

Emerson's Allusive Art: A Transcendental Angel in Miltonic Myrtle Beds

FRANCES M. MALPEZZI

Critics have long recognized the influence of John Milton on Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they have particularly noted that Emerson's "Uriel" owes its title character to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.¹ Though Emerson's indebtedness to Milton in this poem is acknowledged, interpretations of "Uriel" do vary considerably. Charles Malloy argues the poem is an "allegory" suggesting "there are no lines in morals"; E. T. Helmick also reads the poem allegorically, but believes it expresses Emerson's theory of art; for Gay Wilson Knight the allegory of "Uriel" depicts "the furor caused by Emerson's 'Divinity School Address'"; while Kenneth Walter Cameron sees the poem as a "mythological or symbolic commentary on 'the progressive influence of the man of genius'"; and Richard Lee Francis asserts that the poem is a "mythological expression of the 'transparent eyeball,' of the poetic function in its prophetic dimension that unites heaven and earth."² As Kevin Van Anglen has observed, critics usually approach the poem either as an autobiographical expression of Emerson's "Divinity School Address" crisis or philosophically and aesthetically as "one of Emerson's most cogent poetic formulations of the doctrines of Transcendentalism, a virtual summary of his view of the mind and the role of the creative imagination."³ In his own study, Van Anglen combines these approaches as he looks at the way Emerson "was participating in a long tradition of Unitarian Milton criticism."⁴ Whatever their perspective, critics agree that Emerson's angel "with piercing eye" (l. 25) is the same as Milton's "sharpest sighted spirit of all in heaven" (*PL* III.691).⁵ Van Anglen goes further in suggesting the Miltonic influence by demonstrating that the situations in both poems are

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similar: "Uriel here [in Emerson's poem] does exactly what Milton's archangel does in Book III of *Paradise Lost*: he gives a true account of the nature of the universe in response to those who question him."⁶ Still the full extent of Emerson's allusiveness in this poem has yet to be documented. Far more similarities exist than have been noted. Emerson's "Uriel" is a richly textured, allusive poem, embedded with Miltonic resonances. Emerson's appropriation of Milton extends beyond the title character and even the poem's situation. Clearly a sensitive reader of Milton, Emerson has deftly interwoven and enmeshed numerous allusions to his works, especially to *Paradise Lost*, within "Uriel."

Set in the "myrtle-beds" (l. 28) of Paradise in "the ancient periods" (l. 1) of the *extemporal*, before "Time coined itself / Into calendar months and days" (ll. 3-4), Emerson's brief 56-line poem begins with the cosmic scope of the Miltonic epic. In taking us beyond calendrical and diurnal time, "Uriel" also calls to mind Milton's "On Time" with its distinction between the vain and evanescent world and the enduring realm of eternity. Not only is the Edenic locale notably Miltonic but the myrtle beds are as well. Milton places myrtle, the tree of Venus, in conjunction with the original lapse of the human pair. When Satan tempts Eve, he directs her: "Empress, the way is ready, and not long, / Beyond a row of myrtles" (*PL IX.627-28*). Moreover, in the dramatic scene that follows Seyd overhears the conversation between Uriel and the young deities. A poet, Seyd (or Saaidi) figures in other Emersonian poems, including "Saaidi" and "Fragments on the Poet and the Poetic Gift." Like the Epic Voice in *Paradise Lost*, Seyd has access to that beyond human ken. Just as Milton's poet-narrator was able to transcend the realm of earth and the temporal present to visit both the infernal and paradisial realms of the cosmic, so Seyd knows what occurs in the divine sphere before created time.

