14. MILTON, *De Doctrina Christiana*, tr. John Carey, ed. Maurice Kelley, *Complete Prose*, 6:382 (Bk I. Ch. XI).

15. JOSEPH ADDISON, *The Spectator*, no. 351 (12 April 1712), ed. Gregory Smith (London: Oxford University Press, 1945; repr. 1973), 100–12.

16. THOMAS NEWTON (ed.), *Paradise Lost* (London, 1749), II, p. 201.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

18. ALEXANDER POPE, *The Iliad of Homer*, ed. Maynard Mack, Vol. VII of *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt (London and New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 193.

19. That among the upper classes an increasing emphasis upon the 'conjugal core' was accompanied by a strengthening of patriarchal powers is the influential thesis of Lawrence Stone in 'Part Three: The Restricted Patriarchal Nuclear Family 1550–1700', *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977), pp. 123–218. See also Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), pp. 27–62.

20. *Iliad*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago and London: Harper & Row, 1951), p. 303. All further quotations from the *Iliad* are from this edition.

21. Pope, *Iliad*, p. 181.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

24. PLATO, *The Republic*, III, 390, B–C, tr. Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 216–17.

25. FOWLER, *Milton*, p. 916.

26. Although this is not the place for a full bibliography, the following would qualify for membership in the feminist 'opposition': Marcia Landy, 'Kinship and the Role of Women in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Studies* **4** (1972): 3–19; Sandra Gilbert, 'Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey', *PMLA* **93** (1978): 368–82; Christine Froula, 'When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy', *Critical Inquiry* **10** (1983): 321–47. Among the defences are Barbara Lewalski's 'Milton and Women – Yet Once More', *Milton Studies* **6** (1974): 3–20; Joan Malory Webber's 'The Politics of Poetry: Feminism and *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Studies* **14** (1980): 21; and Diane Kelsey McColley's *Milton's Eve* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983). Although it, too, is engaged with the ideologically charged figure, the patriarch Milton, '"Rational Burning": Milton on Sex and Marriage' by David Aers and Bob Hodge is an interesting attempt to deal with some of the contradictions articulated in Milton's writings (*Milton Studies* **13** (1979): 3–34).

13 Allegory and the Sublime in *Paradise Lost**

VICTORIA KAHN

Recent critics have analysed the Sin and Death episode in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost* in terms of its allusions to and revisions of Ovid, Spenser, and Scripture; and have usually understood the episode as dramatizing Milton's critique of allegory. They have thus tended to isolate the episode from the rest of the poem. In contrast, early readers of Milton viewed Sin and Death as examples of the grandeur or sublimity of *Paradise Lost* as a whole, at the same time that they noted Milton's transgressions of the generic constraints of epic in this episode. In this essay I argue for the programmatic rhetorical ambivalence of Satan's encounter with Sin and Death, and suggest that this ambivalence is central to Milton's meditation on linguistic difference as constitutive of human agency in *Paradise Lost*. The essay is located on the methodological cusp of rhetorical analysis and philosophical critique. In attempting to capture the philosophical implications of Milton's rhetorical ambivalence and indeterminacy, I have been influenced both by work on Milton's interest in the theological doctrine of 'things indifferent' (Barker; Fish), and by work on the literary and philosophical notion of the sublime as an unstable rhetorical structure that dramatizes the necessity of negation or difference to cognition and so implicitly stages a critique of mimetic theories of representation. I argue that in the Sin and Death episode Milton both dramatizes the structure of linguistic difference which is constitutive of human agency and stages a critique of his own narcissistic claims to justify the ways of God to men in this way.

True madness lies primarily in immutability, in the inability of the thought to participate in the negativity in which thought – in contradistinction of fixed judgment – comes into its own.

(Horkheimer and Adorno)[1]

Ever since Addison and Johnson, critics have described Milton as the poet of sublimity. Addison remarked in *The Spectator* that Milton's 'Genius was wonderfully turned to the Sublime [and] his Subject is the noblest that could have entered into the thoughts of Man'; and David Hume in his *History of England* wrote, 'It is certain that this author, when in a happy mood and employed on a noble thought, is the most wonderfully sublime of any poet in any language, Homer, and Lucretius, and Tasso not excepted.' As for later readers of *Paradise Lost*, Books 1 and 2 provided many of the chief examples of the Miltonic sublime. In his *Philosophical Inquiry* Burke gives Milton's description of 'the universe of Death' in Book 2 as an instance of the sublime and Hugh Blair, in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, describes the Satan of Book 1 as the sublime figure par excellence:

> Here concur a variety of sources of the Sublime: the principal object eminently great; a high superior nature, fallen indeed, but erecting itself against distress; the grandeur of the principal object heightened, by associating it with so noble an idea as that of the sun suffering an eclipse; this picture shaded with all those images of change and trouble, of darkness and terror, which coincide so finely with the Sublime emotion; and the whole expressed in a style and versification, easy, natural, and simple, but magnificent. . . .[2]

