

Milton's Outsiders:  
The Decentralization of Morality in *Paradise Lost*

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with research distinction* in English in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

By

Jarod K. Anderson

The Ohio State University  
June 2008

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. –Areopagitica

The notion of evil in *Paradise Lost*, as has been said by countless scholars, is deliberately complex, at least on the surface; yet, while the majority of explanations as to the abstruse nature of Milton's portrayal of evil in the poem have centered on a sympathetic Satan, a fortunate fall, or the assertion that the reader is fooled into falling through the subtle use of literary convention, I believe that the true source of moral complication in the poem lies in the struggle between Milton's need to uphold the authority of God while simultaneously legitimizing opposition to the will of God. Milton needs to vindicate elements in the poem contrary to God's will in order to add weight to the reader's choice either to figuratively uphold or reject divine law. These conflicting aims ultimately lend contrary thematic values to the poem which create a fascinatingly paradoxical and engaging narrative.

In order to create a legitimately questionable, but ultimately beneficent God, Milton employs various representations of otherness –elements which are literally or figuratively outside of the rule of God. The fact that Milton creates a universe in which dwell sentient beings that are not created by God, precede the rule of God, and/or are opposed to the will of God, greatly impacts the moral structure of the poem. Given that there are entities in *Paradise Lost* which are essentially outside of God's system, God becomes *a* ruler, *a* creator, not *the* ruler, *the* creator. This validation of otherness, in turn, lends textual credence, if not literal plausibility, to the desires of Adam, and the “stygian council” when they propose embracing nothingness (suicide) in order to escape God's rule. Moloch argues:

What fear we then? what doubt we to incense  
His utmost ire? which to the highth enrag'd,  
Will either quite consume us, and reduce  
To nothing this essential, happier farr  
Then miserable to have eternal being.  
Or if our substance be indeed Divine,  
And cannot cease to be, we are at worst  
On this side nothing (2.94-101)

Ancient Night, Chaos, and all their associates and subjects exist outside of God's created system. Although God may not allow egress from his creation, the idea itself is not outside the realm of possibility in the universe of the poem; it is available to be contemplated by the reader. In each case, the character abandons the notion as impossible because, being in the power of God, escape from the moral universe in which they find themselves is barred. Yet, given that these instances of character-contemplated otherness are preceded by explicit, tangible, personified, validated otherness, such thoughts of escape, though prevented by God, are granted textual credibility by representative analogs; for example, the personification of "uncreated night" (2.150) exists outside of God's created universe and, with her co-ruler Chaos, holds dominion over an "illimitable ocean without bound" (2.892) all of which represents otherness. Thus, when Eve considers escaping the rule of God through Death, the idea that one may exist outside God's system has already been upheld by Milton's choice to include firm examples of otherness in the poem. Eve proposes:

Let us seek Death, or hee not found, supply  
With our own hands his Office on our selves;  
Why stand we longer shivering under feares,  
That shew no end but Death, and have the power,  
Of many ways to die the shortest choosing,  
Destruction with destruction to destroy. (9.1001-1006)

The reader may be aware that God will not allow his creation to escape his judgment and, indeed, Adam reinforces this fact; “so thinking to evade / The penaltie pronounc't, doubt not but God / Hath wiselier arm'd his vengeful ire then so / To be forestall'd” (9.1021-1024). Indeed, in his groundbreaking essay “A Little Look into Chaos,” Robert M. Adams notes the poem’s connection between despair and otherness. “Adam’s agonized cry –‘Both Death and I / Am found Eternal, and incorporate both’ –sounds at the depth of his remorseful monologue. He could just as well cry that Chaos and he are now incorporate, except that death is the special exquisite privilege of the animate world” (628). In addition, this trope is echoed in the debates of the council of pandemonium:

...our final hope  
Is flat despair: we must exasperate  
Th' Almighty Victor to spend all his rage,  
And that must end us, that must be our cure,  
To be no more; sad cure; for who would lose,  
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,  
Those thoughts that wander through Eternity,  
To perish rather, swallowd up and lost

In the wide womb of uncreated night,  
Devoid of sense and motion? and who knows,  
Let this be good, whether our angry Foe  
Can give it, or will ever? how he can  
Is doubtful; that he never will is sure. (2.142-154)

By associating divine retribution with the hope of escaping to an alternative system of existence (or non-existence), a possibility already validated by personified otherness, Milton reinforces the subjective nature of God's imposed moral schema. Yet again, the reader's assessment of God's justice is validated by elements of otherness in *Paradise Lost*. Adam and Eve consider metaphorically embracing otherness through death; the reader is reminded that otherness exists in the universe of the poem. Satan continually wishes to escape the rule of God; the reader recalls that sentient beings, not created by God, exist outside of God's system, predating his rule. As Robert M. Adams points out, "Chaos is present or potentially present throughout Milton's poem" (Adams 621). The presence of otherness makes God's position, and moral authority, relative.

