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Who Narrates the Bible: Reformation Commentary and English Verse Culture

By

Raphael S Magarik

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## Abstract

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

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This dissertation argues that early modern scholars invented the idea of the biblical narrator. In Pentateuchal commentaries beginning with Luther and Calvin, the pressures of Protestant theology forced commentators to focus on Moses, whom they imagined as a mediating, human presence within the divinely authored text. In turn, this innovative literary theory shaped how seventeenth century English poets—particularly Lucy Hutchinson, Abraham Cowley, and John Milton—wrote their own biblically themed poems, offering them a new, narratological sophistication.

Building on critiques of the modern concept “religion,” by Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and others, I argue that scholarship on the early modern Bible—ranging from Barbara Lewalski’s work on biblical poetics through intellectual histories like Eric Nelson’s and Christopher Hill’s—often implicitly assume that the Bible served early modern readers as an epistemic ground, a source of (in principle) fixed truth. By contrast, I argue that for some readers, the commentarial Bible created a space of uncertainty and sophistication. By spurring them to fictive creation, the Bible helped such readers imagine a world free of grounding, authority, or firm commitments. Drawing on the work of Richard Rorty, I offer an alternative account of literary secularization in the period. Articulating a self-reflexive awareness of contingency that at once is secular and religious, I suggest that early modern theologians and poets created an anti-foundationalist Bible, which demanded not assent or but critical reflection.

The first two chapters examine Luther’s and Calvin’s commentaries on Genesis. Both Reformers understood Moses as narrating and mediating the Pentateuch. The narrating Moses helped Luther buttress his views on Church tradition and reconcile his own supplemental commentary with his commitment to Scripture’s simplicity. “Moses” came to name the text’s mediation of itself, which prefigured and authorized Luther’s own preaching. Further, Luther’s Moses is continuous with—and occasionally indistinguishable from—the character-narrators whom he surprisingly inserts into the text, and Luther’s consequently in Genesis numerous instances of free indirect style. Against Deborah Shuger, who sees Renaissance commentary as unconcerned with individual writers, I argue that Luther is deeply invested in Moses, whom he understands primarily in narratological, rather than historical terms.

Calvin similarly invests Moses with narratological significance, in part through radicalizing the traditional doctrine of divine accommodation. Rather than taking particular laws or details of the texts as accommodated, Calvin understands the human literary persona of Moses as an accommodation. Further, Calvinist accommodation must always stimulate the reader's sense of unworthiness and thus announce its own inadequacy. This theology makes Calvin attentive to the Bible's literary and rhetorical effects, as well as to the consistent gaps between the narrating Moses and the authoring God. These two chapters reframe a longstanding debate over Protestant literalism and the hermeneutic tenability of sola scriptura, arguing that Luther and Calvin, in attempting to find an intra-biblical source for their own commentaries, actually produce a newly mediated biblical text.

My third chapter bridges between the dissertation's commentarial and poetic halves. I read Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* as both an attempt to fashion a single, continuous narrative out of a web of commentarial discourse and an early example of biblical fiction. Raleigh's biblical history weaves multiple narratological layers together, producing a unified narrative that contains its own commentary. But Raleigh also creates an unexpected byproduct: biblical fictions. These verisimilar but explicitly false readings of the Bible remain in the text as entertaining and improving almost-truths. This chapter engages a critical assumption that is the target of the dissertation more broadly: the purported link, in work by Watt and MacKeon, but also Gallagher, Davis, and others, between fiction and secularization. I argue that Raleigh provides an early example of biblical fiction. Not necessarily secularizing, fictionality can arise out of internal, religious dynamics surrounding textual mediation, commentary and narration.

Turning to three seventeenth-century, biblically themed poems, I argue that each exploits the Reformation's new distinction between narrator and author. My fourth chapter shows that Abraham Cowley's *Davideis* uses an unreliable narrator to distance Cowley from his defeated Royalism. While I extend scholarship on the tension between the poem's main text and auto-commentary, I argue critics over-credulously accept the poem's claim to resolve an essential conflict between poetic fiction and religious truth. I argue that Cowley was not so much responding to a cultural binary as fashioning one for his own purposes: in this case, emphasizing the inertness and fictionality of his poetry. Through readings of *Davideis*'s transmutation of Cowley's earlier, failed political epic, I argue that biblical commentary provides Cowley a mediated mode of writing, one that lets him distance himself from his narrator. The commentarial Bible provides a fictional refuge from his political perils.

My fifth chapter takes up accommodation and narration in Milton. While previous critics have largely relied upon Milton's theological treatise to ascertain his views on accommodation, I turn to his polemical prose and the surrounding pamphlet wars. I argue that "accommodation" during the Civil War named the theological-political problem of compromise and coalition. This background helps understand Milton's distinctively republican and rhetorical model of accommodation. Milton repeatedly emphasizes how political or religious speakers—whether Parliament or Jesus—are not monarchs speaking

from on high, but instead characters situated humanly in narrative and responding to circumstances they share with their audience. *Paradise Lost* purposely dramatizes the narrator's progressive concession to difficult political circumstances. I thus offer a novel solution to the problem of the poem's politics, claiming that, through its fallible and beleaguered narrator, the poem dramatizes the oppressive constraints on its own writing. My sixth chapter argues that the creation narrative in Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder* implicitly narrates Hutchinson's spiritual autobiography of fall and redemption. The poem promises to repent for Hutchinson's supposed sin in translating Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. Drawing on recent work on Lucretius's reception, I argue that Hutchinson's translation would not initially have seemed sinful or problematic. Rather, *Order and Disorder* reimagines its narrator's youth as a fall because of the poem's need to impose a Calvinist life narrative on her biography. The poem stages its narrator's fall because, within Hutchinson's experimental Protestant milieu, self-consciousness of one's fallen depravity offers a privileged epistemological path to religious truth. Arguing against critical characterizations of *Order and Disorder*'s as simple or plain, I show that Hutchinson actually creates a complex, mediated movement between narrating voice and authorial pattern.

While the narrator-author split permits theologians and poets to think of the Bible as a fictive, human text, I argue that this understanding was lost, as a result of the rise of historical criticism and the emergence of religion as a distinct category of human experience. Through critical readings of Samuel Johnson, Erich Auerbach, and Richard Rorty, I argue the category of biblical fiction is often subtly elided precisely when it is apparently being theorized.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	.....	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	.....	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	.....	<b>34</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	.....	<b>87</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	.....	<b>132</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	.....	<b>195</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	.....	<b>254</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

In the most abstract sense, this dissertation argues that the given and the invented relate to each other differently than some people think. In particular, I think, to receive certain important gifts requires one to participate in their creation. The gifts I acknowledge here are of that sort. They obligate me in their stewardship, and I find myself, as Claudia Card writes, “happy to be obliged.”

This dissertation continues conversations begun when I was a child, on Saturday morning walks with my father. He first taught me to read the Bible, and ours is my longest-running *chevruta*. My mother was the first English major I met and remains the most important. It was from her musty old novels and occasionally exasperating book group that I learned what it is to live with literature. Both my parents taught me to do work in which I believe and encouraged me on my precarious, non-remunerative academic journey, and they also did so much more.

My high school teachers cared for a difficult teenager and taught me to read and write. I particularly remember Mr. Roundy’s exuberant hubris in deciding to read Joyce with twelfth graders; Ms. Refkin’s tolerance for loopy analyses of Gertrude Stein and half-baked imitations of Faulkner; and Ms. Mazzola’s mixture of Catholic school discipline, subversive zaniness, and philology in its etymological sense: love of the word.

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thesis on a topic about which I knew nothing, and she taught me what literary critics actually argue about. David Kastan conned me into thinking both that academics were glamorous and that I could be one. I remain grateful for the deception, as I am for the years of free drinks. Leslie Brisman's questions remain unanswered in the margins of my Shelley and Browning. It has not proved necessary to write down either his more memorable stories or the loving care with which he guided me through years of existential uncertainty, as neither are at risk of being forgotten.

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I hope that Jason Rubenstein will recognize his own ideas in this book, and I hope to become the kind of teacher he is. David Kasher taught me how to teach, and I already miss our post-paschal drives. David Henkin shared the fine points of *leyning*, gambling, and similar pleasures. Cynthia Scheinberg provided joyful, caring mentorship and helped me think seriously about the purpose of college teaching. Towards the end, Rabbi Adina Allen casually opened new pedagogical horizons.

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Last but not least, I am grateful for the fiction of God and happy to let someone else sort out whether that genitive is subjective or objective.

## Introduction

Fear of scholasticism is the mark of a false prophet.  
—Karl Barth<sup>1</sup>

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony.  
—Franz Kafka<sup>2</sup>

## Is the Good Book a Book?

What is the Bible for? In a *New Yorker* essay occasioned in part by Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible into English, Adam Gopnik suggested that moderns "enter into sacred texts as readers, rather than as worshippers," cautioning us that "we forget at our peril that, through most of their history, these have been not books, to be appreciated, but truths, to be obeyed." Gopnik sharply distinguishes between secular literature ("to be studied and shared through the pleasure of pluralist interpretation and constant cross-referencing") and religious scripture ("to be obeyed or scrutinized for lessons").<sup>3</sup> In this book, I will argue against this distinction between the religious and literary Bibles. I will argue that some early modern Protestant scholars and poets understood them as not only compatible but as necessarily complementary—and that this understanding was not a fluke or mistake, but rather a powerful intellectual movement which left lasting literary monuments.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromley and eds. G. W. Bromley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 1969), I.1.279.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Gopnik, "How to Read the Good Books," *The New Yorker*, 1.21.2019. Accessed online at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/28/how-to-read-the-good-books> on 4.23.2019.

To be sure, Gopnik might seem like a straw man. You could only claim the “pleasure of pluralist interpretation” for secular modernity, after all, if you had cultivated a holy ignorance toward the history of scriptural interpretation—studiously neglecting the enforced polysemy of medieval Christian allegoresis, for instance, or the proliferation of self-consciously, exuberantly contradictory rabbinic *midrashim*. If “constant cross-referencing” is modern and secular, then so must have been the thirteenth century Dominicans who invented the Bible concordance. Indeed, Gopnik goes so far as to suggest that to the extent the Good Book is good, it is not a book: “these have been not books... but truths.”

Yet the distinction he proposes so plainly and forthrightly, I argue, creeps more subtly into a great deal of early modern intellectual history, criticism of seventeenth century English literature, and theorizing about religion and the secular: over the following pages, I will argue a version of this critique applies to Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, Erich Auerbach, Christopher Hill, Hans Frei, and Samuel Johnson, to name a few of the highlights. Despite Gopnik’s ham-fistedness and their subtlety, the distinction between religious scripture and secular literature regularly induces exactly Gopnik’s perplexities and absurdities, for it involves erasing and obscuring the profoundly literary qualities of the biblical text itself. Indeed, Gopnik chops so forcibly at whatever threads might connect the religious and the literary that in the end he shreds his materials into incoherent ribbons. He is, as academics like to say, just a journalist. And yet over the pages that follow, we will see not a few learned, erudite scholars and critics committing versions of Gopnik’s mistake. I argue that ultimately, these weird results suggest a basic problem with the distinction.

## The Invention of Biblical Narration

This book takes aim at these false dichotomies. In a crucial moment after the Protestant Reformation, I argue, obedience and interpretation, divine revelation and human imagination, religious givens and secular inventions were exclusive categories. Rather, they were opposed and yet dialectically connected theological poles in what was at once a coherent, orthodox theology of Scripture and also a creatively fertile literary theory of new, biblically themed narrative poems.

In particular, I make two central claims. First, I argue that in the sixteenth century, early Protestant commentators like Calvin and Martin Luther invented the idea of biblical narration. That is, they began to conceive of the Bible—I will focus on the Pentateuch—as reflecting both God’s authorship and the human, mediating presence of a narrator, a presence which they called “Moses.” That narrator’s individual life, situation, character and culture shaped the text in virtually every moment. He offered convenient answers to pesky questions about the ark’s measurements or the peculiar astronomy of Genesis 1, since, like Holden Caulfield or Charles Marlow, he could unreliably report things without tainting the ultimate reliability of the broader work. Of course, Calvin and Luther thought Moses, unlike a fictional narrator, did exist. Nonetheless, like such a narrator, his historicity played no *authorial* role in the text’s form. Although the results would have been odd, God could have revealed a Mosaic Pentateuch to another scribe: Aaron, Hur, Miriam, or an anonymous Israelite.

Second, I argue that this new biblical narratology shaped the writing of English biblical narrative poetry. I focus particularly on three long poems writing during the political turmoil of the interregnum and Restoration: Abraham Cowley’s  *Davideis*, John

Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder*. In quite different ways, each of these poets experiments formally with the relationship between author and narrator, playing with the relationship between contingent, particular speaker and an author's core commitments. Moreover, I argue that these creative experiments follow from and emerge out of the critical innovations of Protestant commentators. They account for much of what is new and surprising in these poems when they are compared to Renaissance epic. In that sense, I am tracing a genealogy, running through Reformation commentary, of a particular form—the ironized, potentially unreliable narrator—as well as for a broader cultural category: biblical fiction.

### **Interlude #1: Who Narrated the Bible?**

Biblical narrators are an inherently slippery characters: are they are historical personages or literary artifacts? features of the original biblical texts or inventions of later readers? And what exactly is their connection to fiction How does this fiction manifest itself in practice? Here is an example which clarifies the sense in which Protestant commentators invented the idea of biblical narration and the connection between that narration and fiction.

In Genesis 2:23, upon first meeting the first woman, Adam exclaims, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Here is the next verse, Genesis 2:24: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.” Who is speaking?

Pre-modern interpreters, particularly Augustine, ascribed verse 24 to Adam.

Augustine attributes the verse to Adam because he believes that the story of the creation of Eve (Genesis 2:21-4) was prophetically revealed to Adam. He writes:

...that ecstasy that God sent into Adam, so that he would fall asleep, is best understood to have been sent for this reason: both so that Adam's mind would share, as it were, in the angelic court, and so that entering into the sanctuary of God he would understand the future. At last awaking, so full of prophecy, when he saw his wife being led to him, he at once erupted... "This is now bone of my bones... Therefore shall a man..." Although the Scripture itself testifies that these words were those of the first man, nonetheless the Lord, in the Gospel of the Lord, declares that God said them... (Matthew 19:4-5), *in order that we understand that* because of the ecstasy that had previously happened in Adam, he was able to utter those words as a prophet inspired by God.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine does not consider splitting verse 24 from verse 23, and he assumes that both are Adam's. Following the Septuagint, which renders the Hebrew "תרדמה" as "*ecstasis*" (*ἔκστασις*),<sup>5</sup> he takes the whole creation of Eve to have been revealed to Adam in a prophetic dream. While Adam *speaks* 2:24, it is God who authored and implanted the verse in him such that when triggered, he would erupt or even vomit it out ("*eructavit continuo*"). According to Augustine, Genesis informs us that Adam spoke verse 24 only so that we will know, in conjunction with Matthew, that Eve's creation was revealed to Adam in an ecstatic trance. Thus, the verse is Adam's only insofar as the physical act of speech production is concerned. It does not reflect his reasoning agency or independent experiences, but rather those of God. Augustine's reading is canonized in Nicholas of Lyra's postilla in the *Glossa*.<sup>6</sup>

*Prima facie*, this reading is strange. First, why should Adam prophesy the future?

He does so nowhere else. (Further, as Shadal notes, a prophecy about leaving one's

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<sup>4</sup> *De Genesi ad litteram*, 9:11.

<sup>5</sup> *Septuagint*, eds. Alfre Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), Gen. 2:21.

<sup>6</sup> *Glossa*, 83.



parents sounds strange from the world's only parentless man.)<sup>7</sup> Second, for the modern reader, linking Adam's speech to marriage clearly reads as a narrator's aside (just like Genesis 32:33, "Therefore the children of Israel eat not the sinew of the thigh-vein"—that's the *narrator* speaking). Third, Christian readers of Genesis have to reckon with Matthew 19:4-5, in which Jesus, proving the impermissibility of divorce, says, "Have ye not read, that he"—that is, God—"which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, 'For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh.'" *That* verse in Matthew attributes Genesis 2:24 to God.

Augustine notably ignores the possibility that the narrator speaks Genesis 2:24. Indeed, almost no ancient or medieval commentator suggests that simple solution,<sup>8</sup> which is an early modern innovation (the lone exception is Radak, who argues *against* Moses being the speaker).<sup>9</sup> Christian commentators are in part influenced here by the Latin and Greek texts, both of which render the imperfect "יעזב," ("leave") and converted perfect "ודבק" ("cleave") as future ("*relinquet*" and "*kataleipsei*"; "*adherebit*" and "proskollethesetai"), which implies that 2:24 is Adam's prophecy of the future and not the narrator's etiology of the present. Some ancient commentators follow Augustine; many do not address the question. Others attribute the line to God directly (the *midrashic* collection *Bereishit Rabbah*, for instance, claims God spoke it to forbid sexual

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<sup>7</sup> S. D. Luzzatto, *Perush SHADAL al Hamishah Humshei Torah*, ed. P. Schlesinger (Tel Aviv: Dvir Tel Aviv, 1965), 27.

<sup>8</sup> This intuitive answer is not the *right* solution. Indeed, there may be no right answer, since Genesis 2:24 is likely a secondary interpolation; the question of who is speaking presupposes that we are dealing with a literary question about the text, rather than a historical question about its evolution. See Angelo Tosato, "On Genesis 2:24," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52.3 (1990), 389-409.

<sup>9</sup> *Torat Hayyim*, 1.53.

immorality to non-Jews, a view canonized in Rashi.)<sup>10</sup> The trouble with this view (and the reason it is *not* the same as attributing the verse to the narrator) is that the text ought to have read, “And God said, ‘therefore...’”

By contrast, things changed considerably in the sixteenth century, specifically with Calvin. He writes, “It is doubted whether Moses here introduces God as speaking, or continues the discourse of Adam, or, indeed, *has added this, in virtue of his office as teacher, in his own person.* The last of these is that which I most approve.”<sup>11</sup> Calvin’s previously unnoticed option quickly becomes the standard.<sup>12</sup> Andrew Willet, for instance, calls verse 24, “the benediction of marriage interserted by Moses.”<sup>13</sup> Matthew Poole, in his annotations, writes, “These are the words of Moses by Divine instinct, or his inference from Adam’s words.”<sup>14</sup> Clericus concurs.<sup>15</sup>

What accounts for this shift from viewing Genesis 2:24 as being the speech of Adam to being the speech of Moses, that is, the narrator? In part, early moderns may simply have consulted the Hebrew, dispelling the tense problem. But more basically, Renaissance commentators took the well-known tradition that Moses transcribed the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1.53.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* vol. 1, trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847-1850), 135-36. *Corpus Reformatum* vol. 51, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, vol. 23 (Brunsvigar: C. S. Schwetschke and Sons, 1882), TK. Cited hereafter in-text.

<sup>12</sup> For the question of Calvin’s influence on English Protestantism in particular, see R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin: that is, A sixfold commentarie vpon Genesis* (London: Printed by John Legat, 1605), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (London: Printed by John Richardson, 1683), note to Genesis 2:24.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Clericus, *Pentateuchus Mosis ex eius translatione cum paraphrasi perpetua*, (Amsterdam, 1735), note to Genesis 2:24.

Pentateuch and exploited it exegetically, constantly using Moses to explain the text's sequential narration of events. For while commentators from Calvin through Clericus agreed that God *authored* the Bible, they were constantly aware, as we see here, of Moses, the mediating writer who narrates the text.

While Calvin's Moses may be a mediator and a narrator, he is definitively *not* an author. That would be God: "the full authority which [the scriptures] ought to possess with the faithful is not recognised, unless they are believed to have come from heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them."<sup>16</sup> As scripture's "author," God stands behind and guarantees its every word (1.7.4). Calvin similarly writes in his commentary on 2 Timothy, "the prophets did not speak of themselves, but as organs [*organa*] of the Holy spirit uttered only that which they had been commissioned from heaven to declare... [scripture] has nothing of human origin mixed in with it [*nec quidquam humani habet admistum*]."<sup>17</sup> Though the point is debated, Edward A. Dowey argues that Calvin "held a mechanical or literal dictation theory of the writing of the Bible," as evidenced by his frequent use of phrases like "*dictante spiritu sancto*" and passages in which "Calvin describes the actual mechanics of inspiration in terms of dictation."<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, various portions of the Bible seem plainly to reflect the human voices and life-experiences of their speakers: Isaiah's poetry does not sound like Amos's, and

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<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of The Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1.7.1. Accessed online at <http://www.reformed.org/books/institutes>. Cited hereafter in-text.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 99, 92, and 90-106 *passim*. See also Puckett, 26-32.

neither sounds like Paul's letters or David's psalms. As David Puckett writes, "Calvin understood stylistic peculiarities as in large part the natural product of the writer's training, the times in which he lives, and the needs of the people."<sup>19</sup> Yet he also explains those peculiarities as the purposeful choice of the Holy Spirit:

In elegance and beauty, nay, splendour, the style of some of the prophets is not surpassed by the eloquence of heathen writers. By examples of this description, the Holy Spirit was pleased to show that it was not from want of eloquence he in other instances used a rude and homely style. But whether you read David, Isaiah, and others of the same class, whose discourse flows sweet and pleasant; or Amos the herdsman, Jeremiah, and Zechariah, whose rougher idiom savours of rusticity; that majesty of the Spirit to which I adverted appears conspicuous in all (*Institutes*, 1.8.2).

That is, both the eloquent David and the rustic Amos give their styles to their respective biblical books because that is how the Holy Spirit chose to reveal the books. To be sure, of course Calvin believed that these men were real, historical personages; nonetheless logically he should not be the least troubled by the suggestion that their books were pseudepigraphic.<sup>20</sup> That is because their particular historical existences do not cause their books' stylistic features; the Holy Spirit's choice to write in their voices does. That is, in speaking of David or Zechariah here, Calvin is not concerned primarily with a biblical author (that must be God, and only God), but with a style or literary structure: "David"

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<sup>19</sup> Puckett, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Writing before the advent of historical criticism, this point would hardly have occurred to Calvin. But now that the religiously orthodox face the problem of biblical criticism, it has acquired a new significance. Bruce M. Metzger, for instance, writes: "It must be acknowledged that the inspiration of the Scriptures is consistent with any kind of form of literary composition that was in keeping with the character and habits of the speaker or writer... If, indeed, an entire book should appear to have been composed in order to present vividly the thoughts and feelings of an important person, there would not seem to be in this circumstance any reason to say it could not be divinely inspired." "Literary Forgeries and Canonical perspectives," cited in Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (Dan Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 110.

names a certain kind of discourse which, for instance, “flows sweet and pleasant,” as “Zechariah” refers to a “rougher idiom” which “savours of rusticity.”

Calvin’s Moses is thus the *narrator* of Genesis. His voice, style, and imprint are to be found everywhere in the biblical text even though it was dictated in discrete words and letters by God. Calvin’s Genesis belongs to Moses in a virtual, purely literary sense: God authored it as if it were written by Moses. Here is how the seventeenth century

Puritan theologian William Ames puts it:

In all those things made known by supernatural inspiration, whether matters of right or fact, God inspired not only the subjects to be written about but dictated and suggested the very words in which they should be set forth. But this was done with a subtle tempering so that every writer might use the manner of speaking which most suited his person and condition.<sup>21</sup>

Moses’s presence in Genesis is thus as a persona that God creates. It is a literary effect, a counterfactual: God dictates the Old Testament verbatim but does so as if each writer were himself composing his respective books. God is Genesis’s author, Moses its narrator.

