The Temptation of Athens and the Variorum *Paradise Regained*

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**Abstract** Two opposed traditions of Milton scholarship arose in the eighteenth century, one that places special emphasis on classical sources, and one that reacts against the first by stripping away all annotations except to note biblical allusions. Milton criticism reproduces the Athens temptation from *Paradise Regained*, in which Satan tempts the Son with the fruit of classical culture. Through the early variorum editions, readers may overcome the impasse of Milton’s rejection of the learning his poetry embodies. By the end of the poem, veneration of the classics becomes logically consistent with devotion to the figure rejecting them. **Keywords:** variorum editions of Milton; John Gillies; Thomas Newton; Charles Dunster; Milton’s augmentation of the gospels

**Despite their many lasting** contributions to scholarship, editions *cum notis variorum* have always made readers uneasy. For some, the sedimentary layers of opinion never quite add up to an accumulation of genuine knowledge. Too often, as “Scriblerus” remarks in the first footnote of the *Dunciad Variorum*, editors making decisions about their texts and commentary seem to have been “mov’d thereto by Authority, at all times with Criticks equal if not superior to Reason.”¹ In his 1788 preface to an edition of *Paradise Lost* that takes one of the most extreme approaches to annotating Milton’s poetry in the entire commentary tradition, Scottish divine John Gillies (1712–1796) explains the rationale behind his notes and rejects the contributions of the great first variorum, published in 1749 by Thomas Newton: “Many of the criticisms in Bishop Newton’s Edition, though very curious and entertaining, are foreign to the design of the present Edition, which is to show this only: that Paradise Lost owes its chief excellence to the Holy Scriptures.”² Already in 1788 a weariness of the

flesh has set in as a result of the variorum. Gillies wants to separate the secular and pagan flourishes from the “chief excellence” of the work, which he thinks he can reveal by winnowing the footnotes down to a biblical concordance of sorts. To gloss anything else would be to collect toys, “trifles for choice matters.” For a certain kind of fundamentalist reader, the poem must be seen as referring only to biblical texts, so that consideration of any other source of meaning amounts to nothing more than pursuit of idle curiosity for entertainment’s sake.

Although in the preface and notes Gillies remains dismissive of editorial guidance that includes pagan sources, his edition features an index, identical to the one in Newton’s variorum, which helps readers form a more realistic picture of the poem’s engagement with classical antiquity. The index itemizes the classical analogues and comparisons for each character. Readers are thus tacitly encouraged to find a passage by means of its association with the fables and characters of myth, but are contradictorily dissuaded from interpreting these allusions by their omission from the textual annotation. Of course, the Gillies edition could hardly be expected to accomplish the erasure of these references. In fact, for his second edition, Gillies added a page to the end of each book tersely enumerating its “Allusions to the Classics.” An advertisement appended to the preface passively admits defeat on this point: “as Milton owns he did not sometimes forget the celebrated heathen poets, it was thought an improvement of this Edition, to point to such passages as seem to have been in his mind, when he composed Paradise Lost. They are therefore selected from Bishop Newton’s notes, and placed at the end of each book.”

Gillies alludes to the supreme importance placed on sacred text in the invocation to the third book of Paradise Lost, where the poet muses past Helicon toward Mt. Zion, “chief / Thee Sion,” in his nightly visitations, “nor sometimes forget[s]” the

“The edition of Gillies contains little beside biblical parallels. The few explanatory notes subjoined by him are insignificant.” Apart from citations of scripture, there are four additional annotations to the Gillies edition, only one of which is not developed out of Newton’s notes (at 3.411, where Gillies praises and quotes lines from Barrow’s commendatory poem). The other few notes praise Milton for his inspired verse through a comparison to Bezaleel (at 1.17), the craftsman chosen to make the furniture of the tabernacle (Exod. 35:31); paraphrase a defense out of Newton’s note on the “punning scene” in the War in Heaven (at 6.568); and, after quoting Newton on Milton’s “frequent allusions to Heathen mythology,” celebrate Milton’s employment of “Egyptian gold to embellish his work” (at 11.8, sig. p6r), by which of course he means pagan teachings as interpreted by the patristic tradition, for example, St. Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Indianapolis, 1958), 75 (2.40.60).


4. In keeping, then, with Newton’s argument that what Milton “borrows from the Heathen mythology, he commonly applies only by way of similitude,” the entry for “Allusions” reads “See Similies [sic],” under which the classical allusions are listed. Paradise Lost, ed. Thomas Newton, 8th ed., 2 vols. (London, 1778), 2:2317 (note to 11.8).

blind poets and prophets of Greek legend, Homer, Thamyris, Tiresias, and Phineus. But is the editor’s reluctance true to the poem, or does he take Milton’s litotes, “nor sometimes forget,” too literally—misplacing the emphasis of the phrase in its original context? For Milton, the uncanny combination of allure and terror in identifying with these seers and bards has much more to do with the idea that their shared blindness could signify divine punishment for the disclosure of forbidden truths than it has to do with their being pagan. He fears that he shares their fate without partaking of their renown. The editorial concession Gillies makes is framed, then, by a rather partial appropriation from the epic, demonstrating how the question of the aim and scope of local editorial annotation quickly expands to encompass the ideology guiding the editor’s interpretation of the text as a whole. Thus, a metacritical perspective opens up as the extremity of his initial critical reaction jostles against the contradictory presence of pagan entries in the book’s index and then eventually transforms into a begrudging acceptance of the “Allusions to the Classics.”

By the end of the eighteenth century, two contrary trends that remain influential in today’s Milton scholarship had become discernible, each seeking and, to some degree, finding warrant in Milton’s own words. The first was exemplified in Newton’s variorum editions of Paradise Lost in 1749 and of Paradise Regain’d, Samson Agonistes, and Poems upon Several Occasions in 1752, and reached its climax in Henry John Todd’s massive and to some tastes excessive accumulation of opinion in his variorum editions of Milton’s Poetical Works in 1801, 1809, and so on. This trend could be described in Borgesian terms as the delirium of the “total library.” Wordsworth, for one, complained about Todd’s editorial practices in a letter to Walter Scott: “three parts of four of the Notes are absolute trash. That style of compiling notes ought to be put an end to.”

Taken to its logical extreme, this insufficiently selective compiling results in the situation advocated by Stanley Fish in his analysis of the Variorum Commentary project (1970–), “Interpreting the Variorum.” In that essay he concludes the interest and value of the Variorum Commentary resides not in its resolution of critical questions but rather in the way its failures to resolve these questions “constitute a pattern, one in which a host of commentators . . . are lined up on either side of an interpretive crux,” thus revealing their participation in an “interpretive community” that determines the legitimacy of readings according to institutional protocols. The second trend, exemplified in Gillies’ first

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edition of *Paradise Lost*, could be seen as the fantasy of a “fig leaf” of exclusively scriptural notes. This remains a reaction of some religiously motivated scholarship to this day, as is clear when the editor of a recent “biblically annotated” edition polemically claims that “current scholarly editions . . . mostly overlook the prominence of the Bible in Milton's text” and document the presence of the classics merely “out of an obligation to provide a balanced coverage of Milton’s other influences.”

