

## A Constructed Reading Self Replies\*

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In his response to my essay concerning religious style in *Paradise Lost*, Harold Swardson clarifies our parting of the ways in terms of “what kind of reading Self” each of us has constructed in our reading of Milton’s epic. His reading self, he confides, was forged under the tutelage of New Critics, who conditioned him to reject literary works which exhibit a so-called “sentimental style,” that is, works that encouraged “satisfying emotional responses and discouraged inspection of what these responses were based on and how they were related to each other” (100). Sentimental style, in short, is the same as “contradictory response” or “wanting things ‘two ways at once’” (99). It is only natural that such a reading self might complain that a Christian epic like *Paradise Lost*, with all its inherent paradoxes (nature and grace, natural and “right” reason, the eternal and temporal, the Word and the world) violates the principle of “non-contradiction.” It is natural too that he should conclude that what I claim as the religiously salutary confusion of religious style is in fact mere sentimentality.

“What would make me call what I am responding to ‘religious style’ rather than ‘sentimental style,’ . . . ?” Swardson asks (101). He replies: “Only a demonstration that what I see is not an ‘inconsistency’ but really a fruitful ambiguity.” Since my attempts to demonstrate the religious fruitfulness of the ambiguities in Milton’s Hell in convincing enough fashion (Swardson fails to see “what is salutary in the confusion”), I propose a change of venue to cooler terrain—Eden.

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\*Reference: Thomas F. Merrill, “The Language of Hell,” *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 244-57; Harold R. Swardson, “One Constructed Reading Self after Another (A Response to Thomas F. Merrill,” *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 98-102.

The particular Edenic ambiguity I have in mind occurs in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*. Eve has eaten the apple and Adam must choose between sharing her fate or maintaining his obedience to God. One whose "reading Self" fundamentally resembles Swardson's, A. J. A. Waldock, charged a number of years ago that Milton erred in depicting this episode by presenting us with a situation which evokes contradictory responses (in his words, "an unbearable collision of values"). We are asked, Waldock explains, to set aside "one of the highest, and really one of the oldest, of all human values: selflessness in love . . . [for] the mere doctrine that God must be obeyed."<sup>1</sup> Waldock insinuates that Milton himself, although "not in a position to admit it," felt that Adam was doing a "worthy thing" by eating the apple and joining Eve in sin. The resultant conflict, as Waldock describes it, is that the "poem asks from us, at one and the same time, two incompatible responses. It requires us, not tentatively, not half-heartedly (for there can be no place really for half-heartedness here) but with the full weight of our minds to believe that he did wrong."

Waldock restricts his eye for "sentimentality" to purely literary issues. He reads *Paradise Lost*, as I suspect Swardson does too, as though it were a drama, and applies the traditional standards of dramatic decorum to the scene. My disappointment is that he ignores the fact that Milton's epic has a religious as well as a literary vocation and that more often than not, Milton took great pains to assure that his religious goals took precedence over mere narrative consistency. Indeed, Milton's religious goals invariably demanded that the rational complacency of the world be subverted by a radically different sacred order. Thus, Waldock, in rendering a non-religious account of a religious enterprise, is disturbed by the way Milton confuses secular and sacred values and deems it "sentimentality." The incompatibility of the inconsistent values as they converge on Adam "is so critical," he says, that it pulls the reader "in two ways" and cheats him of the "full-hearted response that a great tragic theme allows and compels."

The issue, then, is clear: is being "pulled in two ways" a sentimental contradiction or a religiously fruitful ambiguity, consciously engineered by Milton according to the dictates of religious style?

Let me see if I can demonstrate to Swardson what is "salutary in this confusion" without forcing him to "abandon reason and 'the common sense point of view'" for which he feels reproached (101).

