

Jared Powell

Dr. Ainsworth

EN 335

21 March 2014

The Language of the Spirit: An Analysis of Divine Diction in *Paradise Lost*

As a result of the pervading presence of Christian narratives in today's world, many readers bring their own assumptions with them when they first encounter John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps the most obvious assumption is that God is good and Satan is evil, followed by the closely related assumption that God (or Jesus) is the hero, and Satan is the villain. Upon a cursory read of the poem, these assumptions seem to hold true. However, since the poem's composition, many readers have taken the stand that Satan is actually the hero of the epic. This might come across as a shocking assertion for some, but when one carefully reads the descriptions of Satan, particularly how God himself characterizes Satan, this theory can gain some ground. One would expect that God uses morally-charged terms to describe Satan as an undeniably evil force, but this is not inherently present in God's dialogue. God's careful diction when describing Satan is surprisingly neutral on a good-evil continuum, while Satan describes himself in much more disparaging terms, and this unexpected characterization ultimately hearkens back to Milton's argument in *Areopagitica* that one must work through good and evil for oneself.

When analyzing the diction of any character, one obviously starts with what the character explicitly says in any work. Although God's dialogue is somewhat limited in *Paradise Lost* compared to other characters, there is enough material with which one can analyze God's characterization of Satan. Surprisingly little of God's words are actually direct descriptions of Satan, in fact, most of God's dialogue is not even about Satan. This small amount of speech directly about Satan makes it easy to analyze the diction of God. When

referring to Satan, God rarely uses the actual name, he instead substitutes words that are synonymous with “opponent.” When Satan is initially discussed by God and the Son, God calls Satan “our adversary” (*Paradise Lost* 3:81). Later, God calls Satan the “enemy / [I]ate fall’ n himself from Heaven” (*Paradise Lost* 5:239-240). Satan is also called “foe” twice by God (*Paradise Lost* 5:724 and 7:139). What is interesting about this word choice is that there is no explicit moral value judgment in any of them. “Adversary,” “enemy,” “foe” certainly imply that Satan is against God, but they do not carry an intrinsically evil status with them. Opponents are not always evil; they are simply against the person whose perspective is being assumed, in this case God. One can observe this same pattern in the adjectives that God uses to describe Satan. His adjective of choice is “rebellious,” which is used three times by God throughout the poem (*Paradise Lost* 3:86, 6:50, and 7:140). Along the same lines, God also refers to the devils, Satan included, as “[t]hese disobedient” (*Paradise Lost* 6:687). These words, again, imply a disagreement with God, but do not necessarily carry markers of evil that one would expect of descriptions of Satan. Perhaps the most “charged” words that God uses when speaking of Satan are “Tempter” and “Fiend” (*Paradise Lost* 10:39 and 11:101 respectively). The argument can be made that these words carry connotations of evil, or at least not goodness, but these are anomalies in the usual vocabulary of God. The first is used immediately after the temptation of Adam and Eve when God is discussing the event with the angels; therefore, it makes sense that God would call Satan “Tempter” (*Paradise Lost* 10:39). Satan had literally just tempted humanity, and succeeded, so the word fits the circumstances, but still does not seem as negatively charged as could be used. “Fiend” is certainly the most negative word that God attributes to Satan, and the context of the usage makes the choice of diction clear (*Paradise Lost* 11:101). God uses the word as he is ordering Michael to expel Adam and Eve from Eden. God is being forced to punish his newest creation as the result of Satan’s actions, and would be understandably angry (if God can be angry) at Satan.

Therefore, it makes sense that he uses this word choice at this time. It exhibits a burst of emotion, and represents a further distancing of Satan from the angels (since “fiend” is a synonym for “devil”) due to his most recent and heinous act. Despite these two anomalies, it seems surprising that God uses such neutral terms when discussing Satan, but what is more interesting is what God does *not* say about Satan, and how Satan himself fills in these gaps in God’s diction.

As previously mentioned, a surprisingly small amount of God’s time is spent discussing Satan. God instead focuses much of his dialogue on the Son, Adam, or the fate of the world in general. When one does analyze God’s words about Satan, it is apparent that some key words that one assumes might be used are missing from the discussion, primarily the word “evil.” As previously discussed, the words God uses do not carry overtly evil connotations, so there is no outright mentioning by God of Satan’s evil. This is a surprisingly neutral stance for God, considering the massive scale of their disagreements and the typical understanding of Satan as a purely evil being. Another interesting missing phrase is some utter renunciation of Satan. Sure, God casts him out of Heaven into Hell, but he not once expresses any wish to undo Satan’s creation or his actions. One could use this fact to argue that God does not have the power to remove Satan, but this argument loses some ground based on what God does actually say. When the reader first encounters God, he explicitly says, “dear / [t]o me are *all* my works (*Paradise Lost* 3:276-277 emphasis added). God does not say that all of his works are loved *except* Satan. He says *all* of them are loved by him. This causes one to question if God could destroy a creation that he loved, even if that creation is Satan, and the apparent answer is that he cannot. God also seems to carefully determine the appropriate circumstances for discussing Satan. He tends to mention Satan only when talking to a highly-trusted character, most often the Son. This careful and convenient absence of Satan in God’s speech to other characters (Adam, the other angels, etc.) forces the reader to

