The Conclusion of Book VI in *Paradise Lost*

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The Conclusion of Book VI of
Paradise Lost

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THE DEFEAT of the rebel angels at the end of the three-day battle in heaven marks an important point in the action of Paradise Lost. It occurs at the midpoint of the epic; thematically, it asserts the inevitable triumph of good over evil; structurally, it returns the action to the exact moment at which it began in medias res. It might be expected, therefore, that Milton would choose his effects here with unusual care. The climactic passage, describing the actual fall of Satan and his legions to hell, has been admired for its poetic power; it raises, however, an interesting problem which has never been satisfactorily solved. The crucial lines describe the Son as his chariot bears down upon the “impious Foes”:

Yet half his strength he put not forth, but check’d
His Thunder in mid Volie, for he meant
Not to destroy, but root them out of Heav’n:
The overthrown he rais’d, and as a Heard
Of Goats or timerous flock together throng’d
Drove them before him Thunder-struck, pursu’d
With terrors and with furies to the bounds
And Chrystal wall of Heav’n, which op’ning wide,
Rowld inward, and a spacious Gap disclos’d
Into the wastful Deep; the monstrous sight
Strook them with horror backward, but far worse
Urg’d them behind; headlong themselves they threw
Down from the verge of Heav’n, Eternal wrauth
Burnt after them to the bottomless pit.
Hell heard th’unsufferable noise, Hell saw
Heav’n ruining from Heav’n.

(PL VI.853-868)²

¹In the 1667 edition, the division according to books put the half-way mark after V; but, as Isabel G. MacCaffrey notes, the line division into halves occurs in either case near the end of VI: I to VI is about 300 lines longer than VII to XII (Paradise Lost as “Myth,” [Cambridge, Mass., 1959], p. 57, n. 20). For an analysis of the changed structural stresses resulting from the division of Books VII and X in the second edition, see Arthur Barker, “Structural Pattern in Paradise Lost,” PQ, XXVIII (1949), 17-30.
²All citations from Milton in my text are to the Columbia edition of the Works.
Bentley drew attention to the basic difficulty of interpretation when he emended the phrase “or timerous flock” of line 857 by changing “or” to “a.” “If or is admitted,” he argued, “then the other Flock must be Sheep; contrary to the Scripture Allegory, which places Sheep for Happiness, and Goats for Damnation.”\(^3\) Bentley seems to be on safe ground in insisting on the disjunctive force of “or”; as the phrase stands, the “timerous flock” should not be thought of as identical with the “Heard of Goats.” He is probably right also in feeling that Milton would not wish in this context to suggest the Biblical division of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:33), since obviously there is here no question of a saved flock of sheep; both phrases describe the devils’ fall to hell. His assumption, however, that the timorous flock necessarily is one of sheep seems gratuitous; and it is, as a matter of fact, this point in particular which is questioned by Pearce.

Pearce too wishes to avoid the implications of the Scripture allegory, but he objects to the emendation which places the second phrase in apposition, for then it is a mere repetition. “But why,” he asks, “may not we understand Deer by the phrase timerous flock? is not that Epithet as it were appropriated by the Poets to that Animal? Virgil has timidi damae twice at least.”\(^4\)

Newton will accept neither of these hypotheses: he agrees with Pearce that Milton would not have used the term “heard” for goats and then the term “flock” immediately afterwards, and he sees the impropriety of a reference to the allegory of the good and the wicked; but he does not accept the application to deer so is forced into the assumption that Milton “in the highth and fury of his description” did not advert to the possibility that the figurative meaning of sheep and goats would occur to the reader.\(^5\)

Todd summarizes the conflicting viewpoints\(^6\) but does nothing

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\(^5\) Thomas Newton, ed. *Paradise Lost* (London, 1749), I, 453. Newton adverts also to another difficulty which arises from the eighteenth century sense of decorum, namely, the presence of a low comparison to goats among sublime images. He defends the phrase by appealing to the precedent of Homer and to the Biblical use in Matt. 25:33, as well as by pointing out that a low comparison can be fittingly applied to those whom one has no wish to honor.

towards resolving the problem, and subsequent editors seem not
to have been troubled by it. Comments on the passage in the
nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries deal largely with the poetic
effect of particular lines. The basic dilemma therefore remains:
if the timorous flock is in apposition to the herd of goats, Milton
is guilty of redundancy; if it refers to sheep, at worst it suggests
an inappropriate Scriptural reference, and at best it is vague
and ambiguous. It seems unlikely that, particularly at this
emphatic point in his narrative, Milton would have been guilty
of either alternative. But if the phrase does not refer to sheep,
to what does it refer?