Here, as in the first treatise on the subject, Longinus's *Peri Hypsos*, the sublime is a term of highest praise. Yet there is one sublime episode in Book 2 which has proved a consistent source of irritation to readers: Satan's encounter with Sin and Death. Although the episode has the sublime qualities of 'change and trouble, of darkness and terror,' the allegory is regularly criticized from the eighteenth century on as inappropriate to the otherwise non-allegorical epic. While admitting that 'the descriptive part of this allegory is . . . very strong and full of sublime ideas,' Addison complains, 'I cannot think that persons of such a chimerical existence [Sin and Death] are proper actors in an epic poem' (*Spectator*, No. 309; No. 273). And Samuel Johnson echoes this view in his *Life of Milton*: 'This unskilful allegory appears to me one of the greatest faults of the poem.'[3]

Modern readers, in contrast, have preferred to see the 'fault' of allegory as a deliberate rhetorical strategy. Yet, while defending the appropriateness of the allegory of Sin and Death to the poem as a whole,

they have tended to deny its sublimity, arguing that the episode is a parody rather than a genuine instance of the sublime. Thus Anne Ferry has claimed that allegory represents a fallen mode of language,[4] and Maureen Quilligan writes:

> Allegory is the genre of the fallen world, for in a prelapsarian world, at one with God, there is no 'other' for language to work back to since there has been no fatal division. No distance, no divorce, no distaste between God and man, who has not yet known the coherence of good and evil in the rind of one apple tasted.[5]

Rather than being a form of inspired language or divine accommodation, allegory in this case would be a satanic version of the Word.

In the following pages I would like to suggest, in contrast to both eighteenth-century and modern critics, that the allegory of Sin and Death episode is both parodic and sublime, and that this deliberate rhetorical instability has implications for our reading of *Paradise Lost* as a whole. As we will see, the episode dramatizes the indeterminacy – or in seventeenth-century theological discourse, the indifference – of rhetorical figures (here, allegory) which is a condition of correct interpretation and free will.[6] In this light, distance and division are not simply a consequence of the fall but the structural precondition of prelapsarian experience as well. Attention to the generation of Sin as an event which glosses not only Ovid[7] and Spenser, but also Augustine and the Epistle of James, will allow us to read the episode not only as a deliberate exception to the non-allegorical poetic of *Paradise Lost*, but also as a genealogy of the poem as a whole; for the structure of linguistic difference which defines the parodic allegorical 'plot' of the episode also informs its sublime 'counterplot.'[8]

Before analyzing the Sin and Death episode in detail, it may be helpful to return for a moment to the ambivalent response of eighteenth-century readers, for this ambivalence captures something of the ironic structure of plot and counterplot I will be exploring below. Recently Leslie Moore and Steven Knapp have proposed related explanations for this response. Moore argues that in the eighteenth century the category of the sublime was often a way of discussing Milton's generic transgression or revision of the conventions of epic (11–13 and *passim*). In this light, the criticism of Milton's allegorical personification as a violation of epic would thus seem to be an attempt to delineate a proper or appropriate sublime – that of Satan in Books 1 and 2 or of Adam in Book 8 – one that can be integrated within the bounds of epic. In the critical discourse of the eighteenth century, Sin and Death are scapegoated in order to preserve the harmony or aesthetic proportion of *Paradise Lost*.

Knapp argues in a similar vein that eighteenth-century critics were

uncomfortable with the allegorical personifications of Sin and Death because they dramatized the 'programmatic ambivalence' of the sublime. While Knapp insists that this eighteenth-century reading does not correspond to anything in 'Milton's own attitude toward personification,' I would like to suggest that his remarks do indeed describe the intended rhetorical effect of the Sin and Death episode. Commenting on the similarity between the sublime and the personified agency of allegorical figures, Knapp writes:

> the sublime depends on an ideal of perfect, self-originating agency that no one really expects or wants to fulfill. To 'experience' the sublime was not quite . . . to identify oneself with a transcendent ideal of pure subjective power, but rather to entertain that ideal as an abstract, fantastic, unattainable possibility. Kant, along with Burke and the English satirists, was aware of the intriguing proximity of *hypsos* to bathos, of subjective 'freedom' to a mad or comical inflation of the self. The sublime, as Kant explains it, is therefore programmatically ambivalent: it demands a simultaneous identification with and dissociation from images of ideal power. Unless the subject in some degree identifies with the ideal, the experience reduces to mere pretense. But total identification collapses the distinction between ideal and empirical agency and leads to a condition of 'rational raving' that Kant designated 'fanaticism.' (p. 3)

As we will see, Satan in the Sin and Death episode dramatizes the 'intriguing proximity of *hypsos* to bathos', of 'subjective "freedom" to a mad or comical inflation of the self'; and in so doing stages the extremes of total identification and total alienation which the reader of *Paradise Lost* must learn to avoid.

