent sophisticated creeds. For symbolic language emerges from the unmediated wholeness of experience rather than from the fragmentation of analysis (4). Layer upon layer of meaning is sedimented, like fossils, in symbol. It follows, in Ricoeur, that confession and myth are richer than the speculative theology derived from them. Reified into theological propositions about inherited evil or individual freedom, the surplus meanings of symbol and myth may appear contradictory. In the unmediated symbolic discourse, however, they cohere.

In *The Symbolism of Evil* Ricoeur penetrates the deep coherence of the Adamic myth. He sees how Genesis comprehends and foreshadows the polemics that subsequently divides the theological discourses of Augustine and Pelagius (and their numerous successors) by representing human evil as a consequence of both contamination and choice. Theology tends to isolate the notions of inheritance on the one hand and voluntarism on the other, hardening them into mutually exclusive dogmas. Biblical myth, by contrast, conceives of human evil more broadly and subtly. Its sly story of the Fall portrays sin as at once derivative from the serpent and original with humankind, as something humankind begins and continues (258–60). In Genesis, human guilt originates from the individual choices of Eve and Adam (comparable to the responsible human agency envisioned in Pelagian dogmatics) and from the prior evil of the serpent (comparable to the historical determination posited in the Augustinian dogma of original sin).

But Ricoeur only glancingly conveys his understanding of original sin in *The Symbolism of Evil* (237); he reserves his remarkable full analysis for a subsequent essay in *The Conflict of Interpretations*. Owing to the deeply rooted confusion encumbering this doctrine, Ricoeur feels compelled to deconstruct inherited sin as a concept in order to reconstruct it as a “rational symbol” (“‘Original’ ” 281). Thus his project is negative as well as positive. It is destructive of original sin as gnosis, reconstructive of the idea as symbol: “reductive on the epistemological level but recuperative on the symbolic level” (“‘Original’ ” 271). For Ricoeur, original sin at once misleads thought and makes available for thought unspeakable truths about radical evil deposited within the originating languages of evil.

Negatively, Ricoeur characterizes the doctrine of original sin as a pseudosophilosophical attempt “to rationalize the Christian experience of radical evil” (*Symbolism* 4). Hereditary vice constitutes a “pseudo-concept” propounding the spurious idea that sin is biological. Such a notion leads to scholastic controversies over such absurdities as the imputed guilt of children, even in the womb (“‘Original’ ” 269). Speculation of this sort cannot endure scrutiny, for it attempts the impossible: namely, to “unite in an inconsistent notion a juridical category (voluntary punishable crime) and a biological category (the unity of the human species by generation)” (“‘Original’ ” 280; see also 270). Together, guilt and inheritance cancel each other
out: one cannot be guilty of something over which one has no control. As Kierkegaard scornfully observes, sinfulness "is not an epidemic which can be transmitted like cowpox" (35); it cannot be inherited from Adam "in the same sense that man's erect posture, etc., is due to him." If it were transmitted genetically (like baldness, blue eyes, or curly hair), "then the concept of the individual [would be] annulled" (51).

Yoking incompatible biological and ethical categories (inheritance and guilt) into a single concept (inherited sin), the doctrine of original sin is intrinsically unstable. It is ever vulnerable to attack by voluntarists such as the Pelagians. Against Augustine, Pelagius firmly insists that guilt requires the notion of voluntary choice, that sinfulness cannot be transmitted per generationem, like congenital birth defects. In contrast to Augustine's schema of racial determination, Pelagius opposes a schema of individual freedom, which renders sin contingent on each person. In Pelagius's "coherent voluntarism, each man sins for himself. God is just and can want nothing unreasonable. Hence, God could not punish a man for someone else's sin" (Ricoeur, "'Original'" 278).

This argument sounds valid, yet it too is fraught with difficulties. If sin is not inheritable, how does evil devolve from one generation to the other, from Adam to Adam's posterity, so that everyone is necessarily sinful and in need of the atonement? Is there no genealogy of evil? no history? no communal dimension? Locating the etiology of evil in the individual, the Pelagian solution cannot well account for racial evil. It contends that everyone begins in the same position as Adam, bringing sin into the world in the same fashion—by a personal breach of faith. Paul's attribution of human evil to Adam "can only mean a relation of imitation. In Adam means like Adam" (Ricoeur, "'Original'" 278). Pelagianism posits a relation of imitation rather than of inheritance between Adam's sin and subsequent human sin. This fixing of responsibility on humanity rescues God from the scandal of injustice, to be sure. But a freedom so absolute, so unencumbered by the race's past, entails its own non sequiturs. As Ricoeur explains:

For the Pelagians, freedom is without any acquired nature, without habit, without history and encumbrances. It is the freedom that in each one of us would be a unique and isolated instance of the absolute indetermination of creation. ("'Original'" 279)

Or as Kierkegaard observes in a parallel critique: "Pelagianism . . . lets every individual, unconcerned about the race, play his own little history in his private theatre" (31); having no race, no community, no history, individuals "fall apart from one another numerically" (26).