Although this dual literary structure appears occasionally in earlier commentaries, and has as its basis traditional theological ideas surrounding revelation, it nonetheless has a new prominence, intensity, and subtlety in Protestant exegesis. Calvin focuses intensely on Moses’s rhetorical style throughout his commentary on Genesis, Calvin frequently categorizes Moses’s various rhetorical devices. He debates whether the vexed relationship between the Babel material in Genesis 10 and the longer narrative in Genesis 11 is best described as “*hysteron proton*” or “*prolepsis*” (1.318). Similarly, he writes about Moses’s “metaphor” and *copia* in describing the Flood (1:270 and 1:272), his

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<sup>21</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. by John Dykstra Eusden (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1983), 186.

“understood antithesis” between the saved Noah and the damned world (1:259), his *anthropopatheia* in attributing feelings to God (1:247), his writing “heavens and earth” as “synecdoche” for the whole world (1:109), his “hypallage” in describing the curse of the woman (1:113), his “hypotyposis” in representing God as physically descending (1:245), and so on.

Moreover, these rhetorical figures are intimately related to his particular rhetorical situation. For instance, when Genesis uses place names before those places have been so named, Calvin suggests that Moses is using “prolepsis.” In Genesis 12:8, for instance, Abram relocated to “Bethel,” which received that name (which means, “House of God”) some sixteen chapters later, after Jacob’s dream there. Calvin writes, “there is a manifest *prolepsis* in the word Bethel; for Moses gives the place this name, to accommodate his discourse to the men of his own age” (1:356). Merely by speaking in his familiar, characteristic style, Moses accommodates his audience, whose expectations and horizon of experience he shares.

Calvin similarly resolves a conflict between Genesis 11:31 (“And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there”), and Genesis 12:1, in which God commands Abram to journey to “a land that I will show you.”<sup>22</sup> In the first verse,

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin treats 12:1 as a pluperfect and understands it to have occurred chronologically prior to the end of 11. This suggestion is awkward, but there is no clean reading of the text available here, since the end of 11 and the beginning of 12 are plainly two different sources and directly conflict. For a brilliant and entertaining discussion of the critical question, see Yair Zakovitch, “The Exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans: A Chapter in Literary Archaeology, in *Ki Baruch Hu; Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic*

they seem to know where they are heading—what can God mean by suggesting he will show Abram the destination only later? Calvin explains the former verse as “a *prolepsis* in the expressions of Moses... Moses, *speaking in his own person*, mentions the land, which [was] hitherto unknown to them both” (1:344-45, emphasis added). Two features of this note are remarkable. First, Moses does not do anything special to accommodate his audience; his *prolepsis* simply results from speaking naturally. But second, Calvin has a clear sense of the *narrator’s* presence in Genesis. That is, he understands a verse without any identifiable speaker as reflecting the voice of Moses, who speaks in a particular, rhetorically rich manner.

But Moses’s status as a narrator explains not merely the biblical text’s frequent use of rhetorical figures. Perhaps more surprisingly, Calvin’s Moses can be unreliable. Moses, for instance, “did not treat scientifically of the stars.” That is, the account of the celestial bodies given in Genesis 1 is false. As Calvin writes there,

Moses does not here subtly descant, as a philosopher, on the secrets of nature, as may be seen in these words. First, he assigns a place in the expanse of heaven to the planets and stars; but astronomers make a distinction of spheres, and, at the same time, teach that the fixed stars have their proper place in the firmament. Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons that the star of Saturn, which on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend (1.86).

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*Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan, William W. Hallo and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 429-39.

This passage has attracted attention from historians of theology and science,<sup>23</sup> but I want to emphasize its literary significance. For, in the context of the theory I have been sketching, Moses here is an unreliable narrator, and God an author who is writing a fiction: a plausible but deliberately false narrative intended to be understood, at least by some of its readers, as such. Indeed, Calvin sees unreliable narration and divine fiction as necessary components of revelation: because Moses “was ordained a teacher as well of the unlearned and rude as of the learned, he could not otherwise fulfil his office than by descending to this grosser method of instruction” (1.87). Indeed, while that passage makes it seem like an enlightened audience would deserve a more scientifically precise scripture, in fact even the learned need this fiction: “Moses here addresses himself to our senses, that the knowledge of the gifts of God which we enjoy may not glide away... For as it became a theologian, he had respect to us rather than to the stars” (1.85-86). That is, because scripture regulates and channels our phenomenological experience of the celestial bodies, the fictions of Genesis 1 are, to borrow Hilary Putnam’s phrase, “illusions that belong to the nature of human life itself.”<sup>24</sup>

### **The Literary Stakes**

Tracing a Reformation genealogy for biblical fiction is counter-intuitive, because studies of the Reformation and literature usually start with the Protestant focus on the plain sense. In part, that reflects Barbara Lewalski’s landmark study of the emergence of a distinctly Protestant poetics, which emphasized Reformers’ new attention to the plain sense. Against critical models of the Renaissance “poet as maker of fictions which

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<sup>23</sup> See in particular Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 216-19.

<sup>24</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 20.



allegorically conceal and reveal profoundest philosophic truths; or as the inspired shaper of myths and symbols which shadow forth cosmic truth and divine revelation,” Lewalski begins her book with George Herbert’s “*direct* recourse to the Bible as repository of truth... in heartfelt and *uncontrived (plain)* utterance” (emphasis mine).<sup>25</sup> Lewalski’s argument assumes that the Bible’s importance in the English literary Renaissance derived significantly from its newfound literary ordinariness: accessible rather than esoteric, using recognizable literary tropes rather than scholastic codes, and interpretable by laymen rather than just clerics.<sup>26</sup>

When literary critics do dig beyond Reformers’ aspirations to recover the plain sense of the Bible, they rarely focus on the influence of Reformation theology and exegesis on narration. A number of scholars have explored the relation between the Eucharistic controversy and lyric, and particularly how Protestant, deflationary accounts of what Jesus meant when he said, “this is my body” might have affected poetic conceptions of symbolism and metaphor.<sup>27</sup> Other scholars argue for the importance newly placed on oral, collective liturgy and grammatically precise Bible-reading in fostering literary creativity; on this account, an emphasis on the Word led to a profusion of new words.<sup>28</sup> Yet others have read newly robust literary forms like religious lyric and

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> This argument has a long history. See Israel Baroway, “The Bible as Poetry in the English Renaissance: An Introduction,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 32.4 (1933): 447–80.

<sup>27</sup> See Malcolm Mackenzie Ross, *Poetry and Dogma: The Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century English Poetry* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), and Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> See Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), Timothy Rosendale,

professionalized drama as substitutes for the lost spectacles of medieval Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Narration may have been neglected because it has a relatively quiet seventeenth-century literary history. Devotional poetry, for instance, quite obviously flowered and matured in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, a fact which, to borrow an expression from the medieval commentator Rashi, “cries out, ‘explain me.’”<sup>30</sup> The shifts in narration that start with Luther are subtler. They emerge only through close reading, and their literary history requires moving between apparently distant genres.

But more profoundly, linking Reformation exegesis to newly sophisticated narrators runs afoul of the implicit teleology of much scholarship on early modern narration.<sup>31</sup> Such studies usually plot towards the novel, and the plot in question is usually called “secularization.” The novel, for any number of critics, has been *the* paradigmatically secular form.<sup>32</sup> In *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt, for instance,

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*Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> See Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003) and Stephen Greenblatt, “Remnants of the Sacred in Early Modern England,” in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 337-48, as well as *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> See *Torat Hayyim: Hamishah Humshei Torah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook: 1993), 1. Translations of non-biblical Hebrew are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>31</sup> I should say a word about the accessibility of Luther’s exegetical writings in England. From the “1520’s Luther’s Latin writings were well known to scholars in England.” See William A. Clebsch, “The Earliest Translations of Luther into English,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 56.1 (Jan., 1963), 75. Indeed, the influence I am interested in runs through scholar-playwrights like George Buchanan, who almost certainly read Luther in Latin. Luther’s polemical writings were quickly translated into English, as was his very popular commentary on Galatians. See Preserved Smith, “English Opinion of Luther,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 10.2 (1917), 129-158.

<sup>32</sup> See Justin Neuman’s pithy account of this critical history in “The Novel Against God: Questioning the Form’s Inherent Secularism,” *Culture* 3.2 (Fall, 2009), 8-11, developed

outlines correspondences between an epoch's characteristic metaphysics, politics, and literary forms: deism correlates with the liberal constitutional state and the novel.<sup>33</sup>

Schmitt is not alone. Hannah Arendt writes that the novel demonstrates that our lives are ruled by historical contingency rather than tragic destiny,<sup>34</sup> while scholars like Ian Watt and Michael McKeon trace the secular tendencies of the novel's newly realistic techniques.<sup>35</sup> In a telling moment, William Empson reveals that his doctrinally secular reading of *Paradise Lost* essentially relies on treating the poem as a novel, in which the moral claims of the narrator no longer govern our evaluations of characters' behavior.<sup>36</sup>

Literary and cultural histories that plot towards the novel and secularization do not, of course, neglect Protestant reformers. Both Watt and McKeon, for instance, take Protestant spiritual autobiography to be a key predecessor genre to the novel.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in Keith Thomas's and C. John Sommerville's histories of cultural and social secularization in early modern England, Puritans rationalize and compartmentalize

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in greater length in *Fiction Beyond Secularism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 3-19.

<sup>33</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). For extended similar correspondences see Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A world-historical Meditation*, ed. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2015), sections 4-8 and 13-16; Carl Schmitt, "The Historical Structure of the Contemporary Opposition Between East and West," 100-135, in Schmitt, *The Tyranny of Values and Other Texts*, eds. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 141.

<sup>35</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) and Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> See in particular his discussion of how "all the characters are on trial in any civilized narrative," William Empson, *Milton's God* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), 94-5.

<sup>37</sup> See McKeon, 90-96 and Watt, 74-77.

religion, giving birth to secular modernity.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, these Christian mothers always seem to die during labor. Like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, they facilitate a new generation's supersession of the old, but they themselves are ironically marginalized in the process, left no space in the new order.<sup>39</sup> On a much longer timescale, Marcel Gauchet has described Christianity as a "*religion for departing from religion*," an intermediate form that eventually sacrificed itself to liberate us from a tyrannical God.<sup>40</sup> Talal Asad critiques such accounts of a uniquely secularizing Christianity for paradoxically rewriting secularization as a passion narrative,<sup>41</sup> and Saba Mahmood argues they reflect secularization theory's Eurocentric and Christian parochialism.<sup>42</sup>

In all these accounts, secular modernity absorbs and renders obsolete the intermediate forms of the Reformation. By contrast, I am sketching not a teleological prehistory of the novel, but rather an account of how the demands of Protestant theology and commentary produced independent forms of narratological complexity. The

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<sup>38</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971) and C. J. Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Empson is unusually explicit in regarding Milton this way. See William Empson, "Milton and Bentley: the Pastoral of the Innocence of Man and Nature," in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 195-252.

<sup>40</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5. See also the afterword to Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections," Speech at University of Regensburg, Germany 9/12/2016, accessed online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/15/religion.uk> on 3/28/18; Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Jurgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 20-64 (23).

<sup>42</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), 205.

Protestant commentary tradition contains strategies of narrative mediation and perspectival irony, and even immanent critique that may resemble later, novelistic forms, but stand in no straightforward, genealogical relation to them.

### **What is the Secular For?**

In tracking the rise of the biblical narrator, I am providing the history of a particular literary form. I am also offering a new—really, an old-new—account of the secular: I am suggesting that we define “secular,” as it refers to writers and their literary productions, as “self-conscious about contingency and consequently open in principle to revision.” Notably, this property neither entails necessarily nor is necessarily entailed by some of the traditional properties of the secular: materialism or worldliness, naturalism or rationalism, anti-ecclesiasticism or the advocacy of separating church from state. To clarify this above definition, and the role it plays in the argument that follows, I want to answer three questions:

- 1) Why does the posited biblical narrator of Protestant commentary qualify as secular?
- 2) Why do I propose a definition that differs so significantly from other existing ones? (Or, what I take to be the same question, for what is my proposed definition useful?)
- 3) What is the relation between the religious and (this account of) the secular? What relation does secular literature have to the secularization thesis?

### **Section #1: Why is this narrator secular?**

I am drawing my definition of secularity—a property which applies to texts, arguments and ideas and bridges between the domains of public argumentation and imaginative literature—from the neo-Pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty. In a famous review-essay, Rorty defends privatizing religion because, in “discussion with those

outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.”<sup>43</sup> Rorty focuses on a case raised by Stephen Carter, who writes

One good way to end a conversation—or to start an argument—is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position (preferably a controversial one, such as being against abortion or pornography) because it is required by your understanding of God’s will.<sup>44</sup>

Rorty thinks there is no satisfactory response to such a pronouncement. Unlike certain types of Enlightenment rationalists, Rorty cannot avail himself of the argument that secular people “are appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational” (172). Rather, he thinks Carter’s proposed intervener misguided because the religious nature of beliefs matters just insofar as religion offers what Carter calls a “source of moral knowledge,” whereas, in Rorty’s view, “the epistemology suitable for such a democracy is one in which the only test of a political proposal is its ability to gain assent from people who retain radically diverse ideas about the point and meaning of human life, about the path to private perfection,” such that the better a democratic discourse, the less one’s source of knowledge matters (173).

Rorty’s argument became famous and occasioned much conversation,<sup>45</sup> not only, I think, because of Rorty’s fame and rhetorical force, but also because it confidently offered a secularism capable of ignoring religion entirely. Broadly speaking, critics like

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 168-174: 171. 4. Originally published in *Common Knowledge* 3 (1994), 1-6.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Carter, *Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 21.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 85-91; eds. Jacob L. Goodson and Brad Elliott Stone, *Rorty and the Religious: Christian Engagements with a Secular Philosopher* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012); and Stuart Rosenbaum, “Must Religion be a Conversation-Stopper?” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 102.4 (2009), 393-409.

Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff conceded that appeals to divine or scriptural authority stopped conversations, but they noted that secularists had their own “conversation-stoppers” and that both sides instead needed various bridge principles to make discussion possible across fundamental differences.<sup>46</sup> Convinced by these critiques, Rorty subsequently reformulated it: religion sometimes functions as a conversation-stopper, and “citizens of a democracy should try to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible.”<sup>47</sup>

By contrast, this book argues that appeals to scriptural authority also start conversations. That’s the banal formulation. The radical one would be: just those epistemological features that Rorty finds attractive in secular democratic discourse—its non-foundationalism, sense that all truth claims are provisional, preference for ongoing discourse over doxological anchors—I find in the sixteenth-century Bible commentaries of Luther and Calvin. Moreover, the glories he claims elsewhere for secular literature, which he understands to be uniquely aware of its own fictionality, I identify in the English biblically themed poetry of the seventeenth century, and I trace to orthodox, Protestant theologies of revelation.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us about Speaking and Acting for Religious Reasons,” in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul J. Weithman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 162–181.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1 (2003), 141–149: 148. See also Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> See particularly Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 3-23; “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,” *NLH* 10.1 (1978), 141-160; and most explicitly, “The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture,” accessed online at <http://olincenter.uchicago.edu/pdf/rorty.pdf>.

Those orthodox theories of revelation, I argue, contain a powerful mode of immanent critique, the theological doctrine of accommodation. In inventing biblical narration, Protestant commentators drew on this traditional idea, which posits, in its most abstract terms, that a perfect and infinite God must adapt Godself (and God's revelation) to finite and fallen humans. The Christian doctrine of accommodation is at least as old as the New Testament itself.<sup>49</sup> For instance, in Matthew 19, Jesus tells a group of Pharisees that, based on Genesis 2:24, divorce is forbidden ("Have ye not read, that [God] said, 'For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?' [Genesis 2:24] Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:4-6)).<sup>50</sup> When the Pharisees ask how he squares this prohibition with the Mosaic law of divorce in Deuteronomy 24, Jesus replies:

Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery (Matthew 19:8-9, KJV).

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<sup>49</sup> The literature on accommodation is now large. See Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). Accommodation shows up in non-Christian late antiquity as well. Ford Lewis Battles and others cite, for instance, passage in Philo about anthropomorphism ("God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31 (1977), 19-38). Others have argued that the Church fathers draw on the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition (which had long been concerned with howhere. See especially John Reumann, *The Use of oikonomia and Related Terms in Greek Sources to about A.D. 100 as a Background for Patristic Applications*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1957) and "Oikonomia as 'Ethical Accommodation' in the Fathers, and its Pagan Backgrounds," *Studia Patristica* 3.1 (1961), 370-79.

<sup>50</sup> Here and elsewhere, I follow the King James Version except when otherwise noted.



Jesus' substantive conclusion, that divorce is permitted only in cases of adultery, would likely have been unexceptionable. The position is identical to Beit Shammai's in the Mishnah, where it is presented as a plain-sense reading of Deuteronomy.<sup>51</sup> But strikingly, Jesus chooses instead to argue that Moses modified the law because of the Israelites' weakness. The Mishnaic parallel shows the Jesus need not have justified his position on such radical grounds. Unlike Beit Shammai, he deliberately opens the possibility that the entire Mosaic code might be similarly relativized.

Indeed, within this passage, accommodation's destabilizing force becomes evident. The episode contains multiple types of accommodation, for it continues:

His disciples say unto him, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry." But he said unto them, "All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Matthew 19:10-12).

Jesus now applies rhetorical accommodation, which he first uses as a historical explanation for Deuteronomy, to his own words. Only some of his contemporaries can handle the full, anti-marriage implication of his words, and so he deliberately speaks in esoteric half truths. Initially, Jesus defended his overturning of Deuteronomy by reference to Genesis. But if the disciples ideally ought to become "eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake," then indeed not only Deuteronomic divorce but also Edenic matrimony is a conditional dispensation. Once a given scriptural passage is relativized as an accommodation, *all* scripture is, at least potentially, open to being similarly dismissed.

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<sup>51</sup> See Mishnah Gittin 9:10 in *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah*, ed. Hanokh Albeck (Tel Aviv: Dvir Co., 1955), 304.

Accommodation thus contains within itself a radical, destabilizing attitude to scriptural authority. To be sure, throughout its history, it rarely functioned that radically: in particular, from late antiquity on, Christians mostly focused on Jesus' initial, limited account of accommodation as motivated specifically by the *Jews'* weaknesses. But returning to Rorty, I think it is striking to compare Matthew 19 with his caricature of bad, religious conversation-stopping. He writes, in his later essay,

I am not sure it counts as having... reasons if the person who finds such marriage inconceivable is unwilling or unable even to discuss, for example, the seeming tension between Leviticus 22:18 and I Corinthians 13... I would not consider myself to be seriously discussing politics with my fellow-citizens if I simply quoted passages from Mill at them, as opposed to using those passages to help me articulate my views... As Stout properly reminds us, this kind of reply is not confined to the religious. It is the one I should have to make if I were asked why I believe that the aim of political life should be the greatest happiness of the greatest number. So, instead of saying that religion was a conversation-stopper, I should have simply said that citizens of a democracy should try to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible. We should do our best to keep the conversation going without citing unarguable first principles, either philosophical or religious (147-49).

First, Rorty's description of how Christians *ought* to act (but do not) neatly corresponds to how Jesus does in Matthew 19. That is, accommodation makes it impossible to accept Deuteronomy 24 (and in turn, Genesis 1 and even Matthew 19 itself) as simply authoritative, since it opens the possibility that its directive was temporary and provisional. One can only know which verses remain authoritative through hermeneutic reasoning. Indeed, in this sense scripture is *less* foundational than, say, Rorty's utilitarianism, since no accommodation was involved in the formulation of the latter, and thus its application to a given context does not necessarily require parallel questioning. Accommodation offers a specifically religious form of anti-authoritarian discourse.

This anti-authoritarian tendency in Christian theology has a literary corollary in the idea of the biblical narrator.<sup>52</sup> The shared epistemological core of both is that the reader of Calvin's or Luther's Genesis cannot in principle know whether a given statement of fact or normative pronouncement has the author's guarantee or is merely the narrator's. In this sense, Calvin and Luther draw on an existing commentarial tradition. They also, however, radicalize that tradition. Accommodation, in their hands, refers not so much to what Moses *does* as to what he *is*, not discrete acts of distortion but the whole filtering medium of his human personality, and the impression it leaves on the text in innumerable details. Even as Matthew 19 posits a text theoretically open to objection at any given point, it also imagines that we can isolate particular acts of accommodating distortion. By contrast, for Luther and Calvin, Genesis becomes constantly literarily mediated in numerous low-level ways—diction, idiom choice, perspective, rhetoric, etc. Protestant accommodation makes the Bible occasionally unreliable in profound ways, but it also make it quietly but uniformly narrated and mediated.