In the Sin and Death episode, Milton allies both these extremes with allegory at the same time that he provides an allegorical critique of allegory, in order to educate the reader to view rhetorical structures as indeterminate and thus finally less as things than as activities of discrimination and choice. In this episode, as in the poem as a whole, the poet's justification of the ways of God to men is inseparable from a meditation on linguistic mediation.

The Allegory of Sin and Death

The ambivalent critical reception of Sin and Death as both parodic and sublime registers the ambivalence dramatized in the episode itself and provides an important clue to Milton's rhetoric of things indifferent. As I have said, the episode is not simply allegorical but also constitutes an allegorical critique of allegory and thus dramatizes the indifference of this rhetorical mode. At the same time it implicates both thematically and intertextually the related questions of authority, obedience, antinomianism and rebellion in ways that are crucial for our understanding of prelapsarian Eden as well.

From the beginning the episode is presented to us as one with a high degree of self-reflexivity about its own allegorical procedures. Traditionally allegory was seen both as the representation of what is by nature obscure to human understanding and as itself an obscure form of representation. We can only know God or divine truths indirectly or allegorically but in accommodating these truths to human understanding, allegory also presents them under a veil or obscurely. Thus Demetrius in his *On Style* associates allegory with darkness and night, and Vossius writes that 'by its obscurity [allegory] resembles the darkness of night, which easily terrifies the fearful.'[9] The obscure representation of Sin and Death thus functions as a kind of allegorical parody of allegory. That is, in personifying the unknowable or unrecognizable, the descriptions should make Sin and Death clearer to us, but the descriptions themselves merely double the original obscurity of these terms. This is especially true of Death, 'the other shape/ If shape it might be called that shape had none' (2:666–7).

The parodic and self-reflexive dimension of the episode is manifest in other ways as well. On one level, Sin's description of her birth is a parody of God's generation of the Son, since the latter was traditionally allegorized as the birth of Athena during the Renaissance.[10] But while the traditional allegorization of the mythical allusion points to the divine counterplot, the passage also contains plot and counterplot on the literal level, as it were, of its allegorical figures. The passage is in the first instance a drama of recognition and misrecognition, of force and signification. Sin springs out of Satan's head as he and his fallen angels are joining together 'In bold conspiracy against Heav'n's King' (750–1). As Kenneth Knoespel informs us, the Hebrew word for sin, *pesha*, means rebellion. Thus the generation of Sin from Satan's conspiracy serves not only to dramatize etymology,[11] but also conversely to gloss the independent or self-regarding activity of the imagination, with its concomitant claim to unmediated agency, as sinful rebellion.[12] Finally, as a number of critics have remarked, the birth also 'gives rise to a linguistic event of its own' (Knoespel): 'amazement seiz'd/ All th'Host of Heav'n; back they recoil'd afraid/ At first, and call'd me *Sin*, and for a Sign/ Portentous held me' (758–61). Recognition of Sin is inseparable from a lack of recognition or, to put it another way, from a recognition of difference. Sin seems unfamiliar and this unfamiliarity is tied to recognizing Sin as a sign (of something else), a warning. It is familiarity

or habit, here described as a narcissistic identification: 'Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing/ Becam'st enamor'd' (2:764–5), which leads to a misrecognition of sin's otherness, that is, to the deepest sin:[13] 'familiar grown,/ I pleas'd, and with attractive graces won/ The most averse . . .' (2:761–3).

We can begin to clarify the dialectical implications of this parody of allegory by examining Milton's biblical source. The genealogy of Sin and Death from lust derives from the Epistle of James, whose canonical status was controversial in the Renaissance not least of all because of its Pelagian or, in seventeenth-century discourse, Arminian argument for justification by works and thus for free will.[14] The passage reads:

> Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.
>
> (1: 13–15)

In his preface to the epistle, Luther objected,

> Flatly against St Paul and all the rest of Scripture, [James] ascribes righteousness to works . . . [and] does nothing more than drive to the law and its works; He calls the law a 'law of liberty,' though St Paul calls it a law of slavery, of wrath, of death and of sin.[15]

As John Tanner has recently argued, however, it is precisely the Pelagian emphasis on individual responsibility which serves to condemn Satan in our eyes:[16] the autogeneration of Sin from Satan's forehead figures the responsibility of the sinner for his fall (as Adam says of man in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, 'within himself/ The danger lies, yet lies within his power:/ Against his will he can receive no harm' (9:347–9)); and Satan's failure to recognize Sin is a failure to recognize his own responsibility. Yet, according to Sin, when he does recognize her that recognition takes the form of enjoyment rather than use; and it is here that we begin to see the counterplot of Satan's claims to self-determination. What is Pelagian from one perspective turns out to be Augustinian or Lutheran from another.[17]

> familiar grown,
> I pleas'd, and with attractive graces won
> The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft
> Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing
> Becam'st enamor'd, and such joy thou took'st

> With me in secret, that my womb conceived
> A growing burden.
>
> (2: 761–8)