Ultimately, the ambivalence that the variorum editions have inspired stems from the prominence afforded the classics in eighteenth-century commentary on Milton's poems. But the rival attitudes toward the authority of pagan antiquity occupy a crucial place in Milton's works themselves—nowhere more powerfully than in the episode from his second epic called by scholars the temptation of Athens (4.236–364). To look into the historical debate about the proper aim and scope of scholarly annotation is to raise the question: Is peeking into the variorum the cognitive equivalent of succumbing to the temptation of Athens? The editorial response to Milton's poetry unconsciously rehearses the underlying logic of the Athens temptation by either accepting or resisting the kinds of knowledge that the variorum editions stand for. Where Miltonists debate the importance of ancient Greek and Roman sources, the fault lines that run through the criticism describe a series of tectonic cultural shifts giving shape to the poems themselves. Given this dynamic, it is not surprising that the reception history has been complicated by the fact that all of the editors of and major commentators in the early variorum editions were classically trained members of the clergy.

The rejection of the classics in *Paradise Regained* suggests a homology. If classical literature exists only in tendentious relation to the primacy of scripture, then by implication the classicizing critical traditions applied to Milton's poem stand in the same precarious relation to the authority of scriptural interpretation. This isomorphism between interpreters of the poem and interpreters of scripture profoundly affects readers of *Paradise Regained*, because the poem models a revolutionary spirit in the authority Milton assumes for himself as a reader and rewriter of the gospels.

In a simpler, less contentious version of the relationship between creativity and biblical interpretation than Milton’s, the structure would hardly present any challenge: just as the Son follows the will of the Father, so the obedient poet emulates his scriptural

10. *Paradise Lost: The Biblically Annotated Edition*, ed. Matthew Stallard (Macon, Ga., 2011), viii. Like those in the Gillies edition, Stallard’s notes lack argumentative support and ultimately depend on verbal similarities and implicit interconnections. Stallard sees his business as “linking biblical verses with lines from the poem,” quoting from the most similar English translation in order “to let the verses speak for themselves” (xxxiv–xxxv). According to the editor, “The use of epic allusions and practices . . . are [sic] not primary in Milton's text, nor are they used in an evidentiary manner” (xxiv). Stallard believes that his annotations more accurately represent the epic's true origins in scripture—“the only source Milton cites as an authority” (xxii). Contradictorily, the editor claims that “Milton does not rely upon the testimony of Patristics or Protestant commentators” (xxiii) but regularly cites the Geneva glosses in the notes.

sources. But this does not quite tell the whole story of *Paradise Regained*. Milton treats the poem as a belated work of commentary in order to coax the gospels’ narrative toward expression of a prophetic truth not literally contained in the canonical texts. To see the poem in this way entails understanding its vision as correlating to all things secondary, yet in the disjunctive sense that it be made “subsequent, or indeed rather precedent” to the logic that underpins the orthodox salvation narrative.\(^\text{12}\) In this way, Milton sets for us the problem of trying to assimilate two irreconcilable truths: first, that the Son is always to be understood as a subordinate power relative to the Father; and second, that the Son’s submissiveness is precisely the source of his unique strength. The tension between these truths forces us to reconsider in this light the meaning of other forms of subordination in the text. Such a reconsideration will touch not only on the assessment of the classics after the Athens temptation but also more generally on the traditions of commentary that include Milton’s poem as it relates to the Bible and, finally, on our own criticism in relation to the poem.

Provocatively, Milton exacerbates the intellectual problem of the Athens temptation by allowing the Son’s explanatory reasoning to rest on fallacies that implicitly comment both on the nature of the Son’s role in the salvation narrative and on the poem’s status relative to its sources. The idea that “Sion’s songs” are “to all true tastes excelling” depends on an assertion of priority: “*Greece from us these Arts deriv’d*” (4.347, 338). The Son’s formula revises the invocation to *Paradise Lost*, book 3, in which Zion was preeminent among the inspired places conjured in the poet’s wandering, though the poet did not “sometimes forget” his classical forebears or how they suffered for their portion of the truth. In *Paradise Regained*, by contrast, it appears as though the poet *does* sometimes forget—or forcibly repress—how important pagan literature is to his project. The Son’s rejection of the classics fallaciously assumes that temporal precedence signifies intellectual and spiritual primacy, whereas the very existence of what I am calling Milton’s second epic represents the poet’s intellectual commitment to the concepts of renunciation, divestiture, and “secondarity.”\(^\text{13}\) If the triumph over the wilderness temptations in itself regains paradise, this evidently suggests a less central role for the atonement than in the traditional, orthodox Christian


\(^{13}\) For the term “secondarity,” see Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, trans. Samuel Lester (South Bend, Ind., 2002), 54–64, 110–11, 163–64. Brague employs “secondarity” to describe the posture adopted throughout European culture following the Romans, who regarded themselves as belated and derivative inheritors of Greek literature and culture on the one side, and Jewish religion in the form of the Old Testament on the other. Brague contends that this attitude is endemic to Christianity. In her edition of *Paradise Regained* for the recent Blackwell volume *John Milton: The Complete Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 2009), 441, Stella P. Revard notes that “Clement of Alexandra, Eusebius, and other Church Fathers asserted that learning began with Hebraic scripture and then was passed to the Egyptians and the Greeks.” Revard also cites Franciscus Gomarus, *Davidis Lyra* (Leiden, 1637) as a contemporary “assertion of the priority of Hebrew poetry over Greek.” Although she does not show that Milton followed any of these thinkers into the fallacy, Revard establishes its pedigree.
salvation narrative. If the Son himself should be regarded as a created, supplementary deity, then by analogy the assertion of priority as the basis for ultimate value in poetry would diminish other secondary creations, including a poem such as *Paradise Regained* that offers corrective commentary on the gospel narrative. This premise of the Son’s rejection—that first means best—obliquely condemns both Milton’s poem and its hero, since both would have to be seen as derivative according to Milton’s sola scripturism and his Arianism.

By contrast, the poem’s contradictory failure to subordinate the classics—or better, their “insubordination” in the text—places them in an analogous position to Milton’s second epic as it stands in relation to the gospels or, in literary history, to *Paradise Lost*—or even as to the Son himself, as a secondary, created deity—would necessarily stand in relation to the Father. Ironically, therefore, veneration of the classics is logically consistent with devotion to the character who rejects them, a point made luminously clear by the epic similes that celebrate the Son’s triumph in the final temptation on the Jerusalem Temple pinnacle, where Milton implicitly likens Jesus to Hercules and Oedipus (4.565, 574). Unleashed in these similes, this repressed classical material returns at the poem’s conclusion to reveal how essential the classics remain to Milton, in spite of their rejection by the Son. Because classical models and the Son of God are to be resurrected after their humiliation, the sacrificial loss of the classics in the temptation of Athens provides an indirect means of reflection on the sacrifice of the Son of God himself at the Crucifixion, an event that the poem figures in an analogously repressed pattern of imagery.