## **Section #2: On Defining the Secular**

As I have defined it, “secular literature” is not inherently opposed to religious commitment or scripture, is not the exclusive provenance of modernity, and does not have a singular history or genealogy. (That is not to say it is ahistorical; one can tell quite specific, contingent stories about when and where it emerges at particular moments, and I tell one such story in my chapter on Luther.) In all those senses, it departs from some of

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<sup>52</sup> In this regard, my argument closely parallels that found in Victoria Silver, *Imperfect Sense: The Predicament of Milton's Irony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). The major differences between this study and hers are (1) my argument about Protestant commentary identifies the narrator within that discourse already and (2) my interest in a wider array of theological sources and literary authors in the seventeenth century provide a more historically precise and internally variegated account of the core dynamic.

the familiar ideas of the “secularization thesis,” which, among both its proponents and detractors, has shaped debates over secularity since the term’s rise to prominence.<sup>53</sup> In defining “secular” thus, I might sound a little like Humpty Dumpty imperiously pronouncing, “When I use a word... it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less,” and readers may wonder, as Alice does, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

In defense of my choice, I would make three interrelated points. First, I think the critiques to which traditional definitions of categories like “religious” and “secular” have been subjected have shown that those categories *cannot* be used neutrally or straightforwardly. I am thinking particularly of scholars in religious studies who, particularly following after Talal Asad, have argued that “religion” is a modern, constructed category, which has a history entangled with Protestantism and European imperialism. Instead of applying terms like “religious” or “secular” to various contexts, the argument runs, scholars ought to scrutinize the term itself, tracing how its

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<sup>53</sup> Major, early statements of the secularization thesis of relevance to early modern studies are Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. and trans. Stephen Kalberg, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010) and Jacob Burkhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990). For recent evaluations of the secularization thesis with regards to the seventeenth century, see Philip Gorski, “Historicizing the Secularization Debate,” *American Sociological Review* 65 (2000): 138-67 and Blair Worden, “The Question of Secularization,” in *A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration*, ed. Alan Houston and Steven Pincus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 20-40. For an influential recent reconsideration and reformulation of the secularization thesis (though it may not understand itself that way), see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

construction and deployments change over time.<sup>54</sup> Exactly how much so-called “critical religious studies” have shown is debatable but at a minimum, they suggest that even an account of the secular as familiar as commonsensical as Charles Taylor’s is ultimately subject to the critique that its categories are Taylor’s impositions, rather than belonging organically to the history he considers.<sup>55</sup>

That said, I think that it would be a mistake for scholars to treat early modern religion or secularity *only* discursively. That seems to me to over-compensate for the problematically *sui generis* status of traditional religious studies: whereas the field was once unique in grounding itself in an ahistorical essence, now it becomes unique in its total refusal of etic categories or concepts. (Indeed, scholars from critical religious studies forsake the purity of an emic perspective whenever they work on something other than

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<sup>54</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). In this context, of course, see also Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003). Another important theoretical formulation from the same moment is Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For recent formulations of the argument, see Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2005); and Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For examples of work in this vein, see Leora Batnizky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2012); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018); and Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex & Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> In this regard, see especially the discussion of modernization and secularization stories in, Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

religion: if Daniel Boyarin were to apply his strict, philological suspicion with regards to late antique “religion” to his earlier work on “gender” and “sexuality,” how much would survive of *Carnal Israel*?<sup>56</sup>) Rather, I think scholarship on early modern religion and secularity ought to be forthright about the normative commitments and intellectual perspectives that condition the production of its definitions. In this regard I follow Jonathan Z. Smith’s suggestion that religion “is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define... There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.”<sup>57</sup>

Let me conclude, then, by stating as simply as possible the designs of this project on its readers. The cultural problematic that informs this book, at its simplest, is the status of the Bible in American culture. One of the major divisions in American society is over the status and meaning of the Bible. For some people it is the authoritative word of God, and for others, it is an outdated relic of a primitive culture. That’s overly schematic, of course, and yet the cultural clash is real. I study past literatures and religious formations (in part) because they occasionally contain cultural possibilities that challenge what seem today like basic binaries. The Bible of Protestant commentators and poets offers a surprising, refreshing third way in conversations about religion and secularism. It’s a way

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: university of California Press, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179-97: 194. See also Thomas A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion—and Vice Versa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), which makes this argument in great detail and informs this dissertation considerably. See Raphael Magarik, “Normative Commitments: A Philosophical Vision for the Study of Religion” *Los Angeles Review of Books* 9.5.2016, accessed online at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/normative-commitments-a-philosophical-vision-for-the-study-of-religion> on 5.6.2019.

of reading the Bible that, at least in theory, ought to satisfy even some quite fundamentalist intuitions about the Bible's origin and meaning, while nonetheless making room for internal critique, for doubt and uncertainty, even for a certain amount of subversion and irony. I hope I can persuade some readers that much of what they think is special about secular literature actually turns up in Luther, Calvin, John Milton and Lucy Hutchinson. Meanwhile, I hope to persuade others that their commitments to received, revealed truths constrain how they interpret religious texts much less than they might have thought.

## Chapter 1: Free Indirect Revelation: The Reformation Moses and the Narration of Genesis

### The Humblest Writer on Earth: Luther, Calvin, and the Mosaic Paradox

How does one introduce the Bible? In his 1616 commentary to Genesis, the Separatist clergyman Henry Ainsworth began with a biography of “the first writer of holy scripture.” Moses, we learn, was “an Hebrew born in Egypt, about 2432. yeres after the creation of the World: and before our savior Christs coming in the flesh, 1496. yeres.”<sup>58</sup> Ainsworth provides Moses’s genealogy, the origin of his name, his upbringing, his curriculum vitae, and the details of his death. In the tiresome manner familiar to attendees of academic talks, Ainsworth then reflects on each of the great man’s books (in Genesis, for instance, “we have the image of a natural man, fallen from God, into the bondage of syn”).

By beginning with Moses, Ainsworth unusually emphasizes the role of scripture’s “writer.” Augustine, for instance, begins his commentary on Genesis quite differently:

Sacred Scripture, taken as a whole, is divided into two parts, as our Lord intimates when He says: “A scribe instructed in the kingdom of God is like a householder who brings forth from his storeroom things new and old” [Matthew 13:52]. These new and old things are also called testaments. In all the sacred books, we should consider the eternal truths that are taught, the facts that are narrated, the future events that are predicted, and the precepts or counsels that are given. In the case of a narrative of events, the question arises as to whether everything must be taken according to the figurative sense only, or whether it must be expounded and defended also as a faithful record of what happened.<sup>59</sup>

Augustine begins not with the writer but the text. Nothing could be further from

Ainsworth’s exact historical placement of “the first writer of holy scripture” Moses than

Augustine’s emphasis on scripture’s eternal truths and his series of passive, agent-less

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<sup>58</sup> Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations Upon the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis* (London, 1616), fol. \*\*\*2r. Cited hereafter in-text by folio number.

<sup>59</sup> *St. Augustine, the Literal Meaning of Genesis* vol. 1, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 19.



verbs (“*quae ibi aeterna intimentur, quae facta narrentur, quae futura praenuntientur, quae agenda praecipiantur vel admoneantur*”). Scripture’s duality (“*bipartita est*”) similarly effaces the authorial divisions within the Old Testament that Ainsworth’s biographical opening foregrounds. Whereas Ainsworth centers the writer, Augustine focuses on the learned reader or scribe (“*scribam*”), who displaces the text’s original writers. However the scriptures were initially written, now they belong to the learned reader and are figured as the householder’s collection or treasury (“*thesauro*”).

But Augustine’s coordination of the literary assertion of scripture’s duality (“*bipartita est*”) with the hermeneutic question of deciding between the text’s literal and figurative meanings should prompt a corresponding question about Ainsworth: what follows hermeneutically from Moses’s biography? In particular, Moses’s literary role seems hermeneutically trivial for an orthodox Christian, since, after all, whoever wrote scripture, God authored it. “The things which Moses wrote, were not his own,” Ainsworth writes, “but the Law of the Lord, by his hand.” But if Moses merely took divine dictation, why do the particulars of his life matter? We do not write the intellectual biographies of stenographers.

Moses’s biography matters to Ainsworth because correct interpretation depends upon studying Moses’s Hebrew and appreciating its historical specificity.<sup>60</sup> “The literal sense of Moses Hebrew,” Ainsworth writes, “(which is the tongue wherein he wrote the Law,) is the ground of all interpretation.” That ground is not universal: “that language hath figures, and proprieties of speech, different from ours: those therefore in the first

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<sup>60</sup> For more on Ainsworth’s exegetical method and Hebraism, see Richard A. Muller, “Henry Ainsworth and the Development of Protestant Exegesis in the Early Seventeenth Century” in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 156-75.

place are to be opened; that the natural meaning of the scripture being knowen, the mysteries of godlynes therin implied, may the better be discerned” (\*\*2v). Ainsworth was indeed a skilled Hebraist. After moving to Amsterdam in 1590s, he may have studied with his Jewish neighbors and certainly joined the group of expatriate English Hebraists that included Hugh Broughton, Matthew Slade, and John Paget.<sup>61</sup> These commentators, all of whom working in Reformed interpretive tradition and reading Calvin’s Bible commentaries, brought a new philological rigor and literary sensitivity to the Christian study of the Hebrew Bible, one that newly exposed its distinctive linguistic and stylistic features.

Indeed, the majority of his preface catalogues Scripture’s “figures and proprieties of speech,” which he does by comparing versions of the same text found in multiple biblical books. So, for instance, since Moses calls one of Issachar’s sons “Iob” in Genesis 46:13 but “Jashub” in Numbers 26:24, we learn about the text’s frequent “change of names, words, and letters; as also of number, time, person, and the like.” Other comparisons help identify Hebrew’s extreme concision (“the original tongue affecteth brevity”), synonymous language (“words and speeches that differ in sound, but accord in sense”), and interchangeable use of plural or a “principall” singular when addressing a group, and similar philological points. Significantly, as he introduced this series of observations with Moses’s biography, Ainsworth concludes this section of his preface, “I have chiefly labored in these annotations upon Moses, to explain his words and speeches, by conference with himself, and the other Prophets & Apostles, all which are

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<sup>61</sup> “Ainsworth, Henry (1569–1622),” Michael E. Moody in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee online ed., ed. David Cannadine, (Oxford: OUP, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/240> (accessed July 13, 2016).

commenters upon his laws.” Even though Ainsworth’s philology lumps together different writers and even testaments, the figure of Moses grounds the theoretical unity of his linguistic project.

But Moses’s unifying presence itself emerges from the Biblical texts. Whereas modern biographical introductions ground literary texts in a historical context, Ainsworth’s biography of Moses is entirely biblically derived, as indicated by the pack of scriptural citations that crowd the outside margin of his page. Moses is thus an author in Foucault’s sense of “a certain functional principle by which... one limits, excludes and chooses,”<sup>62</sup> though he is not the one limiting, excluding, or choosing: the authority behind Moses is always God’s. Moses thus names a paradox. The Bible’s style is his, but only because God dictated it that way. The genitive construction, five books of Moses, is ambiguously either subjective or objective, describing the Pentateuch’s owner or their content.

In this chapter, I take up this Mosaic paradox. In its radical form, the problem originated in Reformation Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century, such that understanding Ainsworth requires going back to Luther and Calvin. I argue that the Bible’s mediation is far more central to them than has been previously recognized. In particular, the pressure of *sola Scriptura* drove commentators to find intradiegetic models for their mediation—in particular, narrator-figures. While Protestant appeals to the direct reading of Scripture’s plain sense implied that commentaries were superfluous and even dangerous, the combination of new religious sects, intense theological debate, and lay

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<sup>62</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124-127

Bible readers increased the demand for new commentaries. Responding to this pressure, commentators were increasingly forced to ground their own mediations in the Biblical text itself, newly emphasizing how the text commented upon and mediated itself. Not for nothing does Ainsworth describe the “Prophets & Apostles” as “comenters upon [Moses’] laws; Protestants increasingly imagine the Bible as possessing its own, internal commentarial structure. Extra-textual mediation could thus be seen as a continuation of biblical writing, rather than an alternate source of authority. Frequently, those arguments focused on narrators—in the case of the Pentateuch, Moses, a figure poised in between God and the biblical text who implicitly provided an intra-textual model for Protestant commentators.

The first half of the chapter examines Luther; the second, Calvin. Luther’s commentary on Genesis frequently highlights Moses’ role in mediating the divine text. Luther uses Moses, as well as character-narrators drawn from Genesis’s stories themselves, to explain the text’s theological and stylistic problems. Defending church traditions from hardline Reformers like Müntzer, who radicalized Luther’s own arguments about the autonomy and sufficiency of Scripture, Luther ingeniously writes church mediation and tradition into the biblical text itself, creating scriptural sources for supplementing scripture. Doing so allows him at once to condemn Catholic departures from the Bible and to defend Protestant church tradition, but it also leads to a newly sophisticated narratology of Scripture. His theology requires Luther to pay new attention to the Bible’s narration and describe effects that are almost novelistic—most intriguingly, forms of free indirect discourse.

Luther and Calvin could not be more different as commentators. Luther's commentaries are really collected sermons: they repeat themselves frequently, plainly started as speeches, and are often manifestly driven by his immediate homiletic concerns. He wears his learning lightly, although perhaps that reflects not a choice but a limitation. By contrast, Calvin is a commentator's commentator: terse, dense, and immensely erudite, concerned with exegesis as well as application, carefully systematic about theology and interpretation.

Nonetheless, on crucial points Luther and Calvin agree. They both place Moses at the center of their commentaries, they both attribute to him facts about Genesis's style and content. Most importantly, they both see his writing as entirely the work of the Holy Spirit, but they both also clearly differentiate his perspective and contributions from God's. For Calvin, these points emerge out of his distinctive, particular theories of divine accommodation. Further, Calvin's engagement with the commentary tradition, as well as his afterlife through English Reformed commentaries like Ainsworth's, help us understand how the new interest in biblical narration emerges from multiple, parallel Reformation debates over theology—in Calvin's case, a reconfiguration of the traditional doctrine of accommodation.

**“And he spoke through his cloak, most deep and distinguished”: Who judges Cain?**

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.

—Genesis 4:6-7 (NRSV)

God's exhortation to Cain provoked sixteenth-century Christians to vociferous debate. Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536) took it as the prime biblical proof-text that humans have free will and some agency in salvation, ideas utterly anathema to Martin

Luther (1483-1546) and other early Reformers.<sup>63</sup> But its plain sense ought to have been clear enough, and especially the answer to the question: who is speaking? Because God prefers Abel's offering to his older brother's, Cain "was very angry, and his countenance fell." In response, God delivers the above sermon of warning and encouragement (though to little effect; Cain nonetheless kills Abel). The beginning of verse 6, "the Lord said to Cain" explicitly marks the speech as God's to Cain, as parallel phrases mark God's other utterances to Cain in the chapter. Indeed, God is playfully quoting God's own earlier speech to Eve ("yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you," 3:16); this line is apparently one of God's favorite expressions. If God and Cain have, so to speak, a failure to communicate, there is at least no question about who is doing the communicating.

It is thus altogether strange that Luther, in his *Lectures on Genesis*,<sup>64</sup> insists that *Adam* speaks the three admonishing couplets of verses 6-7:

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<sup>63</sup> See the documents in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

<sup>64</sup> The word "his" requires nuancing, since, as Denis Kaiser writes, "it is well-known among scholars that the present text of Luther's Genesis lectures reflects the notes of his students and the editorial work of the publishers rather than what he himself had actually written." "He Spake and it was Done': Luther's Creation Theology in His 1535 Lectures on Genesis 1:1-2:4," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 24/2 (2013): 116-36 (118). On the most skeptical view, see Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung und ihre Herausgeber* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936), which concludes that later editing makes the *Enarrationes* unreliable as a source for Luther's theology. Recent scholarship has pushed back on this extreme view; "Meinhold's conclusions have been criticized as a heavy-handed and flawed analysis," which sprung from Meinhold's theologically motivated assumption that Luther himself did not believe in literal inspiration, as some language in the Genesis lectures would indicate. John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State

When Cain clearly showed his disaffection for his brother, his parent Adam reproved him. I believe these words were spoken by Adam himself. Moses says that these words were spoken by the Lord, because Adam had now been accounted just and had been endowed with the Holy Spirit. What he now says is in accordance with the Word of God and through the Holy Spirit is correctly declared to have been said by God. Similarly today, those who preach the Gospel are not themselves directly the preachers, but Christ speaks and preaches through them.<sup>65</sup>

This reading contradicts Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349), Luther's first source in writing his own commentary: "This kind warning is ordained by *God himself for Cain himself*, so that he is given the opportunity for penitence, as is said."<sup>66</sup>

In this essay, I explain why Luther contradicts both commentarial tradition and the verses' plain sense here. Exploring Luther's theory of how human beings minister and

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University Press, 2008), 6, and see his arguments for the text's value in understanding Luther, 6-9. See also John A. Maxfield, "Martin Luther's swan song: Luther's students, Melancthon, and the publication of the lectures on Genesis (1544-1554)," *Lutherjahrbuch* 81 (2014): 224-248, and the discussion of this question in Mickey Leland Mattox, "*Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs*": *Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesin, 1535-1545* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 263-73. For the purposes of this article, it may not much matter how exactly the *Enarrationes* came together. Although the question of whether these represent Luther's views is important, the distinctive, narrative theology of this important, early Reformation commentary is worth delineating on its own terms.

<sup>65</sup> *Luther's Works Volume 1: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 262: "Cum itaque satis ostenderet se alieno in Fratrem esse animo, admonetur ab Adam parente. Credo enim verba haec ab ipso Adam esse dicta. Ideo autem a Domino dicit Moses esse dicta, quod Adam iam erat iustificatus et donatus Spiritu sancto. Quae igitur secundum verbum Dei et ex Spiritu sancto dicte, recte Deus dixisse dicitur. Sicut hodie qui docent Euangelium, non ipsi simpliciter Doctores sunt, sed Christus in eis loquitur et docet." *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* vol. 42 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1911), 194. Hereafter, I cite both Pelikan's English translation (*LW*) and the Weimar edition (*WA*) by volume and page number, providing the Latin in the notes, where I also discuss any significant discrepancies.

<sup>66</sup> "Hic ponitur ipsius Cain benigna admonitio ab ipso Deo, ut daretur sibi poenitentiae occasio, cum dicitur." *Bibliorum sacrorum cum glossa ordinaria*, vol. 1 (Venice, 1603), 114. Cited hereafter in-text by volume and page number. For more on Lyra, see Philip D. W. Krey and Lesley Smith, ed., *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), Deanna Copeland Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), and especially Thomas Marian Kalita, *The Influence of Nicholas of Lyra on Martin Luther's Commentary on Genesis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1985).

interpret revelation for their particular circumstances, I argue that Luther imagines the Pentateuch as densely and complexly mediated by human beings—primarily Moses, but also a network of character-narrators who play important roles in the primeval, pre-Mosaic Church. In many instances, noticing this mediation challenges a popular image of Luther’s exegesis as focused on the “plain sense.” Instead, I argue, Luther’s Genesis is in crucial ways remarkably indirect and sophisticated; his theology of revelation and commentarial practice ultimately create a narratologically complex Bible, one in which a divine author coexists with complex and ironic patterns of human narration.

Returning to Genesis 4, notice how not only does Luther consistently attribute God’s words in Genesis 4 to human speakers, he also appeals to their particular human standpoints in explaining what they mean. Where the biblical text has God asking Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Luther imagines the following domestic tear-jerker:

A parricide has now been committed, and perhaps murdered Abel has been lying unburied for some days. Therefore when Cain returns to his parents at the usual time, but Abel does not return, the worried parents ask Cain: “You have arrived, but where is Abel. You return home, but Abel does not return. The herd is without its shepherd. Now tell us where he is.” At this point Cain gives vent to his displeasure and very disrespectfully replied: “I don’t know. I am not his keeper, am I?”<sup>67</sup>

Strikingly, in attributing “God’s” words to human speakers, Luther does not imagine these humans merely as vessels for the divine message. Rather, their circumstances and psychologies come to shape how they express divine messages, as well as how their

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<sup>67</sup> *LW*, 1.273. “Parricidium iam perpetratum est et fortasse iacuit occisus Habel aliquot diebus inhumatus. Cum igitur Cain ad Parentes redit consueto tempore, Habel autem non redit, solliciti Parentes interrogant Cain: Tu ades: At ubi est Habel? Tu redis domum: Habel non redit. Grex sine pastore est: Dic igitur, ubi sit? Hic Cain indignabundus parum reverenter respondet: Nascio; Num ego sum custos eius?” *WA*, 42:202. Pelikan renders “parricidium” as “murder,” presumably because its sense of “murder of a near relative” sounds strange to a modern ear. But it is better to be exact here. I thank Samuel Zeitlin for prodding me on this point. Note that earlier in this lecture, Luther took the speaker to be just Adam, here he imagines both parents speaking; he is inconsistent on this point, though Eve remains peripheral.



interlocutors respond. Cain's defiant lie, for instance, is made possible by Adam's worried ignorance: when Cain says he does not know where his brother is, Luther comments, "Cain thinks that his deed was unknown to his father Adam because Adam is a human being; about the Divine Majesty he could not have had this thought."<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, Adam uses a pastoral metaphor that applies with special poignancy to the shepherd Abel. Similarly, in Luther's telling, the question "Where is your brother Abel?" is not just God's dispassionate, judicial demand, but also Adam's worried parental plea for information. Describing "Adam's" first admonition to Cain, Luther writes:

Without a doubt these words were spoken with unusual sternness. Adam sees that his son is impatient of his disgrace and that he is grieving because of his lost prestige. He also realizes what the tempter, who had inflicted such great injury on man in the state of perfection, is now able to achieve in a depraved nature. Therefore he became deeply concerned and began his very earnest sermon.<sup>69</sup>

Adam's sermon emerges from the first man's own experience. He remembers his own fall and reasons from it *a fortiori* to his already depraved son. If Luther's attribution of God's words to Adam is an exegetical puzzle, the puzzle raises broader questions about how humans mediate and process revelation.

To be sure, Luther unequivocally attributes inspiration to Adam. In the process of attributing Genesis 4:6-7 to Adam, he writes, "Adam had now been accounted just and had been endowed with the Holy Spirit." Whatever account we give of Luther's odd humanization of God's speeches in Genesis 4, they remain authoritatively God's. Yet it is nonetheless intriguing to note the passage's *other* slippage between a divine and a human speaker. Whereas Luther first writes, "*Moses* says that these words were spoken by the

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<sup>68</sup> *LW*, 1.286. "Putat enim, quod patrem Adam tanquam hominem lateat factum suum: De divina maiestate id non potuit cogitare." *WA*, 4:211.

<sup>69</sup> *LW*, 1.262-3. "Ac sine dubio cum singulari gravitate haec verba dicta sunt. Videt enim Adam Filium esse impatientem contumeliae: videt, eum dolore de amissa dignitate ac sentit, quid nunc Tentator possit in corrupta natura, qui tantum nocuerat homini adhuc integro. Itaque sollicitus est et instituit gravissimam concionem..." *WA*, 42:194.

Lord,” he then writes that Adam’s speech is “through the *Holy Spirit*... correctly declared to have been said by God.”<sup>70</sup> But who is speaking in Genesis generally: the human Moses or the divine Holy Spirit? If Adam acquires a surprisingly expansive role in mediating God’s word—indeed, one that draws on his distinctive, human experiences and relationships—then, I argue below, so does Moses.

### **Moses, character-narrator: Toward a Distinctive Reformation Narratology**

In what follows, I link Luther’s readings of inspired characters to his broader understanding of Mosaic inspiration.<sup>71</sup> Luther repeatedly assigns God’s words to human characters: Adam, Lamech, Noah, Methusaleh, and Shem, to name just the first examples. This phenomenon was already noticed by Jaroslav Pelikan, who explained it as Luther’s conservative attempt to buttress the authority of ministerial mediation against radicals who claimed direct divine inspiration.<sup>72</sup> But I argue that Pelikan collapses a crucial distinction between a direct, necessarily salvific encounter with God’s word, and the mediated encounter with it through a minister.

Moreover, I argue that Luther understood the mediation of characters like Adam as fundamentally continuous with the mediation of Genesis’s narrator, Moses. Just as there are ministers *in* Genesis, so too there is a minister *of* Genesis; just as characters

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<sup>70</sup> See above, n3.

<sup>71</sup> For a broad overview of Luther’s exegetical writings, see Siegfried Raeder, “The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther,” in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 363-406. For Luther’s immediate exegetical antecedents, see David C. Steinmetz, “Things Old and New: Tradition and Innovation in Constructing Reformation Theology,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 19 (2017), 5-18 as well as David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986).

<sup>72</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer’s Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 101-106.

mediate God's speech and inflect them with their own humanity, so too Moses mediates the divine inspiration that, on Luther's account, lies behind Genesis itself.<sup>73</sup> While God authorizes every word, Moses' humanity inflects how he writes.<sup>74</sup> In particular, he is influenced by his ministry: his personal experiences of and emotions triggered by the Genesis material, and his rhetorical designs to improve his human readers and bring them to salvation.