Satan's response to Sin suggests the familiar Augustinian distinction between signs which are to be used and those which are to be enjoyed. For Augustine 'all things are to be used (*uti*), that is, treated as though they were signs, God only to be enjoyed (*frui*), as the ultimate signification. To enjoy that which should be used is reification, or idolatry.'[18] Thus, while Sin's narrative of her generation might seem to suggest a necessary, organic, or unmediated relation between sign and signified, it also reveals the narcissism implicit in such assumptions. In this episode, in other words, allegory signifies a form of interpretation, and of self-reflection, which precludes genuine engagement with the text or the external world because it presupposes the signified from the outset. Allegory could thus be said to pander to the reader, to commodify truth and thus to obstruct the kind of rational exercise of the will which is the precondition of right reading and of virtue. In not leaving room for the reader's own activity, this pandering might just as easily be described as a kind of violence or coercion.[19] The allegory is thus one of force, of forced signification.

Satan's lust may tell us not only about Milton's Arminian belief in free will but about the dangers of antinomianism as well. It may be significant in this context that excessive allegorizing was associated with antinomian tendencies in the seventeenth century, and that antinomianism was often conflated with libertinism by its critics. James Turner writes, 'In mid-seventeenth-century polemic . . . radical "enthusiasm" was associated with the abuse of Genesis and the attempt to recover an Adamite relation to the body. This was supposed to involve either naturalistic sexual freedom or ascetic hatred of the flesh, and sometimes both at once. . . .'[20] At times such 'paradisal antinomianism' took the form of engaging in sex or sin in order to cast it out (87–8; a kind of parody of the Miltonic 'trial by what is contrary'). The incestuous coupling of Satan and Sin would thus figure in particular the antinomian abuse of the 'letter' or sign (2:760) with its attendant dangers of libertinism.[21] In contrast, prelapsarian Eden would represent the correct version of unfallen sexuality and of reading, where not allegory but innocence is the best 'shadow' or 'veil' (cf. 9:1054–5).

As an allegorical reader, then, Satan dismisses the sign (surface) for the psychological origin (genealogy) and so substitutes both structurally and thematically determinism for freedom, fate for faith and free will. Here too, 'fixed mind' (1:97) and force or compulsion coincide. Signs which should ideally point to something else simply point back to themselves. Despair is represented, in short, as the despair of referentiality.[22] The

error of allegorical reading in *Paradise Lost* is thus, paradoxically, not to allow for error (wandering, the foraying out of uncloistered virtue). Satan's reading allows only for analysis, not for synthesis. At the same time, precisely because such analysis precludes genuine recognition of otherness, allegory here figures the danger of seduction by and idolatry of literature rather than, as it was traditionally presumed to do, providing armor against it. The episode could thus be said to perform its own immanent critique of the literary: the claim to unmediated imaginative activity is itself a form of violence, of reification and rebellion.

The Sublimity of Sin and Death

I would now like to turn to the way the Sin and Death episode itself functions as a thing indifferent, insofar as it articulates a rhetorical structure which has positive as well as negative implications or uses in the poem. If the episode criticizes the narcissism of allegory, it also suggests an alternative mode of reading the obscurity and failed referentiality we have noted in the representation of Sin and Death and in Sin's account of her encounter with Satan. Borrowing from the more appreciative critics of the poem beginning in the eighteenth century, we can describe this mode in terms of the rhetorical category of the sublime. Thus Edmund Burke, commenting on the line 'Rocks, caves, lakes, dens, bogs, fens and shades of death' (2:621), writes:

> This idea of affection caused by a word ['death'], which nothing but a word could annex to the others, raises a very great degree of the sublime; and it is raised yet higher by what follows, a *'universe of death'*. Here are again two ideas not presentible but by language, and an union of them great and amazing beyond conception. Whoever attentively considers this passage in Milton . . . will find that it does not in general produce its end by raising the images of things, but by exciting a passion similar to that which real objects excite by other instruments.[23]

And Coleridge, commenting on the description of Death in *Paradise Lost*, writes in a similar vein:

> The grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form, but a strong working of the mind, still offering what is still repelled, and again creating what is again rejected; the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely, the

substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image.[24]

Burke's and Coleridge's comments nicely capture the ambivalence of the sublime. On the one hand, it seems as though the poet's deliberate failure of representation allows greater freedom to the reader's imagination; on the other hand, the reader's failure to imagine anything precisely serves to refer the reader to what is described by Coleridge as 'a sublime feeling of the unimaginable' but has been described by other theorists of the sublime as an identification with a higher power, one which transcends the faculties of perception and imagination. Luther's description of the law in his *Commentary on Galatians* would seem to exemplify this experience of the sublime: 'Wherefore this is the proper and absolute use of the law, by lightning, by tempest and by the sound of the trumpet (as in Mt Sinai) to terrify, and by thundering to beat down and rend in pieces that beast which is called the opinion of righteousness.'[25] The abasement of the sinner proves to be an uplifting experience insofar as it makes him aware of his own sinfulness and thus receptive to grace.