I am not arguing that God does not have the authority to determine right and wrong within his created system of existence; I am simply highlighting the fact that since God's system of existence is not the only form of existence presented in *Paradise Lost* – due to the Milton's explicit use of otherness – the narrative does not create a logical mandate that necessitates that the reader figuratively ally him or herself with God simply because of unquestionable divine authority and ethos. This rhetorical framework has led some critics to question the beneficence of Milton's God and the true motive of Milton's defense of divine justice. William Empson, for example, asserts:

A sympathetic reader of Milton's prose is accustomed to feel that he writes like a lawyer or a politician, concerned to convince his reader by any argument which would serve, though really more humane or enlightened arguments are what have made Milton himself choose the side he is arguing on. But every decent man is against what he has to maintain; there is an 'outcry' against it; but what he has found in the Bible is the horrible truth about the justice of God, and men had better learn to face it. (Empson 615)

Empson misinterprets Milton's intentions. While otherness does highlight that Milton had a choice to make in defending God by legitimizing the context of that defense –the debate surrounding God's justice; this fact does not undermine Milton's defense or the justice of God in the context of his created universe. Empson further asserts that "the poem, to be completely four-square, ought to explain why God had to procure all these falls for his eventual high purpose" (Empson 612). The poem does address this issue:

...they themselves decreed  
Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,  
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,  
Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.  
So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,  
Or aught by me immutablie foreseen,  
They trespass, Authors to themselves in all  
Both what they judge and what they choose (3.116-123)

Empson's misreading comes from an incorrect interpretation of otherness. At no point in *Paradise Lost* does Milton undermine God's authority within his own universe. To

accuse God of being somehow sinister within the context of the poem is to accuse him of being inconsistent; God, in terms of his created plane of existence is:

Author of this Universe,  
And all this good to man, for whose well being  
So amply, and with hands so liberal  
Thou hast provided all things: (7.997-1000)

Milton's God is not inconsistent. He is the author of all that is good and, by extension, has the power to determine what is or is not good within the bounds of his creation. God is the benchmark of goodness within his own universe. Otherness does not give the reader the freedom to judge God's interpretation of his own brand of goodness; it gives us the holistic freedom to judge the complete, consistent system by which God creates and applies his own subjective morality. Though God's goodness is explicitly sound, concrete, and consistent within his own creation, otherness positions the reader well outside of that creation and allows us to judge the system entire, functional and consistent though it may be. After all, a system, a machine may be both functionally sound and utterly undesirable.

In this sense, it is important to foreground the perspective from which I approach the text. My argument applies to the relationship between reader and poem, the process by which we create and interpret meaning through our interactions with the text. While otherness does not impact the characters of the poem in a way that significantly alters their roles/experiences within the narrative structure of the poem, it greatly affects the reader's perception of the moral structure of the narrative. By expressly attempting to justify the ways of God to men, Milton positions the reader outside the framework of his

narrative universe –a universe that defines God, in part, by recognizing elements that are not God. Milton, by asking the reader to judge the ways of God on a universal scale, explicitly positions us outside the bounds of the universe/reality of the poem. The scale of Milton’s endeavor necessitates that, as judges of issues of universal import, the reader takes an “outside looking in” approach to the poem. While obviously this degree of removal can be observed in any reader/text relationship, the perspective of the reader in *Paradise Lost*, I would argue, is an intentional construct of the author –a construct created by coupling God’s created universe with elements outside of God’s system (otherness). The judgment Milton calls upon the reader to make requires a measure of relativity. Without otherness, there is no relativity. If God’s system is the only system within the narrative (and by extension the world outside the poem, the world of the poem’s reader/arbitrator) there is no way for the reader to question God’s actions and certainly no need for the poet to defend them.

Considering the poem’s constant thematic endorsement of free choice, Milton is hardly likely to frame a narrative around a false question. Otherness validates the question, validates the reader’s judgment of divine justice. It is in this sense that I examine the reader’s relationship with the text. The rhetorical context of *Paradise Lost* as well as the explicit positioning of the reader as an outside judge of God’s moral system must be acknowledged when attempting to examine the moral subtleties of the poem. Milton’s choice to include elements of otherness in his epic becomes a vital tool for correctly interpreting the overarching or universal moral fabric of the narrative – especially when we realize that “universal” does not simply refer to God’s creation given that Milton’s narrative framework creates elements outside of God’s universe. It is on this

scale, from this holistic view of the nature of meaning and the creation of meaning, that I examine the consequences and importance of otherness in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton's authorial choice to create a logical framework in which God is not the original, sole creator and ultimate authority in *Paradise Lost* greatly affects the moral structure of the poem. The presence of otherness in *Paradise Lost*, specifically the personifications of void, night and chaos, make God's position relative; consequently, God becomes stripped of universal authority within the poem and, ultimately, the authority to definitively determine good and evil. This point is specifically supported by Milton's choice to associate authority with creation; Satan, in defense of his rebellion states:

That we were formed then sayest thou? and the work  
Of secondary hands, by task transferred  
From Father to his Son? strange point and new!  
Doctrine which we would know whence learned: who saw  
When this creation was? rememberest thou  
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?  
We know no time when we were not as now;  
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised  
By our own quickening power, when fatal course  
Had circled his full orb, the birth mature  
Of this our native Heaven, ethereal sons.  
Our puissance is our own. (5.850-861)

Though the poem certainly contradicts Satan's assertion concerning self-creation, the association between creation and moral authority is, nevertheless, established and upheld by Milton. After all, what grants the authority to God to dictate to Adam and Eve the prohibition of the fruit of knowledge? "Say first what cause / Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State, / Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off / From their Creator, and transgress his Will" (1.28-31). What, then, is the moral consequence of Milton's choice not to present God as the sole creator within his narrative universe? The choice does not diminish God's authority over his own creation, his own universe within the narrative; yet, it does remove God's authority to project his own morality on the narrative whole—a necessary step for Milton to take if the reader is to judge God's ways and Milton's justification of the divine plan.