Of course, the tradition attaching Moses to the Pentateuch is not original to Luther. Yet that tradition is not the same as identifying Moses as the text's *narrator*. The "of" in "five books of Moses" can mean several things: that Moses wrote the Pentateuch in just the manner Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, that Moses was the scribe copying down God's dictation and left no personal mark on the text, that Moses was just the leader of

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<sup>73</sup> The question of Luther and biblical inspiration is vexed by a polemical history. In Miika Ruokanen's typology, liberal "Neo-Protestant" interpreters, who claimed that for Luther, the divine word was necessarily present-day and existential, such that the Bible was not strictly God's word, warred with conservatives insisting on the "total inerrancy of the authoritative word and text of the Bible." See Ruokanen, "Does Luther Have a Theory of Biblical Inspiration?" *Modern Theology* 4.1 (1987), 1-16: 1-3. For a contemporary assessment of this debate, see Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretative Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004). See also Ulrich Asendorf's argument that "in the course of existential theology, the word of God was generally kerygmaticized, thoroughly and in full harmony with one side of Luther's understanding of the word of God... in recent times the interest, in a kind of reaction, is clearly once again turning to the word as scripture." "Das Wort Gottes bei Luther im Sakramentalen Zusammenhang Patristischer Theologie: Systematische und ökumenische Überlegungen zu Luthers Schrift 'Daß diese Worte Christi' (1527)," *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (1993), 31-47: 32, quoted and translated in Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity*, 33n2.

<sup>74</sup> My account builds on Mickey Mattox, "Hearer of the Triune God: Martin Luther's Reading of Noah," *Luther Digest: An Annual Abridgement of Luther Studies* vol. 20 supp. (2012), 49-70, who discusses "divine-human mutuality" in Luther's interpretation of Noah (66). By extending this analysis to the figure of Moses, the narrating presence throughout Luther's Genesis, I argue that what Mattox calls the "experiential and subjective side of Luther's [hermeneutic]" is not merely evident in the stories of particular characters; for Luther, it is woven into the structure of biblical narrative (67).

the Israelites at the time of the revelation (in the way we would refer to *Richard II* as an Elizabethan play), and so on. By calling Luther's Moses the narrator of Genesis, I mean, specifically and paradoxically, that Moses's voice, style, and imprint are everywhere in the biblical text despite the fact that it was apparently dictated literally by God. That is, Luther's Genesis is Moses's in a virtual, purely literary sense: God authored it as *if* it were written by Moses. Moses's presence in Genesis is thus an effect or persona that God creates—that is, he is Genesis's narrator. This conception may not have been unique to Luther, but it was not the common interpretation of the tradition of Mosaic authorship.

Luther specifically appeals to Moses' humanity to explain the text's stylistic peculiarities. Redundancies and elaborations in an otherwise famously terse and concise text, for instance, result from Moses' heightened emotions when contemplating the events he describes, as well as his rhetorical attempt to evoke the same emotions in the reader.<sup>75</sup> Further, Moses' inspired narration does not merely parallel the primitive ministries of Adam and his inheritors; the two forms of mediation are intertwined. In particular, Luther sometimes attributes a sort of "free indirect style" to the biblical narrator.<sup>76</sup> Thus, not only does Moses' perspective shape Genesis's narration; so,

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<sup>75</sup> In M. H. Abrams's terms, Luther is giving both an "expressive" and a "pragmatic" account of these stylistic anomalies. In other words, Moses is imitating his mental states literarily and thus encouraging readers to imitate them psychologically ("Orientation of Critical Theories" in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3-31).

<sup>76</sup> Attention to free indirect style (also called free indirect speech or discourse) has typically concentrated on the nineteenth-century novel. See Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977). I will use "style" throughout because I am interested in the narrator's adopting the perspective and vocabulary of characters within the text (that is, what Gerard Genette calls "focalization"), rather than the more specific phenomenon of rendering their (imagined) internal monologues as narrated prose without

occasionally, do characters' voices. Finally, since Luther does not sharply divide between the conveying of ethical instruction and the narration of history,<sup>77</sup> the character-ministers in a sense narrate portions of Genesis as well. Taken together, in his most surprising departures from the commentary tradition, Luther imagines Genesis's narratological structure as newly complex. On Luther's account, Genesis is densely and intricately mediated by human narrators.<sup>78</sup>

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a speech tag. See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>77</sup> The classic discussion of the continuity of narration and homiletic is Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 19-25. On the usual account, this conflation of the text's literal and ethical content represents the collapse of the medieval exegetical system, particularly its division between the "literal" and "spiritual" meaning. But Christopher Ocker claims that late medieval scholasticism anticipated this shift and is essentially continuous with sixteenth-century exegesis. See *Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>78</sup> The exegetical phenomena I discuss thus contradict Debora Kuller Shuger's claim that "Renaissance biblical scholarship evinces almost no interest in the intentions, motives, or inner life of either the biblical writers or the texts' sacred personae... One almost never finds phrases signaling authorial intention, like 'Matthew here attempts to show' or 'Luke includes this episode because'—the familiar currency of modern biblical exegesis... The author thus pertains to a prefatory note, having no further relevance to the shape of the narrative, which is analyzed as a linguistic and culture performance" (*The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 45). In fact, however, "phrases signaling authorial intention" appear constantly in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*. The index entry for "Moses" in, say, volume three of the *English Works* runs to 137 entries, and just on that volume's first page, Luther writes, "Moses combines these [trials and comforts] in such a manner with the account of the victory that here as elsewhere he appears to have given little thought to a methodical arrangement of the historical record" continuing to explain Moses' rationale (*LW*, 3:3). "[E]as sic cum historia victoria coniungit Moses, ut parum de ordine historiae videatur cogitasse: sicut alioqui solet: lector non admodum peritus saepe iudicat male cohaerere conciones et narrationes Prophetarum," *WA*, 42:550. Then he writes about Genesis 15:2-3, "Moses seems to imply that..." and so forth (*LW*, 3:12). "Videtur tame Moses subindicare..." *WA*, 42:557. Incidentally, much the same is true of John Calvin. See *Corpus Reformatum* vol. 51, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, vol. 23 (Brunsvigar: C. S. Schwetschke and Sons, 1882) as well as *Commentary on Genesis* vol. 1, trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847-1850), *passim*. In her attempt to assimilate

Delineating Luther's scriptural narratology contributes to but also complicates accounts of how the Reformation transformed the writing of imaginative literature. This essay interprets Luther's own writing, and I do not consider here its influence on later imaginative writers, which is, properly speaking, irrelevant to the interpretation of Luther. But such literary scholarship, I suggest, tacitly assumes a reading of the early Reformers that I question, and so it forms the intellectual horizon and context for my argument. That is to say, my reading of Luther functions as a prolegomenon and invitation to future study of distinctively Protestant narratology.

No such account has previously emerged, even though literary scholars have been studying Reformation hermeneutics and exegesis for several decades. In part, that reflects Barbara Lewalski's landmark study of the emergence of a distinctly Protestant poetics, which emphasized Reformers' new attention to the plain sense. Against critical models of the Renaissance "poet as maker of fictions which allegorically conceal and reveal profoundest philosophic truths; or as the inspired shaper of myths and symbols which shadow forth cosmic truth and divine revelation," Lewalski begins her book with George Herbert's "*direct* recourse to the Bible as repository of truth... in heartfelt and *uncontrived (plain)* utterance" (emphasis mine).<sup>79</sup> Lewalski's argument assumes that the Bible's importance in the English literary Renaissance derived significantly from its

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Renaissance and new historicisms to each other, Shuger overstates Renaissance commentary's disinterest in the history of "great men" and misses, I think, Luther's concern with the text's mediation, in part because that concern is primarily narrative and intra-textual rather than authorial and historical.

<sup>79</sup> Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3-4.

newfound literary ordinariness: accessible rather than esoteric, using recognizable literary tropes rather than scholastic codes, and interpretable by laymen rather than just clerics.<sup>80</sup>

Buried in Lewalski's argument is a familiar, shopworn image of Luther (which he himself cultivated) as a defender of the plain, simple sense of Scripture against the eisegetical excesses of the commentary tradition.<sup>81</sup> "The Holy Spirit," Luther writes, "is the simplest writer and advisor in heaven and on earth."<sup>82</sup> Indeed, in his commentary to Genesis, Luther constantly rebukes earlier commentaries, most commonly the rabbis, for outlandishly inserting their own theologies into the text in the form of narrative embellishments.<sup>83</sup> Of course, terms like "plain sense" are difficult to define and frequently polemical,<sup>84</sup> and a close reading of Luther necessarily complicates matters.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> This argument has a long history. See Israel Baroway, "The Bible as Poetry in the English Renaissance: An Introduction," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 32.4 (1933): 447–80.

<sup>81</sup> Of course, Medievalists have had their own quarrels with disparaging accounts of medieval exegesis informed by Reformers like Luther. See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), as well as Alistair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), and Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>82</sup> "Concerning the Letter and the Spirit" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 78-79. "Spiritus sanctus est scriptor et consiliator simplicissimus in caelo et terro." *WA* 7, 645. He writes elsewhere, "We must recognize that scripture is of itself most certain, simple and open. Scripture is its own interpreter, proving, judging, and illuminating everything" (quoted in Roland Bainton, "The Bible in the Reformation," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge, 1975), 1–37: 22). I regret that I have not been able to track this quotation to its Latin original.

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. *LW*, 1:337; *WA*, 42:247. *LW*, 1:339; *WA*, 42:249. *LW*, 2:107; *WA*, 42:338. *LW*, 2:238; *WA*, 42:431. *LW*, 2:311; *WA*, 42:484. For a broader discussion, see David Nirenberg's discussion of Luther's uses of "Judaism" in his commentary on the Psalms, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 246-69.

<sup>84</sup> As Daniel Boyarin writes, "I will also accept the characterization of midrash as the product of a disturbed exegetical sense, but only if we recognize that all exegetical senses

Nevertheless, this image has been broadly influential.<sup>86</sup> Hans Frei, for instance, celebrates Luther's understanding of the Bible as "self-interpreting, the literal sense of its words being their true meaning, its more obscure passages to be read in the light of those that are clear." Frei continues:

Luther's quoted words remained his typical view on the crucial technical issue of scriptural interpretation on which so much of the claim to the direct authority of the Bible, unmediated by the teaching office of the Church and her tradition, depended. They represent his drastic alternative to the complex and long development of traditional theory... Against that multiplex view Luther's simplification meant drastic relief, affirming as it did that the literal, or, as he preferred to call it, the grammatical or historical sense is the true sense.<sup>87</sup>

Frei, who sees in the early Reformers an exegetical ideal, characterizes Luther as a literalist committed to a direct, unmediated encounter with God's simple, plain word.

Similarly, Scott Hendrix writes, "Luther's exegesis, therefore, differed from the medieval tradition ... in his aversion to excessive allegorizing and in his willingness to

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are disturbed, including most certainly our own. All interpretation is filtered through consciousness, tradition, ideology, and the intertext." *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 18-19.

<sup>85</sup> For this critique, see James Simpson, who writes, "In any reading culture, the literal sense is only ever a fairly tenuous fiction" and concludes, as regards early Reformers like Tyndale (who was deeply influenced by, and whom Simpson takes to be quite similar to, Luther) that "a reading culture with an extreme emphasis on the simplicity and legibility of the literal sense ends up producing its opposite: an extremely authoritarian account of the institutional element in reading... Claims about pure transparency produce near total opacity" (*Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 107 and 5; for Tyndale and Luther's similarities, see e.g. 280).

<sup>86</sup> Euan K. Cameron, for instance, though he acknowledges Luther's "ambivalent attitude toward this vast apparatus of commentary," nonetheless stresses Luther's wish "that the entire carapace of interpretation inherited from the past, as well as his own commentary and exposition, would be discarded in favor of the reading of Scripture on its own." "On Editing Luther's Writings on Scripture" *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56.2 (2017), 126-32. Earlier than Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, see Gerhard Ebeling's essay on the relation between Luther's theological breakthrough and his turn to the plain sense, "The Beginning of Luther's Hermeneutic," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) [1951]: 129-58.

<sup>87</sup> Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 18-19. Frei's argument, like much scholarship on Luther's hermeneutics, involves Luther's relation to allegory, which I will not take up here. As I argue, literary scholarship on the Reformation has focused on questions of figuration, largely to the exclusion of categories like narration.



find the legitimate meaning in the grammatical and historical analysis of the text.”<sup>88</sup>

Many of those who criticize Luther’s simplified, direct literalism also do so against the background of a similar characterization.<sup>89</sup> In a specific sense, my analysis of Luther offers an alternative to this image. The plain sense of “And the Lord said to Cain” is plainly *not* “And Adam said to Cain.” Moreover, Luther’s regular routing of intradiegetic revelation through ministerial intermediaries complicates any account of the “direct authority of the Bible, unmediated by the teaching office of the Church.” In tracing the narratological complexity of Luther’s Genesis, I am offering scholars of literature and the Reformation a new paradigm: a Luther defined by subtlety, sophistication, and mediation.

When literary critics do dig beyond Reformers’ aspirations to recover the plain sense of the Bible, they rarely focus on the influence of Reformation theology and exegesis on narration. A number of scholars have explored the relation between the Eucharistic controversy and lyric, and particularly how Protestant, deflationary accounts of what Jesus meant when he said, “this is my body” might have affected poetic

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<sup>88</sup> Scott Hendrix, “Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 37.3 (1983): 229-239 (234).

<sup>89</sup> For examples of the celebratory mode, see e.g. David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 133-59. For an example of the critical mode, see Simpson above. He does of course depart from accounts like Frei’s in certain respects. For instance, see his claim that Luther preferred direct doctrinal and legal portions of the Bible to narrative because “scripture is no longer a code whose sense unfolds and clarifies through the passage of history” (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 115). But he nonetheless accentuates exactly the most exaggerated forms of Luther’s claims to simplify, as when he writes, for instance, “Scripture, Luther does not tire of repeating, is its own interpreter. . . . It does the work of interpretation itself” (116). Simpson just thinks that such claims are wrong about interpretation, ideological and polemical, and necessarily authoritarian in the compensatory mechanisms they generate to control the potentially explosive interpretive anarchism they would license were they taken seriously.

conceptions of symbolism and metaphor.<sup>90</sup> Other scholars argue for the importance newly placed on oral, collective liturgy and grammatically precise Bible-reading in fostering literary creativity; on this account, an emphasis on the Word led to a profusion of new words.<sup>91</sup> Yet others have read newly robust literary forms like religious lyric and professionalized drama as substitutes for the lost spectacles of medieval Christianity.<sup>92</sup> Narration may have been neglected because it has a relatively quiet seventeenth-century literary history. Devotional poetry, for instance, quite obviously flowered and matured in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, a fact which, to borrow an expression from the medieval commentator Rashi, “cries out, ‘explain me.’”<sup>93</sup> The shifts in narration that start with Luther are subtler. They emerge only through close reading, and their literary history requires moving between apparently distant genres.

But more profoundly, linking Reformation exegesis to newly sophisticated narrators runs afoul of the implicit teleology of much scholarship on early modern

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<sup>90</sup> See Malcolm Mackenzie Ross, *Poetry and Dogma: The Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century English Poetry* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), and Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

<sup>91</sup> See Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), Timothy Rosendale, *Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>92</sup> See Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003) and Stephen Greenblatt, “Remnants of the Sacred in Early Modern England,” in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 337-48, as well as *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>93</sup> See *Torat Hayyim: Hamishah Humshei Torah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook: 1993), 1. Translations of non-biblical Hebrew are mine unless otherwise noted.

narration.<sup>94</sup> Such studies usually plot towards the novel, and the plot in question is usually called “secularization.” The novel, for any number of critics, has been *the* paradigmatically secular form.<sup>95</sup> In *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt, for instance, outlines correspondences between an epoch’s characteristic metaphysics, politics, and literary forms: deism correlates with the liberal constitutional state and the novel.<sup>96</sup> Schmitt is not alone. Hannah Arendt writes that the novel demonstrates that our lives are ruled by historical contingency rather than tragic destiny,<sup>97</sup> while scholars like Ian Watt and Michael McKeon trace the secular tendencies of the novel’s newly realistic techniques.<sup>98</sup> In a telling moment, William Empson reveals that his doctrinally secular

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<sup>94</sup> I should say a word about the accessibility of Luther’s exegetical writings in England. From the “1520’s Luther’s Latin writings were well known to scholars in England.” See William A. Clebsch, “The Earliest Translations of Luther into English,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 56.1 (Jan., 1963), 75. Indeed, the influence I am interested in runs through scholar-playwrights like George Buchanan, who almost certainly read Luther in Latin. Luther’s polemical writings were quickly translated into English, as was his very popular commentary on Galatians. See Preserved Smith, “English Opinion of Luther,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 10.2 (1917), 129-158.

<sup>95</sup> See Justin Neuman’s pithy account of this critical history in “The Novel Against God: Questioning the Form’s Inherent Secularism,” *Culture* 3.2 (Fall, 2009), 8-11, developed in greater length in *Fiction Beyond Secularism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 3-19.

<sup>96</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). For extended similar correspondences see Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A world-historical Meditation*, ed. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2015), sections 4-8 and 13-16; Carl Schmitt, “The Historical Structure of the Contemporary Opposition Between East and West,” 100-135, in Schmitt, *The Tyranny of Values and Other Texts*, eds. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2018).

<sup>97</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 141.

<sup>98</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) and Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

reading of *Paradise Lost* essentially relies on treating the poem as a novel, in which the moral claims of the narrator no longer govern our evaluations of characters' behavior.<sup>99</sup>

Literary and cultural histories that plot towards the novel and secularization do not, of course, neglect Protestant reformers. Both Watt and McKeon, for instance, take Protestant spiritual autobiography to be a key predecessor genre to the novel.<sup>100</sup>

Similarly, in Keith Thomas's and C. John Sommerville's histories of cultural and social secularization in early modern England, Puritans rationalize and compartmentalize religion, giving birth to secular modernity.<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, these Christian mothers always seem to die during labor. Like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, they facilitate a new generation's supersession of the old, but they themselves are ironically marginalized in the process, left no space in the new order.<sup>102</sup> On a much longer timescale, Marcel Gauchet has described Christianity as a "*religion for departing from religion*," an intermediate form that eventually sacrificed itself to liberate us from a tyrannical God.<sup>103</sup> Talal Asad critiques such accounts of a uniquely secularizing

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<sup>99</sup> See in particular his discussion of how "all the characters are on trial in any civilized narrative," William Empson, *Milton's God* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), 94-5.

<sup>100</sup> See McKeon, 90-96 and Watt, 74-77.

<sup>101</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971) and C. J. Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>102</sup> Empson is unusually explicit in regarding Milton this way. See William Empson, "Milton and Bentley: the Pastoral of the Innocence of Man and Nature," in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 195-252.

<sup>103</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5. See also the afterword to Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections," Speech at University of Regensburg, Germany 9/12/2016, accessed online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/15/religion.uk> on 3/28/18; Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York:

Christianity for paradoxically rewriting secularization as a passion narrative,<sup>104</sup> and Saba Mahmood argues they reflect secularization theory's Eurocentric and Christian parochialism.<sup>105</sup>

In all these accounts, secular modernity absorbs and renders obsolete the intermediate forms of the Reformation. By contrast, I am sketching not a teleological prehistory of the novel, but rather an account of how the demands of Protestant theology and commentary produced independent forms of narratological complexity. The Protestant commentary tradition contains strategies of narrative mediation and perspectival irony, and even immanent critique that may resemble later, novelistic forms, but stand in no straightforward, genealogical relation to them. Luther seems to have invented the idea that the Bible uses what we would call free indirect style, for instance, but the surprising resonance of his readings with post-Jamesian narratology in no way suggest a pathway from Luther to the novel. This uncanny, ahistorical echo suggests instead that we should take Luther's criticism seriously on its own terms, as imagining and making possible literary forms without obvious modern children.

### **The Most Primitive Church: The Theology of Genesis as Church History**

Luther takes Genesis to be, as Jaroslav Pelikan writes, "the history of the church as the people of God."<sup>106</sup> Pelikan shows how ecclesiastical polemics shape how Luther

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Columbia University Press, 2005); and Jurgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>104</sup> Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 20-64 (23).

<sup>105</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), 205.

<sup>106</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, Companion Volume, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia

interprets the patriarchs. To explain Luther's ministerial mediators, Pelikan contrasts Luther with his more radical foes. Radical Reformers like Müntzer, as well as more established figures like Zwingli, rejected traditions surrounding the liturgy and church hierarchy and claimed they been instructed to do so in prophetic dreams. Instead of textually mediated traditions, they wanted personal revelation to be their spiritual authority. Against this position, Luther claimed Genesis represented a line of patriarchal tradition: the Word has always been preached in churches (even Abraham's tent becomes one in Luther's lectures) and through ministers, like Adam, Shem, Methusaleh, and others, all of whom Luther takes to be church-elders. Luther also eliminates Genesis's support for claims of personal revelation. Many moments which *seemed* to be individual revelation actually reflect ministerial mediation. For Pelikan, choices like routing God's speech to Cain through Adam allowed Luther to "support the dignity of the ministry" and defuse the revelatory claims of "fanatics on the left wing of the Reformation."<sup>107</sup>

While Pelikan correctly identifies Luther's polemical interest in countering Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), Thomas Müntzer (c.1489-1525), and other Radical Reformers, I argue he misses the deeper theological dynamics of Luther's distinction between two forms of revelation: the direct Word and the ministered Word. Whereas hearing God's Word directly from God is tantamount, for Luther, to being saved, God's

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Publishing House, 1959), 89. Luther writes explicitly at the end of his commentary on Genesis 11, "You now have the history of the first world, which has been faithfully presented by Moses as proof of the uninterrupted transmission of the promise concerning Christ. Therefore if you call this a history of the first church, you are not mistaken" (2:234-35). "Habetis iam Historiam primi Mundi, a Mose fideliter ostensam, ut constaret de perpetua promissionis de Christo propagatio, si igitur hanc primae Ecclesiae historiam appellas, non erraveris." *WA*, 42:427.

<sup>107</sup> Pelikan, 102 and 105. For the polemical framing more broadly, see the section of *Luther the Expositor* entitled, "The History of the People of God," 89-108.

Word exists in mediated oral and written forms, which human beings can hear and interpret intellectually without understanding it spiritually or being saved. Both halves of this theory influence Luther's understanding of Genesis. Luther's salvific account of the direct Word means that he understands revelation as tied to the character and psychology of the hearer, whereas his more humanized, less intense account of the mediated Word creates space for God's revelation to take on human characteristics and tinges. In the section following this one, I explore the narratological import of this theology.