Rejection and Revelation

Confronted by the Son’s victory over Satan in the temptation of learning, scholars have felt indicted by the rebuke as if it were a personal betrayal, as if Jesus had been unmoved by the “numbers numberless” of a Parthian army of footnotes (3.310).

Despite the work’s self-evident bookishness, the Son prefers meditation to reading:


16. According to Balachandra Rajan, in one of the finest answers to this particular instance of scholarly melancholy, “every rejection in the poem is meant to be subverted by the reader’s realization that it is only through the quality of his refusals that Christ is able to construct that historic personality
However many books
Wise men have said are wearisom; who reads
Incessantly, and to his reading brings not
A spirit and judgment equal or superior,
(And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek)
Uncertain and unsettl’d still remains,
Deep verst in books and shallow in himself,
Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys,
And trifles for choice matters, worth a spunge;
As Children gathering pibles on the shore.

(4.321–30)

By placing this emphatic denunciation of secular learning in the mouth of the Son of
God, Milton invites the unwelcome, fundamentalist thought that nonbiblical books—
including this very poem—may be nothing more than an extraneous pastime.17

The passage undermines textuality as a medium for transmitting anything
worth knowing. It is as if “books in Paradise Regained have become something like a
variorum commentary” without an inspired text to annotate.18 For, as the Son puts the
decievously simple question, “what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek” (4.325)?
Classical literature seems to stand for all reading, a point given emphasis by the way
Jesus displaces the authority of scripture even as he alludes to it: “of making many
bookes there is no end, and much studie is a wearinesse of the flesh.”19 First, we need to
recognize that, although in Paradise Regained Milton echoes this verse from Ecclesi-
estes, the Son makes his dismissal of the nonscriptural in an episode that is itself
nowhere to be found in scripture, that Milton has added to the synoptic gospels’
account of the trial in the wilderness.20 Furthermore, the fact that the Son disperses


17. The strongest case to be made so far for this reading is that of William E. Cain, “Learning How
“subversive force” of Christ’s rhetorical question, Cain argues, Milton displaces “not only the classics,
but even the authority of his own text and the role of his readers” (121).
19. Ecclesiastes 12:12, quoted from The Holy Bible: King James Version, 1611 Text,
ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford, 2010). In the 1611 text, a note glosses “studie” as “reading.”
(Providence, R.I., 1966), 281–302, esp. 297–300, is in this, as in so many different ways, an invaluable
compendium of contemporary, patristic, and ancient sources and analogues. It is worth noting that,
despite the otherwise homogenizing effect of a scholarly account that aggregates so many other exam-
pies, Lewalski nonetheless owns that “Christ’s disparagement of classical poetry may seem especially
harsh, and cannot be wholly accounted for in terms of context and tradition” (299). Andrea Walkden
shows that “The Son’s ability to refer to the Word without knowing that he refers to himself is the
the source of this authority when he attributes the wisdom to “men” in the plural and to oral tradition (“wise men have said”) makes the aphorism seem like something handed down proverbially, a method associated with Solomon. The Son calls forth the force of recollected, spoken wisdom at the expense of written, canonized authority. He is the discursive sermo, not the hieratic verbum. Jesus answers Satan's duplicity and visual display with a prophetic rhetoric that attains a “majestic unaffected stile” at once grand and humble in its sincerity, spare but still oracular (4.359).

To some, the Son's rhetorical question in the temptation of Athens—“And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek”—itself smacks of duplicity, as William Warburton suggested in the first variorum edition of Paradise Regained: “The Poet makes the old sophister the Devil always busy in his trade. 'Tis pity he should make Jesus (as he does here) use the same arms.” Despite his dismissive wit, Warburton illuminates a key facet of the Son's approach to the temptation. The Son's parenthetical line, “And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek,” presents in brilliantly compressed form the true nature of the debate with Satan: the combat is principally rhetorical. Jesus openly employs rhetoric as one rudiment of his warfare, “By winning words to conquer willing hearts, / And make perswasion do the work of fear” (1.222–23), as Satan later recognizes when he asks:

And with the Gentiles much thou must converse,
Ruling them by perswasion as thou mean'st,
Without thir learning how wilt thou with them,
Or they with thee hold conversation meet?

condition upon which he is able to speak about himself in his own words in Paradise Regained,” a movement she follows through the relations among the gospel accounts, the Son's soliloquies, and Satan's rehearsal of the Son's life story in the temptations; “Sacred Biography and Sacred Autobiography: Rewriting the Life of the Son in Paradise Regained,” in John Milton: "Reasoning Words," ed. Kristin A. Pruitt and Charles W. Durham (Selinsgrove, Pa., 2008), 165–181, esp. 167, 170, 176–78, quotation at 178.

21. Earlier, when the Son answers Satan's charge that the time is ripe for the Davidic kingship by drawing on Ecclesiastes 3:1, written text also turns into "saying": “All things are best fulfill’d in their due time / And time there is for all things, Truth hath said” (3.182–83). With an unconscious irony, the modern variorum first claims “it is impossible” to name the wise men, then enumerates a speculative list of those “to whom Milton refers” or who “in some measure agree with him” without adequately acknowledging that it is the Son, not Milton, making the reference. Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Pliny, Seneca, and Bacon were certainly known to Milton, but not to Milton's Jesus. Pace Walter MacKellar in A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton: Volume Four: “Paradise Regained,” ed. MacKellar (New York, 1975), 217. Douglas Trevor, “Milton and Solomonic Education,” in Milton and the Jews, ed. Douglas A. Brooks (Cambridge, 2008), 83–104, treats Milton's relationship to Solomonic texts in the prose and in Paradise Lost in depth.


How wilt thou reason with them, how refute
Thir Idolisms, Traditions, Paradoxes?
(4.229–34)

Satan is right, but as so often, right for the wrong reason, “a heretick in the truth” (Areopagitica, 2:543). As he says, “Error by his own arms is best evinc’t” (4.235). The Son shows that he has long since mastered the art of rhetoric with which Satan tries to entice him and that he has moreover internalized it to such a degree that he can out-sophisticate the sophist, as when he “sagely” riddles, “Think not but that I know these things, or think / I know them not; not therefore am I short / Of knowing what I aught” (4.285–88); or when he ruthlessly equivocates on the source of his knowledge of Roman luxury: “(For I have also heard, perhaps have read) / Their wines of Setia, Cales, and Falerne” (4.116–17). Perhaps have read? If, as the old saying has it, the devil is in the details, in Paradise Regained the Messiah also lurks between parentheses. Just as the devil can quote scripture, so the Son can supply answers “dark / Ambiguous and with double sense deluding,” employing a sophistical rhetoric to mislead Satan (1.434–35).

