

C. S. Lewis and His Later Respondents: Letting in Fresh Air, Preventing Questions, and Reimagining *A Preface to Paradise Lost*¹

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This essay chronicles significant responses to C. S. Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) that occurred from the 1960s into the twenty-first century. Important responses include those of William Empson, Stanley Fish, Stuart Curran, John Rumrich, Peter C. Herman, Michael Bryson, and Joseph Wittreich. All of these scholars challenged Lewis on various points—most commonly concerning matters of Lewis's analysis of Milton's Satan, his alleged oversimplification of Milton's theologically complex epic, the supposed similarities between *A Preface* and Fish's *Surprised by Sin*, and his assumed hegemonic prevention of new avenues of critical inquiry into Milton's epic. This essay contends that certain of these critics have misread or misinterpreted Lewis, and it suggests that such portrayals of *A Preface* obfuscate the insights that it continues to offer readers of *Paradise Lost*.

In my previous essay on the critical response to C. S. Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), I focused on the torrent of scholarship between 1943 and 1952 that challenged or, less frequently, supported Lewis's analysis of Milton's Satan (see Urban, "C. S. Lewis and Satan"). Common critiques from Lewis's respondents were that Lewis's brief chapter on Satan was overly simplistic, stuffily moralistic, limited by Lewis's Christian scruples, and heartlessly sarcastic regarding Milton's greatest

character. But regardless of *A Preface's* perceived shortcomings, it certainly inspired numerous spirited responses that themselves became enduring voices in the history of *Paradise Lost* criticism. The frequency of sustained responses to *A Preface* abated after 1952, but two works published in the years that followed, both of which extensively address Milton criticism of previous decades, use remarkably similar phraseology to belittle *A Preface's* larger critical accomplishment. In 1955, while mocking Lewis's notion that Milton's describing Paradise is "'drawing out the Paradisal Stop in us' [*Preface* 47], as if readers were so many Hammond Electric Organs" (38), Robert Martin Adams snidely suggests that elsewhere in *A Preface* Lewis functions better "in his capacity of public moralist" (38). And five years later, Bernard Bergonzi writes lukewarmly of Lewis, arguing that, because *A Preface* "does not [...] meet [Milton's detractors, the "anti-Miltonists"] on their own ground," it does not succeed in "providing the positive and detailed answer to their criticisms that they have demanded" (172). Rather, states Bergonzi, reiterating the views of earlier respondents, "Lewis was not able to resist the temptation to play the public moralist" in *A Preface*, even as he offers some "excessively simplified" critical "assumptions" (171).

From reading Adams and Bergonzi, one might think that *A Preface* was destined to lay in the dustbins of critical mediocrity. But, perhaps unexpectedly, *A Preface* was soon to take on new relevance through appreciative engagement by an unlikely source. For if Lewis's own criticism insufficiently answered the anti-Miltonists, it did, ironically enough, pave the way for one of the most dynamic responses to the anti-Miltonists, William Empson's *Milton's God*. It is not the intent of this essay to debate Empson's ingenious defense of Milton's epic. Rather, I shall discuss herein how the engagement with *A Preface* offered by the 1960s' two most important works on *Paradise Lost*—*Milton's God* and Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin*—solidified Lewis's book's enduring place within Milton criticism. I shall also address how much subsequent, and largely hostile, engagement with *A Preface* has followed in the tradition of Empson and Fish, although these later interlocutors have portrayed Lewis—particularly in his role as a Christian critic

whose *Preface* argues that *Paradise Lost* exhibits “the great central tradition” of Christianity (91)—as one who has stifled complex critical engagement with *Paradise Lost*. Ironically, however, discussion of these later, more hostile voices suggests the opposite: that Lewis’s assertions in *A Preface* have inspired various sustained engagements with Milton’s epic that use Lewis’s orthodoxy and apparent stuffiness—albeit sometimes in misrepresented form—as a platform to react against forcefully as they offer their own visions of an unorthodox Milton whose larger message is characterized by contradiction rather than consistency.

Fresh Air and Satan as God’s Victim: William Empson’s *Milton’s God*

Empson’s *Milton’s God* (1961, rev. ed. 1965) displays the 1960s’ most important explicit critical engagement with *A Preface*. Memorably, in his Preface to *Milton’s God*’s revised edition, Empson expresses his great “regret” regarding the death of Lewis, whom Empson calls one of his “two chief opponents” in *Milton’s God* and who “received the first edition in a very generous-minded way” (7). Throughout *Milton’s God*, Empson eagerly engages with Lewis and contrasts their respective views of Christianity. In a manner that sets the tone of his book’s interaction with Lewis’s *Preface*, Empson cites Lewis in a manner both respectful toward Lewis as a critic and hostile toward his theological beliefs. Writing of the God of *Paradise Lost*, Empson expresses dissatisfaction with the tentative manner in which previous critics have discussed the epic’s deity. He writes that, as “Milton himself” would recognize, the matter of Milton’s God “cannot be viewed in a purely aesthetic manner” (9). Critics have suggested that “[h]is God is somehow ‘embarrassing’ [...] with [that word’s] comforting suggestion of a merely social blunder” (9). But Empson considers such critical pussyfooting both tedious and disingenuous, and he portrays Lewis as an ally in his effort to cast aside such critical niceties. Empson writes: “Professor C. S. Lewis let in some needed fresh air [...] by saying, ‘Many of those who say they dislike Milton’s God only mean that they dislike God’”

(9; quoting *Preface* 126). And Empson promptly sets up the dichotomy between Lewis's beliefs and his own: "[s]peaking as an Anglican, he decided that the beliefs used by the poem are those central to any Christian theology, except for some minor and doubtful points; but even he was ready to grant that Milton might sometimes describe God 'imprudently'" (9; quoting *Preface* 93). Admitting his surprise at what he calls the recent "revival of Christianity among literary critics" (9), Empson writes, in a manner that recalls Lewis's frank proclamation of his Christianity in *A Preface*¹: "I am anxious to make my beliefs clear at the outset, [...]. 'Dislike' is a question-begging term here. I think the traditional God of Christianity very wicked, and have done since I was at school" (9-10). Empson then suggests that, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton is thoughtful enough "to question whether his God is wicked. Such an approach," Empson writes, "does at least make Milton himself appear in a better light. He is struggling to make his God appear less wicked, as he tells us he will at the start (I.25), and does succeed in making him noticeably less wicked than the traditional Christian one" (11). From this, Empson enters into his own particular approach to *Paradise Lost*, an approach that dislikes Milton's God but praises Milton the poet (see Leonard, *Faithful* 510). It is indeed remarkable that Empson, the most influential pro-Satan critic of the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, does in the opening pages of *Milton's God* carve his own critical approach to *Paradise Lost* from an entryway that Lewis's *Preface* opened to him. Moreover, even as Lewis frankly postulates that his Christianity makes him a more effective reader of *Paradise Lost*, so too does Empson suggest that his own hatred for the Christian God makes him a more sensitive reader of the poem, particularly, as we shall see, of Milton's Satan, the prime victim, in Empson's estimation, of the wicked God who oppresses his fallen former servant.