For Ricoeur, this quandary typifies the way speculation rends asunder the surpluses enciphered in myth and confession. Neither Augustinian inheritance nor Pelagian voluntarism includes Scripture's complementarity. Biblical duality entails, in Ricoeurian terms, an Adam who both inaugurates and continues evil (Symbolism 258–60) or, in Kierkegaardian terminology, an Adam who is "at once himself and the whole race," for his life, like every human life, participates simultaneously in separate and communal existence: "the whole race has part in the individual, and the individual has part in the whole race" (26). Augustine explains the racial solidarity of fallen humanity but not the autonomy of the individual, Pelagius the freedom of the individual but not the communal determination of the race. Genesis, by contrast, evinces this double intentionality: like Pelagius, it renders the human being the primary source of evil; like Augustine, it deflects evil onto proximate causes. Explanation is at once fixed on a single disruptive human act and driven back into history—here a past obliquely figured in the prior evil of a seductively subtle serpent. In this manner, Scripture accounts for the individual as agent and victim (Ricoeur, Symbolism 252–60), encompassing both sides of the dichotomy that divided fourth-century polemics.

In Genesis, however, the emphasis falls on the individual as responsible agent rather than as victim. God fashions a good world and pronounces it good seven times over. Humanity makes it evil. Separating the primordial goodness of God's creation from the subsequent evil originating with his creatures, the "'Adamic' Myth is the anthropological myth par excellence; Adam means Man" (Ricoeur, Symbolism 232–35). In this sense, Scripture shares Pelagianism's distinctly anthropological explanation of evil: "Who is to blame for evil?" both ask. Both reply with one voice, "Man!" Yet, unlike Pelagianism, Genesis does not absorb all blame into Adam but, like Paradise Lost, attenuates responsibility—from man to woman, from woman to serpent, deflecting blame onto ever more remote causes. Human sinners not only initiate evil but continue it, becoming evil by a sort of counterpar-
participation in the prior evil of the serpent.

The serpent thus introduces an ambiguous inhuman element into the anthropological narrative, representing "the aspects of evil that could not be absorbed into the responsible freedom of.

That is to say, it delineates the un-Pelagian aspects of evil, transposed by Augustine to the philosophically inconsistent concept of original sin. Like that concept, the serpent confers "quasi-externality" on evil, which in the form of a seducer assaults the woman from without. Like original sin, it acknowledges the "passive aspect of temptation": "to sin is to yield." And, also like original sin, it conforms to humankind's historical experience of evil: "in the historical experience of man, every individual finds evil already there; nobody begins it absolutely" (Ricoeur, *Symbolism* 256–59).

As a biological or anthropological theory, original sin is insupportable. This much must be admitted. But this is not all that must be said, in Ricoeur's view. Augustine's doctrine recovers—albeit in the misleading language of dogma—truths about radical evil deposited in confession and myth (*Symbolism* 4). Specifically, it enciphers the "dark side of sin as a power that encompasses all men"—the side of sin repressed in the sunny Pelagian identification of sin with free choice (Ricoeur, "'Original'" 278–79). This dark side has three features. First, monstrously imputing guilt to the babe in the womb, hereditary sin acknowledges that sin exists prior to any consciousness of it (as it does for Eve in the figure of the serpent). Indeed, inherited evil assimilates the deep accusation that sin includes our consciousness of it, that it transcends any single action and describes a condition of our being. Second, original sin provides a "transhistorical," "transbiological" concept necessary to salvation theology, thus uniting the human family into a race of sinners that all need redemption. And, third, original sin conforms to our experience of evil as not merely something that we choose but also something that chooses us: a foreign power, as it were, binding, capturing, rendering the will servile to its terrible domination (Ricoeur, "'Original'" 282–83). In brief, the pseudoconcept of inherited sin preserves the reality of sin anterior to every awakening of conscience, the communal dimension of sin, which is irreducible to individual responsibility, and the impotence of will that surrounds every actual fault.

(Ricoeur, "'Original'" 284)

II

Ricoeur's analysis of the "Adamic Myth" and original sin makes it possible to reassess *Paradise Lost*’s complex triple genesis of evil: in heaven, initiated by Satan; in the garden, involving Adam and Eve; and in history, entailing Adam’s posterity. From Ricoeur's point of view, the earlier the Fall in *Paradise Lost*, the more Pelagian it looks—like "something without history and encumbrances . . . [an] instance of the absolute indetermination of creation." The later the Fall, the more Augustinian (in the sense of hereditary) it looks—like contamination from some dread disease. In no case, however, does Milton's symbolism of evil completely exclude the counterscheme. Within Milton's representation of voluntary evil remains an ineradicable trace of the involuntary; within inheritance persists free imitation. In this way, Milton's epic, like Scripture, constructs a myth that filiates freedom and causality.

The birth of Sin marks the most unencumbered freedom in the poem; it is the Pelagian dream of "absolute indeterminism" par excellence. To symbolize such freedom, Milton has to imagine, in essence, what the Fall would be like without the serpent and without the tree—the elements within scripture that lend intelligibility to the Fall by spreading out the instant of transgression into a drama of temptation. What remains is a myth exclusively of the leap—a felicitous image borrowed from Kierkegaard's parallel effort to imagine the radical freedom presupposed by the absolute origin of evil (esp. 27–37, 43).

For a model of such a myth of pure self-generation, Milton recasts the Hesiodic story of Minerva's birth out of Zeus's head. In Milton's version, Satan, with no warning or apparent cause, finds himself "all on a sudden" surprised by a violent headache. He swims in dizziness until out of his left side springs forth a dazzling goddess, whom the heavenly host call Sin. He seizes her and, perceiving in Sin his "perfect image," promptly ravishes her, impregnating her with their offspring, Death. One would be hard-pressed to devise an allegory more incisively Pelagian. With its profoundly self-reflective orientation—its redoubled images of spontaneous autogeny, narcissism, and incest—Milton's allegory, like Pelagius's speculation, drives explanation back deep into the human capacity for self-fashioning.