Furthermore, the rhetorical questions and asides implicitly dramatize the Son’s interiority and thereby provide a window into what Charles Dunster referred to in his 1795 variorum as the “latent scenes” of the temptation in the wilderness.26

It is beyond dispute that Milton has added a great deal to the gospels’ narratives, augmented their account of the episode.27 Milton has culled details from the text of scripture and yet, at the same time, claimed their status complexly as “deeds / Above Heroic, though in secret done, / And unrecorded left through many an Age” (1.14–16). In place of a traditional account of events inscribed and assimilated by an institution that will perpetuate their significance, Milton presents a secret gospel, one “unrecorded” and “unsung” (1.17).28 The “unrecorded,” “secret,” “obscure” (1.24; compare 2.101), “private” (4.639), and heretofore “unobserv’d” (4.638) meaning of the wilderness


26. Paradise Regained, ed. Charles Dunster, 2nd ed. (London, 1800), 5, note to 1.16. The source of this insight is itself worth noting: in a type of Freudian slip, Dunster (or the compositor) misquotes Milton’s early poem, “The Passion,” line 22, which in both the 1645 and 1673 editions reads “These latest scenes,” not “latent scenes.” Dunster is recalling the allusion to Vida’s Christiad in the fourth stanza of Milton’s “The Passion,” along with the preem to book 9 of Paradise Lost, as establishing the need to recast martial epic by singing instead “The better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom / Unsung.”

27. There is a striking and similarly extreme analogue to Milton’s reworking of his materials in the insistence, by the Grand Inquisitor of Ivan Karamazov’s poetic parable, that the answers to the temptations in the wilderness foretell all of subsequent human history. Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 1990), book 2, part 5, chapter 5, esp. p. 252.

temptation has only achieved fullness and accuracy in Milton's account, since the received traditions have failed to represent the essence of the episode. "Milton's claim may seem preposterous, even preposterously wrong," writes Joseph Wittreich, "unless he means to draw attention not to a tradition but, instead, to his interrogation, contestation, and eventual transgression of it. . . . *Paradise Regained* is a new revelation, no substitute for the story as it is told by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but a supplement to it." Indeed, it is a supplement that aspires to revise the original. In setting such a bold goal for *Paradise Regained*, Milton becomes supremely, in William Kerrigan's phrase, "the unintimidated poet who read his precursors with 'a judgment equal or superior,' bowing to none of them, not even to Moses or the Evangelists."30

Milton's visionary, prophetic aspiration is not, however, unequivocal; the gift of prophecy rarely comes without pain, as the biblical prophets and Sophocles's reluctant Tiresias reveal time and again. Thus, Milton dons the mantle of prophecy with some ambivalence about that to which he lays claim. "I am one of those who recognize God's word alone as the rule of faith," Milton avers in the preface to the chapter on the Son of God in *De Doctrina Christiana* (bk. 1, chap. 5). "For I take it upon myself to refute, whenever necessary, not scriptural authority, which is inviolable, but human interpretations" (6:203–4). Nonetheless, because of his privileging of the "Spirit of Truth" (1.462) and "unrecorded" details over recorded documents, Milton's adherence to *sola scriptura* creates something of a productive contradiction in *Paradise Regained*, where he often self-consciously draws attention to his embroidery of the scriptural account, as if he were required to inoculate himself against any such infection:

> Full forty days he pass'd, whether on hill  
> Sometimes, anon in shady vale, each night  
> Under the covert of some ancient Oak,  
> Or Cedar, to defend him from the dew,  
> Or harbour'd in one Cave, is not reveal'd[.]

(1.303–7)

Why scruple to include these details when so much else in the poem is clearly invented? The suspension of the syntax allows Milton to range about and imagine an empirical reality that underlies the Bible but then, in grammatically resolving the construction, to admit that the historical fact "is not reveal'd" by the record left in scripture. His hunger for specificity and poetic detail is palpable and at odds with the compression of biblical narrative. Milton points up the incomplete aspect of the written record to draw atten-

who rely on to my mind a questionable *OED* gloss instead of the context of the passage. Of "unrecorded," Carey writes, "indicating that M. believed the events he adds to the gospel narratives really happened, and are revealed to him by the heavenly Muse."


tion to a reality that must have been there if the events described are to be taken as historical fact, as when he bothers to mention the “new-baptiz’d, who yet remain’d / At Jordan with the Baptist,” and says, “I mean /Andrew and Simon, famous after known / With others though in Holy Writ not nam’d” (2.1–2, 6–8). In this way, too, the poet’s own “inward Oracle” must animate the poem’s “living Oracle,” the Son of God (1.463, 460). Like all interpreters of scripture, like the evangelists themselves according to Frank Kermode, Milton records a hidden gospel “to penetrate the surface and reveal a secret sense; to show what is concealed in what is proclaimed.”

In this respect, Milton’s second epic represents a massive expansion and deepening of the commitment already so well announced in the final book of Paradise Lost. There, as Michael describes the corruption of the apostolic church into institutions, the emergence of “grievous Wolves” gives rise to the consequent paradox of spiritual reading. The wolfish priesthood will taint “the truth / With superstitions and traditions . . . / Left only in those written Records pure, / Though not but by the Spirit understood” (12.508, 511–13). As the logical turn of the preposition “Though” implies, the paradox inheres in the relationship between the perceived purity and those records. Put differently, does “pure” modify “written Records” or “truth”? Whether these alternatives are ultimately equivalent or not, inspiration is required for purity to stand revealed. Warburton didn’t think Milton “in all his writings ever gave a stronger proof of his enthusiastic spirit than in this line.”

The discussion of the text of scripture in De Doctrina Christiana (book 1, chap. 30) affirms the boldness of the endeavor of writing Paradise Regained as a revelation that breaks the mold of canonical record:

Nowadays the external authority for our faith, in other words, the scriptures, is of very considerable importance and, generally speaking, it is the authority of which we first have experience. The pre-eminent and supreme authority, however, is the authority of the Spirit, which is internal, and the individual possession of each man. . . . [T]he external scripture, particularly the New Testament, has often been liable to corruption and is, in fact, corrupt. This has come about because it has been committed to the care of various untrustworthy authorities, has been collected together from an assortment of divergent manuscripts, and has survived in a medley of transcripts and editions. But no one can corrupt the Spirit which guides man to truth, and a spiritual man is not easily deceived. (6:587–88)


32. Milton seems to maintain the distinction between inward and outward illumination, along the lines of the Geneva gloss on Ecclesiastes 12:12: “These things cannot be comprehended in books or learned by study, but God must instruct thine heart that thou mayest only know that wisdom is the true felicity, and the way thereunto is to fear God.” I quote from the London edition of 1599.