As was the case with Lewis's earlier respondents, much of the remainder of Empson's most engaging response to Lewis's *Preface* concerns the character of Satan, with Empson focusing on Satan in book 4. Empson first addresses how the solitary Satan, approaching Eden, re-

fuses to repent before God because of both his “disdain” of “submission” and his “dread of shame” before the fallen angels whom he “seduc’d” with the “promise” that he “could subdue Th’Omnipotent” (4.81-86)—and then proceeds to lament his inward “torments” and “supreme / [...] misery” (4.88, 91-92). Empson acknowledges that Satan’s words here are “theatrical,” but he takes issue with Lewis’s criticizing Satan “for always talking about himself” (65-66; cf. *Preface* 99-100). After all, contends Empson, “it is fair to remember that is what his readers always want him to talk about” (66). And Empson emphasizes that Lewis not only misunderstands Milton’s readers, but also Satan and Milton himself. Having offered a fairly detailed and complex analysis of Satan’s monologue, Empson writes, “I do not deny that my opponent’s [Lewis’s] interpretation is the easier; it seems likely that Milton was ready to avoid disturbing the simple-minded reader, though he would aim more at the fit one, who could appreciate his sustained analysis of Satan’s character” (66). Recalling various earlier respondents to Lewis, Empson here charges that Lewis’s analysis of Satan’s character is too simplistic; moreover, Empson also implicitly contends that, over and against Lewis’s suggestion in *A Preface* that his Christianity makes him the kind of “fit” reader Milton sought, his Christian bias against Satan actually makes Lewis less fit to appreciate Milton’s Satan. A bit later, as he discusses Satan’s soliloquy while first viewing, unseen, Adam and Eve, Empson again faults Lewis for a simplistically dismissive and insulting remark concerning Satan’s character. Amid his extended textual analysis, Empson interjects, “By the way, C. S. Lewis need not have called Satan ‘a thing which peers in through bathroom windows’ because he feels jealous here of the sexual pleasures of Adam and Eve” (68, inexactly quoting *Preface* 97²). Instead, Empson commends Satan for his emotional honesty and judges his response as entirely appropriate for his situation: “God has recently cut him off from his own corresponding pleasures, and he is straightforward enough about it” (68). Here Empson portrays Lewis’s humorous comment as distasteful, inappropriate, and immature—indeed, it is Satan and Emp-

son who are the adults in the room, as it were. Moreover, having dismissed Lewis's comment as childish and insensitive, Empson goes on to take the higher ground of close textual analysis, apart from moralizing bias. He agrees with Lewis—based on Milton's description that Satan eyes the couple "with leer malign" (4.503)—that Satan's "character" now quickly "rots away" (68). Nonetheless, Satan's character remains complex enough for Empson to consider the possibility that Satan's "offer" to Adam and Eve of hospitality in Hell (4.375-85) is actually "sincere" (69). And the complexity of Satan's character is compounded by the fact that Satan is living under the weight of God's perpetual cruelty against him. Empson writes that here Satan "is still partly thinking of himself as a patron of Adam and Eve, who can save them from their wicked master; thus he seems genuinely indignant (520) at hearing the conditions of ignorance which God has imposed upon them" (69). A bit later, Empson writes that Satan, continuing to find God "intolerable," "may probably be sincere when he offers [Adam and Eve] high honour in Hell; but even as he speaks his lips are twisted by the new suspicion that God is only waiting to turn all he does to torture" (69).³ In sum, and over against Lewis, Empson charges that Milton's wicked God and his continuing cruelty toward Satan is the main reason that Satan's character falls into cruelty himself.

Empson again draws on Lewis when he analyzes Satan's preparing to wreak havoc upon the yet-unfallen first couple. He writes, "I fully agree with the disgust felt by C. S. Lewis for Satan's character as it has now become" (70). But even here, Empson equivocates, once again making God significantly culpable for Satan's evil machinations: "But surely one must also feel horror at the God who has deliberately reduced him to such a condition" (70). Reading this mitigating statement, we may recall Empson's earlier expressed gratitude for Lewis's letting in "some needed fresh air" by stating forthrightly that critics' personal dislike for the God of Christianity has animated much analysis of Milton's God. Building on Lewis's critical precedent, Empson cheerfully brandishes his disgust for the Christian God and, by extension, Milton's

God. He skillfully transforms his personal theological disgust into a reliable critical tool, one that legitimizes his continued sympathy for the continually degraded Satan, a degradation that, for Empson, is both inaugurated and continued not, as A. J. A. Waldock contended, by the squeamish Christian scruples of Milton's moralizing narrating comments and narrative choices (see Waldock, "*Paradise Lost*" 78-85) but by Milton's God. In any event, as we conclude the present discussion of *Milton's God*, we must recognize that, from Empson's perspective, Lewis's *Preface* does not stifle critical discussion but rather causes it to flourish. This point will be worth remembering when, later in this essay, we examine more recent critics that continue in Empson's tradition, critics whose posture toward Lewis is considerably less appreciative.

Incorporating the Christian Tradition, Manipulating the Reader, and Preventing Questions: Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin*

The work of a second critic from the 1960s proved seminal to future discussion of Lewis's *Preface*. Unlike *Milton's God*, which engages with Lewis explicitly from its opening paragraph and throughout the book, Stanley Fish in *Surprised by Sin* (1967) offers very little explicit acknowledgement of Lewis's influence. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate presently, it has become fashionable for later critics to suggest that Fish's book is essentially a methodologically updated version of Lewis's *Preface*. As I have argued elsewhere, such sweeping claims are tremendous overstatements that ignore both Fish's substantive disagreements with Lewis and the fact that Lewis's Christian defense of *Paradise Lost* was part of a larger, older tradition of Milton scholarship that manifested itself regularly at least since Addison's *Spectator* essays on *Paradise Lost* in 1711-12, a tradition with which Fish connects most explicitly in *Surprised* through his extended engagement with the writings of Jonathan Richardson the elder, not Lewis's *Preface*.⁴ Nonetheless we may recognize Lewis's significant general influence, or at least the demonstrable influence of the tradition Lewis represents, upon Fish's book.

In *Surprised's* original preface, Fish makes no mention of Lewis, who is notably absent from those Milton scholars whom Fish states have most influenced him, specifically Waldock and Joseph Summers (lxxii). But for all of Fish's sympathy for these more methodologically sophisticated antagonists of Lewis, his preface reveals a general interpretive sympathy to Lewis's general attitude toward Milton. Quoting the early seventeenth-century Puritan Richard Bernard, Fish writes, "I believe Milton's intention to differ little from that of so many devotional writers, 'to discover to us our miserable and wretched estate through corruption of nature' and to 'shew how a man may come to a holy reformation and so happily recover himself'" (lxxi). Fish then argues that, throughout *Paradise Lost*, "the reader"

- (1) is confronted with evidence of his corruption and becomes aware of his inability to respond adequately to spiritual conceptions, and
- (2) is asked to refine his perceptions so that his understanding will be once more proportionable to truth the object of it. (lxxi)

Although Lewis himself neither mentions Bernard nor (as shall be discussed below) emphasizes the devotional aspect of the poem, one can argue from the above quotations that Fish, like Lewis, asserts that Milton's overall emphasis in *Paradise Lost* appeals to "the great central tradition" of Christianity.