That this is precisely Milton's intention is sig-
naled by the allegory's intertextuality. For the constitutive texts are not simply pagan but also Christian. Sin's birth figuratively represents the classic Christian articulation of self-temptation:

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. (James 1.13-15)

At the most crucial etiological juncture of the poem, precisely when reason would trace the cause of sin from the creature to the creator, Milton's allegorization of this scripture works as a stop sign. No explanation outside the self is to be sought. By closing off explanation at the self, Milton makes available symbolically (and hence, nonrationally) the fundamental Pelagian intuition about freedom—that it is a condition "without any acquired nature, without habit, without history and encumbrances . . . [a freedom] of the absolute indetermination of creation" (Ricoeur, "‘Original’" 279). The birth of Sin places such Pelagian freedom at the headwaters of evil.

Milton's myth thus exposes the irrationalism that lies at the core of ostensibly rational free-will explanations.7 It acknowledges that, at the deepest level, complete self-determination begins to look more like compulsion than like free choice. Within Milton's Pelagian allegory remain at least three counterindications that resist assimilation into a discourse of total responsibility. First, the evil to which Satan gives birth also possesses him; he does not appear so much to choose evil, rationally and deliberately, as to succumb to it in pain and lust. Second, when personified as the goddess Sin, evil becomes exterior, as it does in the figures of the serpent and of Satan himself and in the concept of genetic inheritance. And, finally, what seems strangely uncaused at this point in the poem appears conditioned by environment when retold in a second, more naturalized recounting of Satan's fall.8 Book 5 explains that envy prompts Satan's apostasy. His jealousy is occasioned by the Son's exaltation and God's dread interdiction, paralleling that regarding the tree in Eden: "him who disobey's / Mee disobey's, breaks union, and that day / Cast out" (611-13). Raphael's accommodated narrative seems to explain the origin of evil far less enigmatically than does the ex nihil birth of Sin. Though Satan cannot say "the devil made me do it," he can say, in some sense, "God made me do it; The Father provoked me"; he can and does attribute his envy to causes outside himself—to the action of others, to environment, to history.

But envy only seems to provide a plausible cause for Satan's defection. In fact, it does not ultimately "explain" Satan's sin any better than does the motiveless birth of Sin. The Son's exaltation cannot be sufficient cause of Satan's revolt, for other angels felt no envy. Circumstance fails to explain Satan's response. Having adduced envy or pride or any other similar motive as cause, one is still left with the mystery of choice, with the power of Lucifer to remake himself into Satan.9 The question of why Satan is jealous is essentially the same question as why Satan is Satan. The answer to both questions is tautological, as God's language implies: "Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell" (3.102). Satan is jealous because he is jealous. As Emilia observes of Othello: "But jealous souls . . . are never jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself" (3.4.159-62). Emilia's monster finds an equivalent in Milton's Sin. Both remind us that frequently adduced motives, such as pride and envy, mask etiological tautologies. Like James 1.13-15, such "causes" simply throw explanation back upon free self-determination. Beyond this we cannot go.

Milton's narrative of the rebellion, no less than his allegory of Sin's birth, respects the ultimate inexplicability of evil. His account of the etiology of Satanic evil checks the infinitely regressive linear momentum of causation. Instead of explaining sin by the existence of prior evil, Satan's fall endorses the circular proposition Kierkegaard calls the "only dialectically consistent account": "Sin came into the world by a sin" (29). Sin irrupts in an instant of radical self-determination, as the Pelagians insist. Yet, paradoxically, the more one inspects such absolute freedom, the more it seems like something else, like captivity. Hence, even Milton's allegory of utter freedom retains vestigial deterministic elements embedded in its structure: evil as impotence as well as choice, as exterior as well as existential, as catalyzed by environment as well as radically self-determined.

III

The outbreak of evil in the garden evinces similarly complementary symbolism. In fact, of the
three origins of evil, Adam and Eve's disobedience is the most perfectly poised between freedom and causality. *Paradise Lost* represents Edenic evil as emerging both in a sudden, discontinuous instant of free choice and within a long, continuous psychological drama of seduction. The Fall as instant and as drama: these two gestalts have given rise to long-standing controversies in Milton studies over a so-called fall before the Fall. Yet in the light of Ricoeur's analysis of the Adamic myth, this complementarity is scarcely surprising. To the contrary, it is to be expected. Ricoeur's work suggests that this major crux in Milton criticism arises precisely out of the poem's fidelity to biblical ambiguity and not, as Waldock supposed, out of Milton's artistic incompetence.10

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, borrowing heavily from Kierkegaard's *Concept of Dread*, Ricoeur identifies a "twofold rhythm" in the Adamic myth: "On the one hand, it tends to concentrate all the evil . . . in a single man, in a single act . . . By this extreme contraction of the origin of evil into one point the Biblical account emphasizes the irrationality of that cleavage, that deflection, that leap. . . ." Like Kierkegaard, Ricoeur calls this irritation of evil a "leap" or an "instant," which focalizes the Fall as a moment analogous to a point in Euclidean geometry—having no dimension yet capable of bisecting a line. "On the other hand," Ricoeur continues, "the myth spreads out the event in a 'drama,' which takes time, introduces a succession of incidents, and brings several characters into the action" (243). This second scheme Ricoeur calls the "lapse of time" or the "drama of temptation" (252).11 The Adamic myth, then, is "both the myth of caesura and the myth of transition, the myth of the act and that of motivation, the myth of an evil choice and that of temptation" (252). One scheme is ethical; in it, sin bisects an innocent "before" from a guilty "after." Ethically, the whole Fall may be "summed up in one act: he took the fruit and ate it":".