Editorial comment, naturally enough, tends to confine itself
to the immediate context of the passage; a more fruitful ap-
proach might perhaps be made by relating it to the total
structural and thematic pattern. A few recent commentators—
usually without referring specifically to lines 853-868, and
without considering the problem posed by the eighteenth-
century editors—have begun to emphasize the relation of Satan's
defeat here to the general pattern of his degeneration. I
should like to suggest that Milton may have inserted here an implied
comparison, a sort of objective correlative, which would under-
line the degradation of this first fall of Satan by hinting at his
later defeats and the further degeneration he was to undergo.
Such a comparison would be in keeping with his usual technique

7 John Mitford, for example, is interested in the derivation of the “ruining” of
I. 868 from the Italian ruinando (The Poetical Works of John Milton, [Phila-
delphia, 1864], I, 221); David Masson remarks, apropos of I. 862-866, that the
rebel angels do not fall in the proper sense, not being subject to gravitation, but
are forced down by the fire of Divine wrath burning after them (The Poetical
Works of John Milton, [London, 1874], III, 209); A. W. Verity cites some
related passages from Lucretius and Tennyson, as well as from Milton’s prose
works (Paradise Lost, [Cambridge, England 1929], II, 527). None of the editions
I have examined takes up the present problem; Merritt Hughes, however, refers
to the eighteenth century editors’ difficulty in accepting the presumed bad taste
of the comparison to goats (Complete Poems and Major Prose, [New York, 1937],
p. 343).

8 Thus Dick Taylor, Jr., in “The Battle in Heaven in Paradise Lost,” Tulane
Studies in English, III (1952), 69-92, has shown the importance of the battle
as a structural point of balance and as an integration of various themes, in-
cluding that of Satan’s degeneration; J. H. Adamson, in “The War in Heaven:
Milton’s Version of the Merkabah” (IEGP, LVII [1958], 690-703) has related
it to a complex of Hebrew and Christian material; and William G. Madsen has
demonstrated its typological symbolism (“Earth the Shadow of Heaven: Typo-
logical Symbolism in Paradise Lost,” PMLA, LXXV [1960], 519-526). Arnold
Stein sees the climax of Book VI as a “grand finale of physical ridicule” and a
suggestion of “the descent of spirit to matter, and of matter to the unformed
matter of chaos, even to a kind of sub-chaos.” (Answerable Style, [Minneapolis,
1953], p. 25).
of foreshadowing and implication. Book VI is filled with overtones of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, which will see Satan's final defeat at the hands of the Messiah: what is needed to complete the symbolism is the suggestion of a similar defeat during the life of the historical Christ. Aside from the allegorical encounter of Christ and Satan at the Crucifixion which had appealed to the medieval imagination but which would have been difficult to treat in an epic, the Gospels offered two scenes in particular in which the two antagonists dramatically confront each other. One of these, the threefold temptation, is the theme of *Paradise Regained*. The other is the casting out of the legion of devils in the country of the Gergesenes:

And he asked him, What is thy name? And he said, Legion: because many devils were entered into him.
And they besought him, that he would not command them to go out into the deep.
And behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?
And there was a good way off from them an herd of many swine, feeding.
So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out suffer us to go away into the herd of swine.
And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters.  

The overall impression (and even some of the details) of this description is very close to the effect of Milton's account of the rout of the rebel angels. A great multitude in headlong flight, the fearful dilemma which forces them into a violent plunge into the abyss as the lesser of two evils, the abject terror of these once boastful spirits, their complete helplessness before the commanding voice which could, if it chose, destroy them utterly—all suggest a parallelism between the two scenes. And since in the Biblical account there is a looking forward to the final defeat of Satan ("art thou come hither to torment us

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before the time?"), the choice of this episode to imply his larger symbolic meanings seems made to order for Milton at this point. Although evidence that he did intend a reference to it is not conclusive, there are indications sufficient to establish a fairly strong possibility.