In the situation Seyd overhears "the young gods talking" (l. 8) about matters philosophical: "Laws of form, and metre just, / Orb, quintessence, and sunbeams, / What subsisteth, and what seems" (ll. 12-14). This philosophical pondering is similar to that of some of the lapsed

rebels in Book II of *Paradise Lost*. While Satan ventures on his great mission, the fallen angels occupy themselves by participating in athletic games, composing heroic poetry, and exploring their infernal world. One group, however, sits apart, engaging in philosophical discussion; they

reason'd high
Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate,
Fixt Fate, free will, foreknowledg absolute,
And found no end, in wandring mazes lost.
Of good and evil much they argu'd then,
Of happiness and final misery,
Passion and Apathie, and glory and shame,
Vain wisdom all, and false Philosophie. (II.558-65)

Although Emerson's young gods are still in Paradise, unlike their Miltonic counterparts, their cosmic speculation is judged to be as false and vain as the demonic philosophizing when Uriel pronounces his "sentiment divine":

'Line in nature is not found;
Unit and universe are round;
In vain produced, all rays return;
Evil will bless, and ice will burn.' (ll. 21-24)

The clear-sighted Uriel, one of the seven archangels who serve as the eyes of God (*PL* III.650) and who is specifically the interpreter of God's will (*PL* III.656-58), finds a solution to the question the young deities pondered about the world. And he does so by asserting the circularity of nature.

Hugh H. Witemeyer in "'Line' and 'Round' in Emerson's 'Uriel'" has pointed out the significance of circles in the body of Emerson's writing.⁷ Yet we must recognize that here too Emerson draws on *Paradise Lost*. Milton's Uriel, dwelling in "the Sun's bright circle" (*PL* IV.578) has an intuitive understanding of the circularity of the universe. This understanding is even keener, given that he witnessed the creative process. As he recounts that event he describes how Confusion heard the voice of God and light came out of darkness:

Swift to thir several Quarters hastend then
 The cumbrous Elements, Earth, Flood, Aire, Fire,
 And this Ethereal quintessence of Heav'n
 Flew upward, spirited with various forms,
 That *rowld orbicular*, and turned to Starrs
 Numberless, as thou seest, and how they move;
 Each had his place appointed, each his course,
 The rest in *circuit* walles this Universe. (III.714-21; italics mine)

Both Milton's Uriel and Emerson's recognize the circle as God's emblem imprinted on his created universe. Unit and universe are round because they reflect the power of the divine creator.

The last line of Uriel's pronouncement, "Evil will bless, and ice will burn," demonstrates the reliance on paradox that Hyatt H. Waggoner finds so prevalent in Emerson's poetry: "The tradition of paradox was ancient, it suited Emerson's purposes, and he was well acquainted with it as a way of writing."⁸ Moreover, the paradoxical last line of his pronouncement is reminiscent of the many paradoxes of *Paradise Lost*. Certainly in Milton's infernal region, ice *does* burn: the exploring fallen angels find a "frozen Continent" of snow and ice (II.587) where "cold performs the effect of fire" (II.596). Uriel, in using the future tense "ice will burn" foretells the creation of the frozen yet fiery infernal region. So, too, his prediction that "Evil will bless" alludes to a concept reiterated throughout *Paradise Lost*: Good will come out of evil. Satan's efforts to pervert good are doomed to failure, he does not see "How all his malice served but to bring forth / Infinite goodness" (II.217-18).

In the next section of the poem, Uriel enters his post-lapsarian period. The remainder of the poem concerns the repercussions of Uriel's lapse both in relation to himself and to the other angels as Emerson depicts the fruit of his actions. The immediate effects occur in ll. 31-34:

The balance-beam of Fate was bent;
 The bounds of good and ill were rent;
 Strong Hades could not keep his own,
 But all slid to confusion.