In his Preface to *Surprised's* second edition (1997), Fish more explicitly articulates Lewis's influence upon him: at the time he originally wrote *Surprised*, Milton criticism needed "a way of breaking out of the impasse created by two interpretive traditions. In one tradition, stretching from [Joseph] Addison to C. S. Lewis and Douglas Bush, the moral of *Paradise Lost*"—and here Fish quotes Lewis's *Preface*—"is 'dazzlingly simple': disobedience of God is the source of all evil and the content of all error; obedience to God brings happiness and the righteous life" (ix; quoting Lewis 70).⁵ So certainly Lewis influenced Fish as a major voice in the Christian tradition of interpreting *Paradise Lost*, one of the two major interpretive traditions that Fish explicitly incorporates into his analysis of Milton's epic. Nonetheless, as I note above, the author in the tradition of Christian *Paradise Lost* criticism who influenced Fish most

explicitly in his reader-response, confessional hermeneutic is clearly Jonathan Richardson the elder, whose “description of the poem’s demands” on the reader, Fish writes, “accords perfectly with my own” (54). Moreover, it bears specific mention that Lewis himself, very unlike Fish and Richardson, states flatly that *Paradise Lost* is not a poem in which the reader will find “his devotion quickened” (127). That significant caveat aside, Fish recognizes Lewis as his predecessor in the idea of the authoritative Miltonic narrator guiding or even manipulating his readers to a particular response. In the penultimate chapter of *Surprised*, having just twice expressed his disagreement with Lewis’s low opinion of *Paradise Lost* books 11 and 12, Fish argues that the comparatively bare style of those books make them “a perfect (i.e. unobtrusive) medium for the conveyance of doctrine,” and then unexpectedly cites Lewis approvingly: “Lewis observes of Milton’s *Paradise*: ‘We are his organ: when he appears to be describing *Paradise* he is in fact drawing out the *Paradisial* stop in us’” (302; quoting Lewis 47). Fish analyzes this phenomenon:

Presumably the paradisial stop is one we all have because it is rooted in an archetypal myth; there are also local ‘stops’, tied to patterns of association that do not antedate the artifact, but are established within its confines; and these are particularly numerous in *Paradise Lost* where so much is involved in pattern. In order to draw forth a response rooted in any one pattern, that is, in order to pull out a particular stop, the poet need only provide a link between the text at hand and the sources of energy existing in his reader’s mind. The impact of the verbal texture resides not in the arrangement of the words on the page or in the moral commonplaces the words present, but in the reader who responds to them as he responds to old melodies which have become a part of him by having been a part of his experience. (302-03)

Fish’s analysis is significant in that he uses a brief quotation by Lewis as a springboard to articulate what amounts to a summary of his larger theory of how the authoritative author can elicit a proper response in a worthy reader—the “fit audience” that Milton envisions and, in Fish’s view, aims to educate through a proper understanding of its own sinfulness. Of course, it would be a mistake to make too much of Fish’s isolated use of Lewis in this passage to express his larger hermeneutical

strategy throughout *Surprised*. The greater overall hermeneutical influence of Waldo, Summers, and Richardson is evident from the degree of Fish's engagement with them throughout his text, as well as, in the case of Waldo and Summers, Fish's explicit acknowledgment in his original preface. Nonetheless, Fish here makes clear Lewis's explicit influence on his interpretive methodology, no small matter given *Surprised's* generally recognized position as the most important book in Milton studies since its publication.

But if Lewis's influence on Fish is evident in both interpretive substance and method, we should note also in what way Fish's depiction of *A Preface* has strongly influenced how Lewis's book has been perceived and portrayed by subsequent generations of readers and critics. Of particular import is what Fish writes in his opening paragraph of chapter 5, "The Interpretive Choice," where he notes, with both sympathy and disappointment, how Lewis

moves to 'dismiss that question which has so much agitated some great critics, "What is the Fall?"' by answering, 'The Fall is simply and solely Disobedience—doing what you have been told not to do.' Aligning himself with Addison, for whom 'the great moral which reigns in Milton is ... Obedience to the will of God makes men happy', Lewis poses a question of his own: 'How are we to account for the fact that great modern scholars have missed what is so dazzlingly simple?' (208; quoting Lewis 70)

On one level, Fish is sympathetic to Lewis's affirmation of the moral simplicity of *Paradise Lost*. He writes: "The 'dazzling simplicity' of the poem's great moral is the counterpart of the dazzlingly simple prohibition, and the obligation of the parties in the two situations is to defend the starkness of the moral choice against sophistications which seem to make disobedience attractive [...] or necessary" (208). On this level, Fish agrees with Lewis: The moral of *Paradise Lost* is indeed straightforward, and to believe otherwise is to fall prey to the strategy of the enemy.

But as Fish continues, he adjusts course: "The opportunities to yield to such sophistications are provided by God and Milton, respectively, who wish to try the faith and integrity of their charges" (208): Adam

and Eve, and the reader, respectively. Fish then cites Lewis again in a manner that will eventually yield dubious repercussions. He writes:

Lewis hopes to 'prevent the reader from ever raising certain questions', but Milton insists that the reader raise them, and then that he answer them, either by recalling the simplicity of the revealed word or by turning inward where there are waiting a ready supply of self-serving rationalizations. These rationalizations become screens behind which the reader may hide from himself facts he finds unpleasant, notably the fact of man's culpability for what happened in Paradise and since. But he is free, on the other hand, to decline the gambit and accept instead the desolating clarity of 'For still they knew, and ought to have still remember'd / The high Injunction not to taste that Fruit' (X.12-13). Whatever he decides, it is his responsibility, as it was theirs. (208; quoting *Preface* 69-70)

Remarkably, even as Fish reaffirms the "dazzlingly simple" *moral* of *Paradise Lost*—and we must recognize, although Fish does not offer clear reference, that the phrase "desolating clarity" is Lewis's, not Milton's (*Preface* 70)—he chides Lewis for falling into *methodological* simplicity by trying to "prevent the reader from ever raising certain questions." In doing this, Fish simultaneously embraces Lewis while throwing him under the critical bus, a rhetorical move that allows Fish both to champion the orthodox substance of his catechismal portrayal of *Paradise Lost* even as he breaks with Lewis by essentially dismissing him as one who avoids the complexities of Milton's poem⁶ and, as particularly concerns Fish, avoids the complexities of the reader's experience while reading *Paradise Lost*.

The problem with Fish's presentation, however, is that Fish in the above passage quotes Lewis incompletely and largely out of context. Although the portion of *A Preface* that Fish cites is in fact part of Lewis's discussion of the Fall, Fish's selective quotation of Lewis's words gives a faulty impression of his intention for Milton's readers. Significantly, Lewis's aforementioned quotation is immediately preceded by Lewis's brief outline of eleven points in which, he argues, "Milton's version of the Fall story is substantially that of St. Augustine, which is that of the Church as a whole" (65; see 65-69). Lewis then writes:

It is my hope that this short analysis will *prevent the reader from ever raising certain questions* which have, in my opinion, led critics into blind alleys. We need not ask "What is the Apple?" It is an apple. It is not an allegory. It is an apple, just as Desdemona's handkerchief is a handkerchief. Everything hangs on it, but in itself it is of no importance. We can also dismiss that question which has so much agitated some great critics. "What is the Fall?" The Fall is simply and solely Disobedience—doing what you have been told not to do: and it results from Pride—from being too big for your boots, forgetting your place, thinking that you are God. This is what St. Augustine thinks and what (to the best of my knowledge) the Church has always taught; this Milton states in the very first line of the first Book, this all his characters reiterate and vary from every possible point of view throughout the poem as if it were the subject of a fugue. Eve's arguments in favour of eating the Apple are, in themselves, reasonable enough; the answer to them consists simply in the reminder "You mustn't. You were told not to." (69-70; italics added)

From the above, Lewis immediately transitions into his agreement with Addison regarding the "great moral" of *Paradise Lost* being "that Obedience to the will of God makes men happy and that Disobedience makes them miserable," a point that, as Fish notes with approval, Lewis calls "dazzlingly simple" (70).