Thus, Milton's choice to include an element of otherness in *Paradise Lost* causes the notion of evil (on a universal/narrative scale) to become subjective, a matter for the reader to decide. As such, the reader is faced with a legitimate choice. If the reader chooses to align him or herself with God in the narrative, he or she must do so freely based on God's merits, not on authorial insistence or unquestionable moral/divine authority. I believe it is fair to say, as evidenced by the many tendentious comments in the poem, that authorial intention is firmly on the side of God; "for what can scape the Eye / Of God All-seeing, or deceive his Heart / Omniscient, who in all things wise and just" (10.5-7). Yet, Milton, as one who philosophically placed the utmost importance on the need for unrestrained choice, created a narrative climate in which good and evil are not absolute. Good and evil are part and parcel of God's created system; yet, otherness grants the reader the freedom to view all of God's creation (including his notions of good

and evil) as a singularity –an object whose value is to be assessed, its ethical credibility weighed in the individual, subjective scales of the reader’s judgment. This structure creates a wonderfully engaging sense of subjective consequence; the poem both validates the reader’s moral response and demands a conclusion. In this sense, Milton has skillfully created a narrative setting in which his task is, indeed, to justify the ways of God to humanity.

Much has been written attempting to explain the uncertainty felt by many readers towards Milton’s treatment of good and evil in *Paradise Lost*; however, relatively little has been written on the subject of what I describe as elements of otherness in the poem. I believe otherness is, essentially, the key to unlocking Milton’s seemingly inconsistent, and at times perplexing, treatment of morality in *Paradise Lost*. Both Milton and Milton’s God in the poem extol the value of free choice. God, commenting on the fall of mankind, asserts:

Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.  
Not free, what proof could they have given sincere  
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,  
Where onely what they needs must do, appeared,  
Not what they would? what praise could they receive?  
What pleasure I from such obedience paid,  
When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)  
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoild,  
Made passive both, had servd necessitie,

Not mee. They therefore as to right belongd,  
So were created, nor can justly accuse  
Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate;  
As if Predestination over-rul'd  
Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree  
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed  
Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,  
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,  
Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.  
So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,  
Or aught by me immutablie foreseen,  
They trespass, Authors to themselves in all  
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so  
I formd them free, and free they must remain,  
Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change  
Thir nature, and revoke the high Decree  
Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd  
Thir freedom, they themselves ordain'd thir fall. (3.102-128)

Additionally, in *Areopagitica* Milton argues that more than just the freedom to choose virtue, but also the fair and accurate estimation of the choice is necessary in order to achieve true virtue:

Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather;  
that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore

which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure (*Areopagitica*).

Milton asserts that true virtue cannot be attained without the knowledge of “the utmost that vice promises to her followers” and, furthermore, that virtue is nothing without trial. While *Areopagitica* does speak to conditions in a fallen world and *Paradise Lost*, primarily, does not, I believe that this ideological tendency of Milton is still relevant to my argument –especially considering that my own critical approach (as well as the narrative structure of the poem) positions the reader firmly outside the narrative universe of the poem and, thus, renders the status of the world (fallen or not) irrelevant to our universal moral judgments concerning the ethical structure of the existence ruled by God within the poem. God does not fall with the world; and, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton positions the reader outside even God’s sphere. How, then, can we take Milton’s moral comments throughout the poem at face value? Should we allow Milton to definitively answer questions of morality in the poem with a series of terse, dismissive directives to the reader when Milton himself argues that “who...to his reading brings not a spirit and judgement...remains shallow in himself” (*Paradise Regained*, Book 4)? Milton chooses to argue on God’s behalf because, as a pious man, it would seem he feels obliged to do so; however, as a thinker, Milton is unable to relegate his grand argument to a simple matter of unquestioning faith. This conflict, I believe, is the heart of the sub-textual tension in *Paradise Lost* that has inspired a wealth of scholarship focused on unraveling the moral mysteries of the poem. Additionally, this conflict is the impetus for Milton’s

employment of otherness in the poem in order to counterbalance the authorial argument that God is the ultimate moral authority in the narrative.

Yet, before further exploring the nature of otherness in *Paradise Lost*, it is necessary to explore, in part, the discourse concerning the nature of the subject I am attempting to elucidate –the moral fabric of the narrative. In this way, I may contextualize my own observations in reference to the larger debate, past and present. However, considering that my thesis reaches beyond a simple postulate concerning the significance of personified figures of otherness to an overarching commentary on the nature of morality, we must first begin by examining the larger debate in question.