In our time, some critics have argued that in the experience of the sublime, reason 'stages' a failure of that form of representation which assumes an analogy between cognition and vision, understanding and the phenomenal world, in order to make room for the non-phenomenological activity of reading,[26] or – one might add – of prophecy in the seventeenth-century sense of exegesis.[27] The imagination fails to comprehend nature but this failure allows reason to recognize its independence from nature. As Donald Pease writes, 'Instead of locating the source of the sublime in its former locus, i.e. in external nature, the imagination redirects Reason to another locus, within Reason itself, where Reason can re-cognize astonishment as its own power to negate external nature.'[28] Accordingly, the failure of referentiality on one level thus allows for its recuperation on another. But it also simply displaces to this ostensibly higher level, 'within Reason itself,' the question of the authority of reason and the power of volition. Like allegory, the literary category of the sublime thus raises questions concerning the relation of free will and determinism which are central to Milton's theological and political concerns.[29]

While Luther's description of the effect of the law would seem to suggest that the sublime is a function of fallen experience, *Paradise Lost* shows that the structure of the sublime is constitutive of prelapsarian experience as well.[30] The fact that the allegory of Sin and Death can be described as both fallen or parodic and sublime is thus part of the larger argument of the poem. Yet, if the sublime exists in Eden, the poet still wants to distinguish between true and false versions of it. Thus, the

distinction that Christianity has traditionally marked with the fall Milton places within Eden itself; though this does not mean that Adam and Eve are somehow fallen before their acts of disobedience. Rather, *Paradise Lost* shows that the structure of the prohibition not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge is the same as that of the law of postlapsarian experience (the prohibition is already a law); and that the differential structure articulated by the law is a condition of freedom as well as slavery. Whether the law is perceived as sublime or not is a function of reading, which in either case depends on the law in order to negate it. Milton's paradise, then, provides us with a phenomenology of consciousness – an account of the way consciousness constantly presupposes difference and at the same time, in so doing, negates and transcends it. So Milton's account of Eden is a metanarrative: a story about why we tell ourselves stories about an original fall, why we need both to posit a pristine state in which our ancestors were unfallen *and* locate the possibility of falling within that state.

The theological and aesthetic problem then is how to allow for difference in Eden while still preserving the distinction between pre- and postlapsarian experience. In this reading, allegory and sublimity name the coercive and enabling versions of the Christian's interpretive dilemma. The interpreter is confronted in both cases with a 'difficult ornament' or signifier which obscures or blocks access to the signified. Yet, in the first case the process of reading is codified and reified, while in the second there is a constant displacement or negation of any positive knowledge, a displacement which itself proves to be spiritually uplifting. We are made to 'judge of the sublime, not so much the object, as our state of mind in the estimation of it.'[31] My specific claim with reference to the description of Sin and Death is once again that the episode contains both these modes in the form of plot and counterplot. The episode does not simply represent the allegorical pole of reading, but criticizes it as well. In confronting the reader with the conflicting ethical possibilities of its indifferent rhetoric, the episode thus looks forward to dilemmas faced by Adam and Eve in Books 8 and 9 of *Paradise Lost*.

This point can be clarified if we return to the literary and linguistic strife dramatized in the description of Sin and Death. As Longinus recognized long ago, sublimity is achieved not simply in nature but also through the dramatization of literary combat, where the failure of recognition (of father by son) allows for struggle and identification. On the thematic level, the struggle between Satan and Death is an Oedipal struggle (cf. 11. 726–7; cf. also 790–800 on Death's rape of Sin), while rhetorically the episode enacts Milton's struggle with Spenser (in particular the figure of Errour in Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*). And, in both cases, the apparent failure of mutual recognition allows for a deeper identification. In 711ff. Satan and Death engage each other in combat and

are identified in a simile which functions to conflate the antagonists just as do the similes of epic combat in *The Faerie Queene*. Satan's seeing without knowledge or recognition (743–4) is a parody of the sublime experience. The 'failure of imagination' in his case is not represented here as a failure to grasp in the imagination some indeterminate object, so much as it is a failure to grasp that the indeterminate object is a product of his own imagination. It is at this point that Sin articulates the allegorical principle of causation. The structure of her narrative is worthy of close attention because, like other moments in *Paradise Lost*, it seems to problematize rather than fix the moment of original sin, the origin of the fall.[32] In fact, her narration makes Sin both cause and effect of Satan's rebellion:

> Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem
> Now in thine eye so foul, once deem'd so fair
> In Heav'n, when at th' Assembly, and in sight
> Of all the Seraphim with thee combin'd
> In bold conspiracy against Heav'n's King,
> All on a sudden miserable pain
> Surpris'd thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
> In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
> Threw forth, till on the left side op'ning wide,
> Likest to thee in shape and count'nance bright,
> Then shining heav'nly fair, a Goddess arm'd
> Out of thy head I sprung . . .
>
> (2:747–58)

The syntactical ambiguity in lines 747–50 makes it seem as though Sin had combined with Satan ('me . . . with thee combin'd') prior to her own birth. Thus her own narration of her origin is proleptic: she is both generated and self-generated.