Certainly, the fight against Müntzer and the Reformer Caspar Schwenckfeld (c.1489-1561) provides crucial context for understanding Luther's conversion of God's apparent revelations into messages delivered through ministers. Luther writes in a typical passage, "For the Holy Spirit does not—as the enthusiasts and the Anabaptists, truly fanatical teachers, dream—give His instruction through new revelations outside the ministry of the Word."<sup>108</sup> In several places, Luther discusses Müntzer's mistaken belief that he had been commanded by God to launch his peasant revolt. For Luther, this belief was falsified by Müntzer's defeat: "He perished, and rightly so; for his actions came from his own spirit, not from the spirit of God."<sup>109</sup> Indeed, Luther sometimes privileges the ministerial word over the possibility of direct revelation. Conceding that he would not refuse a warning "about temporal matters," Luther insists:

For eternal life, however, I need no other revelation. Therefore I desire none. Even if one were given to me, I would distrust it because of the craftiness of Satan, who is in the habit of transforming himself into an angel of light [2 Cor. 11:14]; for God simply reveals himself to me in Baptism and in the ministry.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *LW*, 2:162. "Non enim Spiritus sanctus (sicut Enthusiastae et Anibaptistae, vere fanatici Doctores, somniant) docet per novas revelationes extra ministerium verbi," *WA*, 42:376.

<sup>109</sup> *LW*, 3:31. "concidebat, et iure. Ex suo enim Spiritu [*sic?*], non ex Dei spiritu gerebat ista." *WA*, 42:570.

<sup>110</sup> *LW*, 3:167. "Se ad vitam aeternam nulla alia revelatione mihi opus est, nullam igitur cupio: Et si offeretur, suspecta mihi esset ob Satanae insidias, qui se in Angelum lucis

As Müntzer's example proves,<sup>111</sup> Satan has the same fireworks as God, and thus, Luther insists, reading the Bible is better than seeing God directly. (Luther had apparently not heard that the devil can cite Scripture.) Luther's preference for the ministered word over divine revelation seems to fit the conservative polemical agenda Pelikan delineates.

Yet the location of this passage complicates Pelikan's claim that Luther is only engaged in polemics. Luther is commenting on Genesis 17:22 ("And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham"), and he writes, "This closing statement proves that God appeared in some visible form when He had this conversation with Abraham... And indeed it is something very great to have God conversing and associating with us."<sup>112</sup> That is, despite what he seems to say above, Luther *does* privilege direct revelation over ministry. The problem with God appearing to us in "extraordinary form," Luther writes, is that it is unreliable and that "excessive familiarity breeds contempt,"<sup>113</sup> such that if God or angels regularly appeared to us, "they would surely be despised." Further, most basically, Luther does *not* explain God's dialogue with Abraham as being mediated by a minister, though he easily could have interpolated, say, Shem. Rather, I will argue, this example suggests that in introducing ministerial mediation, Luther was not just downplaying direct revelation. Rather, he was

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transformare solet. Abunde enim se mihi Deus ostendit in Baptismo et ministerio." *WA*, 42:668. Pelikan silently provides verse citations, but I have turned his parentheses into brackets to reflect their absence from the Latin text.

<sup>111</sup> *LW*, 3:165-66; *WA*, 42:666-67.

<sup>112</sup> *LW*, 3:164-5. "Arguit autem clausula haec Deum apparuisse in aliqua visibili specie, quando hoc colloquium cum Abraha habuit... Maximum autem est habere colloquentem et conversantem nobiscum Deum." *WA*, 42:666.

<sup>113</sup> *LW*, 3:165; "singulari specie... Nimia familiarita contemptum parit... profecto contemnerentur." *WA*, 42:666. The expression is ancient and of uncertain origin.



distinguishing two different revelatory modes, each with its distinctive theological role and characteristics.

For Luther, directly hearing God's Word cannot be sharply distinguished from being saved. God's Words, unlike human words, are concrete, performative acts, which created the world and save the elect: God "does not speak grammatical words," Luther writes on Genesis 1:5, "He speaks true and existent realities."<sup>114</sup> For the believer, hearing the Word and having salvific faith in Christ are all but identical.<sup>115</sup> Thus, Luther asserted "that the meaning of the Scriptures had to be experienced before it could be correctly understood."<sup>116</sup> Directly hearing God is primarily about being with God; although correct propositional beliefs follow from such experiences, the key point is God's presence.<sup>117</sup> In the preface to his Latin works, Luther narrates his own personal conversion as simultaneous with his realization that he had been misreading the phrase "justice of God." In one moment, he authentically hears God's voice in Scripture and is saved.<sup>118</sup> By contrast, ministers need not be saved; they may even, like Judas, be great sinners.<sup>119</sup>

Luther's position can be clarified by contrasting it with that of John Calvin (1509-64). Calvin neatly divides, to use Edward Dowey's helpful terms, between *inspiration* ("the original giving of the sacred oracles") and *revelation* ("subjective recognition by the

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<sup>114</sup> *LW*, 1:21. "Deus... loquitur non grammatica vocabula, sed veras et subsistentes res." *WA*, 42:17. See Kaiser, "Luther's Creation Theology," 122: "God's spoken words are not merely grammatical words or vocabularies but true and substantial things."

<sup>115</sup> See also *LW* 8:134-36; *WA* 44:677-78 on believing the word as a necessary and sufficient condition for salvation.

<sup>116</sup> Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 128.

<sup>117</sup> See e.g. *LW*, 3:157; *WA*, 42:661.

<sup>118</sup> Martin Luther, "Preface to the Latin Works," translated by Andrew Thornton from the "Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe. 1545." Accessed online at <https://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/preflat-eng.txt>. *WA* 4:421-428.

<sup>119</sup> *LW*, 4:32; *WA*, 43:158.

believer of their divine authority”).<sup>120</sup> For Calvin, an inspired medium need not have received revelation and might consequently be no more than a secretary or courier. In his Genesis commentary, this distinction allows Calvin to treat the gentile king Abimelech’s divine dream in Genesis, which warns him that Sarah is Abraham’s wife and not his sister, as Abraham had claimed, as merely an instrument in punishing Abraham, with no reflection on the character of the dreamer.<sup>121</sup> Luther, by contrast, does not distinguish between receiving God’s Word and realizing it, or between realizing it and being saved. For Luther, God’s words to Abimelech must be “words of extraordinary grace”<sup>122</sup> with which “He calls the king and his people to the church of Abraham” and encourages him “to abide in the grace which has been bestowed upon him.”<sup>123</sup> Because God appears to Abimelech in a dream, Luther must conclude that Abimelech was saved and converted to

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<sup>120</sup> Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 89-90. Calvin seems to solve the problem by suggesting that one can receive inspiration without revelation (Dowey’s example is Balaam: see 89n211 and Calvin’s commentaries cited there), but that seems difficult. How did Balaam know he had received an authoritative prophecy and not just a hallucination?

<sup>121</sup> “God reproved king Abimelech, *for the sake of Abraham*, whom he covered with his special protection.... Though Abraham had deprived himself of his wife, the Lord interposed in time *to preserve her uninjured*.” (“*Quoniam Deus in favorem Abrahæ, quem fide et praesidio suo tegebat, regem Abimelech aggreditur.... Quum se iam viduasset Abraham, Dominus mature se opponit ut illi integra maneat uxor.*”) To be sure, Calvin is bothered by the problem of authenticity I raised in the previous note above: “Whereas, God is said to have come, this is to be applied to the perception of the king, to whom undoubtedly the majesty of God was manifested; so that he might clearly perceive himself to be divinely reproved and not deluded with a vain specter.” (“*Quod autem venisse Deus dicitur, id refertur ad regis sensum, cui procul dubio patefacta fuit Dei maiestas: ut certo sentiret divinitus se coargui, non ludi inani phantasia.*”) But while Abimelech does recognize the *authenticity* of the Word in a technical sense, Calvin’s commentary gives no sense of his revelation as in any way a spiritual experience or anything more than a mechanical intervention in Abraham’s story. John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 403; *Ioannis Calvini Opera*, 23:288.

<sup>122</sup> *LW*, 3:337. “*Haec sunt verba gratiae singularis.*” *WA*, 43:117.

<sup>123</sup> *LW*, 3:339 and 3:340. “*Hoc verbo vocat regem et suos ad Ecclesiam Abrahæ,*” “*ut maneat in gratia sibi donata.*” *WA*, 43:118 and 43:119.

Abraham's faith.<sup>124</sup> Because he believes a divine dream must correlate with grace, Luther is driven to read Abimelech's question to Abraham ("How have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin?") not as a rhetorical protest of innocence, but (against the plain sense) as a serious question: "he thinks, 'some other sin by which I deserved to fall into this sin must have preceded.' Consequently, he does not remonstrate; but he trembles, is agitated, and seeks peace of conscience" (3.349).<sup>125</sup>

Calvin has no need to bend the text in this way.<sup>126</sup> The contrast with Calvin and his treatment of Abimelech clarify how totally Luther entangles salvation and revelation.

Thus, in assigning many divine revelations to ministers, Luther is not just carving theological space for the organized church. He is also contrasting inspired propositional content, which can be mediated by ministers or writing, with the salvific experience of revelation itself. The crucial test-cases here, which Pelikan misses, are God's numerous messages to Abraham. In Genesis 12:1, when God instructs Abram, "Go from your country," Luther interposes a minister: "I am convinced," he writes, "that he was not called directly by God without the ministry," which turns out to be Shem's.<sup>127</sup> He imagines Abraham as journeying specifically towards Salem, where Luther thinks Shem was living,<sup>128</sup> and he provides Shem's motives in admonishing Abram:

It is as though Shem said: "If you remain in that place, you will not be saved. Therefore if you desire to be saved, abandon that land, abandon your kindred, abandon the house of your father. Go away as far as

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<sup>124</sup> For Luther's complex position on the salvation of "outsiders" to the true Church, see Mickey L. Mattox, "Fortuita Misericordia: Martin Luther on the Salvation of Biblical Outsiders," *Pro Ecclesia* 17.4 (2009), 423-441.

<sup>125</sup> *WA*, 3:349. "Cogitat igitur: necesse est, praecessisse aliud peccatum, quo merui, ut in hoc peccatum inciderem. Non expostulat igitur, sed pavet et trepidat, et quaerit pacem conscientiae." *LW*, 43:126.

<sup>126</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 406-7; *Opera*, 23:291.

<sup>127</sup> *LW*, 2:249. "Ego prosus sum in ea sententia, ut existimem non immediate a Deo, sine ministerio vocatum esse," *WA*, 42:439.

<sup>128</sup> *LW*, 2:281; *WA*, 42:462-63.

possible from those idolaters, among whom there is no faith, no fear of God, but only superstition and blind delusion, which results from a lack of the knowledge of God.” ... Abraham gives ear to [this instruction] and begins to fear God; that is, he believes this threat and follows the holy advice. For this reason there follows such a grand promise later on.<sup>129</sup>

Crucially, in this passage, Abram is not yet saved.<sup>130</sup> God’s threats and instructions are expressed through a minister.<sup>131</sup>

But then in Genesis 15, in which Abram is promised “no one but your very own issue shall be your heir,” Luther pivots: “When Abraham hears the promise concerning the Blessed Seed, he receives the revelation of the Holy Spirit at the same time.”<sup>132</sup>

Luther clarifies that Abraham is receiving not just the promise of offspring, as the Jews read, but also the repetition of the Promise of the “Blessed Seed” (that is, of the Christ) first given to Adam.<sup>133</sup> Luther reads this salvific experience specifically as direct

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<sup>129</sup> *LW*, 2:250. “Quasi dicit Sem: Si manebis isto in loco, non salvaberis. Igitur si cupis salvari, desere terram istam, desere cognatos tuos, desere domum patris tui, et quam longissime discede ab ista Idolatris, in quibus nulla fides, nulla Dei timor est, sed tantum superstitio et caecus error, qui sequitur ignorantiam Dei... hanc audit Abraham, et incipit Deum timere, hoc est, credit huic comminationi, et paret sancto consilio. Ideo sequitur postea tam magna promissio,” *WA*, 42:439-40. I have corrected Pelikan, who renders “Quasi dicit Sem” as “It is as though Shem wanted to say.”

<sup>130</sup> There is a paradox in speaking of the salvation as happening in time, since Luther believed in predestined election. I am speaking of the moment at which people come to believe in Christ and know that they are saved.

<sup>131</sup> See also *LW*, 2:358; *WA*, 42:518 on Genesis 13:14-15; the passing discussion of Genesis 25:22, in which Luther asserts that Rebecca consults God through Shem, *LW*, 2:231; *WA*, 42:425 and *LW*, 4:359-60; *WA*, 43:394-95.

<sup>132</sup> *LW*, 3:11-12. “Abraham cum audit promissionem de semine benedicto, quia simul revelationem spiritus sancti accipit.” *WA*, 42:556.

<sup>133</sup> *LW*, 3:11. “Semine benedicto,” *WA*, 42:556. Pelikan errs in thinking that Luther did not provide a minister for the protoevangelium because “this was obviously impossible” (103). Not at all, as Eve was present, and women can minister too, as proven by the obscure Deborah (not to be confused with the prophet Deborah, this Deborah is first mentioned in Genesis 35:8, when she dies), who Luther thinks may have instructed Jacob on God’s behalf to go to Bethel (Pelikan 104-5). Rather, Adam has to receive this promise directly because it is the Promise of Christ, through which he is saved.

revelation.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, three verses later, God imputes to Abraham righteousness (“the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness”), which Luther takes to be identical with his hearing the Word, since “all who believe the Word of God are just.”<sup>135</sup> Luther subsequently asserts that the account of Abraham is “preferred to all the rest” of the patriarchal narratives because “God is not found speaking so often with any other patriarch.”<sup>136</sup> However, nearly all of the incidents of God speaking to Abraham, in Luther’s account, occur as or after Abraham is saved. The example of Abraham shows the deeper theological stakes for Luther in dividing between revelation’s mediated and direct forms. He is distinguishing the propositional content of divine instructions from the salvific Word, and he is clarifying the distinctiveness of the latter experience.

For our purposes, this distinction is significant for two reasons. First, it is the source of a certain exegetical freedom in interpreting *mediated* revelations, since they are not the Gospel in the strictest sense.<sup>137</sup> When Adam ministers to Cain, there is room for Adam’s individuality and situation to enter his speech, which are literally God’s words

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<sup>134</sup> The counter-example to my division is 12:7, which Luther takes to be direct but which precedes Abraham being saved (*LW*, 2:283; *WA*, 42:464). There, though, he is bothered by “God appeared to Abram.” Also, he has to avoid the Catholic claim that Abraham builds an altar of his own initiative, an example which would, authorize human-created ritual forms like monastic rules or masses for the dead.

<sup>135</sup> The preceding lines are telling too: “Moreover, when Moses adds that Abraham believed God, this is the first passage of Scripture which we have had until now about faith.” For both quotations, see *LW*, 3:19. “Quo autem Moses addit credidisse Abraham Deo, is primus locus scripturae est, quem hactenus de fide habuimus... omnes, qui credunt verbo Dei, sunt iusti.” *WA*, 42:562.

<sup>136</sup> *LW*, 3:114. “Ac historia Abrahae ideo reliquis omnibus antefertur, quia cum nullo toties locutus Deus reperitur.” *WA*, 42:629.

<sup>137</sup> Luther stipulates the limitations of the Psalms, which result from David’s fallenness: “Every one of us could have composed a better and more perfect psalm than any of these if we had been begotten by Adam in innocence.” *LW*, 1:105. “Quanquam nullus tam eximius est Psalmus, quo non unusquisque nostrum meliorem et perfectiorem potuisset componere, si in innocentia ab Adamo propagate essemus.” *WA*, 42:80.

but not spiritually God's Word. But second, the theological point confirms the deeper level on which, for Luther, psychology is central to revelation. Abraham's redemption, like Luther's, is intensely subjective. The ministered Word is potentially salvific, and becomes so just when the recipient has the proper subjective orientation to it. In two different ways, paying close attention to Luther's ministers thus underlines the centrality of the subjective human experience of revelation. In the next section, I explore the literary consequences of this intense subjectivity of revelation, arguing that it inflects Luther's understanding of Moses' narration and particularly how Moses relates to the patriarchs.

### **Free Indirect Revelation: The Literary Consequences of Luther's Theology**

Luther's interest in Moses is apparent throughout the *Lectures* (see n8 above). "Moses" appears many hundreds of times in Luther's commentary, although he is never mentioned in Genesis itself.<sup>138</sup> When bothered by excess words, Luther writes, "Moses is very wordy in this passage";<sup>139</sup> when describing the Pentateuch's stylistic quirks, he writes, "We see that Moses consistently adheres to his method of expression";<sup>140</sup> and when bothered by a historical loose end, he writes, "This is one of the greatest causes of

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<sup>138</sup> Although a cottage industry surrounds the early-modern Moses, no one discusses him as a narrator. Much of the work, following Machiavelli and Spinoza, surrounds his political-theological role as a prophet and lawmaker. See Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology and Imagination from Machiavelli to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Hammill does address how Moses' narration of Deuteronomy reshapes the story of the golden calf (47-53). The narrative effects I discuss are, however, both subtler and more pervasive. Further, political theology typically places Moses in the role of sovereign, I am interested in him more as a mid-level bureaucrat, mediating rather than ordering. See also Jan Assmann, "Before the Law: John Spencer as Egyptologist," in *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 55-91.

<sup>139</sup> *LW*, 4:4. "Moses admodum copiosus hoc in loco est." *WA*, 43:138.

<sup>140</sup> *LW*, 1:48. "Videmus Mosen retinere suam phrasin constanter..." *WA*, 42:36.

offense in Moses.”<sup>141</sup> Moses is inseparable from the Pentateuchal text. His intentions and craft are evident everywhere, and Luther reads Genesis as filtered by them.<sup>142</sup>

But perhaps Moses provides Luther merely with exegetical scaffolding, a technique with which to discuss logic, style, and content? Luther was, after all, an early modern, and he can hardly be expected to write of “the text.” Does Luther’s reference “Moses” affect how he interprets Genesis, or is it just his idiom? One reason to think the latter is that, following no discernible pattern, Luther often interchanges “Holy Spirit” for “Moses” (e.g. “For this is why the Holy Spirit has recorded this outstanding account for us”).<sup>143</sup> On the other hand, it would be peculiar if Luther, whose lectures so frequently discuss his own experiences and how they shape his ministry, did not ask parallel questions about how Moses’ subjectivity affected *his* ministry.<sup>144</sup> In what follows, I argue for the importance of Moses’ ministry, and I show how it is entangled with that of ministerial characters discussed above.

First, Luther sometimes attributes stylistic peculiarities in the biblical text not merely to Moses’ choices, but to his feelings while composing. For instance, bothered by

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<sup>141</sup> *LW*, 1:97. “Hoc est unum de maximis scandalis in Mose.” *WA*, 42:74.

<sup>142</sup> I am discussing Genesis here and not the whole Pentateuch because the *Enarrationes in Genesin* constitute a complete commentary on Genesis; there is no parallel for the whole of the Pentateuch. On this point, Luther is not atypical. For Christianity, and particularly for Protestantism, the first three chapters of Genesis contain the substance of the Old Testament. The rest is, in some sense, commentary. See the discussion in Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 3-26.

<sup>143</sup> *LW*, 2:323. “In hunc enim finem historiam tam insignem Spiritus sanctus nobis scriptam reliquit.” *WA*, 42:493.

<sup>144</sup> See, as one example among many, his discussions of his experiences at court and how they inflect his reading of Abraham’s treaty with Abimelech in Genesis 21 (*LW*, 4:80; *WA*, 42:193).

the extensive, heightened description of the flood in Genesis 7:17-21 (“Here Moses begins to be amazingly wordy”), Luther has a remarkable explanation:

Contrary to his custom [of concision], Moses repeats the same statements in order to compel the reader to pause, to take more careful note of such an important fact, and to ponder it. . . . Moses seems to have written [the prolix description of the flood] with a profusion of tears. His eyes and mind are so completely fixed on that same terrible display of wrath that he cannot help repeating the same things several times. Surely he is doing this in order to thrust the spurs of the fear of God into the hearts of his godly readers.<sup>145</sup>

Luther gives two reasons for the passage’s length and intensity, what humanists would have called Moses’ “*copia*.”<sup>146</sup> First, Moses is preaching the story, and like any good preacher, he uses repetition rhetorically, to evoke the appropriate emotions in his audience.<sup>147</sup> In short, Moses is a minister, and Luther understands him in the same ministerial terms he does Shem. (Or, indeed, as he understands himself—Luther’s lectures on, say, circumcision and faith or Hagar and the Law, each of which stretches a simple theological point over roughly twenty pages, indicate that, as far as repetition is concerned, the Reformer preached what he preached.<sup>148</sup>)

Second, Moses is so disturbed when thinking of the Flood that he loses control of himself (“cannot help repeating”), almost as if he were himself traumatized: “Troubled

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<sup>145</sup> *LW*, 2:96. “Se dixi supra eadem res ideo repeti a Mose contra morem suum, ut cogat quasi Lectorem resistere et diligentius tantam rem cognoscere ac expendere. . . . Nam neque sine largis lachrimis scripsisse haec videtur. Ita enim totus in illud horribile spectaculum irae, oculis atque animo intentus est, ut non possit non saepe cadem repetere. Facit autem id sine dubio eo consilio, ut hos quasi aculeos timoris Dei piorum Lectorum animis infigat.” *WA*, 42:330.

<sup>146</sup> See Desiderius Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005).

<sup>147</sup> Elsewhere, Moses uses repetition to imitate the emotion of characters without explicitly registering that Moses felt these emotions himself. See *LW*, 2:115; *WA*, 42:344 on the joyous exit from the ark. Sometimes, the emotion is communicated with no stylistic trick: see *LW*, 3:153-55; *WA*, 42:658 on Abraham’s hearing that Sarah will have a son. Sometimes, Moses uses repetition to encourage moral, rather than emotional, imitation of the characters. See *LW*, 3:197; *WA*, 43:15-16 on Abraham’s generosity. See also *LW*, 3:235; *WA*, 43:43 on Abraham’s emotion in appealing on behalf of Sodom.

<sup>148</sup> See *LW*, 3:119-42; *WA*, 42:632-49 and *LW*, 4:40-56; *WA*, 43:164-75.



hearts are fond of repetitions.... Thus the repetition in the current instance reflects... the great trouble of his soul.”<sup>149</sup> Critically, this paralyzing sadness is a human response—in a sense, an infirmity—which could not apply to the Holy Spirit.<sup>150</sup> But although the two explanations are in tension—is Moses in control of his *copia* or not?—they are also closely related.<sup>151</sup> Moses wants to evoke in the reader that which he felt, which is in turn what Noah and his family had felt: “Who would doubt that they were profoundly shocked by it?”<sup>152</sup> The term “Moses” thus names the human medium through which Scripture anticipates, interacts with, and effectively ministers to human subjectivity and weakness. Luther is preaching that Genesis is a preached text about preachers. Moses’ and the patriarchs’ emotions are interlaced: “Moses wanted to give us some idea not only of his own exceedingly perplexed heart but also of the heart of Noah himself, who... was

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<sup>149</sup> *LW*, 2:91. “Gratae enim repetitiones sunt animis perturbatis.... Ad hunc modum repetitio haec ostendit magnitudinem affectus et perturbationem animi summam.” *WA*, 42:326.

<sup>150</sup> Indeed, Luther rejects Genesis 6’s report that God “grieved” at human wickedness, claiming that the opening words of the chapter “were spoken either by Lamech himself or by Noah as a new discourse addressed to the entire world” and then attributing the feelings to “the heart of Noah, Lamech, Methusalech, and of the other holy men who are full of love towards all.” *LW*, 2:16-17. “Sic igitur hunc locum intelligo, quod haec verba sint dicta vel ab ipso Lamech vel a Noah, tanquam nova Concio proposita orbi terrarum.... Deus anxius est, hoc est, cor Noah, Lamech, Metusaleh et aliorum sanctorum Hominum, qui pleni sunt charitate erga omnes.” *WA*, 42:272-73. This extreme example of ministerial mediation confirms that Luther regards God as imperturbable.

