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Steven Blakemore
*Florida Atlantic University*

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"With no middle flight": Poetic Pride and Satanic Hubris in *Paradise Lost*

Steven Blakemore

As *Paradise Lost* opens, Milton invokes the "Heav'nly Muse" to inspire him:

... I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.¹

The boast to surpass all previous epic endeavors was an established "pagan" convention which Milton subsequently "Christianizes."² But before this happens, the words and images of the invocation are first parodied and subverted in the subsequent satanic scenes. These words and images are invested with satanic connotations, with satanic echoes, as the attempt to surpass all previous literature is associated with satanic pride.

The satanic echoes begin as soon as the invocation is finished. For instance, just as Milton invokes the muse's "aid" to surpass his epic rivals, Satan also hopes to surpass his "peers": "Of rebel angels, by whose aid aspiring / To set himself in glory above his peers, / He trusted to have equaled the Most High" (1.38-40). The poet's attempt to surpass his epic peers can be retrospectively seen in a suggestively satanic context. The thematic proximity of both Milton's and Satan's "intentions" suggests a connection between the poet's ambition and Satan's presumption, and the verbal echoes accentuate these similarities. Even the postlapsarian verb "aspiring" (1.38) puns on its Latin root, suggesting the "breathing forth"—the implicit inspiration the poet invoked in aspiring to soar beyond his epic rivals.

The satanic echoes linger. In book two Satan "Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires / Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue / Vain war with Heav'n and by success untaught, / His proud imaginations thus displayed" (2.7-10). The passage again
conjures up Milton’s invocation—his intention to “pursue,” to soar above the Aonian mount, thus displaying his “proud imaginations.” There is a suggestive nexus between satanic and poetic pride—a pride which goeth before the fall of angels and poets who aspire to soar beyond established boundaries. Satan is, of course, “the proud / Aspirer” (6.89-90). His followers, envying the Son and “aspiring to his highth” (6.793), soon fall “the deep fall / Of those too high aspiring” (6.898-99). This aspiring only to fall culminates in Satan’s lament that he “That to the height of deity aspired” must descend: “Who aspires must down as low / As high he soared” (9.167-70). The last word returns us to the poet who also aspires to “soar,” suggesting the dangers of poetic pride and ambition. 3

Indeed, when Satan boasts that no difficulty or danger “could deter / Me from attempting” (2.449-50), we are reminded of Milton’s boast that he will pursue “Things unattempted.” Milton’s epic boast is suddenly associated with Satan’s boast that he intends to soar beyond hell and chaos. The narrator, as we will see, also intends the same. In a text so polysemous, there is the additional suggestion that the “attempt” to soar poetically beyond things unattempted is also another version of man’s Fall: for Adam and Eve are also tempted into soaring (cf. Eve’s dream, 5.75-92). They eat the apple “and fancy that they feel / Divinity within them breeding wings” (9.1009-10). The fallen connotations suggest that the poet’s attempt to soar above all previous literature is a kind of satanic attempt seen before in man’s Fall. In this context, the poet’s boast that he will attempt new things is a parody of the ur-temptation and Fall: it is his metaphoric apple.

Milton’s words continue to be parodied and subverted. For instance, the seemingly positive “advent’rous song” (1.13), boasting to soar above pagan mountains, subsequently “falls” in with fallen angels “On bold adventure to discover wide / That dismal world” (2.571-72). These fallen angels soon split into “advent’rous bands,” as they explore hell (2.615). Belial had earlier mocked fallen angels who are “bold / and vent’rous” (2.204-5), and Adam tells Eve after she has eaten the forbidden fruit: “Bold deed thou hast presumed, advent’rous Eve” (9.921). Sin and Death attempt “Advent’rous work” (10.255), making a path “to that new world / Where Satan now prevails” (10.257-58). Satan boasts that he will lead his followers up into this new world “by my adventure hard / With peril great achieved” (10.468-69). In effect, the soaring adjective
("advent'rous") falls into a satanic vocabulary, a postlapsarian semantics which suggests risk and danger (see OED, s.v. nos. 2 and 3), temptation and the Fall. Milton's "advent'rous song" is interrupted by satanic echoes, suggesting the satanic peril of attempting to create an adventurous epic. His invocatory words become entangled in a net of satanic associations; they are ambushed by mocking words which associate the poet's attempt to soar with satanic temptations and "falls." Milton's words are parodied and subverted by fallen words which associate the poet's ambition with satanic pride—infating the poet's boast into a version of Satan's hubris. The result is a poet who seems to see his mocking double in Satan the ur-overreacher, "overweening / To overreach" (10.878-79).