question God's motives. Why does God never call Satan "evil"? Why does he choose to focus less on Satan and more on the Son? How does this translate into an analysis of Satan's character? Before considering these questions based on God's diction, one must get the other side of the coin and analyze Satan's own characterization of himself.

Whereas God seems to have some reservations when it comes to calling Satan "evil," Satan himself feels no need to hold back. Many times throughout the poem, Satan directly states that he is devoid of the goodness that God originally gave him, and that he is now only filled with evil. In the opening book of the poem, Satan states that "[t]o do aught good never will be our task, / [b]ut ever to do ill our sole delight" (*Paradise Lost* 1:159-160). Here, Satan claims that his goal, and the goal of all the fallen angels, will now be to wreak havoc. However, this is still short of the statement of evil that the reader would expect with regards to Satan, and that statement presents itself just a few lines later. Satan describes the work of the devils as "our evil," finally giving the assumed moral extreme typically attributed to Satan (*Paradise Lost* 1:163). In the fourth book, Satan again follows this same pattern, working through his own evil and finally accepting his new nature. Satan, speaking of God, says that "all his good prov'd ill in me, [a]nd wrought but malice" (*Paradise Lost* 4:48-49). Here again, Satan addresses his lost goodness that was originally given to him by God, and in later lines, he again embraces his newfound evil. In two of the most famous lines of the poem, Satan says, "Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good" (*Paradise Lost* 4:109-110). This is the pivotal moment for Satan in which he fully accepts his evil nature and sets himself in full opposition to God. At this point, one might ask why Satan describes himself as evil when God stops short. Johnathan Speer, in his paper "Blindsided: Finding the Good in *Paradise Lost*," argues that evil is purely an invention of Satan and an outgrowth of his actions. This argument would definitely explain why God would have difficulty labeling Satan as evil since it portrays evil as a creation of Satan. Speer argues that

“[e]vil sprang forth from Satan’s anger and pride and his inability to put aside these distorting emotions and have faith in the creator and his will” (Speer 6). His pride also “blinds him to the subordinate position of evil” in the war in heaven (Speer 9). Evil is Satan’s own construct which stems from his pride, and this pride persists throughout the poem and causes him to believe that evil is the superior force. One might argue that the flaw in this argument is that Satan is not the creator, God is; however, there is evidence to refute this in the poem. It is explicitly stated that Satan created Sin and Death, so it is clear that he has the ability to create. By extension, it seems possible that he could create evil. “Satan’s pride distorts his purpose” causing him to “vainly [persist] in his belief that his power can test the almighty’s,” which leads to his refusal of God’s goodness, and the creation and acceptance of his own evil (Speer 9).

There are a few major inferences that one can make based on analysis of the diction of God’s dialogue about Satan. One is that due to God’s atypical descriptions, Satan seems to be a less evil character than one might have previously assumed. If God does not explicitly state that Satan is evil, then does that make him not evil? Satan is certainly guilty of great sin (since sin is often literally defined as any action against God), but does that mean that he is evil because of his sin? The argument can be made for a not-so-evil Satan based on God’s word choice when discussing him. Satan is certainly depicted as God’s opponent, which could make him the antagonist of the story, but all that this fact simply means is that the two characters are at odds. Although most readers typically associate “good” with the protagonist and “evil” with the antagonist, this relationship is not inherently true. At worst, Satan is the true embodiment of evil, but based on God’s direct speech, this assertion seems to be called into question. This then calls a second implication to the forefront, and that is that Satan could be the hero of the epic. This idea caught much ground with the Romantic poets in particular, and part of the basis for this interpretation can be extracted from God’s dialogue.