We do well at this point to recognize that Fish's dubious choice to quote Lewis so selectively serves both to obfuscate Lewis's specific meaning and to overstate the interpretive differences between the two critics. As the above long quotation demonstrates, the "certain questions" that Lewis hopes "to prevent the reader from ever raising" are only two, and they are questions of a rather technical nature that, in Lewis's estimation, have distracted critics from addressing matters more substantive and germane to the poem itself. Curiously, although Fish states that, contra Lewis, "Milton insists that the reader raise them" (208), nowhere in the more than 360 pages of *Surprised* does Fish pursue the questions of "What is the Apple?" or "What is the Fall?" He disregards the first and, as we have seen, agrees with Lewis completely on the second; he does not even ponder alternatives.⁷ We should also note that Lewis does not dissuade readers from asking other questions. His statement that "Eve's arguments in favour of eating the Apple are, in themselves, reasonable enough"—and that her arguments are answered by a recognition of the need to obey God's command—actually

coincides quite closely with Fish's aforementioned statement that the reader faced with the "life situation" of the temptation can (like Eve) either choose to hide behind "self-serving rationalizations" or, alternatively, remember and obey "the simplicity of the revealed word" of God's prohibition (208, 209). Obviously Fish addresses these alternatives and the "questions" that precede them in far more detail than Lewis does. But it is inaccurate for Fish to insinuate that he and Lewis oppose each other regarding the need to raise questions. Rather, we may fairly say that, overall, Lewis and Fish raise many of the same questions and come to many of the same conclusions, but Fish ruminates on matters of close textual analysis far more thoroughly and with far more complexity than does Lewis.

Whatever his and Lewis's ultimate points of agreement, Fish's above misrepresentation of Lewis serves to further the critical narrative of Lewis's dismissive interpretative dogmatism that was prominent from Waldock's first challenge in 1943. It must be nonetheless recognized that Fish's misrepresentation is not committed with a tone of hostility but rather with a comparatively friendly posture toward Lewis. In this sense, Fish's attitude toward Lewis resembles somewhat that of the even more respectful and even affectionate Empson who, as we have seen, seems to welcome Lewis's critical and religious dogmatism as a segue by which to express openly his own doctrinal and interpretive opposition to Lewis and Milton's Christian God.

Following Empson, Disdaining Lewis:

Stuart Curran's "Siege of Hateful Contraries"

But Empson's comparatively irenic posture toward Lewis has not generally prevailed among those critics who have followed Empson's and opposed Lewis's perspective. Rather, hostility toward *A Preface*—largely grounded in hostility toward Lewis's open and well-publicized Christianity—has continued to manifest itself. Such hostility is particu-

larly evident in Stuart Curran's 1975 essay "The Siege of Hateful Contraries: Shelley, Mary Shelley, Byron, and *Paradise Lost*." Like Empson, Curran reveals himself as one whose posture toward *Paradise Lost* and Milton's Satan reflects the influence of Percy Bysshe Shelley. On the one hand, Curran offers some perhaps grudging appreciation for Lewis by imitating Empson in stating that Shelley "would have welcomed the clarity of Lewis's memorable utterance: 'Many of those who say they dislike Milton's God only mean that they dislike God,'" a view to which Shelley (like Empson) "would have assented without feeling any need to follow Lewis into apologetics" (214). On the other hand, unlike Empson, Curran's overall disposition toward Lewis is one of resentment and even disdain. Curran begins his essay as follows: "Few can pretend to the cheek of C. S. Lewis, who first told Milton's readers that none of them knew what *Paradise Lost* was about and then, with the primness of a Tory vicar confident of taking tea with royalty in heaven, informed his auditors that the lesson for the day was obedience" (209). In his second sentence, Curran writes of Lewis's "*hauteur*" (emphasis Curran's) even as he dismisses Lewis's thesis as "erroneous" (209), and two pages later Curran laments that "readers of Milton have at times followed C. S. Lewis into the [...] simplistic pieties of Anglo-Catholicism" (211). Curran's disdain toward Lewis and his religion are palatable, and perhaps I may be permitted to "let in some needed fresh air" of my own by suggesting that, to paraphrase Lewis's *Preface*, "Many of those who say they dislike Lewis's explicitly Christian Milton criticism only mean that they dislike Christianity."⁸ In any event, as I shall soon discuss, Curran's hostility toward Lewis anticipates similar sentiments among scholars holding similar views roughly thirty years later.

Lewis the Apologist's Oversimplification of Milton: John Peter Rumrich's *Matter of Glory*

In the ensuing two decades, the Milton scholar offering the most notable engagement with Lewis is John Peter Rumrich, whose interaction with *A Preface* forms a significant framework within two influential

books and a major article. The first of these is Rumrich's 1987 monograph *Matter of Glory: A New Preface to Paradise Lost*. As Rumrich confirms in his Introduction, his book's subtitle is a clear allusion to Lewis's book. After paying deference to Lewis's stature ("I wish here to disown any implication that I consider myself Lewis' equal in style, lucidity, or general literary expertise" [5]), Rumrich notes that he, "like Lewis," addresses the meaning of *Paradise Lost* as a "whole poem"; and that he, in his book's organization and coverage of topics and "interpretive issues," "follow[s] roughly the same course as Lewis" (6). But Rumrich also self-consciously differs from Lewis, offering "an alternative understanding to *Paradise Lost* in two respects: (1) the epic's relation to its precursors, and (2) the theology of the poem and its relation to Milton's intended meaning" (6). It is this second category to which Rumrich pays the most attention, as will I here. Rumrich, particularly in his Introduction, largely follows Empson's tactic of politely highlighting certain of Lewis's critical strategies, even as Rumrich, like Empson, uses such highlighting to distinguish himself from Lewis and open the way to present his own interpretive assertions in explicit contrast to those of Lewis's *Preface*.

As have many critics before him, Rumrich takes issue with what he considers Lewis's oversimplification of Milton's text for the sake of fitting *Paradise Lost* into the categories of Lewis's "'mere' Christianity" (7). Although Lewis acknowledged some of Milton's doctrinal eccentricities, "Lewis claimed" that Milton the poet "'laid aside most of his private theological whimsies' (92)" in order "to produce a particular effect 'on the ordinary educated and Christian audience of his time' (91)" (7). Rumrich continues:

Significantly, Lewis' own evangelical method was to emphasize the common essence of Christian beliefs—"mere" Christianity as he called it—and he saw Milton as a predecessor on this eminently brotherly path. But as opposed to Lewis', Milton's ecumenism was most strikingly one of dissimilitudes, brotherly or not, and his heresies are neither so arbitrary as the word *whimsies* suggests nor are they expurgated from his epic for reasons of the decorum or the anticipated satisfaction of a mainstream audience. (7)

In overt contrast to Lewis, Rumrich in his book seeks “to reveal how integral, how precisely unwhimsical, Milton’s heresies are to the fictional cosmos of *Paradise Lost*” (7).