When one seeks to “justify the ways of God to men” (1.26), as Milton does in his masterful epic *Paradise Lost*, what exactly is being attempted? Rarely do manifestations of good, of natural beneficence, call for a defense of divine power. No, it is the nature of evil and its relationship to supernal authority and influence that must be negotiated in order to accomplish Milton’s ends. Yet, in a poem in which God himself emphasizes that humans, as free, individual, rational beings, must “enthrall themselves” (3.125) to divine law in order to earn any measure of praise, Milton adopts the difficult task of creating a narrative universe which simultaneously exonerates divine justice and establishes an ideological setting in which the reader is indeed free to align him or herself with God, or to reject divine law. In order to “allow” the reader to earn divine praise, Milton must validate the question; should we accept or reject the rule of God? Yet, as a Christian, Milton intercedes in order to counsel the reader on the “correct” choice. The moral conflicts within God’s system are primarily important to the narrative in that they, in part, influence the moral conflict outside of God’s universe –the reader’s moral judgment of

God's creation. This, in a sense, creates a rhetorical situation in which the authorial voice campaigns against the ideological, or rather logical narrative universe of the poem—a fascinating and endless source of tension that has inspired a myriad of scholarship directed at untangling the seemingly abstruse representation of evil in *Paradise Lost*.

*Paradise Lost* does not set out simply to explore the nature of evil; the poem employs a didactic tone, a tone meant to “justify,” to reveal a central truth. Given this, it is perhaps not so surprising that in the rich history of Miltonic scholarship there exists a strong central debate focused on uncovering the “moral” of *Paradise Lost*. Scholars engaged in this discourse have, traditionally, focused on the character of Satan as a metonym for the poem's overarching moral stance on the broader subject of evil in general. Stanley Fish, a pioneer in reframing this debate, provides a succinct overview of the nature of this discussion in the preface to the second edition of his seminal work *Surprised by Sin*. Fish describes the debate in terms of two primary traditions of thought:

In one tradition, stretching from Addison to C.S. Lewis and Douglas Bush, the moral of *Paradise Lost* is ‘dazzlingly simple’: disobedience of God is the source of all evil and the content of all error; obedience to God brings happiness and the righteous life. In the other tradition, strongly announced by Blake's declaration that Milton was ‘of the Devil's party without knowing it’ and Shelley's judgment that ‘Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan’ and continued in our century by A.J. A. Waldock and William Empson among others, disobedience of God is a positive act that rescues mankind from an unvarying routine of mindless genuflection and makes possible the glorious and

distinctively human search for self-knowledge and knowledge of the truth (Fish x).

Thus, this debate essentially divides critics into polarized, antithetical factions based upon their opinion as to which “side” of the war between God and Satan the poem is really advocating. In this way, scholars addressed the treatment of evil in *Paradise Lost* not based on a holistic view of the moral and ideological structure of the narrative, but rather on the specific moral ethos of its primary players; which character’s fight is truly just? Who controls the moral high ground in the poem? By emblemizing morality, using God and Satan as representative agents, critics framed a manageable, though ultimately a truncated and superficial, means of negotiating evil in Milton’s epic.

Recognizing the inefficiency and myopic nature of this bipartisan approach to addressing the apparent textual tensions surrounding Milton’s portrayal of evil in *Paradise Lost*, Stanley Fish proposes a solution to the debate based on a new way of viewing the central questions of the discourse. Fish observes, “In the context of Milton criticism what was needed was a way of breaking out of the impasse created by two interpretive traditions” (Fish ix). Essentially, Fish asserts that perhaps the impetus for the debate surrounding the “moral” of the poem, the mysterious element in the narrative that one might almost be tempted to call ambiguity based on the multifarious array of voices and theories attempting to elucidate it, might not be a problem to be “solved,” but rather an integral and intentional part of the work. Fish argues that “Milton consciously wants to worry his reader, to force him to doubt the correctness of his responses, and to bring him to the realization that his inability to read the poem with any confidence in his own perception is its focus” (Fish 4). In a sense, Fish argues that the poem forces the reader to

take up an epistemological battle analogous to Satan's literal battle and, subsequently, fall into ideological, metaphoric damnation; after which:

The shattered visage of truth has been put back together in the experience of the poem, indeed by the experience of the poem, which, with our co-operation, has slowly (and sometimes deviously) purged our intellectual ray so that it is once more proportionable to truth the object of it (Fish 331).

With this argument, Fish successfully broadens the scope of the critical discourse attempting to negotiate the moral complexities of the poem; however, he does not, I believe, adequately explain the true source of the moral uncertainty that lies at the core of his assertions; he does not address the significance of otherness.

The subject of otherness has not been utterly overlooked by Miltonists; indeed, many scholars have identified elements of otherness in the poem as perplexing and seemingly anomalous aspects of the narrative that warrant further study. Catherine Gimelli Martin, for instance, commenting on "the allegorical episodes in *Paradise Lost*" says, "no single character has provoked quite so much debate as Milton's Chaos" (Martin 161); yet, Martin does not relegate Milton's Chaos to the realm of pure allegory, asserting that Chaos is both "allegorical and real" (Martin 161) within the narrative. Many of the studies attempting to address these complexities, however, have fallen back on the old, ineffective and ultimately obtuse framework that characterizes the polarizing morality debate I've already delineated. Critics have modeled the debate concerning Chaos on the larger question of the poem's moral allegiances. Is Chaos on the side of good or evil?