Not only is this a direct antithesis to the ordering and harmonizing that occurred in creation as described by Milton's Uriel, but there is a

definite parallel between this and the reaction which occurs both after the fall of Satan and that of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. After the fall of Satan and the rebel angels

Hell heard th'unsufferable noise, Hell saw
 Heav'n ruining from Heav'n and would have fled
 Affrighted; but strict Fate had cast too deep
 Her dark foundations, and too fast had bound.
 Nine days they fell; confounded *Chaos* roard,
 And felt tenfold confusion in thir fall
 Through his wilde Anarchie, so huge a rout
 Incumberd him with ruin:

(VI.867-74)

After Adam and Eve both eat of the fruit, disharmony also results:

Earth tremble'd from her entrails, as again
 In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan,
 Skie lowr'd and muttering Thunder, som sad drops
 Wept at compleating of the mortal Sin
 Original; [...]

(IX.1000-04)

In all three cases confusion and disorder are prominent. The harmony that existed at creation is destroyed as Nature responds to these lapses and is affected by them.

In the third stanza, Emerson's poem turns to the effects of Uriel's pronouncement upon himself as "sad self-knowledge" falls on the beauty of Uriel. As E. T. Helmick notes, Uriel experiences a more "devastating effect" than the old gods: "it is withering to his beauty. This is an expression of the belief that the outward sign of beauty indicates inward virtue. Having lost the freshness of innocence, Uriel has begun the withering connected with the kind of old age Emerson called the Fall of Man. His knowledge has grown too bright not only for society, but for himself as well."⁹ In both *Paradise Lost* and *A Masque*, Milton was concerned with the metamorphic power of one's actions. He often demonstrated ways both good and evil could leave visible marks on his characters or transform them significantly. In *A*

Masque good and evil have this metamorphic power. Bestialized by sin, Comus' followers have the heads of beasts. Their irrationality and intemperance transform the image of the divine in their countenance to "som brutish form of Woolf, or Bear, / Or Ounce, or Tiger, Hog, or bearded Goat" (ll. 70-71). The Elder Brother also articulates the way the virtue of Chastity, on the other hand, enables one to ascend rather than descend the ladder of creation. In *Paradise Lost*, all the fallen were visibly marked by their lapse. When Satan addresses Beelzebub in hell, he remarks,

But O how fall'n! how chang'd
From him, who in the happy Realms of Light
Cloth'd with transcendent brightness didst out-shine
Myriads though bright: (I.84-87)

And Satan himself bears the marks of change. When he asks the angels Ithuriel and Zephon, "Know ye not mee" (IV.828), Zephon responds,

Think not, revolted Spirit, thy shape the same,
Or undiminisht brightness, to be known
As when thou stoodst in Heav'n upright and pure;
That Glorie then, when thou no more wast good,
Departed from thee, and thou resembl'st now
Thy sin and place of doom obscure and foule. (IV.835-40)

As the angelic beauty of Uriel is impacted after his pronouncement, Emerson clearly alludes to Milton's metaphoric use of visible form to mirror inward reality. Thought and action can mark and change the outward form of man or angel.

Uriel now voluntarily withdraws into a cloud. And one of two things is said to happen to him:

Whether doomed to long gyration
In the sea of generation,
Or by knowledge grown too bright
To hit the nerve of feebler sight. (ll. 39-42)

The sea of generation suggests a kind of Spenserian Garden of Adonis, that seminary of life and rebirth. Or it could simply refer to the created world. Uriel may be doomed to roam the earth for an unlimited and unspecified time. He may, like fallen humanity, be placed out of Paradise and forced to live as an exile in a fallen world. Or he may experience a diminishment or change in his focus. Witemeyer sees two options for Uriel:

The fall of Uriel himself results from the "sad self-knowledge" that he has no true place in the community of angels. He must choose either a life of action (circular "gyration" in a Neoplatonic "sea of generation") or a life of pure contemplation in which his thought will have little effect.¹⁰

Both Pettigrew and Witemeyer have accurately noted that ll. 41-42 allude to Milton's *Il Penseroso*, ll. 13-14.¹¹ In moving from the realm of light to his cloudy abode, Uriel may have moved from being *L'Allegro*, a mirthful angel, to being the melancholy contemplative, *Il Penseroso*. As Witemeyer comments: "Like the cloistered scholar of Milton's ode, Uriel will become an invisible observer, devoted chiefly to solitary mental labor, if he chooses this alternative."¹²