Rumrich suggests that Lewis’s role as a Christian apologist is foundational to his attempt to tame Milton’s poem into the strictures of orthodoxy. (Although Rumrich does not note this, it is curious indeed that Lewis published the first part of what became the book *Mere Christianity*—his BBC Radio broadcast and pamphlet *The Case for Christianity*—in 1942, the same year *A Preface* appeared in print.) And along with Lewis’s apologetic agenda comes an attendant inability to analyze Milton’s text for what it really is. Rumrich writes:

That Lewis sees Milton as performing much the same role in the epic genre as Lewis played in the genre of Christian apologetics underscores the great danger besetting anyone who attempts to reconstruct Milton’s meaning, that of falling into a circular argument. One defines the general horizon of a given work in the way that suits one’s sense of the particulars of that work—and then proceeds to find evidence to confirm the horizon so defined. (7)

Rumrich goes on to argue that such is Lewis’s hermeneutical method when Lewis

determines that Milton sacrifices his theological eccentricities for the greater good of Christianity and so misconstrues, for example, Milton’s heretical materialism as a “fugitive colour on the poem which we detect only by the aid of external evidence” (p. 90). (7)

Contra Curran, Rumrich displays no hostility in his tone. But his message is clear: Lewis’s Christian commitment elides into a hermeneutical commitment, and it prevents him from accurately analyzing *Paradise Lost* for what it really is. Rather, Lewis, amid his melding of apologetics and literary criticism, transforms Milton’s epic into a monument of the great tradition of orthodox Christianity at the expense of a truly honest and accurate reading of the poem itself.

For Rumrich, then, *Paradise Lost* is rather a poem in which Milton’s divergences from orthodoxy were integral to his epic. According to Rumrich, Milton’s depictions of “the Anarch Chaos and his Consort Night” (see *PL* 2.959-1009) actually “represent the material dimension

of God's own being" (7). Significantly, "Lewis almost entirely neglects to mention chaos" (7), and no scholar before Rumrich has recognized the degree to which Chaos and Night participate in the being of the complex Miltonic deity that Lewis has attempted to present as a depiction of the orthodox Christian God (7-8). While discussing this matter, Rumrich suggests that Lewis himself—and, again, his Christian presuppositions—is largely responsible for the overall critical failure to recognize Chaos and Night's participation in the Miltonic godhead. Rumrich attributes "[t]he slowness of Milton studies to apprehend accurately and in detail the interpretive significance of Milton's unique theology" to "the same orthodox horizon for *Paradise Lost* that Lewis explicitly proposes" (8). Asserting that "Lewis' basic argument has become dominant in Milton scholarship" (9), Rumrich suggests that Lewis and his Christian orthodoxy have served as a vehicle not, as Lewis himself claimed, to recover the lost proper understanding of Milton's poem, but actually to obscure its more central, vital heretical elements. Indeed, while Rumrich emphasizes the heretical in Milton to the interpretive diminishment of what Lewis taught is *Paradise Lost*'s overall orthodoxy, he effectively seeks to undo Lewis's largely successful effort to restore *Paradise Lost* to the greater orthodox Christian tradition. And Rumrich does this in a way that represents the orthodox Christian tradition—exemplified by Lewis himself—as one that relegates itself to the unfortunate circular interpretive framework Rumrich describes above.

Rumrich's book also initiates the highly influential and thus far enduring association between Lewis's *Preface* and Fish's *Surprised by Sin*, an association that, to the best of my knowledge, had never been made before Rumrich, and certainly was not made by any of the many scholarly reviews of Fish's book.⁹ Rumrich asserts that Lewis's argument "[f]ind[s] its most influential expression in Stanley Fish's consensus-building *Surprised by Sin*" (9). Implicitly building on "Lewis' contention that Milton wrote for the ordinary Christian of his time," Fish's book assumes that Milton's audience is "the relatively orthodox, conservative Puritans of mid-seventeenth century England," and it has caused

“Milton’s own views” to be “identified with the views of that audience” (9). Moreover, Fish’s “catechismal version of *Paradise Lost*” actually “resembles more the work of a Presbyterian didact such as the self-righteous Richard Baxter (seven citations in *Surprised by Sin*) than the work of a politico-religious Independent like Milton” (9).

Although, as we have noted, Rumrich strikes a respectful posture toward Lewis, he does not demonstrate such an attitude toward Fish, whom Rumrich portrays as extending and solidifying the influence of Lewis’s argument in an even more conservative Christian incarnation. And Rumrich’s gratuitously pejorative description of Richard Baxter—whose writings challenged doctrinaire Calvinism and whom many have celebrated for his pastoral soul care—suggests Rumrich’s impatience toward the broader Christian tradition. At the very least, Rumrich is deeply concerned with what he portrays as the far-reaching hegemony of Lewis’s and Fish’s Christian project, a hegemony that Rumrich argues has brought about the “widespread problem in Milton studies” of ignoring Milton’s heretical depiction of Chaos and Night (7). In any event, Lewis’s and Fish’s efforts become increasingly elided both in Rumrich’s subsequent criticism and, as we shall see, in that of certain other critics whom Rumrich influences.

Eliding Lewis and Fish:

Rumrich’s “Uninventing Milton” and *Milton Unbound*

This elision becomes increasingly pronounced in Rumrich’s 1990 article in *Modern Philology*, “Uninventing Milton,” which was awarded the Milton Society of America’s Irene Samuel Award for the most distinguished article published in that year. Rumrich begins “Uninventing Milton” by noting with implicit approval Empson’s challenge to what Empson called “the growing ‘neo-Christian’ bias of Milton scholars, holding this responsible for tendentious overstatement of the orthodoxy of *Paradise Lost* and understatement of the sincerity and difficulty of its attempted theodicy” (249). The foremost of such “neo-Christian”

Milton critics was, of course, Lewis, whose efforts to claim *Paradise Lost* “for Christianity’s ‘great central tradition’” (249) made Lewis’s theologically orthodox reading of Milton’s poem “increasingly dominant,” with “[t]his consolidation of the ‘neo-Christian’ position” being largely the result of “the crystallizing impact of Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin*” (249). Rumrich goes on to pronounce *Surprised by Sin* “Fish’s theoretically sophisticated update of Lewis’s orthodox model,” averring that, because Fish “accomplished the theoretical liberation of Milton studies by placing a destabilizing hermeneutics in the service of conservative ideology,” he was able to bring about an ironic consolidation of opinion within Milton scholarship, for *Surprised* pleased both “freethinkers appreciative of innovative critical methods” and “conservative scholars who saw Milton as a champion of traditional Christianity” (249). The result of this far-reaching embrace of Fish’s work, even among scholars considered each other’s “natural opponents” (249), was, according to Rumrich, to bring about an inertia in Milton studies that resulted in relatively few efforts to move beyond the “neo-Christian” model.¹⁰

Rumrich further associates Lewis with Fish by retrospectively attributing to Lewis a kind of primitive version of the reader-based approach of *Surprised by Sin*. Rumrich writes: “In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis too rested his interpretation on Milton’s supposed intentions toward his audience. According to Lewis, Milton wished to produce a particular effect ‘on the ordinary educated and Christian audience of his time’” (251). To do this, Rumrich claims, echoing his statements in *Matter of Glory*, Lewis had to artificially emphasize Milton’s seeming orthodoxy by incorrectly claiming that, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton “‘laid aside’” his “‘private theological whimsies’” (251; quoting *Preface* 92). Lewis’s one-sided presentation of Milton’s complex theological beliefs (and, by implication, those of Milton’s audience), served to “denigrate” the seriousness of the “painstaking [...]” process by which Milton “arrived at beliefs”—dismissing Milton’s carefully articulated heresies as “the amateurish musings” of a theological “dilettante” (251).¹¹ Lewis’s inaccurate presentation also manipulated his own audience into accepting a chimerical version of Milton the Christian, with Lewis’s “tactic” of

making Milton “appear more orthodox than he was” being a critical blight “that has continued to plague the arguments of certain Miltonists” (251). Although Rumrich only quotes the aforementioned clause as evidence for Lewis’s reader-focused interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, Rumrich’s claim here serves to elide Lewis and Fish a bit more, with their alleged theoretical similarities serving to complement their more substantial agreement regarding *Paradise Lost*’s being indicative of Christianity’s “great central tradition.”