33. Paradise Lost, ed. Newton, 8th ed., 2:432. Newton concurs in a follow-up note, which adduces 1 Corinthians 2:14, “understanding it as some enthusiastic Sectarists have understood it.”
Milton’s questions about the written record, and the prominence afforded the Spirit instead in this account of “the internal scripture of the Holy Spirit . . . engraved upon the hearts of believers” (6:587), arise from historical consideration of the text. Similar suspicion causes Milton to doubt “the chronological accuracy” of the narrative in “the historical” books of the Hebrew Bible (6:588). Milton’s humanist training leads to a textual historicism, in other words, that in turn elevates inspiration over text, despite his overt avowals of Biblicism. The conflict between these impulses, pulling Milton in opposite directions, becomes especially legible in the clash between creativity in representing the Son of God, on the one hand, and fidelity to the Christ understood as having been represented in the New Testament, on the other. Milton was clearly at pains to explain what seems capricious about the divine will with regard to the sacred documents: “I do not know why God’s providence should have committed the contents of the New Testament to such wayward and uncertain guardians, unless it was so that this very fact might convince us that the Spirit which is given to us is a more certain guide than scripture, and that we ought to follow it” (6:589).

The doctrine of inner light, if “doctrine” is not too oxymoronic a term for something not taught but delivered as revelation, erases other doctrine in the name of inspiration. This is what Warburton means when he eyes with suspicion the line quoted above from Paradise Lost (emphasizing the centrality of the spirit in understanding the “written Records”) and labels Milton “enthusiastical.” The suggestion that the poet records deeds of the Son left “unrecorded” until the moment of the poem’s composition implicates Milton in the seemingly sophistical task of proclaiming the unique historical veracity of his epic while, at the same time, interpolating his narrative into the biblical commentary tradition. Although throughout Paradise Regained he implicitly lays claim to greater verisimilitude than the text of scripture by means of his representational technique, Milton—unlike Dante Alighieri—does not explicitly claim the literal truth of his vision, except insofar as inspiration allows him to capture what has gone “unrecorded” and “unsung” until now. Describing this aspect of Dante’s Commedia, William Franke makes a useful case for comparison:

individual interpretation and even imaginative appropriation of meaning by individuals are recognized as key to unlocking the secret truth and the whole truth of human life. This truth, as it is revealed in Holy Scripture and in texts, including Dante’s own, which mediate and renew Scriptural vision, is always in need of further interpretation in order to remain actual and operative in the lives and hearts of human individuals.34

In adding inventive detail and creating new episodes for the trial in the wilderness, such as the Athens temptation, Milton characteristically, if obliquely, represents his own mediating renewal of the gospels as more authentic than the scriptural accounts,

which are unquestionably his main textual source. Implying the poem’s superior historicity, the interpreting spirit gives voice to the enigma of this corrective dependency, this visionary revision, suggesting familiarly, “Thus they relate, / Erring” (Paradise Lost, 1.746–47). We come much closer to appreciating the boldness, vigor, and originality of Milton’s creative prophecy if we analyze what Milton does with scripture in Paradise Regained than if we allow ourselves to arrest interpretation by accepting at face value what Milton more cautiously says he does with the Bible.

Dunster’s manuscript annotation to Paradise Regained 4.290, which eventually made its way into print in Todd’s second edition of 1809, makes this point eloquently by introducing a critical distinction: “The Quakers, it may be observed, admit that the Scriptures are true, but conceive that the necessity of them is superseded by intellectual communications; to which tenet the last line seems to point.”35 Setting aside the questionable Quaker associations of the poem, the purported story of its origin according to Ellwood’s autobiography, I think Dunster’s point stands as a powerful interpretation of the Athens temptation: “he who receives / Light from above, from the fountain of light, / No other doctrine needs, though granted true” (4.288–90).36 The “intellectual communications” to which Dunster refers are surely akin to the spirit everywhere preferred in Milton’s writings as a source of authority over self-perpetuating traditions of thought. Milton overcomes the distinction between text as exterior if universally available commentary on spiritual life and inner voice of the spirit as spoken only to believers by promoting “intellectual communications” that remain “unrecorded” until the inspired poet sings and we note them into being.

Revision, Allusion, and Textual “Purity”

Commentators, as the dispute over the variorum makes clear, will always face tough skepticism when they try to wrest the power to assert the truth of as yet “unrecorded” meanings of texts from tradition. They will be accused of infidelity, of lacking perspicacity, or of simply being wrong or irrelevant. The moment of their disempowerment is often itself displaced onto the “purity” of the text—which, as we have just seen, Milton takes great care to surround with the qualification that the truth of written record is only understood by an interpreting spirit. The inviolable text is imputed, so the argument goes, with disqualifying the supposedly newfangled interpretation, not the accuser. Consider the ironies that arise from Richard Bentley’s invention of a meddling editor who supposedly distorted the text of Paradise Lost, a postulate that served as a pseudo-scholarly pretext for what is essentially Bentley’s own rewriting of the epic; or


36. Dunster himself rejected the notion that Milton’s conceptual alignment with the tenet should be taken as a sign of Quakerism, as his manuscript note goes on to say. In the earlier printed note to the line in the 1795 edition (reprinted in 1800), Dunster had pondered the ways “this passage is rather scriptural than sectical” (227), though his manuscript addendum rejects the earlier interpretation.
from William Lauder's notorious accusation that Milton had plagiarized lines in \textit{Paradise Lost}, which he sought to prove through his own act of forgery, inserting lines from William Hog's Latin translation of Milton's epic into the texts he claimed Milton had plundered.\footnote{37} There will always be those who, as Milton says in \textit{Tetrachordon}, “love tradition more than truth” (2:643).

Even in the case of a relatively unproblematic text such as \textit{Paradise Regained}, there is, however, no such thing as an uncompromised textual origin to get back to. As is so often true for early modern texts, the historical documents from which we derive our primary source materials are themselves the secondary products of missing originals. Given our lack of manuscript evidence, there is only the printed text of 1671, and no earlier witness to the “pure” text exists. Jettisoning the rationale of the monumental, idealized texts of the twentieth-century New Bibliography, many so-called old- or original-spelling editions now return to the typographical arrangement of the earliest surviving exemplars in order to acknowledge the social component of book production and consumption and the complexity of the historical evidence of their circulation. Therefore, in our prime example, Laura Lunger Knoppers's recent Oxford edition of \textit{The 1671 Poems}, twenty-first-century readers are encouraged to reenact the experience of readers of the first edition and to contemplate how “printing-house practices . . . contributed to the form and meanings of Milton's poems.”\footnote{38} Instead of a modern text purified of the traces of its material production, the new Oxford Milton recreates the impurities that seem most meaningful, reproducing the “Omissa” at the end of the text that instructs readers to insert an additional ten lines of \textit{Samson Agonistes} instead of simply incorporating them into the body of the text.\footnote{39}

The list of errors printed in the back of the first edition contains one critical change to the text of \textit{Paradise Regained}, during the Son's rumination on his past when he descends into himself and wanders into the wilderness. Having disputed with the rabbis in the Temple, the Son tells us, he now began to contemplate the future course of his life. In the first edition, the passage at 1.214–26 reads:

\begin{quote}
yet this not all
To which my spirit aspir'd; victorious deeds
\end{quote}