Some seventeenth-century "common sense" is afforded by the famous casuist William Perkins who adjudicates this case of conscience: when "God commaunds one thing & the magistrate commaundes the flat contrarie; in this case . . . the latter must give place to the former, and the former alone in this case must be obeyed: Act. 4, 19 *Whether it be right in the sight of God to obey you rather than God, judge ye.*"<sup>2</sup> With Milton's epic before us we do not need Perkins to tell us that "love and honor to God must be valued, painful as it seems, above love and honor to one's wife," because Milton forces us to share this "unbearable collision of values" along with Adam. Of course "we are pulled in two ways" as we read this episode. Milton intended us to be. Adam's dilemma forces us, perhaps as we cannot force ourselves, to experience the claim of sacred obligation, to work through to the awareness that it is the more worthy thing that Adam love and obey God than that he covet, however gallantly, Eve. To be sure we may feel that a morally reprehensible duty is required of Adam, but that is the point. This is not a "typical tragic conflict" but a religiously-stylized case of conscience—one incidentally that exactly parallels the biblical rendering of the story of Abraham and Isaac: that the love of God must be set above all other loves—even those of wife or son.

I am not at all sure the issue here is totally one of disparate "reading Selves"—that is, looking at identical textual evidence and drawing different conclusions because of differing belief systems. As Stanley Fish and others relentlessly illustrate, *Paradise Lost* is suffused with situations where Milton clearly would have us "surprised by sin," and such surprises, I would contend, are the very essence of religious style. No, the sort of patterns I refer to as religious style in *Paradise Lost* and other Christian literary texts are there, and, as John Wisdom suggests, "Wrongheadedness or wrongheartedness in a situation, blindness to what is there or seeing what is not, does not arise merely from mismanagement of language but is more due to connections which are not mishandled in language, for the reason that they are not put into language at all."<sup>3</sup> The restoration of missing connections is usually the

concern of historical criticism, but Wisdom's concern is not the historical but the religious "replacement" of connections, and he may have had in mind when he speaks of "unspoken connections," the "gaps," "lacunae," and "mysterious omissions" which, according to Erich Auerbach, characterize the style of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> Such missing connections, Wisdom observes, are often "operative but not presented in language," and it is obvious that here is a prime source of interpretive blunder, particularly in cases where a relatively secular culture assays to understand the sacred literature of an older religious one, ignorant of its unspoken connections.

As for my particular reading self, I cannot claim any privileged status. I boast no antennae of faith enabling me to see patterns that Swardson cannot, and I confess that my constructed reading self was first fashioned (like Swardson's, I assume) by that classic New Critical text: Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. Neither New Criticism nor the possession of belief or non-belief should define our differences over *Paradise Lost* in my opinion. The real issue is the essential nature of the poem that Milton wrote. Is it a poetic theodicy *about* the Christian experience or *of* it? This is the foundation upon which our reading selves are constructed. To me it seems that Swardson reads a *Paradise Lost* that is (to use his words) "constructed on the model of Socrates" (99), a text that should be expected to respond to the decorum of a well-made poem. But if the poem fails to meet those Socratic expectations, are we forbidden to apply more plausible Christian ones?

Mr. Swardson's remarks remind me of the "constructed reading self" of another "classicist," T. S. Eliot, who, in the course of faulting John Donne for a lack of a proper "*gout pour la vie spirituelle*" because "there is always the something else, the 'baffling'" in his preaching, found more profit in Lancelot Andrewes because "reading Andrewes . . . is like listening to a great Hellenist expounding a text of the *Posterior Analytics*."<sup>5</sup>

Granted, one is less likely to find "sentimental" violations of "the law of non-contradiction" in the *Posterior Analytics* than in the Bible or, I would argue, *Paradise Lost*, but this requires one's "reading Self" to bow

to a decorum which forbids the intrusion of the very inconsistent and contradictory stuff that life is made of, be it spiritual or literary.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A. J. A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost and its Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966) 55-56.

<sup>2</sup>*William Perkins: 1558-1602*, ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1966) 11.

<sup>3</sup>John Wisdom, "Gods," *Logic and Language (First Series)* ed. Antony Flew (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955) 200.

<sup>4</sup>See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953) 4-19.

<sup>5</sup>See "Lancelot Andrewes," *Selected Essays*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1934) 342-43.