Rumrich reaffirms his belief in Lewis and Fish’s problematic “neo-Christian” alliance even more strongly within his 1996 book *Milton Unbound*, a volume that confirmed Rumrich’s position as both a major Miltonist and the intellectual forbear of subsequent critics who have attacked both Lewis and Fish. In his opening chapter, Rumrich revises his argument from “Uninventing Milton,” calling *Surprised by Sin* “a methodologically radical update of Lewis’s reading of *Paradise Lost* as a literary monument to mainstream Christianity” (4). According to this phraseology, Lewis and Fish are not merely drinking from the same “neo-Christian” waters; rather, Fish’s superlatively influential book is merely an “update” of Lewis, although Rumrich offers no precise evidence of Lewis’s specific influence on Fish, whose book, as I have discussed, demonstrates the influence of various Christian Miltonists, most extensively not Lewis but Jonathan Richardson the elder.¹²

In *Milton Unbound*, Rumrich restates his aforementioned argument that Lewis obfuscates the importance of Milton’s heresy in order to present an orthodox reading of *Paradise Lost*. In his book, Rumrich also argues that Lewis oversimplifies not merely Milton’s theological beliefs, but also those of Milton’s seventeenth century audience: “Lewis’s word ‘ordinary,’ though qualified by ‘educated and Christian,’ is problematic” because “[t]he conventional politico-religious categories that apply to mid-seventeenth-century (say, 1635-65) are slippery and invite caution and qualification” (34). The sweep of such Christians included, Rumrich notes, Arminians of the absolute right and republican left, pro-toleration Independents and pro-toleration Catholic sympathizers, pro- and anti-monarchical Presbyterians, and numerous smaller sects

that Rumrich lists, representing various religious eccentricities and heresies (see 34-35). Moreover, in much of Milton scholarship, Lewis's "ordinary" Christian audience has been stereotypically reduced to being a "composite sketch" that amounts to "Low Church Anglican and Presbyterian, more or less convinced of the bondage of the will, and imbued with attitudes and values appropriate to what has with some distortion been called the emergent bourgeoisie" (35).¹³ This "composite sketch" hardly fits with the fiercely independent, extreme champion of free will, and indefatigable polemic champion for divorce who authored *Paradise Lost*. Simply put, to follow Lewis's interpretive model is to perpetuate faulty and simplistic historical stereotypes and to remain lazily innocent of the complexities of Milton the man, Milton's great epic, and Milton's religious and political milieu. If Lewis can claim that he follows Charles Williams's footsteps in championing "the recovery of a true critical tradition after more than a hundred years of laborious misunderstanding" (*Preface* v), then Rumrich is accusing Lewis of perpetuating misunderstandings of his own—a hegemonic interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, founded on a reductionistic and doctrinaire championing of "mere" Christian orthodoxy, and perpetuated by Fish and sundry other scholars. By contrast, Rumrich and a few allies are laboring to correct the faulty image he calls "the invented Milton" (*Milton Unbound* 1), shining forth the light of truth to use the fullness of *Paradise Lost* and Milton's canon to free readers from such hermeneutical obfuscations.

Lewis as Preventor of Inquiry:

The New Milton Criticism and Subsequent Controversy

Rumrich's 1990 article was, some fifteen years later, hailed as an early iteration of what Peter C. Herman in 2005 would call "The New Milton Criticism," a critical movement that counted *Milton Unbound* as one of its foundational interpretive texts. This movement, according to Herman, is one that "embraces indeterminacy and incertitude" in Milton's

writings generally and *Paradise Lost* specifically (“Paradigms” 1). Significantly, the group of scholars that Herman discusses in his article includes a number who, like Rumrich, express strong critical agreement with Empson—often accompanied by an attendant sympathy for Milton’s Satan and dislike of Milton’s God; pronounce distaste for what they consider Lewis’s reductionistic, stifling, and hegemonistic orthodoxies; and, in some cases, associate closely Stanley Fish with Lewis, even going so far as to portray Fish’s *Surprised by Sin* as being supremely influenced by or even an extension of Lewis’s *Preface*.

One example of scholarship that offers sweeping attempts to associate Lewis and Fish is Michael Bryson’s *The Tyranny of Heaven* (2004), which, in addition to quoting approvingly Rumrich’s aforementioned 1996 statement about *Surprised by Sin*’s being “a methodologically radical update” of Lewis’s *Preface*, calls Fish’s book “a combination of C. S. Lewis and cognitive psychology” (22). But the attempted association between Lewis and Fish is demonstrated even more strongly by Herman himself, who, having just asserted that “Milton’s traditional critics” refuse to acknowledge “that Milton would ever be skeptical, or even mildly critical, of the Christian deity,” goes on to state the following: “C. S. Lewis wrote in 1942 that ‘many of those who say they dislike Milton’s God only mean that they dislike God,’ and Fish, in *Surprised by Sin*, turns Lewis’s observation into a deliberate, pedagogical strategy for instructing the reader as to his or her genuine state” (“Paradigms” 12). And yet, as I have noted previously,¹⁴ the extreme connection Herman makes here between Lewis and Fish simply isn’t supported by Fish’s actual text—a matter that should be of crucial import to a critical movement that, according to Herman, is characterized by “close-reading” (15). Rather, the statement by Lewis that Herman writes is the very foundation for *Surprised by Sin* is in fact nowhere mentioned in Fish’s book, and none of the few places where Fish cites Lewis approvingly address anything connected to Milton’s God. Like Rumrich, Herman greatly overstates the influence of Lewis’s *Preface* on Fish, and, as I will discuss shortly, I suspect there is a specific polemic reason for doing so. Indeed, one may speculate that Herman, whose 2005 book, *Destabilizing*

Milton, is largely dedicated to undercutting Fish's arguments in *Surprised by Sin and How Milton Works* (2001), chooses, like Rumrich, to attack Fish via his alleged supreme influence, Lewis, because the dead, old-fashioned, and orthodox Christian Lewis is an easier target than Fish. While Fish is probably "the ultimate target of the New Milton Criticism's iconoclastic scholarly reformation" (Urban, "Speaking" 102), he remains, in his seemingly perpetual relevancy to academic and popular culture, more difficult than Lewis to discredit within academic circles. But if, as Rumrich states in 2021, "the value of Lewis's work tends to be discounted among academic readers (and that may be understating the case)" ("William Empson" 62),¹⁵ then associating Fish's Milton scholarship so closely with Lewis's seems an expedient strategy for portraying Fish's writings as similarly passé and stifling.

Also like Rumrich, Bryson and Herman portray Lewis as one who, amid his Christian orthodoxy, has curtailed substantive inquiry regarding *Paradise Lost*. Ironically enough, doing so, Bryson and Rumrich actually follow Fish—without acknowledgement—in making sweeping, out of context claims that Lewis's larger goal is to "prevent the reader from ever raising certain questions" (*Preface* 69; cf. Fish 208). This phenomenon is first evident within Bryson's book: he contends that "Lewis's argument, dedicated as it is to assimilating Milton's epic to an orthodoxy comprised of equal parts Augustinianism and Anglicanism, is made with the express intent of, as he puts it, 'prevent[ing] the reader from ever raising certain questions.' Thus is the goal of nearly all orthodoxies summed up" (21). Bryson's above statement manifests, among other things, his participation in the tradition—dating back to Lewis's earliest respondents—of eliding distaste for Lewis's Christianity and distaste for his commentary on Milton's poem.¹⁶ But, most seriously, Bryson here badly takes Lewis out of context, even more egregiously than Fish did nearly four decades earlier. Whereas Fish's misrepresentation of Lewis at least implicitly limited itself to matters related to Eve's Fall, Bryson portrays Lewis's point about preventing "certain questions" as the very *raison d'être* of Lewis's book. In any event, it is indeed ironic that the uncredited origin of the erroneous idea that

Lewis aimed to prevent wider scholarly discussion is *Surprised by Sin* itself, the very text New Milton Critics claim fortified Lewis's "neo-Christian" critical agenda and extended its hegemonic influence.