It is clear, first of all, that Milton attached a somewhat surprising importance to the story of the swine. At the climax of Paradise Regained, when Christ has successfully repulsed Satan, the angels declare that the latter has not yet received his last and deadliest wound. The later encounter to which they look forward is neither the Crucifixion nor the Second Coming but this very episode:

hereafter learn with awe
To dread the Son of God: he all unarm’d
Shall chase thee with the terror of his voice
From thy Demonic holds, possession foul,
Thee and thy Legions, yelling they shall flye,
And beg to hide them in a herd of Swine,
Lest he command them down into the deep
Bound, and to torment sent before thir time.
(PR IV.625-632)

Milton evidently regarded the incident as a striking symbol of the combat between Christ and Satan which runs from the first battle in heaven to the end of the world. In the De Doctrina Christiana he refers to it several times; when he quotes the sentence “Art thou come hither to torment us before the time?” in support of the doctrine that the evil angels are reserved for punishment, he associates it with those passages in 2 Pet. 2:4 and Jude 1:6 which refer back to the

10Cf. Northrop Frye’s suggestion that the central act of Christ’s ministry, as seen in the context of Paradise Regained, was the casting of devils out of the human mind (The Typology of Paradise Regained,” MP, LIII [1956], 229).
11In Ivii (Works, XV, 34) to prove that angels are spirits; in Lix (ibid., 106-110 passim) to prove that the evil angels are reserved for punishment, that their proper place is hell but they are permitted to wander through the earth, and that their knowledge serves only to aggravate their misery; in IIiv (Works, XVII, 102) to show that God at times grants the requests even of devils. There is also a reference, in a different context, in Elegia Quarta, 11. 103-104 (Works, I, 192).
12“For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment. . . .” “And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.”
original expulsion from heaven. The episode clearly contained for him in germ not only a forecast of the Last Coming but also an ironic contrast between the original state of the evil angels and the ignominy of their present request.

If Milton meant his "timerous flock" to apply to swine, he was neither adding a useless phrase nor raising an inappropriate image; rather, he was enriching his account by making it include a prophecy of the final events which were to round out his plot in Books XI and XII. As Newton suggested, the comparison to a herd of goats can be justified by the fact that it is not applied to beings deserving of honor, but there is a more significant reason for its inclusion; it is simply a transitional simile, a bridge to the deliberately low comparison to a flock of swine.¹³

The hypothesis does, however, raise some semantic difficulties. It is true that Milton's many other uses of the word "flock" refer in almost every case to sheep, and that on the one occasion in which he refers to a group of swine (in PR IV.630, quoted above) he uses "herd." The force of the pastoral tradition and the frequency with which he had occasion to use shepherds and flocks allegorically might account for the first fact, however, and the single instance of the phrase "herd of Swine" is not sufficient to indicate a habitual practice. On the other hand, the OED reports that although the term "flock" is now usually confined to birds, sheep, and goats, it was used with many different animals through the centuries: seventeenth-century applications to elephants, mites, and lions are cited, as well as an interesting quotation (though too early for direct relevance here) from a manuscript of about 1200: "De deules beden ure louerd ihesu crist Pat he hem sende into floe of swin." The references to the swine episode in his Latin works employ the word "grex," which can be indifferently translated "flock" or "herd." The collocation of the two words in PL III.44—"Or flocks, or heards, or human face divine"—sheds no light on the problem, since here they are used in a deliberately general sense. There seems to be no evidence, therefore, either in Milton's works or elsewhere in seventeenth century usage, which would rule out the application of the term "flock" to swine.