<sup>151</sup> The two are tied by the criterion of sincerity, See Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 52-53.

<sup>152</sup> *LW*, 2:97. “Quod autem ea non extreme sint commoti, qui est, qui dubitet.” *WA*, 42:331.

almost overcome by his emotions over the coming disaster.”<sup>153</sup> Luther takes Genesis to be stylistically saturated with the human personalities of both Moses and the patriarchs.

Moses’ and the patriarchs’ perspectives are so interlaced in Luther’s Genesis that occasionally the latter subtly enter the text’s narrative voice. In these instances of what literary critics have called “free indirect style,” the narrator adopts, without explicit marking, terms that are properly specific to characters within the text (see n6 above). As a representative example, consider George Eliot’s 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda*, which opens with Daniel’s questions upon seeing Gwendolyn:

Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?<sup>154</sup>

Daniel’s thoughts are recorded without speech tags, a phrase like “Daniel asked himself,” or quotation marks. They are full-blown free indirect speech. Often the effect is subtler, as when the narrator introduces just a word or two proper to the character’s perspective into an otherwise objectively narrated sentence.

Sometimes, Luther uses free indirect style to solve a textual crux. Take, for instance, Genesis 8:1: “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.” Luther immediately names the problem: Moses “points out that Noah had drifted on the waters so long that God seemed to have completely forgotten him.”<sup>155</sup> The implication that God could forget had long bothered

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<sup>153</sup> *LW*, 2:91. “Quod Moses assidua ista repetitione non tantum voluerit imaginem aliquam summe perturbati sui animi nobis proponere, sed etiam ipsius Noah... commiseratione futurae calamitatis pene oppressus.” *WA*, 42:326-27.

<sup>154</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>155</sup> *LW*, 2:103. “Ostendit enim Noah sic iactatum tam longo tempore in aquis, ut videretur Deus eius plane oblitus.” *WA*, 42:335.

both Christian and Jewish commentators, who suggested various solutions.<sup>156</sup> Nicholas of Lyra suggests that scripture speaks “according to our way of speaking,” in which “someone is said to forget someone when he does not free him from evils at hand when he might have, and he is said to remember him when he begins to free him.”<sup>157</sup> Luther sharply rejects this reading: “Moses’ statement, ‘The Lord remembered Noah,’ must not be weakened as though it were a figure of speech meaning that God acted as if he had forgotten Noah.”<sup>158</sup> The verse is no metaphor; rather, it reflects how Noah feels:

A grammarian does not understand what it means to live in such a manner as to feel that God has forgotten you.... In these circumstances there was the feeling that God had forgotten them, as Moses indicates when he states that the Lord at last remembered Noah and his sons.<sup>159</sup>

As in the medieval reading, the biblical text is accommodated to a human perspective.

For all of Luther’s hostility to Lyra’s reading, he is clearly building upon it. Yet the vehicle of accommodation has shifted, from the abstract, universal language<sup>160</sup> to the

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<sup>156</sup> Rashi reads “ויזכר” to mean that God found Noah meritorious; the medieval French Jewish commentator Hizkuni (thirteenth century, dates uncertain) takes it to refer retrospectively to God’s care throughout the flood. See *Torat Hayyim*, 110.

<sup>157</sup> “Nec est sic intelligendum, quod aliqua oblivio cadat in Deum sed scriptura loquitur secundum modum nostrum loquendi. Dicitur enim aliquis alicuius oblivisci, quando eum non liberat a praesentibus malis cum possit, & dicitur ipsius recordari quando incipit eum liberare.” *Bibliorum sacrorum cum glossa ordinaria*, 1:157.

<sup>158</sup> *LW*, 2:104. “Non enim extenuandum est, quod Moses dicit ‘Recordatum Dominum Noah’, Quasi grammatica ea figura sit, qua significatur, Deum se habuisse in modum eius, qui oblitus sit ipsius Noah,” *WA*, 42:336. I restore the “ipsius Noah,” which is curiously absent in Pelikan’s translation.

<sup>159</sup> *LW*, 2:104-5. “Nam ita vivere, ut sentias, Deum tui oblitum, hoc Grammaticus quid sit, non intelligit.... Fuit hic sensus obliviosi Dei, sicut Moses ostendit, cum dicit Dominum tandem recordatum ipsius et filiorum eius.” *WA*, 42:336.

<sup>160</sup> Scholastic interpretations of accommodation often focused on the inevitable humanity of language. See for example the discussion of linguistic representation in the medieval philosopher Maimonides (1135 [?]-1204), in Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37-66, as well as the post-Augustine sections of Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). For the longer history of accommodation, see Ford Lewis Battles, “God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,” *Interpretation* 31

particular mediating experience of Noah, a historically particular character. To interpret Genesis correctly, on this new reading, one must have pined for God and languished in God's absence, as Luther certainly did. Mere grammatical expertise will not suffice. The importance of Noah's experience, rendered through Moses' use of free indirect style, is confirmed clearly when Luther transforms the narrator's words into Noah's speech:

Just as Paul complains of the angel of Satan [2 Cor. 12:7], so we must assume that Noah, too, felt similar barbs in his heart and often disputed with himself: "You don't suppose that God loves only you this much, do you? You don't suppose, do you, that in the end God will save you, even though there is no limit to the waters and it seems that those immense clouds can never be emptied?"<sup>161</sup>

This device construes the biblical text as shaped by the experiences of its characters.

This moment is not the only one in which Luther interprets the narrator's statement as expressing the experience of characters. Like most traditional exegetes before him, Luther understood Nimrod to be a villain.<sup>162</sup> To explain why Genesis 10:9 calls him "a mighty hunter before the Lord," Luther writes, "In his own eyes and before the entire world, Nimrod was considered to be a mighty hunter before God, that is, he

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(1977): 19-38 and Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 202-90. See also Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Netherlands: Springer, 2006).

<sup>161</sup> *LW*, 2:105. "Sic igitur Paulus de angelo Satanae conqueritur, ita putabimus ipsum Noah quoque similes stimulus in corde sensisse, ac secum saepe disputasse: Num putas te solum sic a Deo diligi? Num putas te servatum iri ad extremum, cum nullus sit aquarum modus et illae ingentes nubes nunquam videantur posse exhauriri?" *WA*, 42:336. Pelikan has "reasoned with himself," but I think the more literal translation better captures Luther's sense of the internally conflicted Noah.

<sup>162</sup> See the marginal note in Nicholas of Lyra, *Bibliorum sacrorum cum glossa ordinaria*, which identifies him as the builder of the tower and a demon: "Qui ultra naturam coelu penetrare voluit, significat diabolum, qui ait. *Ascendam super astra coeli. Nemrod... nova regnem cupiditate tyrannidem arripuit & fuit author aedificande turris quae tangeret coelum*" (1:176). See also Rashi ("he hunted the opinions of people with his mouth, and he misled them to rebel against God") and other classical Jewish commentators, *Torat Hayyim*, 134. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–c.1167), an exception to the general tendency, denies significance to Nimrod's name, and takes him to be the first to hunt animals and sacrifice his prey—thus "before God" (133).

was regarded as the high priest, as the head of the church, and altogether as what the pope would like to be regarded as today.”<sup>163</sup> Here, as it might be in Jane Austen, the free indirect style is ironic. Nimrod is falsely mediating God’s word, and Luther allows him a momentary entry into the narrative voice to expose more clearly his vainglory.

More commonly, though, the mediators are real ministers correctly preaching God’s word.<sup>164</sup> Luther writes, for instance, about Genesis 18:16:

Moses calls the angels [who visit Abraham] three men, for it was the opinion of Abraham and Sarah that they were prophets of God driven into exile because of the Word... these things are also set before us as an example, in order that we may learn to revere the prophets of God or ministers of the Word and to honor them with services of every kind.<sup>165</sup>

Note the close inter-relation between the characters’ perspective and the text’s sermon.

Shaken by the influx of religious refugees the Reformation created, Luther frames Abraham and Sarah as models of hospitality,<sup>166</sup> and, as he always does, he reads the biblical text as itself already a version of that sermon. But here, the homiletic depends upon the misunderstanding. Had they known the men were angels, Abraham and Sarah would be examples not of hospitality but of fawning opportunism. Moses’ free indirect style thus serves Abraham and Sarah’s ministry. Luther’s Bible accommodates itself not

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<sup>163</sup> *LW*, 2:198. “Sic Nimrod in suis oculis et coram toto Mundo habitus est, quod coram Deo sit fortis Venator, hoc est, est habitus pro Sacerdote summo, pro capite Ecclesiae, et omnino talis, qualem se hodie Papa vult *haberi*,” *WA*, 42:401. Pelikan renders that final “haberi” as “to be”; I have translated it consistently with the other instances of the verb in the sentences, that is, as “to be regarded as.”

<sup>164</sup> Sometimes Luther even uses free indirect style to contrast the thoughts of the wicked and the righteous. See the discussion of Genesis 18:20-21 (*LW*, 3:229-30; *WA*, 43:39), which pits Abraham and Lot against the inhabitants of Sodom in understanding how God could “go down to” Sodom or how “the cry of it [the city]” could ascend to God as if God had been previously ignorant of it.

<sup>165</sup> *LW*, 3:218. “Moses Angelos vocat hic tres viros: Sic enim Sara et Abraham iudicabant, esse Prophetas Dei, expulsos in exilium propter verbum... Proponuntur autem haec quoque nobis in exemplum, ut discamus revereri, et omni offitiorum genere colere Prophetas Dei, seu ministros verbi.” *WA*, 43:31.

<sup>166</sup> *LW*, 3:178-95; *WA*, 43:2-14.

to the universal or even historical horizons of human understanding, but to its particular ministers' experiences and perceptions.

Characterizing Lutheran hermeneutics, James Simpson writes, "The entire machine of academic scriptural reading had to be disabled in favor of a scripture so limpid that it interpreted itself."<sup>167</sup> Simpson argues that such simplification is illusory, because texts can never interpret themselves. He treats this point as an embarrassment for Reformation theology. By contrast, I argue that Luther's theology paradoxically produces a biblical text with a newly complex structure of internal mediation. There is nothing clear or straightforward about the Reformation claim that the biblical text interprets itself, and this point that reflects not the failure of *sola scriptura*, but its sophistication and complexity. While earlier readers had seen *sola scriptura* as an advance towards reasoned, Enlightenment reading, Simpson sees it as an impossible, dangerously naïve hermeneutic ideology of simplification. Against both camps, I am suggesting we bracket early Reformers' polemical claims to simplicity and observe their commentarial strategies. I argue that Luther's lectures attempt not to simplify the text, but to enfold the work of interpretation into the text's literary structure—foregrounding, in particular, the complex mechanics of narration and mediation in Genesis.

Indeed, only in the heat of polemic and disputation could auto-commentary be equated with simplicity. Would anyone claim that the notes in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* simplify the poem, that it is, in Simpson's phrase, more "limpid" because it interprets itself? Luther's Bible, to be sure, does not have a formal commentarial apparatus. Yet his contradictory demands of the biblical text do impose on Genesis a

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<sup>167</sup> Simpson, *Burning to Read*, 120.

doubled literary structure. Luther requires the text, first, to interpret itself and assume commentary's traditional role and, second, to model and legitimate the supplemental interpretation of Luther's preaching itself. The result is a text theoretically riven between narrative and narrator, its revelation always mediated, at least potentially, by the contingent, individual experiences and needs of Moses and its other character-narrators.

### **Who Narrated the Bible? Calvin and Genesis 2:24**

In Genesis 2:23, upon first meeting the first woman, Adam exclaims, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Here is the next verse, Genesis 2:24: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh." Who is speaking?

Pre-modern interpreters, particularly Augustine, ascribed verse 24 to Adam. Augustine attributes the verse to Adam because he believes that the story of the creation of Eve (Genesis 2:21-4) was prophetically revealed to Adam. He writes:

...that ecstasy that God sent into Adam, so that he would fall asleep, is best understood to have been sent for this reason: both so that Adam's mind would share, as it were, in the angelic court, and so that entering into the sanctuary of God he would understand the future. At last awaking, so full of prophecy, when he saw his wife being led to him, he at once erupted... "This is now bone of my bones... Therefore shall a man..." Although the Scripture itself testifies that these words were those of the first man, nonetheless the Lord, in the Gospel of the Lord, declares that God said them... (Matthew 19:4-5), *in order that we understand that* because of the ecstasy that had previously happened in Adam, he was able to utter those words as a prophet inspired by God.<sup>168</sup>

Augustine does not consider splitting verse 24 from verse 23, and he assumes that both are Adam's. Following the Septuagint, which renders the Hebrew "תרדמה" as "*ecstasis*"

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<sup>168</sup> *De Genesi ad litteram*, 9:11.

(ἐκστασιν),<sup>169</sup> he takes the whole creation of Eve to have been revealed to Adam in a prophetic dream. While Adam *speaks* 2:24, it is God who authored and implanted the verse in him such that when triggered, he would erupt or even vomit it out (“*eructavit continuo*”). According to Augustine, Genesis informs us that Adam spoke verse 24 only so that we will know, in conjunction with Matthew, that Eve’s creation was revealed to Adam in an ecstatic trance. Thus, the verse is Adam’s only insofar as the physical act of speech production is concerned. It does not reflect his reasoning agency or independent experiences, but rather those of God. Augustine’s reading is canonized in Nicholas of Lyra’s postilla in the *Glossa*.<sup>170</sup>

*Prima facie*, this reading is strange. First, why should Adam prophesy the future? He does so nowhere else. (Further, as Shadal (better, for your audience: S.D. Luzzatto) notes, a prophecy about leaving one’s parents sounds strange from the world’s only parentless man.)<sup>171</sup> Second, for the modern reader, linking Adam’s speech to marriage clearly reads as a narrator’s aside (just like Genesis 32:33, “Therefore the children of Israel eat not the sinew of the thigh-vein”—that’s the *narrator* speaking). Third, Christian readers of Genesis have to reckon with Matthew 19:4-5, in which Jesus, proving the impermissibility of divorce, says, “Have ye not read, that he”—that is, God—“which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, ‘For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh.’” *That* verse in Matthew attributes Genesis 2:24 to God.

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<sup>169</sup> *Septuagint*, eds. Alfre Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), on Gen. 2:21.

<sup>170</sup> *Glossa*, 83.

<sup>171</sup> S. D. Luzzatto, *Perush SHADAL al Hamishah Humshei Torah*, ed. P. Schlesinger (Tel Aviv: Dvir Tel Aviv, 1965), 27.



Augustine notably ignores the possibility that the narrator speaks Genesis 2:24. Indeed, almost no ancient or medieval commentator suggests that simple solution,<sup>172</sup> which is an early modern innovation (the lone exception is Radak (again, I would say David Kimchi), who argues *against* Moses being the speaker).<sup>173</sup> Christian commentators are in part influenced here by the Latin and Greek texts, both of which render the imperfect “יעזב,” (“leave”) and converted perfect “ודבק” (“cleave”) as future (“*relinquet*” and “*kataleipsei*”; “*adherebit*” and “*proskollethesetai*”), which implies that 2:24 is Adam’s prophecy of the future and not the narrator’s etiology of the present. Some ancient commentators follow Augustine; many do not address the question. Others attribute the line to God directly (the *midrashic* collection *Bereishit Rabbah*, for instance, claims God spoke it to forbid sexual immorality to non-Jews, a view canonized in Rashi.)<sup>174</sup> The trouble with this view (and the reason it is *not* the same as attributing the verse to the narrator) is that the text ought to have read, “And God said, ‘therefore...’”

By contrast, things changed considerably in the sixteenth century, specifically with Calvin. He writes, “It is doubted whether Moses here introduces God as speaking, or continues the discourse of Adam, or, indeed, *has added this, in virtue of his office as teacher, in his own person.* The last of these is that which I most approve.”<sup>175</sup> Calvin’s

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<sup>172</sup> This intuitive answer is not the *right* solution. Indeed, there may be no right answer, since Genesis 2:24 is likely a secondary interpolation; the question of who is speaking presupposes that we are dealing with a literary question about the text, rather than a historical question about its evolution. See Angelo Tosato, “On Genesis 2:24,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52.3 (1990), 389-409.

<sup>173</sup> *Torat Hayyim*, 1.53

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.53.

<sup>175</sup> Calvin, 1.135-36.

previously unnoticed option quickly becomes the standard.<sup>176</sup> Andrew Willet, for instance, calls verse 24, “the benediction of marriage interserted by Moses.”<sup>177</sup> Matthew Poole, in his annotations, writes, “These are the words of Moses by Divine instinct, or his inference from Adam’s words.”<sup>178</sup> Clericus concurs.<sup>179</sup>

What accounts for this shift from viewing Genesis 2:24 as being the speech of Adam to being the speech of Moses, that is, the narrator? In part, the early moderns may simply have consulted the Hebrew, dispelling the tense problem. But more basically, Renaissance commentators took the well-known tradition that Moses transcribed the Pentateuch and exploited it exegetically, constantly using Moses to explain the text’s sequential narration of events. For while commentators from Calvin through Clericus agreed that God *authored* the Bible, they were constantly aware, as we see here, of Moses, the mediating writer who narrates the text.

### **Calvinist Accommodation and the Biblical Narrator**

In particular, it is no accident that Calvin was the first to “solve” the problem of Genesis 2:24. Calvin was intensely concerned with the Pentateuch’s Mosaic mediation, because the early Reformer was, as scholars have long observed, especially concerned with the mediation of revelation generally. In theological terms, Calvin was especially interested in the problem of accommodation. As long as readers have been embarrassed

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<sup>176</sup> For the question of Calvin’s influence on English Protestantism in particular, see R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1997).

<sup>177</sup> Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Genesis: that is, A sixfold commentarie vpon Genesis* (London: Printed by John Legat, 1605), 39.

<sup>178</sup> Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (London: Printed by John Richardson, 1683), note to Genesis 2:24.

<sup>179</sup> Jean Clericus, *Pentateuchus Mosis ex eius translatione cum paraphrasi perpetua*, (Amsterdam, 1735), note to Genesis 2:24.

of their cultures' privileged, ancient texts, they have suggested that those texts do not reflect the true views of their authors. Rather, the authors are said to have accommodated themselves to vulgar audiences, which were either incapable of understanding or unready for the truth. While in principle, accommodation can be attributed to a human author (Cicero and Quintilian discuss *accommodatio* from the speaker's perspective), it is particularly attractive and convenient when interpreting Scripture. First, the potential embarrassment is especially acute: Homer may nod, but God presumably may not. And second, theologians often see a radical gap between divine and human perspectives as intuitively plausible or even intrinsically attractive, beyond its hermeneutic handiness.

Calvin's treatment of accommodation has attracted a fair bit of scholarly attention (including two recent, full-length studies by Jon Balsarak and Arnold Huijgen), for several reasons.<sup>180</sup> First, because of the Reformed emphasis on human depravity, accommodation seems to structure Calvin's theology to an unusually intense degree, a fact that Richard Muller plays on in the title of *The Unaccommodated Calvin*.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, scholars of theology at least since Edward A. Dowey have seen in accommodation a unifying principle with which to interpret the *Institutes*.<sup>182</sup> Second, accommodation has seemed a gateway towards critical, academic study of the Bible, as when David L. Puckett frames his study of Calvin on the Old Testament by associating the

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<sup>180</sup> Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Rotterdam: Springer Netherlands, 2006) and Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011).

<sup>181</sup> Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>182</sup> Dowey, *passim*.

accommodated character of Scripture with historicist, humanizing philology.<sup>183</sup> Thus also the vexed historiographical question of whether Calvin's use of accommodation derives (as his philological chops and interest in literary devices did) from his Humanist background, as Quirinius Breen, E. David Willis and Ford Battles argued. If Calvin's accommodation has roots in classical rhetoric and Humanist philology, the suggestion is, then understanding it as a predecessor to modern, critical scholarship is not merely teleological reading.

Finally and more broadly, Amos Funkenstein argued that accommodation provided the intellectual scaffolding that became modern historicism.<sup>184</sup> To be sure, Funkenstein (and then his student Stephen Benin) took up Calvin as one link in a long chain. Nonetheless, idiosyncratically but powerfully, he raised the stakes for understanding Calvin's idea of accommodation, by making it relevant not just to theologians and Bible scholars, but to a broader, secular (or rather, not specifically religious) intellectual history.

I want to do something analogous to what Funkenstein did, though my focus is on the *literary* historical, rather than historiographical or philosophical, significance of Calvin's historicism. Calvin's concept of accommodation, I argue, amounted to a novel literary account of Scripture (for simplicity, I will focus on the Pentateuch). For while theologians have tended to imagine accommodation as God's *lie*, which God the author can see through, Calvin emphasizes how God uses Moses as an accommodating medium, a characteristic *condition* of revelation. Moses becomes, for Calvin, a literary screen

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<sup>183</sup> David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 1-12.

<sup>184</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 202-79.

through which the text is accommodated, in ways which Moses is theologically unsuited to understand fully himself. Calvin's interest in accommodation requires him to posit not just an author but a narrator, mediating the biblical text from within, imbuing it with his perspective without having either final authority or even knowledge of its full purpose.

Theorists of accommodation usually understand it as a conscious, authorial act by someone capable of cleanly distinguishing between the underlying truth and its accommodated form. This assumption is implicit in metaphors of accommodation as pedagogy or medicine. Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, writes about the Mosaic code's compromise with Israelite weakness:

And therefore like a tutor or physician He [God] partly removes and partly condones ancestral habits, conceding some little of what tended to pleasure... For it is no easy matter to change from those habits which custom and use have made honorable. For instance, the first [covenant] cut off the idol, but left the sacrifices; the second, while it destroyed the sacrifices did not forbid circumcision. Then, once men had submitted to the curtailment, they also yielded that which had been conceded to them.<sup>185</sup>

Such metaphors, which are widespread, imagine accommodation as the product of God's skill or knowledge. Furthermore, they construe the accommodations as susceptible of delineation (thus the several, defined steps) and eventual transcendence by the audience. Augustine writes similarly, "a single physician prescribes one medicine to weaker patients through his assistants, and another by himself to stronger patients."<sup>186</sup>

But what about the assistants, that is, Moses and the other Old Testament prophets, who contrast with Christ, the New Testament's divine pharmacist? Do the assistants need to understand the accommodation? In Augustine, this question remains unasked. And similarly, while Philo (and other Hellenistic, philosophical commentators)

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<sup>185</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes in Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Graeca* vol. 35-6, ed. Jacques Paul Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857-1912), 31, 25.

<sup>186</sup> Augustine, *De Vera Religione, CSEL 77*, ed. Gunther Weigel (Vienna: CSEL, 1961), 17:34 (translated by Benin, 98).

usually treats Moses, the lawgiver, as the agent of accommodation, Philo always imagines Moses as unlike his audience. Philo's Moses knows God philosophically, has no personal need for anthropomorphism or the like, and thus understands his own accommodated lies. Calvin takes seriously the twofold structure of Augustine's metaphor, and the attendant possibility, namely that the intermediary ministering the accommodation might not fully understand it. First, I describe the elements in Calvin's theology that lead toward a new conception of accommodation. Second, I give two examples of how this works and say why they matter.