Martin argues that, despite the complex and multifarious nature of the concept of Chaos in *Paradise Lost*, it appears to be an evil element in the poem:

Simultaneously representing a person, place, and thing, Chaos not only has an ambiguous ontological status but also an apparent hostility to his putatively divine origin, both of which pose extremely perplexing problems. While in one sense his kingdom merely represents the latent state of the manifestly material energies flowing within Raphael's 'one first matter' (5.472), in another both this chaotic realm and its 'Anarch' (2.988) seem 'naturally' drawn to the satanic camp (Martin 161).

Yet, despite Martin's implications to the contrary, neither the idea that Chaos is satanic, nor the notion that he has a divine origin are universally accepted in Milton studies. In fact, ultimately, Martin herself espouses the contrary viewpoint: "The tables have now turned so far that uncreated matter, or flux, rather than stability is linked to spiritual good, which is conditional upon indeterminacy" (Martin 163). Indeed, to Martin, it is the "state" that Chaos represents that is important –the state of infinite potential. "Of course in the same sense that Satan's hellish mind is 'its own place,' Chaos's realm has also become more state than place" (Martin 177). Finally, focusing on the conceptual chaos – chaos the state, not the being –Martin concludes, "By affiliating its vacuities with those of divine freedom, Milton makes his reformed Chaos far more positive than negative, a medium of regeneration as well as choice" (Martin 178). Despite the fact that Martin observes that Chaos seems "naturally drawn to the satanic camp," she ultimately dismisses this original assessment of Chaos, embracing the antithetical viewpoint. Other critics, however, believe that Martin's "natural" inclination is the far more sound position in the debate.

John Leonard asserts that in terms of “the much-debated question of whether Milton’s Chaos is ‘good,’ ‘neutral,’ or ‘evil’” (Leonard 198), he is more sympathetic with the view that Chaos and Night are malevolent forces in the poem. Leonard argues that, while Chaos and Night are not purposefully aligned against humanity, this lack of purpose intensifies rather than reduces their sinister role in the narrative:

Critics on my side usually cite Chaos’s line ‘Havoc and spoil and ruin are my gain’ (2.1009) as if it settled the question of his moral allegiance. Perhaps it does, but I have always found Chaos the person to be a pale shadow of Chaos the place.... Even Chaos the person harbors no special malice against mankind. He resents the universe, but he never so much as mentions its occupants. He might not even know of their existence. To my mind, this ignorance or indifference is more alarming than Hell’s hatred. Satan’s malevolence at least reassures us that we matter. Chaos might annihilate us and not notice. (Leonard 199)

In this sense, Leonard argues that not only is Chaos malevolent, he is, in fact, more sinister than Satan.

John Rumrich, in a response to John Leonard’s viewpoint concerning chaos (which was already, in part, a response to an earlier essay by Rumrich), states:

Leonard begins by saying that I have argued for the goodness of Chaos, which I have, and concludes by saying that although he finds the question of Chaos’s goodness fascinating, he believes that the moral frame is irrelevant. I agree with him and, paradoxical as it may sound, will claim that this irrelevance is central to my claim for the goodness of Chaos (Rumrich 218).

Rumrich goes on to reassert that “Chaos is not evil or God’s enemy, that indeed, Chaos is, after its fashion, good” (Rumrich 220).

The final ethical position represented in the debate surrounding Chaos is that Chaos is morally neutral. William B. Hunter, in “The Confounded Confusion of Chaos” argues that:

The only sense in which his [Chaos’s] realm, the physical chaos, can be described as good is as providing the materials from which God founds creation. He would not create an evil Deep but one with the potential of becoming evil, as was true of his creation of the angel who would become the evil Satan and of Adam. I conclude with Michael Lieb that Chaos is neutral. (Hunter 229)

Yet, despite the fact that Hunter argues, essentially, that Chaos is neutral because God created Chaos neutral, he also states, “As to whether it [Chaos] derives ex nihilo or ex deo, the poem is simply silent.” Not only does that admission negate, in part, the founding logic of Hunter’s proposed neutrality theory, it is completely inaccurate.

Personified Chaos co-rules his realm with personified “eldest Night” (2.894) –a character described as “eldest of things” (2.962) (not simply eldest creation of God). In addition, the poem refers to “the wide womb of uncreated night” (2.150). Similarly, the realm of otherness is a “...wilde Abyss, / The Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave, / Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire, / But all these in thir pregnant causes mixt” (2.909-913). Otherness is “uncreated;” it is eldest; it is very different from the works of God. Furthermore, all of God’s creations described in the poem are of a finite nature, whereas the realm of Chaos and Night is an “Illimitable Ocean without bound, / Without dimension, where length, breadth, and highth, / And time and place are lost” (2.892-894).