\footnote{38. \textit{The 1671 Poems}, ed. Knoppers, lxxvii.}

\footnote{39. In this, Knoppers follows the argument first set forth by Stephen B. Dobranski, “Samson and the Omissa,” \textit{SEL} 36 (1996): 149–69. In a mild irony, the edition therefore must emend the text of the Omissa to reproduce the original effect more authentically for the modern reader: the page number on which to add the Omissa text refers, not to the page in the first edition, but rather to the page in the Oxford edition, which of course has different pagination. Revard, in \textit{Complete Shorter Poems}, 505 and 512, avoids this particular irony but perhaps compounds it by both inserting the emendation into the body of the text and then also reprinting the Omissa without emendation at the play's end—even including the first edition's misprint of the line number in the Omissa where the lines are to be incorporated (“after verse 537” instead of 1537).}
Flam’d in my heart, heroic acts; one while
To rescue Israel from the Roman yoke,
Then to subdue and quell o’re all the earth
Brute violence and proud Tyrannick pow’r,
Till truth were freed, and equity restor’d:
Yet held it more humane, more heavenly first
By winning words to conquer willing hearts,
And make perswasion do the work of fear;
At least to try, and teach the erring Soul
Not wilfully mis-doing, but unaware
Misled; the stubborn only to destroy.⁴⁰

Let us for a moment dwell on the rationale for emending “destroy” to “subdue” in the phrase “the stubborn only to destroy,” as all modern editors have done. The list of errors printed at the back of the first edition, of course, instructs us to make precisely this change.⁴¹ The second edition of 1680 also reads “destroy,” but it may have been typeset from a copy or copies of 1671 that lacked the errata sheet.⁴² Although, as Knoppers speculates, “there is no evidence that Milton supervised the Errata” and “this change could have been made by the compositor or corrector looking at copy,”⁴³ it is essential to admit that there is also no evidence that Milton did not intervene to insist on the specific contents of the Errata. In fact, there is no evidence at all either way.

So while it is possible that a compositor missed an interlinear or marginal revision to the manuscript, it is equally possible that Milton revised the line at some late stage in the printing process. What seems less likely is a scenario in which a compositor simply substituted a word that was never written on the manuscript, for example by catching his eye on the word “rejoyc’d” two lines later and mistaking it for “destroy.” The question whether Milton “supervised” the Errata is of only minor importance once one concedes that the manuscript could have included an alteration of the wording by the poet. In any case, the simplest explanation for the change would be an authorial revision to the text at some stage of poetic composition. “Like the insertion of the Omissa,” Stephen B. Dobranski suggests, “the change from ‘destroy’ to ‘subdue’ suggests a last-minute revision, perhaps as Milton was considering having Paradise Regain’d and Samson Agonistes published together.”⁴⁴

As the only truly substantive variant in the poem, the specific diction of the line provides a test case revealing what we bring to the text and need not elsewhere seek. Response to the crux unveils the interpreting spirit that makes the judgment about the text. Commentary must rely on inspiration to animate the text and render the crux

⁴¹. The unpaginated leaf would be numbered 103 in the edition of 1671.
⁴². The 1671 Poems, ed. Knoppers, lxxvi.
⁴³. Ibid., lxxxiv.
decidable. In other words, the variant makes legible an interpreter’s assumptions about what the text can, or should, mean. This is because a preference for one word choice over the other indicates an idea about which one is more contextually appropriate, about which word stands in a more decorous relation to the surrounding speech and therefore to our sense of the words attributed to the Son of God throughout the poem. Again, the early variorum editions draw our attention to precisely what is at stake in the crux, despite the fact that their theoretical bias might differ from ours (the editors insist upon authorial intention as the touchstone for all textual decisions). According to Thomas Newton, “We cannot sufficiently condemn the negligence of former editors and printers, who have not so much as corrected the Errata pointed out to them by Milton himself, but have carefully followed all the blunders of the first edition, and increased their number with new ones of their own.”

Newton goes on to acknowledge that “the stubborn only to destroy” makes “good sense,” and therefore that “the mistake is not so easily detected.” Indeed, for Newton, the point is that, “if we consider it, [subdue] is the more proper word, more suitable to the humane and heavenly character of the speaker: besides, it answers the subdue and quell in ver. 218.” Newton then adduces Luke 9:56 as a counter to the uncorrected diction in the first edition: “The son of man came not to destroy mens lives &c.”

Newton’s quotation is telling, for it betrays the editor’s inability to reconcile the original wording of the text, not with the rest of Milton’s poem or any other writing by Milton, but instead with the Gospel of Luke, which the editor will not allow the poem to contradict. Newton’s treatment of the crux reveals one persistent irony of intentionalist editing. The editor posits the author’s intention and defers to this hypothetical reconstruction instead of the extant text. The very idea that Milton’s poem could show evidence of contradicting the Bible in any detail therefore necessitates the change, because Milton could never have intended such blasphemy. Newton’s orthodoxies tacitly become Milton’s.

Thus, to choose one word over the other is to infer a whole psychology; it is to choose one Word over another. Is it more or less likely that at some stage in the composition of the second epic, Milton thought the Son would have wanted to “destroy” the stubborn? The image of a destructive impulse in the Son of God is certainly unsettling, even if it is only represented as a passing thought about his earlier state of mind, but this does not rule out the possibility that Milton wrote it. The notion of the Messiah pondering the destruction of those who cannot be persuaded may seem out of place, but it cannot be discounted without some explanation of why, and for whom, such a thought must be ruled out of bounds. In the first edition of the poem, though less viscerally in modern, emended texts, the most meaningful variant in Paradise Regained elicits commentary by its very nature. At least in this instance, one cannot “subdue” the earliest textual witness without to some degree “destroying” it.

Intriguingly, then, we have what looks very much like a Miltonic second thought, almost a commentary on his initial impulse—a violent instinct tempered by a more

46. Ibid., 25.
nuanced ethical realization. Elsewhere in the poem, however, Milton reflects back on this speech in a way that should cause us to rethink our sense of the meaning of “subdue” in the early speech. “They err who count it glorious to subdue / By Conquest,” the Son says when resisting Satan’s insistence that he pursue empire as Julius Caesar did (3.71–72). Of course, this is precisely what the Son of God had done when ending the War in Heaven in Paradise Lost, as the angelic choir reminds us at the conclusion of Paradise Regained:

The Son of God, with Godlike force indu’d
Against th’ Attempter of thy Fathers Throne,
And Thief of Paradise; him long of old
Thou didst debel, and down from Heav’n cast
With all his Army[.]

(4.602–606)

Milton calls attention to at least two contexts with the alliterative choice of the now obsolete “debel,” a usage that derives ultimately from the Latin verb debellare, “to battle down, vanquish, subdue by force.” First, all commentators since Newton have recognized in this description an allusion to a line from the Aeneid, where Anchises admonishes Aeneas in the underworld:

\[
tu \text{ regere imperio populos, Romane, memento}
\]

(hae tibi erunt artes) pacique imponere morem,
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.

[Remember, Roman, your mission to rule the nations; these will be your arts: to establish peace and moral custom, to spare the conquered, and to battle down the proud.]

