

Emerson and Milton: Allusion and Theodicy*

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In Frances M. Malpezzi's explication, richly evocative of Milton's presence in Emerson's poem, I acquired a new appreciation of the American poet. As a newcomer to "Uriel," but a veteran Milton reader, I found the two poets traveling the same road but in different directions.

In some ways, Milton's narrative resembles Emerson's: both proceed, like Raphael in telling of the war in heaven, "[b]y likening spiritual to corporal forms" (*Paradise Lost* V.573).¹ "Uriel," too, is metaphorical, a fable, achieving that form's necessary mystery and distance by using a frame narrator to introduce something that "[s]eyd overheard."² So Malpezzi does well to locate in Emerson's poem "Milton's metaphoric use of visible forms to mirror inward reality" (167). The classicism of Milton's form requires pagan trappings, especially the mythology so offensive to Dr. Johnson³; Emerson similarly infuses Christian heaven with Pythagoras, Plotinus, and Fate (ll. 39-40, 51, 31). Malpezzi's note on the image of myrtle in the two poems is strengthened by two other appearances of Venus's tree (I dare not say bush) in Book IV, first in the description of Paradise. There, a lake whose "fringed bank with myrtle crowned / Her crystal mirror holds" (IV.262-63) anticipates, in its image of self-gazing, Eve's narrated Narcissus episode in her first hours of life. But not until after the Fall can Venus's myrtle and Narcissus's reflection acquire their fallen significance. Later in the same episode, Milton reports that Adam and Eve's bower is shaded by "[l]aurel and myrtle" (IV.694), so that the

*Reference: Frances M. Malpezzi, "Emerson's Allusive Art: A Transcendental Angel in Miltonic Myrtle Beds," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 162-72.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debmalpezzi01413.htm>>.

plants sacred to Apollo and Venus enter into a rich complex of both pre- and postlapsarian meaning (male/female, fame/love, aggression/lust). It is not quite the case that Emerson's poem is "[s]et in the 'myrtle beds' (l. 28) of Paradise" (163); those beds are specifically domiciles from which "[t]he seraphs frowned" (l. 28). Since the mid-eighteenth century "seraphic" meant "characterized by ecstatic fervor or devotion" (*OED*); thus, to associate the plant of sexual love with unquestioning devotion would seem to indicate a surrender of the critical mind to the complacencies of mere admiration. The seraphs behave like intellectual voluptuaries frowning at the prospect of having to get out of bed.

Another image from pagan antiquity that Emerson shares with Milton is the weighing scales of divine justice, as when, in the *Iliad*, Zeus's scales weigh the destiny of the Greeks against that of Troy, or, later, those of Achilles and Hector. In *Paradise Lost* God hangs his golden scales in heaven, "[w]herein all things created first he weighed" (IV.999), at the critical moment when it appears there will be another horrendous battle, this time between Satan and the angels guarding Paradise. On one side God puts parting, on the other, fighting—" [t]he latter quick up flew, and kicked the beam" (IV.1004). In "Uriel," because of Uriel's radical pronouncement, "[t]he balance-beam of Fate was bent" (l. 31). Of course "bent" can mean inclined, but I wonder if Emerson does not mean that the scale itself is broken, since once the cross-piece from which hang the two weights is bent all weighing will be inaccurate. This is in keeping with the next line, "[t]he bounds of good and ill were rent." In that scene at the end of Book IV Milton says that if an angelic battle had ensued,

the starry cope
Of heaven perhaps, or all the elements
At least had gone to wrack, disturbed and torn
With violence of this conflict [...] (IV.992-95)

It is interesting that Emerson goes back to the pagan epic in giving the scales to Fate, whereas Milton's God—who declares, "what I will is

Fate" (VII.173)—is characteristically unsharing in His power. Finally one wonders if the "forgetting wind" that "[s]tole over the celestial kind" (43-44) originates in the "windy sea of land" that is Milton's Paradise of Fools (III.440), or if the "fruit of chemic force," whence "[c]ame Uriel's voice of cherub scorn" (50, 54), originates in the disastrous fruit of Genesis and Milton.

In further supplementing Malpezzi's inventory of Miltonic parallels, I would point out that both the long and short poems are theodicies, attempts to explain the ways of God to man. But I would say that they differ significantly in their temporal vision. Milton follows the conjoined paths of Renaissance humanism and the Reformation in seeing a time of perfection in the remote past. Creation, Fall, and Redemption are the only points that matter in history (see Michael on history—"so shall the world go on"—in XII.537). We know that Milton's fellow "rebels" avoided the taint of that name by arguing that the royalists were the rebels in that they overthrew the ancient English rights of parliament by trying to invent an absolute monarchy. Emerson, by contrast, appears in sympathy with the romantic revolutionary spirit anticipating the overthrow of the old order. Or, perhaps, he anticipates a new cycle, *saeculum*, in a round universe where "all rays return" (23)—meaning a geometric ray, or seemingly straight line proceeding from a point—, something like Yeats's gyres. "Uriel" seems to refer in part to Emerson's break with conventional Harvard religion. As a keen-sighted but stoically suffering prophet of Unitarianism, or of a system of belief more in keeping with the true nature of the universe, Emerson-Uriel removed himself from the scene.⁴

A final comment is due on how we are to read Milton's poem, if not Emerson's. Malpezzi claims that Milton is "dramatizing the moment change occurred" (169) in creation, and that this moment is an act of choosing. She sees some difference between the two poems here in that "Uriel does not act; rather, he speaks" (169) when he utters his anti-straight-line heresy. Because I recognize how thoroughly traditions of drama underlie Milton's epic, I want to agree with her. However, I have recently encountered this, by Stanley Fish:

Drama is a vehicle of idolatry [...]: it nominates moments of crisis (will she or won't she? What shall he do now?) and therefore presents a picture of the moral life in which crisis occurs only at special times rather than at every and all times. Like narrative and plot (which are its constituents), drama insists that some moments are different from others, whereas in Milton's vision all moments are the same.⁵

If this is what Milton believed, that there is only *chronos*, no *kairos*, that "[t]o everything there is *not* a season," *pace* Ecclesiastes, it probably would not have sat well with Emerson, for whom his crisis with the Divinity School was one of the great dramatic moments of his life.

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NOTES

¹John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1979). All subsequent references are to this edition.

²Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Uriel," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols., vol. 9, *Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918) 13-15. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³"With these trifling fictions [of "the heathen deities"]," Johnson writes, "are mingled the most awful and sacred truths [...]." "The mythological allusions have been justly censured, as not being always used with notice of their vanity." *Lives of the English Poets*, Everyman's Library (London: Charles Tilt, 1840) 48; 52.

⁴Emerson's biographer John McAleer informatively discusses the links between "Uriel" and the Harvard and Boston ministers' quarrel with Emerson, in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984) 264-66.

⁵Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001) 492. This is from chap. 14, "Gently Raised," one of the new parts of this collection of old and new Fish. Some of the concerns in this passage are elaborated in the chapters on "The Temptation to Action" and "The Temptation of Plot" (307-25; 349-90).