Yet, it is not merely nothingness; it is a ruled domain. This, in addition to the Chaos camp's view of God as an unwelcome interloper, in my mind, mandates an ex nihilo reading far more than an ex deo interpretation. Certainly, in *Paradise Lost* God created his universe, but not the broader universe of the narrative.

Hunter is, however, not alone in discounting the significance of Chaos and otherness both in ideological and spatial terms. Adams correctly notes, "the composition of Milton's poem does make it necessary for us to look at Chaos, or think of Chaos, again and again" (Adams 620-621); yet, he too misinterprets what might be called the geography of Chaos, the spatial scope of otherness:

Chaos, then is situated in one of Milton's universes –in the big universe, with Heaven at the top, Hell at the bottom and no determinate shape at all –Chaos occupies in this universe a middle position. . . . So Chaos is a large, elastic, disorderly place between two fixed and essentially unchanging planes of existence. (Adams 617-618).

Adams further asserts, based on his spatial model, that those who wish to undermine the importance of Chaos could simply argue that otherness is a byproduct of Milton's narrative setting:

A skeptic could shrink the matter over which I've made such ado to small proportions indeed. Milton, he would say, had certain inescapable geographical facts to cope with: Hell, Earth, and Heaven are bound to lie at some distance from one another, and to have some minimal, representable stuff in between. (Adams 629).

However, this “skeptics” view is based on an inaccurate map of Milton’s universe. Chaos is not simply the space between God’s creations. Consider the fall of Satan and his associates; “Nine dayes they fell” (6.871). Thus, in terms of Adam’s model, the space from the “top” of God’s universe to the “bottom” may be traversed by a nine day fall. Yet, when Satan, leaving his dungeon at the “bottom” of God’s universe, first steps into the realm of Chaos:

He spreads for flight, and in the surging smoak  
Uplifted spurns the ground, thence many a League  
As in a cloudy Chair ascending rides  
Audacious, but that seat soon failing, meets  
A vast vacuitie: all unawares  
Fluttring his pennons vain plumb down he drops  
Ten thousand fadom deep, and to this hour  
Down had been falling, had not by ill chance  
The strong rebuff of som tumultuous cloud  
Instinct with Fire and Nitre hurried him  
As many miles aloft... (2.928-938).

Clearly, chaos is not simply the middle space between God’s creations. The fall from heaven to hell lasted only nine days. As the poem explicitly states, one might fall through chaos for eternity –Satan might be falling “to this hour.” Gordon Teskey remarks, “Like the later Roman emperors, Chaos resides on his ‘frontiers’ (2.998) (whatever frontiers means), to defend ‘That little which is left so to defend’ (2.1000), though ‘little’ hardly

seems the most just for what is left: a ‘dark / Illimitable ocean without bound’ (2.891-892)” (Teskey 70). In spatial terms, otherness dwarfs the creations of God.

Hunter, as well as the other critics I have just described, fail in their analyses due to their insistence on viewing the narrative universe of the poem as God’s universe. This logical misstep accounts for, in part, the mass of contradictory claims concerning the nature of not only Chaos, but the moral structure of the poem in general. Indeed, the sheer number of antithetical claims on the subject argues the validity of my reading, the need to consider otherness when attempting a coherent reading of Milton’s defense of God’s system of morality. Adams notes, “Milton’s poem, whether by accident or design (and with Milton that’s never a real option) returns to Chaos over and over” (Adams 621). Is chaos evil in terms of God’s system of morality? It simply doesn’t matter –at least not in terms of an overarching reading of the moral universe of the poem. Adams’ analysis begins to come to terms with this notion. He argues that Chaos:

Represents a very deeply felt image of evil as essential weakness. Saint Augustine tells us somewhere that the devil himself is an advocate of peace; he must have certain varieties and areas and levels of peace, in order to be more effectually malicious. But Chaos is neutral as between good and evil; all he likes is disorder.

That inclines him to evil, of course, but not all the way, for evil is itself a principle of order; and Chaos, is, so to speak, beyond good and evil. (Adams 621)

What Adams fails to recognize is that Chaos is “beyond good and evil” because Chaos is beyond God’s system. Chaos is otherness. And it is this otherness that, as Adams says of Chaos, represents “an authentic psychic menace” (621); yet, this menace arises from the way in which Milton frames good and evil as subjective qualities. Thus, the only way for

the reader to neutralize this “psychic menace” is to make the judgment that the poem requires –to judge the ways of God and, by extension, the poem’s subjective model of morality.

Chaos and by extension otherness in general, is not meant to be measured against the moral fabric of God’s creation, quite the contrary. We may measure God because of the authorial license granted to the reader by the presence of otherness. Chaos, considered relative to God’s universe, is endlessly paradoxical. Adams says of Chaos, “It is not an empire, to be fought by ranked battalions; it is discord, passivity, weakness –Chaos, in other words, seen not from the outside as a stuttering, moping old man with a facial tic, but from the inside as a constant ingredient of the Christian life, an intimate and ultimately invincible enemy” (Adams 629). Yet, otherness is not a physical enemy of God. As Adams suggests, otherness is an ideological enemy. Chaos (and all otherness in *Paradise Lost*) is not meant to be viewed on God’s terms. Indeed, that’s the whole point. Otherness is that which is not God. It allows the reader to conceptualize God’s justice from a position outside of its authority. By positioning “outsiders” in the narrative universe of the poem, Milton gives us license to be outsiders ourselves. In a sense, Milton is giving us narrative permission to judge God’s system and, in turn, he creates the need for his own justification of divine law. If Milton was simply asserting that “God is God. He created everything. He is all knowing and all powerful and his system is the only system in existence. Therefore, we must obey him” this would be a vastly different poem.