The rest of the stanza concerns the repercussions of Uriel's act in relation to the other angels. Since Uriel's words pose a threat to their existence, they are unwilling to recognize the meaning of his statement. Yet the idea cannot be completely extinguished:

Straightway, a forgetting wind
Stole over the celestial kind,
And their lips the secret kept,
If in ashes the fire-seed slept. (ll. 43-46)

The term "fire-seed" is almost a kenning for Uriel's earlier pronouncement, perhaps prophesying the eventual fall of the young gods and suggesting the possibilities of the infernal region where ice will burn. While they choose to ignore the import of Uriel's words, to keep meaning concealed, they have not extinguished the significance of Uriel's pronouncement. Although the fire-seed sleeps in the ashes of

self-imposed forgetfulness, the flame of knowledge can be re-kindled, not unlike the phoenix rising from its ashes.

While the estimation of Frost's Job that "Uriel" is "the greatest western poem yet"¹³ may be deemed hyperbole, one must acknowledge that the poem is allusively complex. Moreover, this very allusiveness is Miltonic. Milton's great works are layered with allusions to classical, scriptural, and contemporary works. Emerson's technique in "Uriel" bears witness to his sensitive reading of Milton and his desire to emulate that poet.

As Pettigrew has noted, Emerson's "life-long enthusiasm" for Milton's poetry and prose is evident in the "numerous comments, quotations, and allusions" in his *Journals*.¹⁴ Given that Emerson knew *Lycidas* by heart (with the exception of a few lines) not because he had consciously memorized the poem but because he had read it so frequently,¹⁵ is it any wonder that Emerson's poem about an angelic "lapse" (l. 5) would resonate with Miltonic overtones? Though choosing dramatically different poetic forms, Milton in *Paradise Lost* and Emerson in "Uriel" are both concerned with exploring prelapsarian and postlapsarian reality and dramatizing the moment change occurred. The demarcating experience in Milton's epic centers on choice: the choice made by the rebel angels as they refuse submission to the Son and quit their vow of loyalty; the choice made by the Edenic couple when they disobey their creator's sole command and eat of the forbidden fruit. With a ripple effect the choices made by the fallen angels and the fallen Adam and Eve continue to impact themselves and others. In "Uriel," however, the life-defining moment is not one of action but of utterance. Uriel does not act; rather, he speaks. In "low tones that decide" (l. 15), he utters his pronouncement. Though his poem is brief, Emerson, through his numerous allusions to Milton, is able to suggest both the personal ramifications and the cosmic reverberations of Uriel's expression of his "sentiment divine" (l. 19). Perhaps in focusing on utterance rather than action, Emerson not only reminds us that words can be as powerful as deeds but underscores yet another Miltonic pattern. Certainly throughout *Paradise Lost* we

are aware of the motif of the one voice speaking in contradistinction to the views and opinions of the many. Like Abdiel who would not “swerve from truth, or change his constant mind / Though single” (*PL* V.902-03), Uriel speaks out while seraphs frown and war-gods sternly shake their heads. And just as the pronouncements of Abdiel or Enoch or Noah alienated them from the conformist crowd, so Uriel feels the alienating repercussions of his statement. The “sad Self-knowledge” (l. 35) that shadows the beauty of Uriel is, perhaps, his recognition that his postlapsarian exclusion is necessary. Aware of the “shudder” that runs through the sky at his words (l. 26), Uriel withdraws “into his cloud” (l. 38). His self-imposed exile from the companionship of the other young deities in Paradise, of course, also bears some resemblance to the enforced exclusion of the rebel angels and the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden. His postlapsarian world differs from his prelapsarian as significantly as theirs. While the length of Milton’s work enables him to expound extensively on the conditions both before and after the life-defining moment, Emerson’s brief poem only suggests those aspects. We know that Uriel withdraws, but we also realize he is not silenced for his words continue to resound. As he depicts a defining moment in “Uriel,” Emerson continually invokes Miltonic works, most notably *Paradise Lost*. In Miltonic myrtle beds, the transcendentalist poet found a powerful model for considering that instant when “The balance-beam of Fate was bent” (l. 31).