That this doubling and undermining of the narrative is positive as well as negative can be clarified by returning to Luther's objections to the Epistle of James. The Lutheran view of the law as a law of slavery consequent upon the fall would seem to underlie any strict differentiation between pre- and postlapsarian experience. While Pelagius might suffice for a description of the original fall, as fallen creatures we are incapable, according to Luther, of willing freely. Yet, in *Paradise Lost* Milton takes issue with this Lutheran position. The fact that Sin is first a sign means conversely that signs (linguistic mediation) allow for the recognition of the possibility of sin. In glossing the genealogy of Sin and Death in the Epistle of James, Milton's allegory thus suggests that sin shares the linguistic structure of the sublime not only with the law but with the prelapsarian prohibition.

Adam describes the prohibition in Book 4 in a way which helps us to see it as an example of the sublime since he explicitly ties its linguistic structure and its failed referentiality to the possibility of virtue. God 'requires,' he tells Eve,

> From us no other service than to keep
> This one, this easy charge, of all the Trees
> In Paradise that bear delicious fruit
> So various, not to taste that only Tree
> Of Knowledge, planted by the Tree of Life,
> So near grows Death to Life, whate'er Death is,
> Some dreadful thing no doubt; for well thou know'st
> God hath pronounc't it death to taste that Tree,
> The only sign of our obedience left
> Among so many signs of power and rule
> Conferr'd upon us, and Dominion giv'n
> Over all other Creatures that possess
> Earth, Air, and Sea. Then let us not think hard
> One easy prohibition, who enjoy
> Free leave so large to all things else, and choice
> Unlimited of manifold delights:
> But let us ever praise him, and extol
> His bounty, following our delightful task
> To prune these growing Plants, and tend these Flow'rs,
> Which were it toilsome, yet with thee were sweet.
> (4:420–39)

Here it is clear that while Adam does not understand the word 'death,' he does understand the prohibition as a test of obedience.[33] The partial obscurity of the prohibition is thus analogous to the obscurity of Sin and Death; in both cases it functions as a sublime obstacle, a boundary or limit. The sign is thus in a curious way performative rather than cognitive. It refers Adam and Eve to the limits of cognition, but recuperates this failure of cognition ('whate'er Death is/ Some dreadful thing no doubt') in the recognition of the task of obedience to God's word: 'for well thou know'st/ God hath pronounc't it death to taste that Tree.' As Milton intimates in the homophones of Raphael's later warning, 'Know to know no more' (4:775), knowledge is predicated on negation, on the knowledge of limits. Furthermore, this limit is of ethical as well as epistemological importance, for absolute knowledge would itself be coercive and thus preclude virtue. At the same time, it is clear that the prohibition itself is an obstacle, a limit which tempts one to 'think hard' – i.e., beyond the boundary it establishes; and to think that hard which formerly – i.e., without thought – was easy and so without

virtue. Negation makes thought possible, at the same time that it makes the closure of absolute knowledge impossible, for us. But this impossibility is the condition of virtue. Just as the Mosaic law is given to fallen man to allow for the recognition of sin (12:187ff.), so the prohibition is given to Adam and Eve as a sign which, as it articulates difference, allows for genuine choice, reason, obedience. If the recognition of sin has the structure and effect (amazement) of the sublime by allowing one to recognize the condition from which one has fallen (i.e. to recognize difference), the prohibition is also a sign which by this very fact establishes the difference between force and signification.

In light of the preceding reflections on Sin and Death, Milton's narrative of prelapsarian events can be interpreted as an attempt to negotiate between two allegorical extremes: one in which everything is a function of the self, with the result that all experience is narcissistic; the other in which everything is a function of God and external circumstances, in which case experience – and education – are impossible. Disjunction between language and meaning has to exist in order for there to be interpretation and choice, at the same time that it must not be so radical that reading is impossible. Conversely, if reading is to be possible then the text must be conceived of as a thing indifferent in the precise sense that it offers an occasion for ethical deliberation.

I have argued that the Sin and Death episode is an exemplary instance of Milton's ambivalent or, in theological terms, indifferent rhetoric. In Sin's narration of her encounter with Satan we are offered an allegorical parody of allegory; and in the poet's description of Sin and Death we are offered what critics since the eighteenth century have called the Miltonic sublime. From one perspective (which we can identify with Sin's description of Satan's response), allegory implies a fallen mode of reading since it reifies signification and precludes any genuine encounter with otherness, any genuine exercise of deliberation and choice among possible meanings. From another perspective, the episode provides us with an allegorical critique of reading allegorically and so dramatizes the indifference of this rhetorical mode. From this second perspective, allegory shares with the sublime a structure of signification which characterizes pre- as well as postlapsarian experience. One burden of the episode is thus to show that signs, including prohibitions and laws, are not simply a consequence of the fall but the precondition of any genuine ethical choice: language itself is a thing indifferent which can be used well or badly.