God’s system of rule, including the punishment of Satan and the fall of mankind, is, explicitly, all part of divine justice. God has complete moral authority over his

creation. Yet, Milton presents God's creation to the reader along with an infinite backdrop of unavoidable otherness:

God wants Satan to be responsible for the wrong and evil in the world, and Satan, with surprisingly little resistance, accepts the responsibility. The result of their mingled intentions and self-restrictions, is a partial, muted, and metaphorical reassertion of the sway of Chaos in the last books of the poem...Chaos in this last part of the epic is nowhere named, nor specifically described; it has become part of the air we breathe. Its presence is felt in three contexts particularly: in the exterior structure of the world, in the history of man, and in his most inward workings, his psyche. (Adams 625-626).

The subtextual influence exerted by chaos/otherness is present throughout the poem because of rhetorical necessity. The reader must always have the authority to judge the ways of God. Milton subtly weaves layers of meaning into a single text that argues in favor of God's system while simultaneously decentralizing moral authority in order to validate moral subjectivity. This is the function of narrative otherness. Yet, what are the consequences of Milton's choice to validate subjective approaches to universal notions of morality? Or, in a broader sense, what is the interpretive consequence of exploring Milton's calculated use of narrative subjectivity?

In *Destabilizing Milton*, Peter C. Herman explores issues of subjectivity and critical convention in *Paradise Lost*. Herman points out that when Stanley Fish, in his landmark work *Is There a Text in This Class*, asserts that "interpretation precedes, in fact constitutes, the text, that *Paradise Lost*, or any other piece of writing for that matter, is not a repository of meanings discoverable by the competent reader" (Herman 3), he "left

himself open to the charge that he left a nightmare of relativity in which all readings (and by implication, all political positions) are equal” (Herman 3). Herman notes that there are certain unwritten rules for “separating acceptable from unacceptable interpretations” (Herman 4) and, if one deviates from these rules, “then one risks, at best, professional marginalization (the work will be ignored) and, at worst, professional failure (e.g., drummed out of graduate school, rejection letters from learned journals, losing one’s bid for a position or tenure)” (Herman 4). After exploring these critical taboos, Herman turns to Miltonists’ conventions:

The paradigm that has largely governed Milton studies until very recently, and which continues to hold great sway consists of three propositions:

- Milton is a poet of absolute, unqualified certainty;
- *Paradise Lost* coheres;
- The critic’s task is to make the poem cohere. (Herman 7)

Much of Herman’s text seeks to undermine the wisdom of these governing paradigms of Miltonic studies; yet, as much as my analysis of otherness does focus on the ideological necessity of moral subjectivity in *Paradise Lost*, I would argue that my interpretation upholds these conventions far more than it seeks to contradict them. Though I would be happy to be one of Herman’s rebellious destabilizers of Miltonic studies, it is important to note that these conventions say nothing of authorial intention or dialectic scale. The fact that Milton seeks to “justify the ways of God to men” (1.26) necessitates that he frame a moral debate. Milton argues in favor of God’s system of morality/existence, but he, recognizing the need for a cohesive narrative, acknowledges that any debate is founded upon a measure of subjectivity. Milton, as a poet of certainty that recognizes the

merits of a coherent narrative ideology, utilizes objectivity to legitimize the debate in which he intends to take part. Otherness and the subjective morality it creates frame the reader as a judge of God's universe and allow Milton to defend God's methods. Granting the reader the narrative authority to judge Milton's defense of God does not diminish the poem's coherence or the certainty of the poet; it augments these characteristics.

Otherness enhances the ideological cohesiveness of the epic by allowing Milton to construct his grand argument on the framework of a legitimate question – a legitimate question requires at least the premise of valid subjectivity.

However, despite the ideological/rhetorical necessity of otherness in *Paradise Lost*, it is, at times, an intentionally elusive concept. It is both powerful and marginalized within the narrative. Adams apologetically states:

Writing a paper about "Chaos" in *Paradise Lost* is almost as mechanical, as computerly a process, as writing a paper about Milton's use of the color green, the quality of hardness, or triangular shapes. All you need to write this sort of paper is monomania. (Adams 629)

Of course, inspiring a kind of monomania is what otherness does in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton puts the reader in the awkward and awing position of being asked to judge the ways of God, and otherness legitimizes the reader's moral conclusions.