More suggestively, following Dunster, we might return in the light of this allusion to the crux from book 1 of Paradise Regained: “the stubborn only to [destroy / subdue].” Dunster hears an allusion to the same passage from Virgil in the corrected phrase from book 1, “the stubborn only to subdue”: “This is Virgil’s debellare superbos,” he claims. The “heroic acts” (1.216) imagined by the Son in the book 1 speech have, ironically, already been enacted on the battlefield of heaven, as the angels recall. If Dunster is right, what had perhaps initially seemed to be the ameliorating revision of “destroy” to “subdue” nevertheless retains troubling martial and imperial resonances. The values of classical heroism, overtly rejected by the Son throughout the poem, are

arguably even more present in the revision of “destroy” to “subdue,” if in fact the revised phrase recalls Anchises’s advice amid the prophecy to his son. Augustine, for example, thought this phrase (*debellare superbos*) so representative of the ethical values of classical, pagan civilization that he contrasted what he saw as its haughty, self-congratulating anthropocentrism with the humility exalted in the similar diction of the Vulgate New Testament. Despite the rejection of Greek and Roman culture in the Athens temptation, classical heroism nevertheless exerts a latent pressure on the Son’s triumph, as we see earlier in the poem when the Son recollects the virtue of the heathen worthies (2.443–46) or praises Socrates (3.96–99).

The polarities of Milton’s thought on this matter, as William Blake grasped in his inimitable way, were irreconcilable. In the preface to his *Milton* (1804–11)—itself modeled on the Son’s rejection of Athens—Blake raises the suspicion that Milton “Set up” the “artifice” of “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to contemn” against “the Sublime of the Bible”: Milton was “curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword.” Milton’s ongoing complicity with the ideology of epic form, as Blake sees it, necessitates Milton’s return to earth 130 years after his death to renounce further “the detestable Gods of Priam” that are followed by the warmongering nations. Blake’s accusation reveals his sense that the givens of the eighteenth-century commentary tradition are true: not only that Milton contradictorily persisted in his commitment to classical culture, but also that “Miltons religion is the cause: there is no end to destruction!” At either extreme of the reception history, then, the two positions merge. On the one hand, Milton was too liberal in his enduring regard for the classics, even as he tried to purge his Jesus of their effect. On the other, his religion, despite its apparent severity in the episode, did not go far enough. Therefore, Milton’s classicism and his religion, like his Adam and Eve exiting paradise, go hand in hand. As Blake’s intensification of the Son’s disavowal shows, a neoclassical specter haunts Milton’s poetry, even where it stands most firmly in opposition to the spiritual value of the learned pagans.

**Athens and Jerusalem**

What if, therefore, we reject outright the rhetorical nature of the question asked by Tertullian: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” (*De praescriptione haereticorum*, 7.9).
What if instead of seeing an absolute rejection of the one pole by the other, we hear an
invitation to provide a fuller answer than Tertullian would have accepted, despite his
highly rhetorical formulation, itself a product of his classical education? The danger
with rhetorical questions, as John Leonard says, is that “they risk (even court) an
unwelcome answer.”\(^55\) The conflict between the two positions drives Milton’s poem.
Indeed, the two remain, for complex reasons, inseparable throughout the poem, both
before and after the Son’s rejection of classical learning. Both directly and indirectly,
the early variorum editions provide the clearest access to this fact in the history of Mil-
ton criticism. The language of revelation uncannily intermingles with the language of
epic in a way that, as we have just seen, Blake thought compromised Milton’s vision.
For Milton, however, the harmony of these discords produces the music most expres-
sive of his thought. Not epic or apocalypse: both Homer and Revelation, in a produc-
tive tension. At the start of the fourth book of Paradise Regained, “the Tempter stood”
 ceaselessly “tempting him who foyls him still” (4.2, 13):

\[
\text{as a swarm of flies in vintage time,} \\
\text{About the wine-press where sweet moust is powr’d,} \\
\text{Beat off, returns as oft with humming sound[.]}
\]

\[(4.15–17)\]

The model for this part of the simile is the battle over the corpse of Sarpedon in the Iliad,
where the Achaians are likened to flies swarming around milk pails in springtime (Iliad
16.641–43). In substituting wine for milk and the wine-press at vintage time for spring,
Milton “makes the simile apply also to Christ in his sacrificial or sacerdotal role.”\(^56\)

Nonetheless, the common way for scholars to conceive of the relationship in
Paradise Regained between Jerusalem and Athens, each understood of course as a
synecdoche for an entire civilization, is to see Athens as diabolical, and Jerusalem as
holy. This conceptual current in the criticism then flows into the mainstream notion of
Milton’s use of classical rhetoric and poetic flourish to ornament the tempter’s speeches,
as Robert Thyer contended in the first variorum:

\[To whom our Saviour sagely thus reply’d.] This answer of our Saviour is as
much to be admired for solid reasoning, and the many sublime truths
contain’d in it, as the preceding speech of Satan is for that fine vein of
poetry which runs through it: and one may observe in general, that

and John Milton in Honor of Alan Rudrum, ed. Donald R. Dickson and Holly Faith Nelson (Newark,
Del., 2004), 77.

\(^56\) Neil Forsyth, “Having Done All To Stand: Biblical and Classical Allusion in Paradise Regained,”
Milton Studies 21 (1985): 204. For an argument that the imagery of the Passion, while “subtle,” perme-
ates Paradise Regained, see Russel M. Hillier, “The Wreath, the Rock and the Winepress: Passion
the wine-press.
Milton has quite throughout this work thrown the ornaments of poetry on the side of error, whether it was that he thought great truths best expressed in a grave unaffected stile, or intended to suggest this fine moral to the reader, that simple naked truth will always be an overmatch for falsehood tho’ recommended by the gayest rhetoric, and adorned with the most bewitching colors.⁵⁷

The moral of the story—the content of its form, we might say—is that poetry and rhetoric adorn error, whereas the “simple naked truth” battles down “that fine vein of poetry,” which tempts by presenting itself as tantalizingly dressed in “the most bewitching colors.” The gravity of the “unaffected stile” subdues its rhetorical foe, the baroque sophistry of satanic verse. Yet intricate classical allusions remain crucial to the poem to its end, just as the Homeric device of the epic simile returns in the celebration of Satan’s defeat and fall. What to make of this sudden reappearance of the classical form and content of epic poetry in the wake of the Athens temptation? The consensus of Milton scholars, from Thyer on, has been that, as Neil Forsyth writes, “Greek myth may still help us understand the enemy.”⁵⁸