About the event there is nothing to say; one can only tell it. . . . About the instant, as a caesura, one can only say what it ends and what it begins. On the one hand, it brings to an end a time of innocence; on the other, it begins a time of malediction. (244)

The other scheme is psychological. The myth of temptation "multiplies intermediaries, countering the irrationality of the Instant" and "tries to fill up the interval between innocence and the Fall by a sort of dizziness from which the evil act emerges as if by fascination" (252; cf. Kierkegaard 55).

The psychology of temptation presupposes that the peace and repose of innocent bliss (required by the ethical scheme) are overlaid with something else, something Kierkegaard calls *Angest*: "This is the profound secret of innocence, that at the same time it is dread [*Angest*]. Dreamingly the spirit projects its own reality." Such anxiety has no more substance than a dream or a presentiment: "it is not a heavy burden, not a suffering which cannot be brought into harmony with the felicity of innocence" (38). For both Ricoeur and Kierkegaard, anxiety—registered as fascination, dizziness, dreams—fixes itself on the limit: "Dizziness begins with alienation from the commandment, which suddenly becomes my 'Other'"; the vertigo then intensifies until finally "the infinity of desire itself . . . takes possession of knowing, of willing, of doing, and of being" (Ricoeur, *Symbolism* 253). According to Kierkegaard, such a state marks the extreme moment in the psychological drama leading to the Fall: "Further than this psychology cannot go and will not go." Yet even at this extreme one is still free to fall or stand. In the next instant, however, "everything is changed, and when freedom rises again it sees that it is guilty. Between these two instants lies the leap, which no science has explained or can explain" (55).

Milton's redaction of the Adamic myth makes conspicuous the "twofold rhythm" that both Ricoeur and Kierkegaard detect in Scripture. In *Paradise Lost* the Fall at once demarcates an absolute ethical boundary and defines the culmination of a gradual process of psychological development.12 Ethically, the Fall collapses into an act, a rupture located in a specific instant: "she pluck'd, she eat: / Earth felt the wound" (9.781-82). Before this Eve is "yet sinless" (7.659). On hearing her recount her deed, Adam understandably asks, "How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost[?]" (9.900; my italics), for Eve's fall is an event that splits before and after in a single dislocating instant. Like the birth of Sin, Eve's disobedience breaks forth "on a sudden" (2.752), as a moral cataclysm that ruptures human time forever.

Yet psychologically Eve's fall scarcely seems sudden at all. Milton prepares for it through an elaborate drama of temptation, a drama that "multiplies intermediaries" and imbues Eden with anxiety. In *Areopagitica* Milton observes: "God
therefore left him [Adam] free, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes” (733; my italics). Likewise in the poem, not only the tree but every other boundary (e.g., patriarchy, knowledge, love) seems to loom ever larger in Adam and Eve’s consciousness as “the infinity of desire” begins to find that “finiteness is insupportable” (Ricoeur, *Symbolism* 253). Adam’s early aside about the interdiction, “whate’er Death is, / Some dreadful thing no doubt” (4.425–26), may already betray a hint of anxiety. Much more than a trace of anxiety is evident in our Grand Parents’ response to Eve’s demonic dream: Adam calls the dream “uncouth” and admits that it “affects [him] equally” (5.98, 97). Though “cheered” by her husband’s labored explanation of the dream, Eve still sheds tears, “the gracious signs of sweet remorse / And pious awe, that fear’d to have offended” (5.134–35).13 Similarly, Adam’s response to Raphael’s initial warning manifests anxiety over “the alarming possibility of being able” (Kierkegaard 40): “What meant that caution join’d, if ye be found / Obedient? can we want obedience then?” (5.513–14). Indeed, all the warning voices that echo through Milton’s paradise serve to rivet Adam and Eve’s attention on their limits. By the time Eve separates from Adam, the encircling walls of Eden and of Adam, who “shades thee and protects,” have come to feel like a “narrow circuit” (9.266, 323; cf. 4.384); God, formerly the author of “One easy prohibition” (4.433), is on his way to becoming “Our great Forbidden” (9.815). Even before she falls, Eve begins to feel hemmed in: what had seemed an “ample World” (4.413), a fullness or “creative limit[,] becomes hostile negativity and, as such, problematic” (Ricoeur, *Symbolism* 253). When she finally eats the fruit, Eve feels “goaded by interdictions” (“but his [God’s] forbidding / Commends thee more” [9.753–54]) and “maddened by the vertigo of infinity” (*Symbolism* 257): “nor was God-head from her thought” (9.790). Her telling remark immediately after the Fall registers Eve’s vertiginous “infinity of desire” (*Symbolism* 253): “for inferior who is free?” (9.825).