¹³See above, n. 5. Possibly the transition begins even earlier, in 1. 855; the primary meaning of a radical separation in "root them out of heaven" might hint also at an association with dirt or mud and, by extension, with the action of animals rooting therein.
“Timorous” might present another problem, for the twentieth century reader associates it with something more gentle than either swine or devils. But Milton’s own usage shows that the word could have unfavorable connotations, as it does when he describes Belial as “timorous and slothful” (PL II.117) and when he defends the Britons in the History of Britain: “But that they were so timorous and without heart, as Gildas reportes them, is in no way credible” (Works, X, 318). In these contexts the word suggests cowardice rather than timidity.

The obvious question must, of course, be faced: If Milton meant a flock of swine, why didn’t he say so? Perhaps he did share to some extent the feeling that such a reference would not be decorous: although he admits “low” comparisons elsewhere, he might have wished to maintain a more dignified tone in those books which deal directly with God and heaven. Perhaps he preferred the effect of indirection. In any case, however, the argument from silence is inconclusive because it may be used in either way: the fact that swine are not mentioned may mean that no reference is intended; but the apparently deliberate and otherwise clumsy avoidance of naming any specific animals as a timorous flock may invite investigation of a possible veiled reference.

If the hypothesis is valid, then the climax of Book VI, the half-way mark in the epic, includes symbolically the threefold defeat of Satan by the Son—at the beginning of time, during his mortal life, and at the end of time; it thus becomes a true center of action in more than a literal sense. Moreover, if Milton wanted to emphasize the degradation of the devils, he could have found no more suitable comparison than that of the deliberate descent of the devils of the Gergesenes into the lowest of animals. The indignity of this metamorphosis, a prelude to the greater one of Book X, is consistent with the treatment of Satan throughout Paradise Lost and with the irony of his gradual deterioration. The irony lies not only in the contrast between what he was and what he has become but also in the dual nature of the results of his sin. Freely he has chosen evil, which is essentially a moral degradation; the physical deterioration, though not wished, is a necessary result of the first choice. Hence his physical degeneration is both wished and not-wished: he shrinks from it and would not choose it directly; but neither will he reverse it by making that choice of moral good which alone
could halt his physical decay. The interior state of mind elaborated in the soliloquy in Book IV is shown in Book VI in external action: the plunge into hell is more desirable than the thundering wheels of the Son’s chariot; and it is this same grim inner necessity which, centuries later, was to impel the devil-infested swine “violently down a steep place” into the deep.

The appropriateness of a reference to the swine episode at this point is seen from another viewpoint if we recall Milton’s attitude towards the warfaring and wayfaring Christian. The final victory is assured to the faithful, who are to share in the glory of the Messiah; but the pattern of their pilgrimage on earth is less a reflection of a triumphal onslaught than an imitation of the example of Christ; the immortal garland is to be run for not without dust and heat. As man, Christ is the exemplar whom other men are to imitate; hence his dramatic victory over the devils is type and model of the warfare of the elect. Thus this final scene in the great battle is an epitome of the typological meaning of the entire Book VI, including all phases of the Messiah’s future role; it is a guide to the pilgrim in via and a hope for the journey’s end.

It may be noted, finally, that, seen in the light suggested, the episode allies itself with all the connotations of the Circe myth. The use of this popular Renaissance symbol of evil and degradation enriches the Biblical material with classical overtones in Milton’s best manner.

To summarize: the final rout of the rebel angels comes at an important structural point in Paradise Lost; a reading of it as a foreshadowing of Christ’s casting the devils into the swine gives it a significance consonant with its structural prominence; such a reading is not contradicted by anything that is known of seventeenth-century or Miltonic word usage, and it explains the otherwise unsatisfactory reference to a timorous flock; it is consistent with Milton’s usual technique and with the importance he attaches to the swine episode elsewhere in his works; it emphasizes the irony of Satan’s position, underlines the contrast between him and the Messiah, suggests the nature of

\[14\] Cf. Areopagitica (Works, IV, 311).

\[15\] Another classical reference is probably present in 11. 858-859, “pursu’d / With terrors and with furies”: Todd cites Dunster’s suggestion that Milton has in mind the Orestes of Euripides pursued by the Furies (Poetical Works, III, 338).
man's struggle with evil, and places the episode in the stream of classical as well as Biblical tradition. It would seem, therefore, to be a possible reading.

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