

Brittany Johnson

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Dr. Ainsworth

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Poetic Beauty as an Aesthetic and a Tool in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Abstract: This paper seeks to define poetic beauty as it exists in John Milton's Paradise Lost, while focusing on a particularly beautiful passage from book three that captures a conversation between God and the Son as they discuss free will regarding to the fall of man. Ultimately, I argue that the definition of poetic beauty is best understood (and experienced) through Milton's masterful use of poetic devices in the text. What's more, the beauty that Milton crafts serves not only an aesthetic purpose, but also a utilitarian one: one of Milton's most beautiful passages also provides clear insight into the complicated Biblical doctrine of free will and God's larger intentions for mankind in the fall.

Tradition holds that ancient epic poems, such as Homer's *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*, were recited aloud to enthrall audiences before the advent of reading and writing. These poems were passed down through the oral tradition until they could be recorded, and as such, possess qualities unique to literature that is meant to be performed rather than simply read from a page. Early epics were filled with poetic devices such as pervasive repetition and rich imagery that aimed not only to provide dramatic inflections to the literature, but also to highlight the verbal and idiomatic intricacies of the work itself. John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, though written in a post-Homeric, literate society, follows the ancient tradition of the oral epic in its artful employment of poetic devices that not only imbue the poem with sonic beauty, but also further

the conceits and larger thesis of the poem itself. While writing *Paradise Lost*, Milton suffered from almost total blindness, forcing him to dictate the poem aloud to a scribe rather than record it himself. Though necessitated by unfortunate circumstances, the fact of Milton's dictation of the poem results in a work of literature that rightfully claims a place of honor beside the ancient epics of the oral tradition. Without Milton's expert use of poetic devices such as repetition and metaphoric conceits built on evocative imagery, the poem would lack much of its striking beauty when read aloud (or, for that matter, silently), as well as its powerful commentary that works to supplement the word of God.

Poetic beauty is largely subjective; what one reader finds particularly awe-inspiring might fall flat for another, and so on. Speaking broadly, a person who finds William Carlos Williams's simple, short stanzas brilliant might not be equally drawn to elaborate Shakespearian sonnets. Despite the fact that the definition of beauty rests largely on the opinion of an individual reader, poetic devices exist to elicit certain responses in those who consume literature and can play a major role in creating poetry that is universally considered to be beautiful. Perhaps this offers some concrete explanation as to why *Paradise Lost* is treasured by so many—Milton's twelve-book epic employs no shortage of poetic devices and, consequently, contains no shortage of notable passages that are strikingly beautiful. One of Milton's most stirring and gorgeous stanzas comes from book three as God converses with the Son about the doctrine of free will and the future of His creation, which exists without sin at the time of the conversation. The stanza, spoken by God, utilizes poetic devices in a manner that is both aesthetically pleasing and insightful, ultimately furthering the poem's commentary on the convoluted and nuanced nature of free will as it pertains to God's apparent omnipotence and the fall of man. The passage is as follows:

So without least impulse or shadow of fate,
 Or aught by me immutably foreseen,
 They trespass, authors to themselves in all
 Both what they judge, and what they choose; for so
 I form'd them free: and free they must remain,
 Till they enthrall themselves; I else must change
 Their nature, and revoke the high decree
 Unchangeable, eternal, which ordain'd
 Their freedom: they themselves ordain'd their fall.
 The first sort by their own suggestion fell,
 Self-tempted, self-deprav'd: Man falls, deceiv'd
 By the other first: Man therefore shall find grace,
 The other none: In mercy and justice both,
 Through Heaven and Earth, so shall my glory excel;
 But Mercy, first and last, shall brightest shine (Paradise Lost 3:120-134).

Perhaps one of the most beautiful segments of poetry in *Paradise Lost*, these fourteen lines rely heavily on repetition and imagery to convey God's intent behind His creation's free will and His hand (or lack thereof) in the fall of man. When read aloud, these poetic devices paint a picture of the mechanics of God's creation that is not only beautiful, but also powerful and eternal—

qualities important for a poem written to expand upon the story that The Holy Bible originally tells. Through masterfully crafted poetics, God explains that Adam and Eve not only possess a sense of authorship in their judgments and choices, but also that this autonomy was God-designed. God goes on to state that the fall of man is due to this freedom in combination with Satan's temptation, but that only man will see God's grace to repair the errors made in their fallen state.