These postlapsarian associations continue to entangle Milton with Satan. When the poet declares that he intends no "middle flight," the adjective can, of course, refer to the middle style of rhetoric (Bush, p. 212) and the poet's intention to soar above mediocrity. But the adjective is also a spatial metaphor which quickly "locates" the narrator in a "middle flight" through hell and chaos. After the narrator makes his boast, we watch him as he follows Satan's troubled flight through both these landscapes. In hell Satan usually has problems soaring, as when "with expanded wings he steers his flight / Aloft, incumbent on the dusky air / That felt unusual weight" (1.225-27). When Satan audaciously flies through chaos, he suddenly falls "Ten thousand fathom deep" (2.934)—an image later repeated in the paradise of fools (3.487-88). In hell, the fallen angels hover "on wing under the cope of hell / 'Twixt upper, nether, and surrounding fires" (1.345-46). In their future roles of pagan gods, they rule "the middle air, / Their highest heav'n" (1.516-17). Fallen angels can soar only so far, and all these "middle flights" parody the poem's beginning. This is hardly Beelzebub's vision of "airy flight / Upborne with indefatigable wings" (2.407-8). All these middle flights and falls recall the "middle flight" which was not intended, but, nevertheless, is visually depicted and verbally echoed in the passages cited above.

It is true that these parodies of Milton's boast can also be seen as contrasts between the magnificent poetry which wings us through hell and chaos up into heaven in book three and the vain attempts of fallen angels to soar, only to waver and fall through the metaphorical "middle air" of chaos and hell. It is also true that
Satan defines himself through perverse parodies; however, Milton's poetic tenor and vehicle thematically clash. The lingering satanic echoes and the imagery depicting various middle flights through chaos and hell clash with the poet's declaration that he intends "no middle flight." Indeed, the echoes and imagery seem to point back self-consciously to the poet's boast, as we are given fallen as well as middle flights. Milton is, in fact, linguistically and metaphorically performing all these sublunary flights, and this raises the possibility that Milton is questioning his initial intentions, perhaps even deconstructing the premises of his opening lines.

Consider the opening to book three:

Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,
Thee I revisit now with bolder wing,
Escaped the Stygian pool, though long detained
In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight
Through utter and through middle darkness borne
With other notes than to th' Orphéan lyre
I sung of Chaos and eternal Night,
Taught by the Heav'nly Muse to venture down
The dark descent, and up to reascend,
Though hard and rare. Thee I revisit safe,
And feel thy sovran vital lamp; but thou
Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain
To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn.

(3.1, 13-24)

This is Milton's voice, but the voice is also suggestively satanic. Satan has also just labored his way up through hell and chaos, and this could just as well be his response (mutatis mutandis) to the sun's light, after escaping "the Stygian pool" (3.14). In hell both Satan and Beelzebub also gloried "to have scaped the Stygian flood" (1.239), and this satanic echo is too close to the narrator's voice for comfort. In addition, the imagery of middle flights returns ("while in my flight / Through utter and middle darkness borne"), and even the autobiographical lament about blind eyes which "roll in vain" can suggest Satan's eyes in hell: "round he throws his baleful eyes" (1.56).