Eve does not, however, succumb to anxiety, fascination, dizziness, and dreams wholly of her own making. She is also seduced by the serpent. Likewise, Adam is actively invited into evil by Eve. Both act freely in a moment of individual choice, but both act under the pressure of external temptation. The etiology of Edenic evil thus bears a double orientation: choice and temptation, act and moti-

vation, instant and lapse of time. The one concentrates guilt in the individual, as did Sin’s birth; the other mitigates guilt by explaining it dramatically, as a consequence of the interaction between the individual and enticing circumstances. Milton’s God carefully delineates this difference between the genesis of evil in heaven and its reemergence on earth, distinguishing between demonic and human evil in these terms:

The first sort [i.e., devils] by their own suggestion fell, Self tempted, self-deprav’d: Man falls deceiv’d By the other first: Man therefore shall find grace, The other none. (3.129–32)

Here Milton’s God conceptualizes a distinction delicately imaged in Genesis: namely, that demonic evil is fully self-generative while human evil is partly derivative. This differentiation between the etiologies of angelic and human evil succinctly paraphrases Scripture’s subtle intentionality, as Ricoeur understands it:

. . . it must be said that man is not the absolute evil one, but the evil one of second rank, the evil one through seduction; he is not the Evil One, the Wicked One, substantivaly, so to speak, but evil, wicked, adjectivally; he makes himself wicked by a sort of counter-participation, counter-imitation. . . . To sin is to yield. (*Symbolism* 259)

Like Ricoeur, Milton’s God recognizes qualitative differences between demonic and human evil. Demonic evil is of the first order: absolute, irreversible, substantival, self-determined. Human evil is of a second order: partial, reversible, adjectival, resulting from temptation. By acknowledging human victimization in Eden, God’s speech makes room for mercy.

Yet, it is possible to go too far in attaching evil to a seductive environment. And Milton’s God, not one to exculpate sinners easily, prefaces this speech with many other utterances affixing the blame on “Man”—of which the following prophecy is representative:

For Man will heark’n to his [Satan’s] glozing lies, And easily transgress the sole Command, Sole pledge of his obedience: So will fall Hee and his faithless Progeny: whose fault? Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee All he could have. I made him just and right (3.93–98)
With its obvious theodicean intent of justifying God and condemning his creatures, this oracle anchors Adam and Eve’s sin to the pole of self, securing it from excessive drift toward external causes. In God’s view, then, Adam and Eve are at once culpable and forgivable. Since the etiology of their evil refers simultaneously to self and other, to freedom and compulsion, the Father responds by sending his Son as “Judge and Savior” on a mission of “Mercy colleague[d] with Justice” (10.209, 59). God’s oracle prophetically lays blame at humanity’s feet and acknowledges that those feet are led into error, succinctly conceptualizing the etiology of evil symbolized in the Adamic myth. Both Genesis and Milton’s God subsume Adam and Eve under the double designation of agent and victim, initiator and continuant of evil. Both regard them as responsibly evil, but not as exclusively responsible, for a great power collaborates in bringing about their awful guilt in Eden.

IV

The poem’s account of historical evil presents the same double designation, though the emphasis naturally shifts from individual agency to racial victimization. Still, it often echoes the freedom-responsibility discourse, allegorized in the birth of Sin and articulated in the theology of Milton’s God. In the Father’s oracle, for example—“So will fall / Hee [Adam] and his faithless Progeny”—“faithless” binds us together into a race of sinners but also isolates us as individually responsible, according to the logic of accusation that immediately follows: “whose fault? / Whose but his own? ingrate. . . . .” God’s rhetoric seems to place all human guilt generally under the sign of responsible freedom. We feel accused with Adam. Similarly, as the denunciation continues, we feel included among those created sufficient to stand though free to fall, those who at once initiate evil and fall prey to temptation. As God disposes of Adam and Eve’s sin, he seems to speak against all human sin. Their fall thus becomes not simply the source of human sin but its archetype:

I form’d them free, and free they must remain,  
Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change  
Thir nature. . . . .  
Man falls deceiv’d  
By th’ other first: Man therefore shall find grace  
(3.124–26, 130–31)

Richly ambiguous, the pronouns they, them, and their and the generic man reach out to embrace both the race and its founders. The entire human family seems to fall under divine accusation and to qualify for God’s promised mercy. By such means, the Father’s supposedly voiceless oracle masks in its subtle rhetoric the contradiction entailed in representing hereditary evil as somehow voluntary.14

As a rule, however, the more historicized evil becomes, the more encumbered seems its freedom and, consequently, the more its symbolic representation in Paradise Lost swerves from voluntarism toward inheritance. Biological images for evil abound in the last books (see, e.g., 10.824–26; 11.477–95; 12.286, 400). This imagery conforms to Milton’s materialist personal theology. De Doctrina Christiana explicitly advances the doctrine that Adam’s sin communicates moral debility through the process of physical propagation (15.43, 183, 191–92). Aware that Milton privately endorses the doctrine that original sin is transmitted per generationem, some critics provide defensively Augustinian glosses for the phrase “faithless Progeny” (see Hughes’s edition of Milton 260n; Kelley 145). They reason, evidently, that since the whole race is tainted by evil from the womb, Adam’s posterity cannot be thought to inaugurate evil in the same way Adam and Eve do. Hence, “So will fall / Hee and his faithless Progeny” is construed to mean “Consequently Adam will fall and through him, genetically, his faithless offspring.” Such a narrowly Augustinian reading eliminates the Father’s multivalece by restricting the meaning of “So” to “consequently” (rather than “in the same manner”), by applying the word only to “Hee” (rather than to Adam and his faithless Progeny”), and by specifying the biological character of faithlessness. In this reading, Adam absorbs all fault, for his sin and for the sinfulness of the entire race.