For his part, Herman, whom Bryson credits in his acknowledgements "for his interest in and encouragement of this project" (6), restates Bryson's misrepresentation no fewer than three times. First, in his 2004 review of Bryson's book, Herman quotes Bryson's aforementioned quotation of Lewis and then affirms Bryson's dismissal of Lewis by writing: "While Lewis published those words in 1942, they continue to guide Milton criticism" (2). For Herman, Bryson's egregiously out-of-context quote was an opportunity to assert Lewis's supposed continued dominance over Milton studies,¹⁷ a dominance that squelched critical inquiry for the sake of "neo-Christian" orthodoxy, an idea emphasized by Bryson when he writes that Lewis and Fish are the leaders of what he derisively calls "Milton *ministries*" (23; italics in Bryson).

Herman restates Bryson's misrepresentation of Lewis twice more in 2005. First, in *Destabilizing Milton*, he laments the "limits of acceptable inquiry" in Milton studies, exemplified with "breathtaking candor" when Lewis allegedly writes that "the whole point of his Augustinian approach to Milton's epic is to 'prevent the reader from ever raising certain questions'" (7). Once again, Lewis's very limited agenda of "prevention" becomes, in Herman's words, the driving motivation behind the whole of *A Preface*, with the "certain questions" he means to "prevent" encompassing any daring form of critical inquiry that might challenge accepted orthodoxies in Milton studies. Herman expresses this sentiment again in the concluding sentence of his 2005 essay, "Paradigms Lost, Paradigms Found: The New Milton Criticism," when, having once more lamented how various writers have "labored [...] to suppress" free thought in Milton studies, he writes: "If C. S. Lewis wrote *A Preface to Paradise Lost* with the intention of preventing 'the reader from ever raising certain questions,' the New Milton Criticism encourages all questions, regardless of where the answer will take the reader" (19). Here, once again, Lewis is used as a convenient scapegoat

who merits his punishment by dint of his insidious role in the tyrannical oppression of new ideas.¹⁸

In their respective responses to my 2011 calling out their misrepresentations of Lewis, both Herman and Bryson remain intractable, with Herman affirming that the motivation behind *A Preface* is “to stop discussion, not encourage it” (“C. S. Lewis” 259).¹⁹ And Bryson responds to my concerns in the Introduction to his 2012 book, *The Atheist Milton*, by digging in his heels, “stating [...] outright” that “in *A Preface to ‘Paradise Lost,’* Lewis works to prevent certain thoughts and certain questions, not just from being thought or asked, but from being available to be thought or asked in the first place” (10). Moreover, Bryson in 2017 repeats his previous portrayal of Lewis. Again setting up Lewis as a critical strawman, Bryson and Movsesian call Lewis “the great orthodox critic, whose stated ambition about *Paradise Lost* is to ‘prevent the reader from ever raising certain questions’” (Bryson and Movsesian 472). The out-of-context sweeping generalization continues.²⁰

Two other misrepresentations about Lewis were put forth by New Milton Critics in the first decade of the new millennium. The first is Bryson’s 2004 portrayal of Lewis’s having essentially single-handedly overturned what Bryson calls the “dominant” pro-Satan critical opinion that flourished in Romantic, late nineteenth-century, and earlier twentieth century Milton criticism until the appearance of Lewis’s 1942 volume (see *Tyranny* 20-21). But, in fact, the debate regarding Satan had been brewing throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with anti-Satan arguments being offered consistently throughout the many decades preceding Lewis’s slim volume, and the pro-Satan position was already on the decline before Lewis’s book appeared (Urban, “Speaking” 96-97).²¹ I postulate that Bryson’s attempt to link the academically “discounted” Lewis so singularly with the quelling of the noble pro-Satan position seeks both to increase the aura of Lewis’s oppressive scholarly hegemony and to more closely associate the anti-Satan position with someone considered passé in scholarly circles, a combination that makes the dislodging of Lewis from his alleged place of critical dominance paradoxically both easier and more glorious.

But if Bryson was suggesting that Lewis was solely responsible for the upending of the Satanist position, then perhaps the most prominent New Milton Critic, Joseph Wittreich, in his 2006 book *Why Milton Matters*—provocatively subtitled *A New Preface to His Writings*—was restating Rumrich’s earlier charge that Lewis’s *Preface* had squelched subsequent critical inquiry. Offering no connection between Lewis and Fish, Wittreich charged that Lewis’s book, which “announced ‘the recovery of a true critical tradition’ for Milton,” served to “inaugurate a modern—fundamentally conservative—phase of criticism by reinstating the gag rule lifted from Milton criticism during the Romantic era,” effectively prohibiting not merely expressions of the pro-Satan position, but also discussions of “inconsistencies and contradictions” in *Paradise Lost* (xxi). Wittreich’s word choice is particularly telling. A “gag rule,” as defined by Wikipedia, “is a rule that limits or forbids the raising, consideration, or discussion of a particular topic by members of a legislative or decision-making body.” And, as Wikipedia’s various examples across different countries, throughout history demonstrate, a “gag rule” is something that is decreed and enforced by government entities that can use the threat of violence and imprisonment to enforce the “gag rule” in question. We must reasonably ask ourselves: Did Lewis have any such power or authority to silence dissenters from his position? Did he attempt to silence anyone? Did he succeed in silencing anyone? We should consider soberly the numerous critics who rose up to oppose Lewis in the first decade after *A Preface*’s publication and who championed the kind of interpretive framework Wittreich says Lewis squelched. We should also consider the subsequent books by John Peter, J. B. Broadbent, and especially Empson that similarly championed the Satanist position and, that, especially in the case of Empson, used Lewis’s alleged dogmatism to inspire and empower their own statements, many of which were every bit as forcefully articulated as Lewis’s. And we also do well to consider if the hyperbolic condemnations of Lewis and the so-called “neo-Christian” critical perspective might themselves serve as rhetorical instruments to silence dissent

from the current incarnation of the rebel Miltonist party, whose sustained attacks against the “neo-Christian” position and its adherents can amount to the establishment of a new orthodoxy of accepted opinion.²²

In any case, there can be little question that *A Preface to Paradise Lost* has, from the time of its publication up through the present, consistently been used as an antagonistic point of reference against which more radical approaches to Milton criticism have set themselves, a matter recently demonstrated yet once more in a particularly complex manner in queer Milton criticism, a movement whose response to Lewis I discuss in a subsequent article appearing in this volume of *Connotations*.²³ And although I think there is some fairness in the charge that *A Preface* oversimplifies certain interpretive matters, I also believe that much of the critical response to *A Preface* has been to oversimplify Lewis’s arguments and indeed Lewis himself, a convenient temptation for those who would like to set Lewis’s moral, religious, and critical orthodoxy over and against their own comparatively daring new interpretations. To offer a reductionistic engagement with Lewis is to risk not only misrepresenting *A Preface* but also to deprive oneself and one’s audience of what remains an enduringly valuable reading of *Paradise Lost* in the Christian interpretive tradition Fish so notably engages in *Surprised by Sin*. Lewis’s orthodox reading effectively addresses, in memorable and engaging prose, not only Milton’s Satan but also his Adam and Eve, and, less effectively, Milton’s God. And we who seek to convince the rising generations of readers of the continuing value of *Paradise Lost* do well to recognize that the very fact that the perpetually popular Lewis authored an important yet readable book on Milton’s epic can serve as an effective inducement for new audiences to read the poem itself. If Lewis’s assertions are sometimes simplistic, let us remember that such assertions are made within a conveniently short and reader-friendly volume whose chapters can stand alone as effective introductions to an important strand of *Paradise Lost* criticism. Lewis’s assertions may invite disagreement, and the ease with which such dissent may be offered speaks to the readability of Lewis’s prose. But let such

disagreement be offered fairly and in its proper context. To do so allows *A Preface*—and *Paradise Lost* itself—to teach and delight on its own terms and to be engaged fairly and profitably.