Yet, Adams also recognizes that:

Nobody reads *Paradise Lost* without feeling the power and terror of the Chaos whom Satan encounters out there in intergalactic space; and no half-wakeful reader has failed to see that Chaos, as a concept if not a figure, continues to exert pressure on the latter part of the poem. How far precisely that pressure extends

may be questioned; but we've all felt it, as what Milton plainly intended, a marginal element. You, therefore, who have always treated it as a marginal element, are in a better position to assess its importance than is someone who focuses on it, and strains to see it wherever there's the least hint of its potential existence. The man who sees the nuances of a text in their proper light can never be a man who's concentrating on nuances. (Adams 630)

Chaos must be a marginal element because, as a representative of otherness, it is explicitly an outsider. Marginality does not dismiss the importance of Chaos; being a marginal element is the reason Chaos is important.

Adams further asserts that Milton, "in allowing the negative power of Chaos to assert itself, muffling and muting the active imperial rhetoric on both sides, can be appreciated as an extraordinary touch of art" (Adams 632). Yet, in arguing that Chaos represents "a hidden third force" (Adams 632) in the poem, he is far too dismissive of the overarching significance of this argument. Rather than following this line of thinking to a conclusion that elucidates the ideological framework of the narrative, Adams dismisses his own observations by relegating them to a Miltonic "touch of art." However, the final statement of Adams' analysis does begin to acknowledge the significance of Chaos as an agent of otherness:

[Chaos's] agency, precisely because it isn't tied to explicit benevolence or malice, makes easier that response of ours, which mingles rueful regret, reaffirmation to the 'right' cause, and an awareness that nobody's intention corresponds very closely to what we have to live with. (Adams 632)

Otherness legitimatizes our response, whatever it may be. Otherness grants Milton the freedom to speak in favor of God's justice with certainty without undermining the central question that necessitates a defense of that justice. As Gordon Teskey states concerning the nature of Milton's writings:

They are at base a theoretical project because Milton is a theoretical poet. His poetics is very much of a piece with his revolutionary politics, his libertarian conception of human nature, his spectacular conception of the physical world, and his sublime notions of ultimate reality and God. (Teskey 1)

Given the nature of the poet and the logic of the narrative, we must be free to reject God's system of morality. Only otherness gives us the ideological liberty necessary to reject God or accept Milton's defense.

Throughout this analysis I have primarily discussed chaos, though I have stated that both the concept and personification of chaos are only facets of the larger concept of otherness. My continual references to the debate surrounding the nature of Milton's chaos simply reflect the direction and trends of the critical discourse. Chaos, it seems, is by far the most debated element of otherness; yet, critics are reticent to make connections even between the various incarnations of Chaos, let alone otherness. Teskey argues:

It is not possible to make Milton's three chaoses –the personification, the narrative scene, and the cosmological concept –consistent with one another, nor is it necessary to do so. Why shouldn't a poet be imaginatively free to blend three different needs into one? But it may also be difficult to make any one of these three things, and certainly the last, consistent even with itself. Nor, again, is there an overwhelming need for the cosmological concept to be consistent: *Paradise*

*Lost* is a poem, not a metaphysical treatise in which the strictest logic is required.

(Teskey 75-76)

Not only does this interpretation dismiss the work and its logic based on the fact that it is just “a poem” (a cardinal sin of criticism in my opinion), it also overlooks what I consider a rather obvious connection between all of these “chaoses;” they are not God. They are not part of God, nor his created system –just as the concept and personification of Night are neither God nor his creation. I find it far more likely that Milton intentionally connects these elements in order to emphasize otherness and decentralize morality than the notion that he decided not to use the “strictest logic” because he was, after all, only writing a poem.

Framing God’s creation, God’s universe, within a larger uncreated narrative universe allows the reader to appreciate and uphold, or criticize and dismiss, the ways of God and Milton’s defense thereof from the perspective of an explicit outsider. This perspective, masterfully created by Milton’s employ of ideological otherness, grants the poet the rhetorical freedom to speak with certainty concerning the goodness of God without dismissing or undermining the poem’s implicit question of universal moral authority and justice. Through otherness the poem validates the central debate of the narrative and the reader’s response without sacrificing coherence or undermining God’s justice within his own system.

## Works Cited

- Adams, Robert M. "A Little Look Into Chaos." Paradise Lost: Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993. 617-632.
- Empson, William. "Milton's God." Paradise Lost: Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993. 605-616.
- Fish, Stanley. Surprised by Sin: the Reader in Paradise Lost. Berkeley: University of California P, 1971.
- Herman, Peter C. Destabilizing Milton. New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005.
- Hunter, William B. "The Confounded Confusion of Chaos." Living Texts: Interpreting Milton. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 2000. 228-236.
- Leonard, John. "Milton, Lucretius, and 'the Void Profound of Unessential Night'" Living Texts: Interpreting Milton. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 2000. 198-217.
- Martin, Catherine G. "Pregnant Causes Mixt: the Wages of Sin and the Laws of Entropy in Milton's Chaos." Arenas of Conflict: Milton and the Unfettered Mind. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 1997. 161-182.
- Milton, John. Areopagitica. London: N. Douglas, 1927.
- Milton, John. Paradise Lost. Norton Critical ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.
- Milton, John. The Poetical Works of John Milton. Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Company, 1886.
- Rumrich, John. "Of Chaos and Nightingales." Living Texts: Interpreting Milton. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 2000. 218-227.
- Teskey, Gordon. Delirious Milton. London: Harvard UP, 2006.