Milton’s text, however, distributes blame more evenly between Adam and his faithless progeny, admitting both Augustinian and Pelagian emphases. God the Father does not specify that the guilt of Adam’s progeny is biological; indeed, “faithlessness” transcends somatic categories, connoting personal apostasy in a way that “corrupt” or some similar term would not. Likewise, “So” may signal inheritance (the effect of Adam’s fall on his posterity) or imitation (the way all human beings will fall)—or it may describe both. God’s dogmatic pronouncement resists the reductive either-or logic.
of speculation and preserves the both-and fullness of symbolism. His rhetoric summons up both a genetic and a generic relation between the Fall and all subsequent sin. On precisely such ambiguity the Augustinian-Pelagian controversy first turned.

Similarly, the impressive vision of history that Michael opens up to fallen Adam attributes historical evil to both inheritance and imitation. Michael begins, however, emphasizing sin per generationem:

Adam, now ope thine eyes, and first behold
Th' effects which thy original crime hath wrought
In some to spring from thee, who never touch'd
Th' excepted Tree, nor with the Snake conspir'd,
Nor sinn'd thy sin, yet from that sin derive
Corruption to bring forth more violent deeds.

(11.423-28)

Here Adam's sin appears to describe not merely an immoral action but a disease capable of producing "corruption." His evil contaminates all who "spring" from him, even though they have not "sinn'd [his] sin." Human beings contract sinfulness not by choice but by birth. Such biological discourse anticipates notions of evil elaborated in the pseudococept of inherited evil. It also recalls the ancient association between evil and stain, impurity, defilement (see Ricoeur, Symbolism 25-46). The primordial identification of evil with disease finds further reinforcement in what follows—the wretched pageant of human suffering portrayed in the lazar house. Michael discloses this grim spectacle of sickness so "that thou [Adam] may'st know / What misery th' inabstinence of Eve / Shall bring on men" (11.475-77)—as if every physical debility visited on humanity emanates from a tainted lineage.

At this point, the poem seems to be careening headlong into a schema of unqualified inheritance, which threatens to invalidate its previous etiologies. Yet precisely at this juncture, the poem (as we have often seen before) counterpoises one mode of causation with another, coupling imitation with inheritance. Thus by acts of personal "intemperance" the human family imitates Eve's sin and augments whatever maladies it inherits from her "inabstinence" (11.472, 476). To Adam's poignant lament over "miserable Mankind," Michael responds that human beings are not simply born to blight, they elect it:

Thir Maker's Image . . . then
Forsook them, when themselves they vilifi'd

To serve ungovern'd appetite, and took
His Image whom they served, a brutish vice,
Inductive mainly to the sin of Eve.
Therefore so abject is thir punishment,
Disfiguring not God's likeness, but thir own,
Or if his likeness, by themselves defac't
While they pervert pure Nature's healthful rules
To loathsome sickness, worthily, since they
God's Image did not reverence in themselves.

(11.515-25)

Michael's "Inductive mainly to . . . Eve" places historical evil under the sign of inheritance, acknowledging the genealogy of human evil. But Michael complements the etiology of inheritance with that of imitation. Historical men and women inaugurate evil as well as continue it; for evil begins afresh in history as the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve deface the remnants of God's image in themselves, thereby replicating both Satan's original defection and their first progenitors' transgression. The apostasies of Satan, Eve, and Adam "explain" the etiology of historical evil in two ways: archaeologically, as it were, and archetypally. The evolution of evil Michael unfolds in books 11 and 12 reverses the maxim from evolutionary biology; ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In Michael's etiology, the development of evil in the whole family of sinners (phylogeny) recapitulates the origin of evil in single individuals (ontogeny)—Satan, Eve, and Adam.

The several reflexives that govern the complex syntax of Michael's outburst—"themselves they vilifi'd," "by themselves defac't," "they / God's Image did not reverence in themselves"—do more than intensify the accusation. They spring from an even deeper theodicean imperative. The same impulse leads Milton to attribute sin to self-temptation in the Father's oracles in book 3 and to construct an Ur-fall for Satan entirely out of self-reflexivity in book 2. The reflexives redirect etiology to the self, subsuming sin under the concept of personal freedom. Michael's answer infuses inheritance with imitation so that the poet, conscious of his theodicean purpose, may introduce the syntactically displaced "worthily" to vindicate God's punishment of fallen humanity.

The tortured syntax of Michael's speech suggests the difficulty of his task. That Adam's posterity are worthy of their punishment is, of course, nonsense if they only inherit guilt and do not choose it. So Michael labors to recover voluntarism for necessary racial iniquity, to include self-determination within
the “inconsistent notion” of biologically determined guilt. Though this admixture of incompatibles is by now familiar, the result here seems especially volatile. Centrifugal forces threaten to break apart Michael’s amalgam of biology and ethics; the stresses are reflected in the oddly disjunctive syntax of “worthily,” as they are, too, in the questions Michael’s answer begs—such as the vexing issue of the inherited vitiation of children. Surely infants (much less the unborn) lack sufficient will and reason (Paradise Lost 3.108) to “pervert Nature’s healthful rules,” vilify themselves, and disfigure the image of God. How does Michael’s explanation make them “worthy” of abject punishment?