The first beautiful poetic quality of the selected passage to be examined is repetition. The lines above come from an even greater segment of the poem wherein God offers vital insight into His thinking behind the engineering of free will and the role it played in the loss of paradise and the fall of man. As the words are from the mouth of God, serving as a decree from His heavenly rulebook, it is important that Milton's presentation of God's thoughts comes across as both powerful and glorious. Repetition of "free" in lines 124 and 128, "fall" and "fell" in lines 128, 129, and 130, "self-" in line 130, and "mercy" in lines 131 and 134 offer a sort of verbal outline for the crux of God's argument throughout the passage. Ultimately, God communicates His divine plan to give His creation the power to choose their own paths completely apart from His control so as to elicit genuine love for the Creator—despite the fact that doing so results in creations that sin and fall in a manner similar to Satan. The double mention of God's mercy closes the passage with a reminder that despite man's sin, God has the capacity and desire to redeem what He could easily damn.

In fact, Olivia McDermott argues in "The Restraint in Freedom in *Paradise Lost*" that God's allowance of the fall is an iteration of mercy in and of itself. McDermott writes:

However, if one takes the stance that God is all-powerful, all knowing, and perfectly good, God's actions must be seen as justifiable and reasonable. God has not made

creation perfect, and their flaws bring about many problems, but God also wants to redeem from their flaws through His Son, Jesus. “Man shall not quite be lost, but sav’d who will, / Yet not of will in him, but grace in me” (Paradise Lost 3:173-174) (McDermott 2).

The excerpt from McDermott’s essay cites lines from later on in book three that are a part of God and the Son’s conversation; ultimately, God explains that His omnipotence allows Him to redeem situations by His grace in ways that man cannot. As such, the repetition Milton utilizes also reinforces the notion that God’s mercy and grace, extended through the Son, are the only antidotes to error made by man in their autonomy. Repeating the word “mercy” throughout the passage, then, adds cohesion to God’s divine message, offering the passage the resonance of a gracious royal decree. Milton reinforces his repetition further when he states in line 134 that “Mercy, first and last, shall brightest shine”. His expert use of both syntax and repetition here reinforces God’s doctrine of mercy from all angles. When this passage is read aloud, the addition of human voice to the text illuminates the repetition to maximize the poetic device’s impact of emphasis on the listener. Furthering the repetition and the sensation of permanence it creates is Milton’s choice to use words that end in “-all” in addition to “fall” throughout the lines selected. “All” in line 123, “enthrall” in line 125, and “shall” in lines 133 and 134 serve to extend the presence and importance of the fall throughout God’s words. The repeated sounds seem to echo in God’s voice, reverberating from the heavens down to His creation on earth. The effect of this poetic device is not only grand and beautiful, but also illuminating as it untangles aspects of the mystery of God’s thinking behind the controversial Biblical doctrine of free will.

While McDermott’s earlier argument suggests that God’s gift of free will serves as an opportunity for Him to rescue mankind through His son by His grace, Callan Buck takes issue

with the notion that God extends any level of free will to His creation, let alone that He has good intentions behind the mechanics of the universe He orchestrates. As Buck argues in her essay “Free Will or Willed Folly?”:

In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve make substantial choices, but not under the specific conditions that define free will. God’s deliberate actions and suspicious allowances throughout the story set up the perfect storm of circumstances that constrain Adam and Eve to inevitably fall in order to carry out His plan to ultimately glorify His Son exceedingly more than any perfect Heaven and Earth could achieve (Buck 1).

Buck’s argument ultimately undercuts the previously stated notion that Milton’s poetics reinforce a genuine intent by God to extend mercy to His creation after their free will allows room for sin and mistakes. The assertion that God actively works against His creation seems to be largely unsupported by the text, especially in light of Milton’s thoughtful use of poetic devices to emphasize God’s focus on mercy and grace through repetition. While the selected text from book three is certainly prelapsarian and therefore supports the fact that God is omniscient, it does not imply that God manipulated Adam and Eve as fated pawns in a scheme to ruin and save His creation in order to glorify the Son. Buck’s statement that God creates “the perfect storm of circumstances that constrain Adam and Eve to inevitably fall...” is directly refuted by God’s singular assertion that “they themselves (Adam and Eve) ordain’d their fall” (*Paradise Lost* 3:28). In this regard, it seems plausible that Milton’s use of poetics not only contributes to the beauty of the lines, but also serves a real utilitarian purpose of communicating God’s good intentions and designs.

The second device apparent in the passage that contributes to the overall beauty and utility of the text is imagery that furthers the metaphoric conceits found throughout the poem.