The allusiveness in “Uriel” should also suggest the need to evaluate the use of this technique in other poems by Emerson. In “Poetry and Imagination,” he presented a capsulized statement of his poetic theory:

In poetry we say we require the miracle. The bee flies among the flowers, and gets mint and marjoram, and generates a new product, which is not mint and marjoram, but honey; the chemist mixes hydrogen and oxygen to yield a new product, which is not these, but water; and the poet listens to conversation and beholds all objects in nature, to give back, not them, but a new and transcendent whole.¹⁶

For Emerson the poet is a miracle worker who through imagination transforms what he sees in nature—or what he reads—into a new finished product. Clearly this represents Emerson's method in "Uriel." Having sampled the mint and marjoram of the Miltonic garden, he produced the honey of his own poem. Certainly in "Uriel" there is scarce a line that does not echo Milton in some way. Emerson subsumed Miltonic language, characters, situations, and concepts in the creation of his own transcendental work. The extent of this allusiveness should encourage us to investigate this technique in other Emersonian works.

Arkansas State University
Jonesboro, Arkansas

NOTES

¹For the general influence of Milton on Emerson see Richard C. Pettigrew, "Emerson and Milton," *American Literature* 3 (1931): 45-59; William M. Wynkoop, *Three Children of the Universe: Emerson's View of Shakespeare, Bacon, and Milton* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966); and K. P. Van Anglen, *The New England Milton: Literary Reception and Cultural Authority in the Early Republic* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1993). For Milton's influence on Emerson's "Uriel" see especially Richard Lee Francis, "Archangel in the Pleached Garden: Emerson's Poetry," *ELH* 33 (1966): 461-72; Kevin Van Anglen, "Emerson, Milton, and the Fall of Uriel," *ESQ* 30.3 (1984): 139-53.

²Charles Malloy, "The Poems of Emerson: 'Uriel,'" *Arena* 32 (September 1904): 278; E. T. Helmick, "Emerson's 'Uriel' as Poetic Theory," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 1.1 (1969): 35-38, here 35; Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 1981) 480; Francis 467; Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Coleridge and the Genesis of Emerson's 'Uriel,'" *Philological Quarterly* 30.2 (April 1951): 212-217, here 216.

³Van Anglen 139.

⁴Van Anglen 139.

⁵All quotes from Emerson's poetry and prose, unless otherwise indicated, will be from Brooks Atkinson's *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 1950). All quotes from Milton's works will be from Roy Flannagan's *The Riverside Milton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

⁶Van Anglen 148.

⁷Hugh H. Witemeyer, "'Line' and 'Round' in Emerson's 'Uriel,'" *PMLA* 82 (1967): 98-103.

⁸Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Emerson as Poet* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 71. Waggoner believes Emerson uses paradox because "he felt that 'his people' were few, that the mass of men were blind to the truths he was busy announcing and praising" (70). In other words, like Milton, Emerson was writing to an audience fit "though few" (*PL* VII.31).

⁹Helmick 37.

¹⁰Witemeyer 102.

¹¹Witemeyer 102; Pettigrew 57. Pettigrew notes that, aside from these lines and the title character, "The poem does not, further than this, show any Miltonic influence" (57). While he argues for the influence of Milton on Emerson's prose he finds "few Miltonic echoes in Emerson's poetry itself" (56).

¹²Witemeyer 102.

¹³*The Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Henry Holt, 1959) 601.

¹⁴Pettigrew 45.

¹⁵Pettigrew 53.

¹⁶Perry Miller, ed., *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957) 204.