To understand Calvin's distinctive view of accommodation, it is important to recognize that he is concerned above all with *widening* our sense of the gap between humans and God. For example, a strong current in Christian exegesis saw the Mosaic sacrificial system as an accommodated concession to the Israelites' idolatrous tendencies on leaving Egypt. Calvin completely rejects this idea, since it implies that the Israelites were intended to fulfill the law. He writes about the Mosaic code:

If we were to try to do perfectly all that God commands, we would find God revealing just what a grievous state of condemnation we are in, by bringing our failure to the forefront. . . . But if we pause to place our lives alongside his commandments, we will find that although it appears that God is willing to be so kind and indulgent towards us as to reward us if we serve him and keep his law, the purpose of this is to plunge us deeper into the pit in which we already find ourselves by nature.<sup>187</sup>

Now, Calvin is not saying that the Mosaic code is un-accommodated. Rather, the Law has been accommodated to reveal our weaknesses, its difficulty exactly calibrated so that we initially think ourselves able to fulfill it but are constantly frustrated. The pedagogy here, appropriately enough, is cognitive rather than practical: we are not being weaned of Egypt, we are being trained to recognize that we are in Egypt.

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<sup>187</sup> John Calvin, "We All Stand Condemned by the Law: Galatians 3:11-12," in *Sermons On Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 266-83.

Crucial to Calvin's sensibility concerning accommodation, then, is that accommodation does not so much bridge the gap between God and humans as make it visible. "Almost the whole of our wisdom," he writes early in the *Institutes*:

...in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and produces the other. For in the first place no man can look at himself but he must immediately turn to the contemplation of God in whom he lives and moves... Again, it is plain that no man can arrive at the true knowledge of himself without having first contemplated the face of God and then descended to an examination of himself.<sup>188</sup>

That is, Calvin's theology is structured, as Dowey showed, by a dialectical movement between inspecting the finite, sinful human and contemplating an infinite, perfect God. Accommodation, then, is not a merging of these two poles, which Calvin constantly keeps separate. It is rather a pathway back and forth.

Calvin's resistance to seeing accommodation as a middle ground surfaces in his understanding of Scripture as divine accommodation:

That invisible God, whose wisdom, power, and justice, are incomprehensible, is set before us in the history of Moses as in a mirror, in which his living image is reflected. For as an eye, either dimmed by age or weakened by any other cause, sees nothing distinctly without the aid of glasses, so (such is our imbecility) if Scripture does not direct us in our inquiries after God, we immediately turn vain in our imaginations.<sup>189</sup>

Scripture is thus accommodated to our inability to know God directly. But note the slippage in metaphor: the Bible is first a mirror, then glasses. The difference, I think, reinforces the gap Scripture is supposed to overcome: as it pertains to God, Scripture is an imperfect mirror of God's image, whereas as it pertains to us, it is a set of spectacles fitted to our eyes. And correspondingly, for God, Scripture is the accommodated truth, whereas for us, Scripture is an instrument in our inquiry for it. Even as the two poles are being joined, they are also being separated.

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<sup>188</sup> *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

<sup>189</sup> *Institutes*, 1.14.1

In insisting on the correlative, dialectical nature of the divine and human poles even *within* accommodation, Calvin is introducing an extra degree of mediation: even the accommodation needs to be accommodated. This feature of Calvin's theology creates an important literary dynamic in Calvin's commentaries on the Pentateuch. When Calvin leans on accommodation, he sometimes *separates* God's perspective and Moses', answering separately, that is, questions about the mirror and questions about the glasses. Questions about those glasses correlate with my question about Augustine's "assistants," but Calvin takes the questions seriously.

Here are two examples of the phenomenon in which I am interested, one relatively innocuous, one more theologically loaded. Both concern Genesis 1:5: "And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day." Calvin, like earlier Christian commentators, is bothered by the text's implication that day begins at night. He writes,

[Moses] begins the day, according to the custom of his nation, with the evening. It is to no purpose to dispute whether this be the best and the legitimate order or not. We know that darkness preceded time itself; when God withdrew the light, he closed the day. I do not doubt that the most ancient fathers, to whom the coming night was the end of one day and the beginning of another, followed this mode of reckoning. Although Moses did not intend here to prescribe a rule which it would be criminal to violate; yet (as we have now said) he accommodated his discourse to the received custom. Wherefore, as the Jews foolishly condemn all the reckonings of other people, as if God had sanctioned this alone; so again are they equally foolish who contend that this modest reckoning, which Moses approves, is preposterous.<sup>190</sup>

Calvin is ambiguous: either there is no matter of fact about when a day begins from God's perspective, or there is such an answer, but we cannot know it. At any rate, the text is accommodated to human beings, both generally, in that a human text *must* order the day somehow, and particularly to the ancient Israelite custom. But importantly, despite language of accommodation and audience (*sed receptae consuetudini... accommodavit sermonem suum*), Calvin does not imagine Moses standing outside of the custom. He is

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<sup>190</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, 77-78.



not bending his understanding to someone else's, he is rather *reflecting* his people's custom ("*usitatum gentis suae morem*"). David Wright has drawn attention to Calvin's sense of accommodations made to "Israel as a primitive ethnos," which fits well with the association between accommodation and historicism.<sup>191</sup> But note that Moses himself is *inside* that ethnos, such that Calvin is imagining Genesis as immanently mediated.

Now, Moses' mediation is notably non-authorial. God, Calvin insists often in the *Institutes* and in the *Commentary to Genesis*, is the unambiguous, sole author of Scripture: "the full authority which [Scriptures] ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized, unless they are believed to have come from heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them."<sup>192</sup> Calvin, as Dowey argues, seems to have "held a mechanical or literal dictation theory of the writing of the Bible," as evidenced by his frequent use of phrases like "*dictante spiritu sancto*" and passages in which "Calvin describes the actual mechanics of inspiration in terms of dictation."<sup>193</sup> Thus, "Moses begins the day with the evening" in Calvin really means, "God dictates to Moses words that begin the day with the evening." To whatever extent Moses' perspective is registered in the text, that reflects not Moses' authorial agency, but God's accommodation to Israel: what God knows Moses' predilections and perspective *would be*, if Moses *were* authoring a text.

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<sup>191</sup> See David F. Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism: Equity, Hardness of Heart, and Divine Accommodation in the Mosaic Harmony Commentary," *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986), 33- 50 and "Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries," in *Understanding Poets and Prophets. Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, ed. A. Graeme Auld (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Series, 1993), 413-427.

<sup>192</sup> *Institutes*, 1.7.1

<sup>193</sup> Dowey, 90-106.

accommodation. But God remains entirely separate from the accommodated form, which renders no insight on the divine perspective. This sort of neutral, cultural humanization is all over Calvin's commentaries, and Calvin consistently and curiously uses the word "accommodation" to refer to Moses' usage of his *own* people's terms. In moments like these, Calvin is grammatically describing Moses as the *accommodator* but theologically thinking of him as the *accommodation*, the medium through which God makes the text legible to Israelites.

This subtle switch in Moses' role becomes especially clear when he is reworking an earlier commentary with which he is dissatisfied. Take the hexameral creation, which has long bugged theologians: why should an omnipotent God need six days? and what are these days, after all, if several of them occur before the creation of the celestial bodies?

One answer comes from Philo: God created everything simultaneously, and Moses:

says that the world was made in six days, not because the Creator stood in need of a length of time... but because the things created required arrangement; and number is akin to arrangement; and, of all numbers, six is, by the laws of nature, the most productive.<sup>194</sup>

That is, Moses accommodated his speech to human literary needs. This also seems to be

Augustine's view. Of course, this is unsatisfactory to Calvin, who writes on Genesis 1:5:

it is too violent a cavil to contend that Moses distributes the work which God perfected at once into six days, for the mere purpose of conveying instruction. Let us rather conclude that God himself took the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men. We slightly pass over the infinite glory of God, which here shines forth; whence arises this but from our excessive dullness in considering his greatness? In the meantime, the vanity of our minds carries us away elsewhere. For the correction of this fault, God applied the most suitable remedy when he distributed the creation of the world into successive portions, that he might fix our attention, and compel us, as if he had laid his hand upon us, to pause and to reflect.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Philo Judaeus, "The Creation of the World," in ed. Oliver J. Thatcher, *The Library of Original Sources* (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), Vol. 3, 355-369.

<sup>195</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, 78.

Instead of Moses accommodating us in speech, Calvin has God accommodating us in deed. That solves the literalism problem.

But it would be wrong to think that Moses' writing is no longer at issue here, since God's concern is precisely to guide our experience reading the text and combat our distraction (*ut nostram attentionem retineat, & quasi sustinere, manu iniecta, cogat*).

Note that Calvin's gloss here is on the phrase, "The first day." Calvin is explaining not just the physics of a hexameral creation, but also its rhetoric: the sonorous, rhythmic divisions of Genesis 1 ("And there was evening and there was morning, one day").

Indeed, Calvin uses exactly this phrasing in describing *Moses'* rhetorical repetition in Genesis 21:

There is also great emphasis in the repetition, "The Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken." For he [Moses—clear from context] thus retains his readers, as by laying his hand upon them, that they may pause in the consideration of so great a miracle.

Calvin's comment on 1:5 is clearly about the language, not just the content. But how does this repetition come about: is Moses deliberately highlighting God's accommodation with his style? Is he so moved by God's creation that he is driven to sublime heights? Or has God chosen a form of creation the simple recounting of which reads as rhetorically heightened?

These are the sort of questions literary critics ask about *narrators*, and what I am suggesting here is that in Calvin's hands, Moses is becoming, perhaps for the first time, the narrator of the Pentateuch. The relevant points about narrators are: first, they provide the perspective and immediate rhetoric of a given text or narration, and their perspective emerges from a particular context; second, they are in principle separable from that text's author (who is *really* responsible for all those things); and third, it is useful to talk about them just to the extent that we want to differentiate, and even contrast, narrators and

authors. This author-narrator polarity corresponds to an impulse basic to Calvin's theology and that Calvin's commentaries on the Pentateuch regard Moses as its narrator. Indeed, as the exegetical history of Genesis 2:24 suggests, he may have been the first to think of Moses in this way. God, then, I assume, is the author. Perhaps you should state that here, and not just below.

One final thought, returning to Funkenstein. On the one hand, Funkenstein's sense of historically specific moments and a universal perspective correlates neatly with the split between Moses the narrator and God the author, suggesting the continuity of my argument with his. On the other hand, Calvin's Moses is a mediating literary structure *internal* to the text. That is, Moses is the accommodated humanized shape that God needed the text to take, not so much an author making his own choices as a personified description of God's choices. To be sure, Calvin certainly believed in the existence of the historical Moses. But the historical Moses isn't the point; God's literary design about what Moses *would* say is. So while accommodation does anticipate important modern intellectual paradigms, it may be that the paradigms in question may not belong to historiography or the philosophy of history, but to literary history, and particularly to the history of narratology.

## Chapter 2: Raleigh's *History* and the Origins of Biblical Fiction

### I. Raleigh's Historical Digressions

Not enough has been made of Sir Walter Raleigh's parentheses. If writers have characteristic forms of punctuation, Raleigh's would be the two half circles that announce interruption, qualification, and digression. Every page of his million-word *History of the World* contains a parenthetical, often three or four. Interjections shape not only his sentences, but also the work's larger structure. Whole sections depart tangentially from his main narrative, and then Raleigh returns to his previous subject as casually as if the aside had been two or three words. Yet even when he digresses only for two or three words, the round walls of his parentheses marks cannot fully contain their verbal prisoners. When you take the parenthetical seriously, it turns out the force of the main point has been quietly but radically altered.

Take a parenthetical early in the *History*. It occurs after the text's long first paragraph, which describes how an otherwise unknowable God can be apprehended through the manifold forms of creation. First, the paragraph:

God, whome the wisest men acknowledge to be a power vneffable, and vertue infinite, a light by abundant claritie inuisible, an understanding which it selfe can onely comprehend, an essence eternall and spirituall, of absolute purenesse and simplicitie, was and is pleased to make himselfe knowne by the worke of the World: in the wonderfull magnitude whereof, (all which he imbraceth, filleth, and sustaineth) we behold the image of that glorie, which cannot bee measured, and withall that one, and yet vniuersall nature, which cannot be defined. In the glorious lights of heauen, we perceiue a shadow of his diuine countenance, in his mercifull prouision for all that liue, his manifold goodness: and lastly, in creating and making existent the world vniuersall by the absolute art of his owne word, his power and almightinesse, which power, light, vertue, wisdom, and goodnesse, being all but attributes of one simple essence, and one God, wee in all admire, and in part discerne *per speculum creaturarum*, that is, in the disposition, order, and varietie of celestiall and terrestriall bodies: terrestriall, in their strange and manifold diuersities; celestiall, in their beautie and magnitude; which in their continuall and contrarie motions, are neither repugnant, intermixt, nor confounded. By these potent effects we approach to the knowledge of the omnipotent cause, and by these motions their Almighty mouer.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World* (London: Printed for Walter Burre, 1614), 1-2. Main text hereafter in-text by page number, preface by folio.

The sprawling first sentence imitates God's remarkable fecundity. Its simple main clause ("God... was and is pleased to make himselfe knowne by the worke of the World") is complicated by manifold elaborations and adornments, just as God's "one simple essence" is apprehended through the multiplicity of creation. By a sleight of hand, Raleigh expands the divine unity into a list of unfathomable qualities ("a power vneffable, and vertue infinite, a light by abundant claritie inuisible, an understanding which it selfe can onely comprehend, an essence eternall and spirituall, of absolute purenesse and simplicitie"). Through gradual, consistent lengthening of the phrases, Raleigh's rhetoric gradually overcomes its own claims that its object is inexpressible: what is ineffable in three words can nonetheless be expounded upon for ten. The enumeration of God's incomprehensibilities prepares us for the next part of the sentence, which correlates parts of creation with the attributes of God they make known. As the first list had five items, so Raleigh provides five correlated pairs, and the component of creation mentioned last ("creating and making existent the world vniuersall by the absolute art of his owne word") makes known God's "power," returning us to "a power vneffable" and the beginning of the first list.

Yet the lists do not align perfectly, and that too serves Raleigh's purpose. The third set of five ("which power, light, vertue, wisdom, and goodness") at once echoes and modifies the first two lists. The partial, overlapping repetitions and variations of Raleigh's language communicate the shifting, teeming variety of creation, as well as their nagging, incomplete suggestions of an ultimate unity and identity ever-so-slightly beyond expression: words recur subtly altered, the reference of "light" flickering between God and the heavenly bodies, God's "glory" becoming the "glorious lights of heauen,"

“magnitude” shifting in application from the whole “world” to the celestial bodies. This virtuosic slippage, then, is part of Raleigh’s attempt to recreate linguistically the created world, imperfect yet alluding to perfection, diverse yet emerging from unity. Even the celestial bodies’ “continuall and contrarie motions” are mirrored in the chiasmus of “celestiall and terrestriall: terrestriall... celestiall.” In praising the “disposition, order, and varietie” of these bodies, Raleigh is also celebrating his own words, which are at once proliferating in exuberant variety and tightly controlled and “in their continuall and contrarie motions, are neither repugnant, intermixt, nor confounded.” As Raleigh explicitly asserts that the created world’s manifold forms imperfectly disclose an unknowable God, his rhetoric imitates that world and thus offers the reader an immediate, miniature experience of the movement between worldly multiplicity and divine unity.

Yet this elaborate parallel between rhetoric and creation, as well as the latter’s capacity to inform us about God, crumbles in a two-word parenthetical in the very next sentence. “In these more then wonderfull workes,” Raleigh continues, “God (saith *Hugo*) speaketh vnto man, and it is true, that these be those discourses of God, whose effects all that liue witness in themselues” (2). Whereas the first paragraph harmonizes the manifold bounties of rhetoric and nature, imagining that both unambiguously signify God’s creation, the parenthetical injects a note of skepticism. Is that nature we are hearing, or Hugo? If God speaks through nature, this speech is always doubly mediated through human interpreters: the metaphor of “speaketh” and “discourses” is highlighted by juxtaposition with the literal “saith.” The list of authorities Raleigh provides to bolster Hugo (Saint Gregory in the *Moralia*, Job, Cusanus, etc.) at once confirms God’s legibility

in the created world and raises a doubt. If God wrote so clearly, why do we need these supplements?

Indeed, the contrast between the clean, authorial prose of the first paragraph and the pastiche of quotations that follows exposes the artifice of Raleigh's writing. A confident rhetoric, which both asserted theological truth univocally and presented itself as the literary complement to nature's speech, is now revealed as a contingent, historically situated writer among other writers. Having quoted Augustine to the effect that God cannot be corporeally perceived, Raleigh insists:

But by his owne [i.e. God's] word, and by this visible world, is God perceiued of men, which is also the vnderstood language of the Almightye, vouchsafed to all his creatures, whose Hieroglyphical Characters, are the vnnumbred Starres, the Sunne, and Moone, written on these large volumes of the firmament: written also on the earth and the seas, by the letters of all those liuing creatures, and plants, which inhabit and reside therein (2).

Very good, except that the next phrase—"Therefore said that learned *Cusanus*"—jerks us from the vast conceit of creation as God's literature to the concrete, specific writing of a historical personage. But this contrast is already imbedded in the preceding sentence. In its drift from the world as language to the world as book, portions of which are merely mute medium ("these large volumes of the firmament" and "the earth and the seas"), the sentence admits the particularity of writing, the sense in which not everything can signify—and thus in which no writing can represent the world totally, objectively, or automatically, but rather requires a specific writer's rhetorical and inevitably partial choices. The repetition of "creatures," who are at first the readers and then the text, further suggests that God's expression requires a mediating consciousness to be fully legible—a suggestion that suggests "the letters of all those liuing creatures" refers not just to the letters that we *are* but also to the letter we write. All the world's a text—or so, at least, writes Cusanus.



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This episode encapsulates one of the *History*'s constitutive tensions, the conflict between its intense drive to represent the world directly and the immediate dependence such a project entails on the contingent, situated human sources that mediate that world. Throughout the work, Raleigh frequently rhetorically distances himself from commentarial discourse, its technical hairsplitting, fantastical inventions, and perspectival limitations. He imagines history as an anti-commentarial form: directly about the real world, univocally authoritative, standing on its own. Yet the *History*—and particularly the first, biblical section, on which I will concentrate—is also constructed from the materials of biblical commentary. The *History* synthesizes biblical and other ancient histories, but it also assimilates the questions, contradictions, and speculations of the commentarial tradition into a new biblical narrative. Raleigh's self-interruptive style combines the Bible's direct, linear narration with Renaissance commentaries' rambling, second-order discourse, producing a biblical history that self-reflectively glosses, interprets, and sometimes even undermines itself.

In focusing on how Raleigh uses and reacts to Renaissance commentary, I am attempting to bring together the two halves of scholarship on the *History*: literary biography and Renaissance historiography. Literary historians have long mined the *History* for biographical information, as if the book's brief passages of memoir were the fruit from which a huge, indigestible skin of history had to be constantly peeled.<sup>197</sup> As long as the *History* has been around, it has attracted such readers, who are interested in

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<sup>197</sup> For instances of such mining, see Edward Thompson, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 129 and A. L. Rowse, *Raleigh and the Throckmortons* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1962), 178-9.

looking for anecdotes of Raleigh's youth, tests of his religious orthodoxy, or hints of his esoteric critique of James I.<sup>198</sup> As early as his 1618 sentencing, the Lord Chief Justice said, "Your religion has been much questioned, but I am resolved you are a good Christian, for your *History*... doth testify as much," so collapsing the distinction between book and man as to imagine the *History* itself on the stand.<sup>199</sup> The literary biographers have often been content to follow the Chief Justice's lead, reading the *History* as memoir.

Such reading has produced not just old-fashioned literary biography but arguably also New Historicism itself.<sup>200</sup> In his first book, Stephen Greenblatt uses Raleigh as a test-case in the attempt to "broaden the focus of criticism to include works not usually considered literary, and beyond these, to include Raleigh's life itself."<sup>201</sup> The *History*, on Greenblatt's account, is "first of all a work of the individual imagination, vitally related to the tensions, concerns, and sense of self that shaped Raleigh's actions and poetry" (131). Rather than being a quarry for biographical gems, the *History* becomes itself a precious artifact, its crafted form and style recording and exemplifying Raleigh's intensive self-fashioning. Greenblatt thus increased the fraction of the *History* that could be interestingly related to Raleigh. But he retained from literary biography the structuring

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<sup>198</sup> See for instance Pierre Lefranc, *Sir Walter Raleigh Écrivain: L'œuvre et Les Idées* (Paris: A. Colin, 1968), 320-29; Steven W. May, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 90-93; and Charles G. Salas, "Raleigh and the Punic Wars," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.2 (1996), 196-215.

<sup>199</sup> Cited in Thompson, 74.

<sup>200</sup> See the 2005 retrospective preface to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which discusses how the concern of Greenblatt's dissertation and first book with Raleigh's "lifelong practice of staging himself" fed his later work. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005),

<sup>201</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), xii-xiii.

assumption that meaning is organized around an individual author, and that what is shared or conventional in the *History* is thus uninteresting.<sup>202</sup>

Yet the *History* is often read as if it were the product not of Raleigh but of some broader, national or even civilizational collective, such that his personal asides are embarrassing lapses. Thus we read that the *History* “recapitulated the entire sixteenth-century development” of history writing in England, as if its importance were that it summarized what had preceded it.<sup>203</sup> Many readers look backwards, placing Raleigh within the sixteenth-century historiographic tradition,<sup>204</sup> whereas scholars concerned with recovering a prehistory for radical, anti-monarchic thinking look forward, imagining Elizabeth’s prized courtier as a proto-republican.<sup>205</sup> Whereas the biographers delight in the swashbuckling, theatrical, and unique Raleigh—representative, if of anything, of the limitless subjective horizons of the Renaissance man—the historians often find that

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<sup>202</sup> Further connections between Raleigh and the birth of New Historicism can be seen in the emphasis on his patronage relations with Elizabeth, which for Greenblatt and others became a model for linking artistic activity with state power. See Leonard Tennenhouse, “Sir Walter Raleigh and the Literature of Clientage,” in eds. Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel, *Patronage in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 235-260.

<sup>203</sup> F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1967), 294. See also Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s “Histories,” Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1947), in which the *History* is judged the “culminating document of Renaissance historiography in England” (79).

<sup>204</sup> See F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought 1580-1640* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 191-210, who writes, “In the chronology of historical writing and thought, Raleigh’s *History* marked the ending, not the beginning of an epoch” (193), concluding that Raleigh was “not one of the Moderns... Raleigh’s *History of the World* had few affinities with exact scholarship” (210).