Phrases such as “shadow of fate” in line 120 and “authors to themselves” in line 123 work within a larger series of metaphors that Milton utilizes throughout the poem. Beyond these lines and throughout the bulk of the poem, there are instances where God is referred to as “Author of this universe” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 360) and “Author of all being” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 374). Additionally, throughout the text, Satan is referred to as “author of all ill” (*Paradise Lost* 2: 381) and “author of evil” (*Paradise Lost* 11: 262). This passage represents the only moment that Adam and Eve are referred to specifically as authors, but not the only occurrence where it is suggested that the couple is able to choose their own path; for example, in the final lines of the play Milton writes, “The world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and Providence their guide” (*Paradise Lost* 12: 646-647). The recurring theme of authorship represents a conceit utilized by Milton to place an importance on writing the story of the universe as well as the story of God, all nested within the larger framework of a story Milton himself is, in part, authoring. The imagery of an author penning a tale resonates all the more as readers know that the author of the poem is working from a sacred text already authored many years ago (and divinely inspired by God himself). This makes Milton’s reference to Adam and Eve’s metaphoric authorship of their lives all the more essential as the conceit is woven throughout the books of the poem to supplement God’s divine doctrine of free will that He authors for His creation. In that regard, it seems intentional that Milton would use the word “author”, as it holds resonance with the notion of authority, which God and the Son discuss in the passage. If the word “author” in the poem typically refers to God, but in the instance of the selected passage from book three refers to Adam and Eve, it would appear that authorship (and, by extension, authority), work on a micro-macro level within *Paradise Lost*. Free will, as God presents it, seems to suggest that, while Adam and Eve have autonomy to make choices and remain free by His design, the ultimate

authority to intervene and save what is otherwise condemned by human error rests in the hands of God. Indeed, God's ultimate omnipotence is reinforced in book 12 when Milton writes:

[T]o himself assuming

Authority usurped, from God not given:

He gave us only over beast, fish, fowl,

Dominion absolute; that right we hold

By his donation; but man over men

He made not lord; such title to himself

Reserving, human left from human free (*Paradise Lost* 12: 65-71).

In this sense, the use of the word “author” appears to be a syntactic choice made by Milton to weave the conceit of authorship/authority more intricately throughout the books of *Paradise Lost*. His choice— as an author himself— to use certain words that work together across books to illuminate larger themes of the poem only increases the detail and beauty of the work itself. Single words link together grand ideas across thousands of lines of Milton's epic. Poetic beauty, here, works on a large and small scale. Milton's syntactic decisions serve as the scaffolding for the overall impact of the poem on readers and listeners as it pertains to complex theological ideas of the fall of man and free will.

In addition to his use of the metaphor of authorship in the passage, Milton additionally creates beauty through imagery such as “high decree” coupled with “fall” and “fell” between lines 126-129, and “Mercy...shall brightest shine” in line 134 contribute to the image of Heaven as a place that is both lofty and glorious. God, seated above everyone in His kingdom, seems to

dole out his judgements and proclamations from His royal throne; this image of height and grandness is contrasted with Milton's description of original sin as a "fall", a physical action that removes the sinner from his original location and places him at a lower status. This "fall" is literally realized in the character of Satan as he moves from the heights of Heaven to the depths of Hell with his rebellion, and figuratively displayed in the case of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. The phrase "Mercy... shall brightest shine", found in line 134, serves to sharpen the image of Heaven as a place of glory that surpasses earth and Hell as shown in physical light and the presence of Biblical fruits of the spirit. Heaven's brightness is juxtaposed with the "shadow of fate" mentioned in line 120, bookending the passage in images of light and dark. All of these instances of imagery serve to paint a beautiful picture in the mind of the individual listening to (or reading) the poem, particularly at an instance when God is sharing formative aspects of His views of the laws of creation. Milton's use of imagery solidifies both God's almighty power and place above all things, as well as the recurring theme of authorship and the force of fate throughout the poem.

Although the selected passage cannot definitively be named the *most* beautiful from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the lines examined here do represent an example of the author's use of poetic devices to craft a text that is strikingly lovely to read aloud. Coupled with Milton's flawless execution of iambic pentameter, rich imagery develops a listener's literal and metaphoric grasp of the story, and repetition highlights both the themes of the text and the sonic beauty of the lines. As such, the poetic devices that Milton employs are far from ornamental; rather, they function as tools that Milton utilizes to create an epic poem for the early-modern world that respects the oral tradition of ancient authors such as Homer. Milton's primary source material, The Bible, is perhaps one of the greatest stories ever told. By utilizing poetic devices to

contribute to both the beauty and utility of his writing, Milton creates an epic that supplements the story of God and attempts to tease out complicated theological issues, such as free will and the fall of man. Such a task would surely be impossible without Milton's thoughtful and brilliant grasp of what makes poetry beautiful as well as meaningful.