As the poem articulates a purely biological conception of sin, flaws become visible, just as they do in the birth of Sin, a purely ethical etiology. In their different ways, the etiologies of historical and of Satanic evil turn out to be equally problematic. The one suffers from too much freedom, the other from too much necessity; the one emerges in a vacuum, the other in a chain reaction. At either extreme, we can discern the polarities that imperil the cohesion of Milton’s etiology of evil. What impresses is that Milton preserves his characteristic emphasis on responsible freedom, while fashioning a complex, subtle, and inclusive etiological myth.

Readers should not expect or demand perfect logical consistency from the poem, for as G. K. Hunter reminds us, “Milton’s art, like that of other major authors, is an art of having it both ways”; with regard to the causes of evil, it is an art of “steering his poem between the necessary causation-effect pressures . . . and the ad hoc freedom of individual and unfallen responses” (63, 65). In its inclusiveness, Ricoeur would suggest, Milton’s epic art resembles the symbols and myths from which it originates. Ricoeur helps us clarify precisely what etiological contradictions Milton inherited from Christian symbol and dogma, as well as how he accommodated these paradoxes in Paradise Lost. Through Ricoeur, we see that Paradise Lost subsumes contrasting modalities of evil—as inherited and imitative, as physical and moral, as ontological and existential, as necessary and free, as communal and individual. Each of these antithetical pairings is inscribed in the “Adamic Myth.” Each is subsequently rent asunder by speculative theology. And each is partly restored in Milton’s redaction of both Scripture and theology. As an exercise in mythmaking, the text thus tends to transcend narrow theological positions hardened in the heat of debate and recover a measure of Scripture’s symbolic wholeness within a new mythopoiesis. Milton criticism often regards the poem as either argument or myth.3 Ricoeur points criticism toward a middle way “between these two . . . a creative interpretation of meaning, faithful to . . . the gift of meaning from the symbol, and faithful also to the philosopher’s oath to seek understanding” (Symbolism 348).

Notes

1 For a fuller analysis of how Milton follows Vergil and Homer in attributing human suffering to the gods, see Hunter’s fine discussion of “epic causality” (56–71). In addition to Hunter’s book (the best general treatment of Paradise Lost since Summers’s), several other fine studies in recent Milton criticism concern the poem’s relation to epic conventions, including most significantly the books by Blessington, Lewalski, and Webber.

2 It may be objected that I slight the text’s narrative order to analyze its absolute chronology and to straighten out what Milton self-consciously convoluted. I do so deliberately, however, confident that Milton cared as much about his narrative’s histoire as he did about its discours du récit (a distinction I borrow from Genette’s narrative theory). I have no thought of disparaging the claim that significant meanings are produced by Milton’s disposition of his material and by the reader’s experience with that ordering. For insightful discussions of the poem’s narrative strategies, see Hunter’s “Narrative and Meaning” (31–56) and Nyquist’s essays “Reading” and “Gynesis”; for examples of various reader-response interpretations of Paradise Lost, see Fish, Croxman, and Quilligan.

3 Except for my unpublished dissertation, the only other analysis of Milton to make significant use of Ricoeur is Kerrigan’s Sacred Complex. While Kerrigan distances himself from Ricoeur’s “faith in the Christian myth” (vii), he confesses that his “largest intellectual debt is to the work of Paul Ricoeur.” I share Kerrigan’s indebtedness to Ricoeur, though not his skepticism about the Christian myth.

4 Augustine’s translation of Romans 5.12, “in whom all have sinned” is, in fact, a notorious mistranslation of the Greek “because all have sinned.” According to Mollenkott (38) and Patrides (100), the whole edifice of original sin is built on this misconstruction. But a mistranslation of such consequence could hardly be so inadvertent as this suggestion implies. Rather, Augustine’s misreading of Paul is strategically overdetermined; it is calcu-
lated to refute Pelagian concepts and reinforce his own views. Ricoeur shows what impulses in Augustine's polemics with Pelagius led the bishop of Hippo to insist that all humanity is biologically bound to Adam in sin.

Here and throughout I use *Augustinian* narrowly, to refer to hereditary evil, but Augustine's full understanding of evil is clearly much more complex than this usage suggests. In fact, the bishop's early conceptions of evil, which evolve within an anti-Gnostic dialectic, deny that evil possesses physical reality. Evil has no nature; it is not being but doing; it is a defect, an inclination toward nonbeing, nothingness. Against the Gnostics, Augustine pursues a decidedly voluntaristic line of thought. Subsequently, however, he asserts his own "quasi-Gnosticism" (inherited guilt) in his battles against the radical voluntarism of Celestius, Pelagius, and Julius Eclansus (see Ricoeur, ""Originary""

272–81).

For a different account of the relation between *Paradise Lost* and Augustinian original sin, see Fiore's *Milton and Augustine* (esp. 42–60) and his entry "Augustine" in *A Milton Encyclopedia*. Asserting that original sin is the "theological basis" for *Paradise Lost*, Fiore finds Milton much more thoroughly Augustinian than I do. I see Milton as willing to use patristic and Reforma
tion theology when it suits his purposes but skeptical of "received opinions" and in principle committed only to scripture (sola scriptura; see *De Doctrina Christiana* 14: 2–15).

6 Here and elsewhere the similarity between *Paradise Lost* and Kierkegaard's *Concept of Drear* is striking. To explain the absolute origin of evil, both Milton and Kierkegaard look beyond the serpent to an Ur-fall. And both, once the distraction of prior causes has been eliminated, adduce the scriptural doctrine of self
temptation (James 1.13–15) as the ultimate ground of evil (see Kierkegaard 43) and independently arrive at the metaphor of sin as leap to describe such freedom. See my dissertation for a thorough discussion of the similarities between Milton and Kierkegaard; for topical discussions of Milton and Kierkegaard, consult Kerrigan and Broadent.