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NOTES

¹Lewis writes: “In order to take no unfair advantage I should warn the reader that I myself am a Christian, and that some (by no means all) of the things which the atheist reader must ‘try to feel as if he believed’ I actually, in cold prose, do believe. But for the student of Milton my Christianity is an advantage. What would you not give to have a real, live Epicurean at your elbow while reading Lucretius?” (*Preface* 64).

²Lewis actually calls Satan “a thing that peers in at bedroom or bathroom windows” (*Preface* 97).

³For a response to Empson’s suggestion that Satan is being “sincere” in this offer, see Urban, “Falls” 96-97.

⁴See Urban, “Surprised by Richardson”; and Urban, “The Acolyte’s Rejoinder,” 176-77.

⁵Fish continues: “In the other tradition, strongly announced by Blake’s declaration that Milton was ‘of the Devil’s party without knowing it’ and Shelley’s judgment that ‘Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan’ and continued in our century by A. J. A. Waldock and William Empson among others, disobedience of God is a positive act that rescues mankind from an unvarying routine of mindless genuflection and makes possible the glorious and distinctively human search for self-knowledge and knowledge of the Truth. For one party God and his only begotten son are the obvious co-heroes of the epic; for the other, the poem’s true energy resides in the figures of Satan and the Eve who ‘Bold deed ... has presum’d’ (IX. 921), figures whose actions would seem to exemplify Milton’s declared preference in his *Areopagitica* for a virtue that is active rather than ‘fugitive and cloister’d’” (ix-x).

Fish goes on to assert that *Surprised* succeeded in demonstrating the poem’s “coherence” in terms of “the experience [that it] provoked.” He writes: “I was able to reconcile the two camps under the aegis of a single thesis: *Paradise Lost* is a poem about how its readers came to be the way they are; its method, ‘not so much a teaching as an intangling’ is to provoke in its readers wayward, fallen responses which are then corrected by one of several authoritative voices (the narrator, God, Raphael, Michael, the Son). In this way, I argued, the reader is brought to a better understanding of his sinful nature and is encouraged to participate in his own reformation” (x). Fish emphasizes that his approach offered some rapprochement amid

“the ‘Milton Controversy,’” for “it achieved the full enfranchisement of all combatants; everyone is partly right and everyone’s perspective is necessary to the poem’s larger strategy” (x-xi).

⁶In this sense, Fish’s posture toward Lewis’s *Preface* is in keeping with the sophisticated critical response to *A Preface* inaugurated by Waldock in 1943 (see Urban, “C. S. Lewis and Satan” 205-07).

⁷Fish does, of course, address matters of why and how Adam and Eve fell—see 208-16—but that is a different matter altogether from what Lewis was addressing.

⁸Here one may remember Allan H. Gilbert’s question regarding Elmer Edgar Stoll’s hostility toward Lewis’s *Preface*: “Is [Lewis’s] religion—and Milton’s—what Stoll objects to?” (223).

⁹The silence among reviewers concerning Lewis’s influence on Fish include Earl Miner, who calls *Surprised* “unquestionably the liveliest book on Milton since C. S. Lewis’s little *Preface to Paradise Lost*” (300); and Arthur Turner, who innocently asserts that the Jewish Fish “is surely an orthodox traditional Christian” (422).

¹⁰Leonard observes the problematic and potentially degrading aspects of the term “neo-Christian” and its continued use in Milton studies (*Faithful* 524).

¹¹Rumrich here is particularly concerned with Lewis’s dismissive attitude toward *De Doctrina Christiana*, the posthumously discovered heretical theological treatise traditionally attributed to Milton. For a discussion of Rumrich’s opposition to challenges to Milton’s authorship of *De Doctrina*, see Urban, “Revisiting” 162, 166-67.

¹²Here again, see Urban, “Surprised by Richardson.”

¹³It bears mentioning that Lewis’s brand of “mere” Christianity hardly fits Rumrich’s notion of Christians essentially committed to “the bondage of the will”; indeed, Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* (1952), in a section of the book first published in 1942, contains one of the best-known popular twentieth-century defenses of the doctrine of free will (see 47-49).

¹⁴This and the next three paragraphs borrow from Urban, “Speaking” 99-100.

¹⁵I must emphasize that Rumrich, who kindly sent me an advance copy of his essay, writes these words in the context of his own “admir[ation]” of Lewis (62).

¹⁶See Urban, “C. S. Lewis and Satan” 205-28.

¹⁷Elsewhere Herman avers that the “ruling deities” of the Milton Society of America “are C. S. Lewis et al.” (*Destabilizing* 3).

¹⁸In a brief response to Urban, “Speaking,” Richard Strier, while aligning himself with the New Milton Critics, concedes that “Speaking” is “certainly right that the line about preventing questions has been taken out of context and used in a somewhat irresponsible way” (271).

¹⁹Curiously enough, however, Herman and Elizabeth Sauer omit any mention of Lewis’s “prevent the reader” statement in their 2012 rewriting of Herman’s “Paradigms Lost” as the Introduction of their co-edited volume *The New Milton Criticism*. For my largely positive review of *The New Milton Criticism*, see Urban, “Reading.”

²⁰Bryson's and Herman's misrepresentations of Lewis's "prevent [...] certain questions" phraseology continues to be disseminated, even by unlikely sources. In a 2020 essay, John Leonard, arguably the most knowledgeable living Milton scholar, quotes without correction Herman's use of the phrase in *Destabilizing Milton* (See Leonard, "'Or' in *Paradise Lost*" 915).

²¹In his response to Urban, "Speaking," Strier affirms my point regarding the continuous scholarly debate regarding Satan both before and after Lewis: "I am sure that you are right that the history of Milton criticism since the eighteenth century has been one of profound disagreement, often centering on the figure of Satan. Anyone who denies this is clearly wrong" (271). Strier's comment applies to my objections both to Bryson in this paragraph and to Wittreich in the next.

²²In response to Urban, "Speaking," the New Milton Critics resorted to ad hominem attacks against me and misrepresentations regarding my place of employment (see Herman, "C. S. Lewis" 265n6; and Bryson, *Atheist* 12). Herman also uses Christian terminology disparagingly as he accuses me of being Lewis's water-carrier, calling me "his acolyte" ("C. S. Lewis" 262). I address these attacks and misrepresentations more fully in Urban, "The Acolyte's Rejoinder"; and Urban, "Reading" 50-51. For a more extensive critique of Wittreich's "gag rule" accusation with relation to Milton studies, see Urban, "Speaking" 97-99.

²³See Urban, "C. S. Lewis's Complex Relationship with Queer Milton Studies."

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