Milton is aware of these satanic parallels. He self-consciously
calls them to our attention; hence he does not deconstruct his argument; rather, he chastens it. The lines from book three reveal not only that Milton recognizes these similarities, but that he invites the reader to do the same. The narrator is aware that his attempt to soar and pursue "things unattempted" is dangerously close to satanic ambition and pride. He confronts this self-conscious criticism by qualifying the conventional epic boast and, in effect, humbling and Christianizing it. He suggests that he has humbled himself in order to rise and soar: "Taught by the Heav'nly muse to venture down / The dark descent, and up to reascend" (3.19-20). Milton alludes to the paradoxes of Jesus that the last shall be first; thus he metaphorically "descends" in order to rise.

By descending into hell and metaphorically enduring Satan's middle flight, Milton confronts the satanic dangers of his poetic "attempt." As he entangles himself in satanic similarities, he self-consciously chastens his epic boast, in a kind of "harrowing" of himself. Thus in the invocation to book three, he, again, suggests and acknowledges the satanic similarities before turning his argument to resuggest that his descent into hell was an act of poetic "humiliation" (in the theological sense). By recognizing the dangers of poetic pride, he confronts his satanic double and, in effect, exorcises him. The previous satanic similarities which invited comparisons now invite distinctions, and the poet who chastens his poetic boast now invites comparisons with the humiliation and harrowing of the Word.

In this thematic "turn" Milton acknowledges the danger of his poetic attempt, while distinguishing it from pagan and satanic "overreaching." Thus his bold assertions which initially seemed to command rather than petition the holy muse (1.12-16) give way to a new spirit of humility and lament. The assertion that he intends to surpass the pagan poets is now qualified by the hope that he may equal them in renown. The mood grammatically changes from the imperative to the subjunctive, and it emotionally turns from the aggressive assertion to the humble petition that the blind poet "may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight" (3.54-55). Milton, of course, intends to surpass his epic rivals, but he inverts the conventional epic boast, revealing that he only "seemed" to be a member of the "devil's party." He subsequently reveals himself to be a Christian poet, humbly descending into hell, patiently enduring the satanic mockery of lines parodying his
“voice,” and then ascending only to remind the reader that he is old and blind (3.40-50). This is not mock humility. Milton is sincere in his attempt to distinguish Christian values from epic values, to separate Christian endeavor from satanic presumption, in a poem “Not less but more heroic than the wrath / Of stern Achilles” (9.14-15). Milton qualifies the apparent aggressive meaning of the poem’s first lines, and this culminates in his hope that his “intended wing” may still soar, despite his age and his country’s climate (9.44-45). Indeed, Milton acknowledges his dependence on the heavenly muse for inspiration and aid (46-47). The result is an implicit contrast between Satan and himself. In hell Satan is his own muse, and the movement is from the poet’s suggestively satanic boast to the humble plea of a poet who voluntarily descends in order to ascend on the wings of God’s grace.

In contrast to Satan and fallen man, the chastened poet does not attempt to overreach prescribed limits. After soaring up to paradise and heaven (Bks. 4-6), the poet does not desire “to know” more. As he has surpassed the flight of “Pegasean wing,” he now asks the muse to descend:

Descend from heav’n, Urania, by that name
If rightly thou are called, whose voice divine
Following, above th’ Olympian hill I soar,
Above the flight of Pegasean wing.

(7.1-4)5

As the epic boast of book one has been chastened, Milton can now appropriately announce that he has achieved his goal “to soar above th’ Aonian mount.” Thus he now soars above “th’ Olympian hill,” surpassing the pagan poetry associated with the ancient haunt of discredited gods and muses. Indeed, in comparison to the Christian heights he has reached, Mount Olympus is only a pagan “hill.” Although Milton echoes the earlier epic boast, he has chastened his poetic ambition. There has been a movement from apparent satanic ambition to poetic humility, from the desire to soar higher to the surrender of his poetic will to power—appropriately crystallized in his humble plea to be led down to his “native element”:

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Milton remains conscious of the fine line between satanic ambition and poetic ambition. His words expressing a fear of falling "Erroneous there to wander and forlorn" carry self-conscious echoes of earlier erroneous falls—of forlorn devils who find "no end in wandering mazes lost," roving "on / In confused march forlorn" (2.561, 614-15), and Adam and Eve expelled from paradise "with wand'ring steps and slow" (12.648). Moreover, the allusion to Bellerophon is especially pertinent because it allows Milton to again distinguish between satanic-pagan attempts to soar too high and the disciplined poet's desire to descend lower. As he has already soared above the Aonian mount, the victorious and disciplined poet can now descend in glorious contrast to Bellerophon's ignominious "fall." As we have seen, the ambition to soar higher is satanic, and Bellerophon's fall is another version of Satan's ur-fall. Having already soared above pagan "hills," the disciplined poet knows to soar no further—aware of the satanic "temptation" and the attendant consequences.

Thus Milton's subsequent qualification of the poem's opening lines is a poetic exercise in Christian self-criticism. As we have seen, Milton invites postlapsarian comparisons. From the beginning he intentionally ambushes himself with satanic associations, and he shows that he is aware that his attempt to soar above all previous literature is fraught with satanic dangers. Hence he establishes a paradigm of the ur-Fall based on Satan's pride and arrogance as well as Adam and Eve's temptation to be as gods. When he announces that he intends to surpass all previous literature, Milton self-consciously suggests similarities between Satan's arrogant pride and his own poetic pride. In effect, Milton self-consciously tempts himself with the ur-temptation of Satan and fallen man. But it is a "test" he passes. Although the poetic boasts initially seem similar
to Satan’s boasts, they are subsequently chastened, as Milton acknowledges the similarities in order to distinguish the satanic suggestions from the poem’s Christian meaning. Milton’s strategy is to invite these comparisons and then show that they are ultimately deceiving. For it is ultimately not the satanic echoes which mock his poetic endeavor, as it is his own self-conscious questioning of his poem’s initial premises. Thus he freely descends into hell, endures a series of “middle flights,” and the ordeal of lines which seem to mock his ambitious assertions. Through the imagery of flights and falls, Milton suggests that the Christian poet must “descend” in order to rise, metaphorically clipping his ambitious wings, in order to soar above the Aonian mount. Milton was contemptuous of a “cloistered virtue”; hence he tempts himself with his satanic double and then confronts and exorcises the double with poetry which soars “Inspired, and winged for heav’n with speedier flight / Than loudest oratory” (11.7-8).

NOTES


3The verb *soar* is usually a fallen verb, as when Satan scornfully tells unfallen angels: “Know ye not me? Ye knew me once no mate / For you, there sitting where ye durst not soar” (4.828-29). It expresses satanic pride and ambition, a desire to go beyond established boundaries. As we will see, it is only after the thematic “turn” in book three that the narrator’s boast (“That with no middle flight intends to soar / Above th’ Aonian mount”) reappears in book seven, corrected and chastened (7.3-4).

4Milton refers to the mythical Thracian poet Thamyris (see *Iliad* 2.595-600) and Homer as “equaled with me in fate, / So were I equaled with them in renown” (3.33-34). Aside from their “equal” blindness (“equaled with me in fate”), his former boast of rivalry is modified by a new declaration of humility.

5There is a thematic connection between the “unfallen” poet who petitions the muse to help him “descend” and the unfallen Adam who petitions Raphael: “Deign to descend now lower, and relate / What may no less perhaps avall unknown” (7.84-85). This is echoed again in book eight, as Adam again addresses Raphael: “Therefore from this high pitch let us descend / A lower flight, and speak of things at hand” (8.198-99). In book twelve Michael tells Adam that they must descend from the Hill
of Speculation ("Let us descend now therefore from this top/Of Speculation," 12.588-89), and then "they both descend the hill" (606). The passages are thematically related. They stress humility, discipline, and boundaries—knowing when to descend from intoxicating heights. The passages function as contexts which distinguish disciplined "descents" from satanic "falls."