Milton's recuperation of imperfect knowledge, including textual indeterminacy, as the condition of virtue is consonant with post-Kantian definitions of the sublime. As Neil Hertz has written, the sublime can be thought of as 'the story of Ethics coming to the rescue in a situation of cognitive distress.'[34] In this light, Milton's remark in Areopagitica –

'Reason is but choosing,' a remark which also describes the activity of the reader of *Paradise Lost* – is a sublime narrative in little: it posits the passage between epistemology and ethics. Faced with some kind of cognitive blockage or obscurity, the reader exercises ethical judgment and in so doing identifies with a higher power. The problem of course – and it is the problem of Reformation hermeneutics – is: how does one tell the difference between the Satanic self-aggrandizement of 'perfect, self-originating agency' (to recall to Knapp's remarks cited at the beginning of this essay) and those actions which do not simply claim to be but are obedient to a higher power? Here we return to those modern critics who suggest that, in the experience of the sublime, reason 'stages' a failure of the imagination in order narcissistically to 'discover itself freshly in an attitude of awe.'[35] Satan's narcissism in his encounter with Sin enacts this theatrical possibility. But the fact that the sublime can be staged or parodied, this also raises questions concerning Milton's own sublime rhetorical defence and education of the reader's ethical judgment. We know not only from the Sin and Death episode but also from the poet-narrator's self-descriptions, which frequently echo earlier descriptions of Satan, that Milton was himself sensitive to this dilemma. Milton stages the plot and counterplot of allegory and the sublime in the Sin and Death episode not only to engage Spenser in literary combat, or to begin to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate dissent, reformation and rebellion, but also to meditate on the Satanic dimension of justifying the ways of God to men.

Notes

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York, 1972), 194. A longer and earlier version of this paper occurs in *A Creative Imitation*, ed. David Quint *et al.* (Binghamton, MRTS, 1992).

2. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* (London, 1729), No. 315 (3:111). Burke, Hume and Blair quoted in *Milton 1732–1801: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John T. Shawcross (London and Boston, 1972), 236, 237, 244.

3. Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, 2 vols (London, 1961), 1:110. See also Addison's *Spectator Papers*, No. 315; No. 357. On eighteenth-century discussions of sublimity in *Paradise Lost*, see Leslie E. Moore, *Beautiful Sublime: The Making of 'Paradise Lost,' 1701–34* (Stanford, CA, 1990); Dustin Griffin, *Regaining Paradise: Milton and the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1986); and Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985). Knapp cites additional eighteenth-century critics who describe the allegory of Sin and Death as sublime on p. 52.

4. Anne Ferry, *Milton's Epic Voice: The Narrator in 'Paradise Lost'* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 116–46.

5. Maureen Quilligan, *Milton's Spenser: The Politics of Reading* (Ithaca and London, 1983), p. 95.

6. I use indifference here in the technical theological sense to refer to things or activities which are not essential to salvation and which may therefore be chosen or avoided, used well or badly at the discretion of the individual believer.

7. Satan's narcissism in the Sin and Death episode anticipates Eve's narcissism in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* and shares with it an Ovidian subtext, *Metamorphoses*, 3:354, on Narcissus. On the relation of Ovid to Milton, see among others Richard Du Rocher, *Milton and Ovid* (Ithaca, NY, 1985).

8. I borrow these terms from Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'Milton's Counterplot' in *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven and London, 1970), pp. 113–123, esp. 115: 'Milton's feeling for this divine imperturbability, for God's omnipotent knowledge that the creation will outlive death and sin, when expressed in . . . an indirect manner, may be characterized as the counterplot. For it does not often work on the reader as an independent theme or subplot but lodges in the vital parts of the overt action, emerging from it like good from evil.'
   In considering the Sin and Death episode, I have benefited from the following works in addition to the ones already cited: Philip J. Gallagher, '"Real or Allegoric": The Ontology of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*', *ELR* 6 (1976): 317–35; John S. Tanner, '"Say First What Cause": Ricoeur and the Etiology of Evil in *Paradise Lost*', *PMLA* 103 (1988): 45–56; Stephen M. Fallon, 'Milton's Sin and Death: The Ontology of Allegory in *Paradise Lost*', *ELR* 17 (1987): 329–50; Ruth H. Lindeborg, 'Imagination, Inspiration and the Problem of Human Agency in *Paradise Lost*', unpublished paper.

9. Cited by Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), p. 160. The quotation is from *Gerardi Joannis Vossi commentariorum rhetoricorum, sive oratorium institutionum libri sex* (1606).

10. See the note to this passage by Alastair Fowler in his edition of *Paradise Lost* (New York, 1971).

11. On the Hebrew etymology of sin, see Kenneth Knoespel, 'The Limits of Allegory', *Milton Studies* 22 (1986), p. 82. Maureen Quilligan also discusses this passage in terms of etymological wordplay, but does not note the Hebrew meaning of sin. For the association of sin and sign, Merritt Hughes refers us to Dante's 'trapassar del segno' in *Paradiso* 26:115–17 ('Beyond Disobedience' in *Approaches to 'Paradise Lost'*, ed. C.A. Patrides [London, 1968], 188–9).