7 Pace Dr. Johnson, Milton's decision to shift the mimetic mode here to allegory makes powerful sense. For absolute freedom does not lend itself to realistic narrative, since it is something with which historical reality must struggles, whose guilt always locates itself within a compromised historical nexus, have no experience. Human evil always emerges in a context of prior evil; for us, there is always a serpent already in the garden, pointing back to a long history of fault that those with longer memories, like Raphael, stand ready to recount. Nevertheless, the possibility of pure freedom, untrammeled by necessity, remains a permanent unspoken human illusion. Milton rightly creates for this dream its own myth, thereby retaining within a persistently rationalized account of Genesis something irrationally matic.

8 Milton often tells the same story from two or more points of view. He presents the creation, for example, alternately from divine and human points of view through two roncours, Raphael and Adam. The accounts in books 7 and 8 correspond to a similar doubling in Genesis. As Evans noted some time ago, Raphael envisages creation "from above," like the priestly creation story of Genesis 1, while Adam sees the events "from below," like the Yahwistic version of Genesis 2 (256). More recently, Nyquist has offered a much more complex discussion of the ideological motivations informing Milton's disposition of the two creation narratives in Genesis (see "Gynesis," esp. 185–92). I would suggest that the two narratives of Satan's fall are likewise ideologically motivated. For another discussion of the relation between ideology and the allegorized elements in Satan's characterization, see Kendrick 148–78.

9 A full discussion of Satan's pride and envy appears in Revard's chapters on each motive (28–85). No such motives are fully explanatory, however; all conceal underlying tautologies. And this, surely, is precisely the hermeneutical point of Sin's birth. As Fish observes about the cause of the Fall, all that can finally be said is that Adam and Eve disobeyed because they were disobedient:

Properly seen, . . . more sophisticated analyses of cause are merely amplifications of the word "obedience," indicating, variously, what disobedience involves (presumption, ingratitude), what Adam and Eve commit themselves by disobeying (lust, anxiety). . . . To any one of these we can still demand, why? (what cause) and receive no satisfactory reply. It is the habit of criticism to use one description of the Fall to explain another.

10 The attack on Milton for "faking" a fall before the Fall is generally associated with the mid-century Milton controversy and specifically with Waldock, Tillyard, and Bell, who all suppose that Milton's art is fundamentally at odds with his theolo
gy. Consequently Milton must resort to "faking" (Tillyard 10) or "literary cheating" (Waldock 81) to extricate himself from theological conundrums. The best responses to such charges appear in books and articles from the sixties and early seventies, particularly those by Burden, Fish, Lewalski ("Innocence"), Diekhoff, and McColley. That the issue has not been laid to rest, however, is evident from the considerable critical attention still paid to it. Important recent contributions, for example, include those by Reichert, Danielson, and Nyquist ("Reading").

11 *Drama* continues to be an essential term in the criticism of *Paradise Lost*—though few, if any, critics now measure the poem against purely dramatic criteria and find it wanting, as did many mid-century critics (e.g., Waldock, Bell, and Peter). The critique of reductively dramatic interpretations, originally mounted by Frye (1–66), has been immensely enriched by recent studies of the poem's generic complexity and multiplicity. See especially Lewalski's comprehensive study, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*, and also Hunter (72–95), Damaray (esp. 16–56), Kendrick (148–78), and Nyquist, "Reading."

12 See Nyquist's "Reading" for a partial bibliography of those who argue for a developmental reading of the Fall (1996). I would add to her list the essays by Ogden and Diekhoff. Nyquist's article makes a significant contribution to a developmental reading of the Fall, though I take issue with her reintroducing the old error of calling the prelapsarian Adam and Eve "fallen." I do not believe Milton sees either Eve or Adam as "inwardly fallen" before they eat the fruit ("Reading" 218, 222).

13 Milton here introduces into Eden emotions as close to guilt as is possible in innocence. Eve's unfallen "remorse" seems to approximate what Kierkegaard calls the maximal point of anxiety: the individual dreads "being regarded as guilty" so deeply that anxiety begins to feel like guilt (67, 97).

14 My reading suggests that the Father's speech may be subtly rhetorical as well as simply axiomatic. Similarly, Lieb vigorously challenges the view of the Father as voiceless logician—a view typified by this passage from Fish's *Surpris'd by Sin*: the Father "does not argue, he asserts, disposing a series of self-evident axioms in objective order, 'not talking to anyone
in particular but meditating on objects’” (86). To the contrary, Lieb contends, Milton dramatizes the debate between the Father as the voice of justice and the Son as the voice of charity.

Note how Michael’s language echoes the Father’s: “they themselves decreed / Thir own revolt, not I”; “and free they must remain, / Till they enthral themselves”; “they themselves ordain’d this fall.” The point of the multiple reflexives in both cases is to attach human evil to individual responsibility.

Emblematic of this dichotomy are the titles of Kelley’s pioneering work *This Great Argument* and MacCaffrey’s fine book *Paradise Lost as ‘Myth’.* Kerrigan’s study of the “psychogenesis” of *Paradise Lost* commingles argument and myth in a fashion comparable to mine. It is not coincidental that both Kerrigan and I are indebted to Ricoeur’s work (see Kerrigan vii).

### Works Cited