This stems from the same line of logic of the protagonist-antagonist distinction mentioned above, coupled with the repeated depiction by Satan of God as a tyrant. This implication ultimately boils down to individual interpretation of the poem, since many compelling arguments have been made on both sides of the issue, but one can see the possibility of the theory based on God's word choice. If God has an issue labeling Satan as evil, then that opens the possibility for God as the evil one, and Satan as the genuine hero. Another implication of God's diction is that Satan is not the hero, but that he is part of God's master plan. This possibility gains ground when one considers the absence of any renunciation of Satan, as previously discussed. If God does not wish to undo Satan's actions (assuming he has the power to do so), then it can be assumed that God is pleased with the actions. If this is true, then Satan begins to lose some ground as the antagonist of the narrative, and instead becomes a tool for God as the protagonist. This theory is further supported when one reconsiders the absence of the adjective "evil" in God's discussions of Satan. If God says that Satan is evil, but Satan is secretly part of God's plan, then one could argue that God is evil by extension. It is much safer for God to use terms like "rebellious" or "disobedient" because they cannot easily be extended to himself through Satan since God cannot rebel against or disobey himself. These implications all show that as a result of God's somewhat neutral descriptions of Satan, one can question Satan's role as the assumed evil antagonist of *Paradise Lost*, but how do they stand in light of Satan's own words?

These implications can certainly be made into compelling arguments; however, they are complicated when one recalls Satan's own self-descriptions. As previously stated, the argument can be made that God does not see Satan as evil, but can this argument be extended to say that Satan is not an evil character? Satan describes himself as evil, and he seems proud of his evil nature; therefore, "good" seems to be one of the last words that Satan would use to describe himself. Also, the argument that Satan could be the hero is somewhat refuted by

Satan's diction. Although one could read Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve as saving them from the tyranny of God, it is not clear if Satan would think of his actions in such a way.

These arguments are not clearly settled by the text, and ultimately boil down to some essential questions that can only be answered based on the individual reader's interpretation.

Who has the upper-hand in this rhetorical argument, God or Satan? Is one's moral nature something that can be determined by oneself, as Satan seems to think, or by others on the outside? Perhaps the most pressing question to ask is why Milton even makes this issue of good and evil, which one would expect to be a straightforward concept in a Christian epic, so complicated. Why does Milton have Satan introduce and analyze the concept of evil instead of God, and what does this mean for the reader? To address these questions, one must look back to Milton's argument in *Areopagitica*. The treatise presents a similar question regarding the nature of good and evil, but Milton actually reaches a conclusion on the question in *Areopagitica* that can be translated to the similar issues in *Paradise Lost*.

*Areopagitica*'s argument mostly focuses on Milton's views on censorship, but part of his argument hinges on the part of censors to label books as "good" or "evil." He argues that one must not allow censors to determine what one should read and accept their understandings without question. Milton states that "the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue," and that it is therefore necessary for one to expose oneself to both good and bad books, in the context of the treatise (*Areopagitica* 729). He argues that one must "scout into the regions of sin and falsity...by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason" (*Areopagitica* 729). Milton believes that one must read and work through books, and evil, on one's own without simply accepting a "truth" passed down from someone else. This argument can be applied to the questions raised regarding good and evil in *Paradise Lost*. As previously stated, one of the central concerns that the language of God and Satan calls to mind is Milton's choice to have

Satan contemplate evil instead of God. One might expect God to be the divine judge of good and evil, but this is not completely evident in the poem. Instead, Satan creates evil, as Speer argues, and he is the one who places this label upon himself. Satan is also the one who has the internal debates about the nature of evil. Why would Milton write the poem in this fashion? As argued in *Areopagitica*, to allow the reader to work through the poem for his or herself and create an individual judgment of good, evil, and Satan. If Milton's God passed down the label of evil on Satan, then Milton's predominantly Christian audience would have likely accepted this label without question, which goes against his own wishes from the essay. By having Satan contemplate the complicated nature of evil, Milton creates a shocking twist for his audience that would make them question the characters and the nature of their virtues, just as this paper has done. Once the questions are raised, then the reader can successfully work through the poem on an individual level and come to his or her own conclusions. A reflection on *Areopagitica* bridges the gap between the diction of God and Satan with regards to Satan's characterization, and answers the questions of Milton's use of Satan as the source for the contemplation of evil in *Paradise Lost*.

It is surprising that God does not depict Satan as the ultimate evil in *Paradise Lost*. One would expect that God, considering himself to be good, would make it a point to describe Satan in evil terms, but this is not at all how God actually discusses Satan. The language that God uses to describe Satan is much more neutral than what would typically be expected, and this characterization results in the creation of an atypical depiction of Satan. This unexpected description is countered by Satan's own self-labeling as evil, and further complicates the implications that can be drawn from God's diction. However, the puzzling disconnect between the expected word choice of God can be explained by revisiting *Areopagitica* and realizing that the use of Satan's inner debates about good and evil is meant to prompt the reader to reconsider the nature of these opposing forces in *Paradise Lost*.



Works Cited

Milton, John. *Areopagitica*. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y.

Hughes. New York: Macmillan, 1957. 716-749. Print.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y.

Hughes. New York: Macmillan, 1957. 211-469. Print.

Speer, Johnathan. "Blindsided: Finding the Good in Paradise Lost." *The Edifice Project*.

University of Alabama, 8 May 2009. Web. 30 Apr. 2014.