12. I was helped to see this point by the unpublished paper of Ruth H. Lindeborg. See also Maureen Quilligan's chapter, 'The Sin of Originality' in *Milton's Spenser*.

13. See Luther's remarks in his *Lectures on Genesis (Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan [Saint Louis, 1955]), 1:166, on the sins which are so fully ingrained 'that they not only cannot be fully removed but are not even recognized as sin'.

14. On the identification of Pelagianism and Arminianism by seventeenth-century Calvinists, see for example A.S.P. Woodhouse (ed.), *Puritanism and Liberty* (London, 1938), p. 54.

15. 'Introduction to the Epistle of Saint James and Saint Jude' (1545) in *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1932), 6:478.

16. John S. Tanner, '"Say First What Cause": Ricoeur and the Etiology of Evil in *Paradise Lost'*.

17. Tanner makes a similar point, though he does not comment on the significance of the allegorical form of Sin and Death in this context: 'Milton's myth thus exposes the irrationalism that lies at the core of ostensibly rational free-will explanations. It acknowledges that, at the deepest level, complete self-determination begins to look more like compulsion than free choice' (p. 49).

18. JOHN FRECCERO, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1986), p. 108.

19. On the political dimension of allegory as a mode, see Joel Fineman, 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire' in *Allegory and Representation*, Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979–80, n.s. 5, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore and London, 1981), pp. 32–3:

   Allegory is always a hierarchizing mode, indicative of a timeless order, however subversively intended its contents might be. This is why allegory is 'the courtly figure,' as Puttenham called it, an inherently political and therefore religious trope, not because it flatters tactfully, but because in deferring to structure it insinuates the power of the structure, giving off what we can call the structural effect.

20. JAMES GRANTHAM TURNER, *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 84.

21. Turner makes a similar point when he writes in a discussion of the allegorical interpretations of German mysticism and neoplatonism, 'Indeed, the grotesque figure of Sin [in *Paradise Lost*] . . . may parody the excesses of neo-Gnostic myth-making' (p. 155 and ff.).

22. In this context, see the interesting remarks by Joel Fineman in 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire'. Defining allegory in terms of Jakobson's 'poetic function', which 'projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection [*langue*] into the axis of combination [*parole*]' (p. 32), Fineman comments, 'This leaves us, however, with the paradox that allegory, which we normally think of as the most didactic and abstractly moral-mongering of poetic figures, is at the same time the most empty and concrete: on the one hand, a structure of differential oppositions abstracted from its constituent units; on the other, a clamor of signifiers signifying nothing but themselves' (34).

23. Quoted in *Milton 1732–1801: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John T. Shawcross (London and Boston, 1972), p. 236.

24. Quoted in Knapp, p. 8.

25. MARTIN LUTHER, *Commentary on Galatians* in *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY, 1961), p. 141.

26. See THOMAS WEISKEL, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore and London, 1976), pp. 40–1. See also NEIL HERTZ, 'The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime' in *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 71–6; and STEVEN KNAPP, *Personification and the Sublime*, pp. 74ff.

27. See JOHN MILTON, *Christian Doctrine*, YP (6:582 and 584) (Book 1, Ch. 30). I am grateful to Victoria Silver for calling my attention to this definition of prophecy in the seventeenth century.

28. DONALD E. PEASE, 'Sublime Politics', *Boundary 2* **12/13** (1984): 264.

29. Cf. Jonathan Arac, 'The Media of Sublimity: Johnson and Lamb on *King Lear*', *Studies in Romanticism* **26** (1987): 209ff., on the sublime as allowing rebellion or reinforcing conformity; and Ronald Paulson, 'Burke's Sublime and the Representation of Revolution' in *Culture and Politics: From Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. Perez Zagorin (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1980), pp. 241–69, esp. 248–52, on the political ambivalence of the sublime.

30. For a related argument, see SANFORD BUDICK, *The Dividing Muse: Images of Sacred Disjunction in Milton's Poetry* (New Haven and London, 1985), pp. 48, 73, 79.

31. IMMANUEL KANT, *Critique of Judgment*, cited by Raimonda Modiano, 'Humanism and the Comic Sublime: From Kant to Friedrich Theodor Vischer', *Studies in Romanticism* **26** (1987): 234.

32. See the remarks by Mary Ann Radzinowicz in 'The Politics of *Paradise Lost*' in *Politics of Discourse*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Stephen N. Zwicker (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), p. 217.

33. This is a traditional understanding of the prohibition. See Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, p. 154: 'It was God's intention that this command should provide man with an opportunity for obedience and outward worship, and that this tree would be a sort of sign by which man would give evidence that he was obeying God.' See also the gloss on this passage in the Geneva Bible, and *Paradise Lost* 3:93–5.

34. Hertz, p. 73.

35. Weiskel, p. 41.