Not until the end of Paradise Regained does Milton fully resuscitate text as a vehicle for spiritual knowledge, as the principal way one might bring what one need not seek elsewhere.⁵⁹ In the Son’s concluding recuperation of textuality on the pinnacle of the Temple of Jerusalem, Milton verbally follows Matthew instead of Luke, his primary model for the narrative of the wilderness temptations. In the Greek text of Luke 4:12 Jesus uses the verb eiretai (“it has been said”) to introduce his final, decisive quotation from Deuteronomy 6:16 (“Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God”). Unlike Luke 4:12, Matthew 4:10 introduces the quotation from Deuteronomy with the verb gegraptai (“it has been written”), and Milton follows suit: “also it is written, / Tempt not the Lord thy God, he said and stood” (4.560–61).⁶⁰ This is the moment when Milton’s narrative converges word for word with the gospel. At precisely this moment, Milton’s verse becomes one with scripture, becomes the gospel in the making. The interpretive horizon of the reader meets with the visionary inspiration of the poet. A quotation from Deuteronomy becomes a quotation from the gospels and, at the same moment, the substance of Milton’s verse: Milton quotes a quotation of Deuteronomy. Milton’s reading has become the scene of the gospel’s writing. Milton seeks to

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⁵⁹. My formulation here is indebted to Ryan Netzley, “How Reading Works: Hermeneutics and Reading Practice in Paradise Regained,” Milton Studies 49 (2009): 146–66, esp. 147–49, 153, 160. Netzley argues that the practice of reading leads to the inculcation of the spirit with the judgment necessary to read aright, and that rereading textual sameness for significant difference becomes the implicit method suggested in the Son’s “also” in the non sequitur “Also it is written.”
⁶⁰. I transliterate the Greek from Novum Testamentum Graece, 27th ed., ed. E. Nestle, K. Aland, and B. Aland et al. (Stuttgart, 1996). At Luke 4:4 and 4:8, however, Jesus prefers gegraptai (“it has been written”) to eiretai (“it has been said”; Luke 4:12) to introduce the authority of his proof-texts from Deuteronomy; gegraptai is preferred at each analogous juncture in Matthew 4:4, 4:7, and 4:10.
engraft his poem on the Word of God and therefore momentarily subordinates his own prodigious reading and creativity to follow the text literally, word for Word—in parallel to the way the Son must come to grips with what it means to be the Son about whom he has read in the texts of sacred scripture. Again, the question arises whether it is possible not to deviate from scripture in the creative act—like Pierre Menard, who recreates Don Quixote word for word in the Borges story—even at a moment when it seems that the text replicates scripture verbatim.61

Just as the Son’s quotation of scripture following the phrase “it is written” regains textuality as a medium, so the passage that follows this directly restores the power of classical form and content to the epic. The conclusion of the poem makes clear that Milton does not reserve poetic devices exclusively for satanic ornament.62 The matter of classical literature becomes a question of Milton’s poetic need, when the poetry, according to William Kerrigan, “passes over into another dimension of signification, and some of its careful discursive arrangements become mysteriously reordered” so that it “becomes supremely prophetical.”63 The fountain of light delivers the inspired comparisons; what Milton brings, he need not elsewhere seek, and yet he brings it from his lifelong immersion in the classical tradition:

But Satan smitten with amazement fell
As when Earths Son Antaeus (to compare
Small things with greatest) in Irassa strove
With Joves Alcides, and oft foil’d still rose,
Receiving from his mother Earth new strength[.]

(4.562–66)

Early on, in the Nativity Ode and “The Passion,” Milton had straightforwardly employed the conventional representation of Hercules’s miraculous deeds as a type of the newborn Christ: “Nor all the gods beside, / Longer dare abide, / Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine: / Our Babe to shew his Godhead true / Can in his swaddling band controul the whole damned crew.”64 More eccentric and sophisticated, the comparison between “Joves Alcides” and the Son of God in Paradise Regained introduces the contrast between the source of strength upon which the combatants draw; Antaeus receives “from his mother Earth new strength,” whereas Hercules’s and Christ’s power derives from their divine fathers.65

62. See Forsyth, “Having Done All to Stand,” 199–214, for a subtle account of this aspect of the similes.
65. See Kerrigan, “The Riddle of Paradise Regained,” 64–80, for an expansive treatment of the interlocking Oedipean simile, the ambiguous antecedent of “him” suggesting the sudden identity of protagonist and enemy in line 4.583, and the conceptual implications of this moment for the poem as a whole.
Moreover, a different convention, derived from a classical source, intervenes in the parenthetical disclaimer: “(to compare / Small things with greatest)” (4.563–64). As Dunster recognized, “This is the third time Milton has imitated Virgil’s sic parvis componere magna solem. Ecl. i. 24. See Paradise Lost, ii. 921. x. 306. Some such mode of qualifying common similies [sic] is necessary to a poet writing on divine subjects.”66 Dunster again reminds us of the traditional nature of Milton’s rhetoric by pointing out a classical source in Virgil. His comment is unassuming and understated —perhaps too much so. By way of comparison, we might consider how Milton translates Ariosto’s Cosa non detta in prosa mai, né in rima (Orlando Furioso 1.2) as an ironically unoriginal comment on his own ambition to attain originality in Paradise Lost 1.16: “Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.” Yet here, in his second epic, Milton’s irony cuts the other way. Instead of proclaiming originality in a traditional act of imitation, which through its irony actually manages to create an original and idiosyncratic effect, Milton’s Virgilian dismissal of the basis of the comparison imitates a traditional commonplace to suggest his poem’s essential difference from the classics—a difference based in his authorship’s doctrinal advantage. Milton memorably describes this distinction as an aspect of his ambition in The Reason of Church-Government: “That what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine” (1:812). Through this parenthetical appropriation, Milton conscripts Virgil to downplay the legitimacy of his classical simile. Milton rejects his own overt poetic method—epic similes with classical allusions—ironically drawing the power of his disavowal of the relevance of the classics from a classical rejection of the propriety of comparison. The enduring relevance of this rhetorical combat between classical literature and what it can only obliquely reference through similitude, then, stands at the pinnacle of the work to suggest that it is only through the renunciation of the things of this world that an intimation of the next can be poetically represented.

Ultimately, the poem does not end with triumph, or with renunciation. The poem ends more quietly confirming the Son of God’s humanity, represented through the synecdoche of his “Mothers house”: “hee unobserv’d / Home to his Mothers house private return’d” (4.638–39). Milton concludes his second epic with a depiction of the private and unspectacular moment in which Jesus, having “regain’d lost Paradise” (4.608), returns to the source of his humanity, a return that the poet reminds us was “unobserv’d”—until Milton observed it. Unlike Hercules or Antaeus, Milton’s Son of God gains unearthly strength from his entirely human mother. In his recovery of the textuality of scripture at the climax of the final temptation, the Son of God merges fully with the sacred inscription through which we may recognize him, even if we eventually progress beyond that “external authority . . . of which we first have experience” in

pursuit of the Spirit (De Doctrina Christiana, 6:587). Milton transcends the temptation of learning by showing us that the Son’s act of renouncing classical culture gains in originality and power through the poem’s enigmatic, enduring dependence on the disavowed tradition on which it comments. The classics suggest the paradigm of rejection, even as the variorum commentary regains them. Paradise Regained, through the variorum editions it inspired, shows us what Milton could not do without, even if he would.

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