<sup>205</sup> See Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution Revised* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 192, as well as the far more detailed argument in Anna F. Beer, “‘Left to the World without a Maister’: Sir Walter Raleigh’s *The History of the World* as a Public Text,” *Studies in Philology* 91.4 (1994), 432-463 and *Sir Walter Raleigh and His Readers in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

context demotes him, rendering the *History* generic, unexceptional, and merely an instance of a larger trend. Nicholas Popper, in a recent full-length study of the *History*, concedes that Raleigh was no leader but rather the “rank and file of a movement”—that is, exacting Renaissance historiographers, who Popper argues ironically undermined the historical tradition they set out to buttress—and construes the significance of the *History* entirely in terms of that movement.<sup>206</sup>

What is needed, and what is offered by focusing upon how Raleigh depends on, repudiates, and above all manipulates the biblical commentary tradition, is an account of how to relate Raleigh’s individual authorship with his generic exemplarity, how the passages that render the *History* so unmistakably and dramatically Raleigh’s connect with, rather than merely coincidentally appear in the same work as, the mass of details, ideas, and writing that might easily be someone else’s entirely—and sometimes are.<sup>207</sup> I argue that this paradoxical conjunction lies at the center of the *History*. The book is defined by the tension between its main, authorial narrative and its multiple, contradictory sources, which Raleigh struggles to contain. If Raleigh continually asserts his work’s authority by denigrating those sources, the constraints within which he binds them—parentheticals, rejected alternatives, inessential tangents—actually give them a new force and vitality, producing a new literary genre: biblical fiction.

My argument advances in several steps. First, I trace how Raleigh’s empiricism aspires towards a singular, objective history, one that replaces multiple, oratorically

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<sup>206</sup> Nicholas Popper, *Walter Raleigh’s History of the World and the Historical Culture of the Late Renaissance* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2014), 7 and 11-12.

<sup>207</sup> For a discussion of both Raleigh’s sources and use of intermediary scholarship and summaries, see Jean Racin, *Sir Walter Raleigh as Historian: An Analysis of The History of the World* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974), 18-27.

inflected accounts with a singular, authorial version. Yet the *History* constantly asserts this monological empiricism not only against, but also through the manipulation of a plural, rhetorical tradition of commentary. Having sketched Raleigh's explicit philosophy, then, I first turn to two theoretical questions that illustrate the tension between narrative unity and multiplicity in the *History*: the notorious distinction between first and second causes, and the question of conjectural history. Then, in two readings, I argue that Raleigh did not simply err. Rather, the remarkable fact about the *History* is how it fashions the authorial, individual Raleigh precisely through its ambivalent handling of commentarial sources. These sources themselves are, in Raleigh's hands, refashioned into something, I suggest finally, that we might call, without overdue anachronism, "fiction."

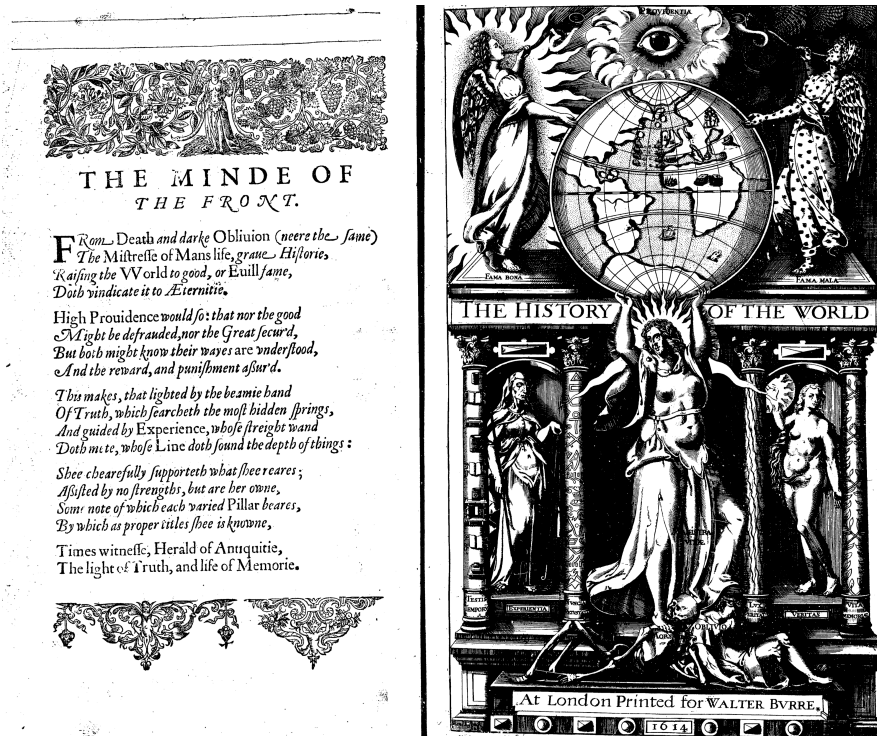
## II. "Raleigh Was Right": The *History*'s Purportedly Monological Empiricism

Raleigh's ambition to represent history directly is evident from the image adorning the *History*'s frontispiece and the accompanying poem. Both are drawn from Cicero's famous definition of history in *De Oratore*: "In truth, History is the witness of times past, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger of antiquity; by which voice, if not the orator's, can she be committed to immortality."<sup>208</sup> Cicero is arguing that history belongs to the orator (who is, of course, the central focus of *De Oratore*), and he understands history as expressed through rhetoric. History is *De Oratore*'s final example of rhetorical occasions on which the orator's gifts are particular

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<sup>208</sup> "Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua voce alia nisi oratoris immortalitati commendatur?" Latin text from Cicero, *On the Orator: Books 1-2*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1942), 2.36, 224. All translations from Latin are my own unless otherwise noted.

needed: “the giving of council about the greatest things,” “the inciting of the languid people and the calming of the frenetic,” and so on.<sup>209</sup>



Cicero’s four epithets for history are inscribed on Relgh’s title page, but the orator has disappeared, his place taken by history herself.<sup>210</sup> She lifts the world into the eternal realm represented by the second story of the building (in Cicero’s terms, committing it to immortality), and she herself tramples on “oblivio” and “mors.” As the poem explains, she is “assisted by no strengths, but are her own.” Furthermore, while Cicero views the orator’s ethical judgments as indispensable to history (whose purpose is rhetorical and

<sup>209</sup> “dando consilio de maximis rebus,” “languentis populi incitatio et effrenati moderatio” (2.35).

<sup>210</sup> Gerald M. MacLean discusses the frontispiece and caption, but he misses its modification of Cicero. *Time’s Witness: Historical Representation in English Poetry, 1603-1660* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 20-21.

occasional), the title page's illustration partitions such judgments from history-producing, imagining *fama bona* and *fama mala* as eternal angels, partitioning them from the lower, human sphere and thus from the process of history-writing. She raises the world "to good, or Evill fame," but she does not choose which, or inflect the world with her own judgment.

If her oratorical agency is thus minimal, Raleigh is all but invisible, his authorship registered on the preceding, first title page's illustration. When that page was excised on James's instructions, the *History's* second title page conveniently presented the *History* as an un-authored text. If Raleigh is present anywhere on these pages, it is in the poem's first stanza: "*From Death and darke Obliuion (neere the same) / The Mistresse of Mans life, grave Historie, / Raising the World to good, or Euill fame, / Doth vindicate it to Æternitie,*" which hint at the author languishing forgotten in the tower and position the *History* as his vindication. With Elizabeth dead, and Raleigh's manuscript poetry to "Cynthia" languishing in an irrelevant, un-publishable manuscript, Raleigh transferred his hopes to be rescued and redeemed from the flesh-and-blood queen to a feminine abstraction. But to author the *History*, for Raleigh, is not to shape it oratorically. He imagines himself as parallel to the world—not the subject writing history, but rather her object.<sup>211</sup>

Raleigh's desire for a history free of oratorical shaping corresponds to an impatience with traditional authorities. In the Preface, he expresses amazement that Aristotle denied the overwhelming arguments of natural reason for Creation, but he finds the respect Aristotle has commanded "no lesse strange":

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<sup>211</sup> TK: Longer discussion of the subject/object distinction here, depending on outcome of frontispiece research. Some work needed to clarify this point.

Those men which are desirous of knowledge (seeing *Aristotle* hath failed in this maine point; and taught little other than *termes* in the rest) haue so retrencht their mindes from the following and ouertaking of truth, and so absolutely subiected them selues to the law of those Philosophicall principles; as all contrary kinde of teaching, in the search of causes, they haue condemned either for phantasticall, or curious (D2v).

Raleigh's modern empiricism is evident in his contempt for terminology; he contemptuously calls Aristotle's philosophy "his *Verball Doctrine*" (D2r).<sup>212</sup> Tradition is imagined as just so many verbal assertions: "But doth it follow, that the positions of Heathen Philosophers, are vndoubted grounds and principles indeed, because so called? Or that *ipsi dixerunt*, doth make them to be such? certainly no."

Reverence for such tradition is "subjection," and the political metaphor links the Preface's critique of Aristotle to its broader, central theme: that dispassionate accounting will reveal the manifest injustice of tyranny. As he writes earlier in the Preface, "Who hath not obserued, what labour, practise, perill, bloodshed, and cruelty, the Kings and Princes of the world haue vndergone, exercised, taken on them, and committed; to make them-selues and their issues maisters of the world" (A2v-A3r). In other words, in tackling Aristotle's undeserved reputation, Raleigh is fomenting intellectual revolution. "By the aduantage of... slouth and dulnesse, ignorance is now become so powerfull a Tyrant," he writes of learning in his own day, "as it hath set true Philosophie, Phisick, and Diuinity, in a Pillory; and written ouer the first, *Contra negantem Principia*; ouer the second, *Vertus specifica*; and ouer the third, *Ecclesia Romana*" (D2v). Raleigh, who clearly imagined a vernacular audience for the *History* and thus consistently translates his Latin

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<sup>212</sup> Raleigh's view of Aristotle and the Aristotelianism is of course a gross caricature, in part because the latter was so internally variegated and contentious that Charles Schmitt has suggested we think in terms of sixteenth-century "Aristotelianisms." See *John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 23 and *Aristotle in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). See also Mary Thomas Crane, *Losing Touch with Nature: Literature and the New Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 19-52.



quotations, here leaves the scholastic slogans as so much unexplained, obscurantist, and Roman *hocus pocus*. These are not intellectual positions, but enemy flags in Raleigh's war on scholasticism, Papism, and inherited intellectual authority.

### III. Natural Supernaturalism: Raleigh and Alternate History

But Raleigh's empiricism proves curiously elastic, both in its account of nature and (relatedly, I am claiming) his treatment of sources. First, Raleigh often questions specific facts and traditions but never offers a broader theory of experience and its epistemological importance. He does not articulate a clear concept of nature; indeed, he specifically resists doing so. In the *History*, the line between nature and the supernatural is never fully fixed, even as it is frequently asserted. This ambiguity, though it has vexed philosophically minded readers of the *History*, has to be understood primarily as a literary strategy rather than a philosophical position—an attempt to allow the text to decide between competing inherited narratives from Raleigh's sources, while retaining those sources' plausibility and thus qualification to enter into the *History* at all.

There is significant disagreement about Raleigh's views on nature, particularly his distinction between the first power (that is, God's agency) and secondary causes (the highly varied, recognizable forces of nature in our world). Hill claims that "Raleigh secularized history... by concentrating his vision on secondary causes *and insisting that they are sufficient in themselves for historical explanation*" (162), whereas Hugh Trevor-Roper, in response, argues, "The major lesson of *The History of the World* is that history is the working out of the First Cause, God's will, divine Providence."<sup>213</sup> Greenblatt regards the distinction as "traditional" and argues it "does nothing to resolve the major

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<sup>213</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, "Review of *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* by Christopher Hill," *History and Theory* 5.1 (1966), 61-82: 77.

philosophical problems of providential history”—namely, whether history reflects God’s will or the vagaries of contingent circumstance. “Rather, it simply permits the historian to operate in radically contradictory modes without ever directly facing the consequences” (142-3).<sup>214</sup> In philosophical terms, Greenblatt is surely right: the business about first and second causes is a dodge.

But curiously, Raleigh does not try to hide this trick. In fact, he foregrounds it, which suggests that he is not primarily concerned with philosophical consistency. Raleigh introduces the idea of second causes by asserting, in the title of the relevant section, “our ignorance, how second causes should haue any proportion with their effects” (13).

Denying any satisfactory account of the relation between second causes and their effects makes Raleigh an odd empiricist, but he is emphatic on this point:

Of the manner how God worketh in [second causes], or they in or with each other, which the Heathen Philosophers, and those that follow them, haue taken on them to teach: I say, there is not any one among them, nor any one among vs, that could euer yet conceiue it, or expresse it, euer enrich his own vnderstanding with any certaine truth (13).

That is, despite Raleigh’s empiricist posture, he adamantly denies the possibility of natural science, that is, of a coherent, well-organized account of how second causes function. A good portion of the argument between those who place Raleigh in vanguard of a newly rational naturalism and those who see him as a traditionalist reactionary misses his explicit skepticism on the crucial question.

The natural world, in Raleigh’s conception, is so slippery that it can hardly be seen clearly on its own terms, let alone divided cleanly from supernatural intervention:

As the minde of man seeth by the Organ of the eye, heareth by the eares, and maketh choice by the will: and therefore we attribute sight to the eye, and hearing to the eares, &c. and yet it is the minde only, that giueth abilitie, life, and motion to all these his instruments and Organs; so God worketh by Angels, by the Sunne, by the Starres, by Nature, or infused properties, and by men, as by seuerall organs, seuerall effects;

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<sup>214</sup> For a similar analysis, see Fussner, 139-40.

all second causes whatsoever being but instruments, conduits, and pipes, which carry and disperse what they have received from the head and fountain of the Vniuersall (13).

In the nested levels of apprehension here, the mind, which had initially seemed the real layer beneath our illusory way of speaking is then in turn revealed as merely manifest or apparent—just another organ itself. Furthermore, the passage plays with different conceptions of how God relates to the world: the dualism of mind and physical organs is complicated by the opposition of mind to will, apparently a spiritual organ, and then, in a curious slippage, God is finally imagined not as the mind but as the head. Even as the passage insists on God's universal and exception-less causal role, its rhetoric performs the human indispensability of multiple levels of interpretation. Against both its investment in God's total providence and the opposite reductionism of nascent physical science, the text articulates a non-reductive methodological pluralism, on which the various levels of historical interpretation cannot be easily collapsed.<sup>215</sup>

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In practice, too, the interplay between first and second causes in the *History* reflects Raleigh's negotiations with his sources and their competing logics. Sometimes, these sources conflict about the same event. Later, I discuss in detail conflicting accounts of Noah's flood, but here it is worth mentioning Raleigh's refutation of pagan claims that

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<sup>215</sup> For contemporary defenses of methodological non-reductionism, see recently Jonathan Kramnick, "The Interdisciplinary Fallacy," *Representations* 140.1 (2017), 67-83 and "Against Literary Darwinism," *Critical Inquiry* 37.2 (2011), 315-347. More broadly, see the philosophical arguments of, for instance, Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) and also Paul Oppenheim and Hilary Putnam, "Unity of Science as a Working Hypothesis," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 2 (1958), 3-36. See also Ernest Nagel, "Reduction of Theories," in *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), 336-97. See also Wayne Booth's discussion of historical pluralism in "M. H. Abrams: Historian as Critic, Critic as Pluralist," *Critical Inquiry* 2.3 (1976), 411-445.

the miracle at the Red Sea reflected merely the vicissitudes of “a low ebbe.” Raleigh claims to refute this claim on the terms of his opponents:

For not to borrow strength from that part of the Scriptures, which makes it plaine, that the Waters were diuided, and that God wrought this miracle by an Easterly winde, and by the hand and rod of *Moses* (which authoritie to men that beleue not therein perswadeth nothing) I say, that by the same naturall reason vnto which they fasten themselues, it is made manifest, that had there beene no other working power from aboue, or assistance giuen from God himselfe to *Moses*, and the children of *Israel* than ordinarie and casuall, then could not *Pharao* and all his Armie haue perished in that pursuit (1.262).

This passage resembles later, rationalist suspensions of revelation (like Grotius’s famous “*etsi deus non daretur*”),<sup>216</sup> but the similarity is superficial: Raleigh is using natural reason to render the contents of Scripture *less* plausible, rather than more. Raleigh’s logic in thinking that the unbelieving would be convinced of the Red Sea crossing’s being, rather than its being false, may seem questionable, but then, he is writing in this moment specifically for the “*Aegyptians*, and of them the *Memphites*, and other *Heathen Writers*” who stake out exactly that position. That is, the function of natural reason—and the extended treatment of the Red Sea in terms of its second causes that follows—is not to explain the biblical texts,<sup>217</sup> but to allow Raleigh to respond to ancient naturalistic critiques. The literary counterfactual on which the Red Sea episode is to be investigated by natural reason—an investigation rendered absurd by its conclusion that the Red Sea is a *sui generis* miracle—exists to allow Raleigh to include and comment on pagan

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<sup>216</sup> See the discussion in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 126 and Richard Tuck, “The ‘Modern’ School of Natural Law,” in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99-119. But see Johann P. Sommerville, “Selden, Grotius, and the Seventeenth-Century Intellectual Revolution in Moral and Political Theory,” in Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson eds., *Rhetoric & Law in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 318-45: 328 and 342n43.

<sup>217</sup> In fact, there is a good argument to be made that the Egyptians have the plain sense of the biblical narrative—or rather, of the J half of it. See Joel Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 193-214.

materials. Natural reason serves a literary function; it has no metaphysical purchase on the actual splitting of the Sea.

The distinction between levels of explanation becomes most relevant as Raleigh pivots from biblical to classical history. There is a popular scholarly line about the *History* which helps locate, in a text conspicuously full of pious pronouncements about God's providence, a supposed secularizing tendency. God's miraculous Providence, the story goes, fades in prominence as the work develops. In particular, the book's first, biblical and second, profane sections read quite differently. In the former, Raleigh is said to be both more pious and more concerned with providence, whereas the latter was more worldly, secular, and skeptical.<sup>218</sup>

The observation is fair, but the conclusion is suspect. First, if the gradual fading of God's miracles over the course of a text, and their replacement with world politics and strategizing, qualifies as a secularizing tendency, then the Hebrew Bible itself exhibits the same secularizing tendency in its movement from the wonders of Genesis and Exodus to the largely natural world of Song of Songs, Esther, and Ruth. Such arguments exist, but they stretch the process of secularization to an impossibly abstract, ahistorical thinness.<sup>219</sup> Not every depiction of a *saeculum* can be said to secularize. Rather, the illusion of a

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<sup>218</sup> Greenblatt writes, "As biblical history draws to a close... Raleigh's vision of history changes. God gradually retreats from the stage of human affairs" (146). He tracks this change also in the style, which initially "improvises, crosses syntactic boundaries and then returns upon itself, bending and shifting as the mind muses on human time and God's eternal will" but which "in the later books... is far more concerned with clear historical narration and with the formulation of political maxims" (147). See also Fussner, 205 and the discussion in Andrew Hiscock, "'Provide for the Future, and Times Succeeding': Walter Raleigh and the Progress of Time," in eds. Andrea Brady and Emily Butterworth, *The Uses of the Future in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 90-109:91.

<sup>219</sup> See particularly

secularizing movement in the *History*, like the parallel illusion in the case of the Hebrew Bible itself, results from the heterogeneity of sources being synthesized.<sup>220</sup>

Raleigh himself is conscious of the mismatch in his materials, and he understands it in terms of the distinction between first and second causes. In particular, he discusses the relationship between profane and sacred history at some length while defending his conjectural reconstruction of the Athalia episode from 2 Kings 8.<sup>221</sup> To explain why he (uniquely and totally implausibly) speculates that Joash was Jehoram's son, Raleigh explains that Scripture, concerned above all with Providence and thus "referring all vnto the will of God, I meane, to his reuealed will," is weaker on human causation: "the concurrence of second causes with their effects, is in these bookes nothing largely described" (1.536). Conversely, Raleigh describes profane histories as basically concerned with second causes and ignoring Providence:

All Histories doe giue vs information of humane counsailes and euent, as farre forth as the knowledge and faith of the writers can affoord; but of Gods will, by which all things are ordered, they speake onely at randome, and many times falsly. This we often finde in profane writers, who ascribe the ill successe of great vndertakings to the neglect of some impious Rites, whereof indeede God abhorred the performance as vehemently, as they thought him to be highly offended with the omission (1.535).

Raleigh is twisting his sources here, since in fact, as he admits, they *do* speak about divine Providence. Indeed, in less theoretically charged contexts, he records such moments, as when he reports strange events attending Alexander's birth, which "might with the reason of those times be interpreted for ominous, and foreshewing the great things by *Alexander* afterward performed" (2.168-69). This casual historical relativism clashes with Raleigh's

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<sup>220</sup> As Ernest A. Strathmann observed more than 75 years ago, "In Books II, III, and IV [sic], concerned largely with pagan history, Raleigh has less to say on the subject of God's control of human affairs than in Books I and II, wherein the unquestionable words of the prophets point the moral of a narrative based upon the Old Testament." "The *History of the World* and Raleigh's Skepticism," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 3.3 (1940), 265-287: 272.

<sup>221</sup> On this digression, see Fussner, 198-201.

more pious attitude in his methodological discussion of historical conjecture. In the earlier passage, then, Raleigh is not giving a fair account of his profane sources; he is instead twisting them to differentiate generically sacred and profane sources.

Profane and sacred sources thus employ independent historical modes, based on different concerns and, crucially, both necessarily incomplete. According to Raleigh, historians seek not truth but plausibility:

The heart of man is vnsearchable: and Princes, howsoever their intents bee seldome hidden from some of those many eyes which prie both into them, and into such as liue about them; yet sometimes either by their owne close temper, or by some subtile miste, they conceale the trueth from all reports. Yea, many times the affections themselues lie dead, and buried in obliuion, when the preparations which they begate, are conuerted to another vse. The industrie of an Historian, hauing so many things to weary it, may well be excused, when finding apparant cause enough of things done, it forbearth to make further search; though it often fall out, where sundry occasions worke to the same end, that one small matter in a weake minde is more effectuell, than many that seemes farre greater (1.536).

The prince's mind, like a temple's deity, is paradoxically at once on public display and obscured by a cloudy penumbra. The structure is oddly reminiscent of the hierarchy between first and second causes, even though he is speaking only of human causes. In both cases the problem (how to make weigh "sundry occasions work[ing] to the same end") is the same: overdetermination. (Scholars usually read Raleigh's doubled narrative of first and second causes in the theological terms of paradoxes about providence; this passage suggests strongly that his concern is broader—less about the interface of God and the world than about history writing's inherent multiplicity.) And in both cases, Raleigh confines the historian's scope to apparent, outward events, sharply dividing between apparent causation and the imperceptible, singular reality.

The *History* thus constantly drifts from singular exactitude to multiple, plausible possibilities. That drift, I am suggesting, is best understood not in theological but in literary terms—as a result of the multiplicity of Raleigh's sources, and the impossible

pressure he puts on them to cohere into a unity. Raleigh explicitly theorizes his sources' variety in his final argument for speculating about Athalia:

Wherefore it being the end and scope of all History, to teach by example of times past, such wisdome as may guide our desires and actions, we should not maruaile though the *Chronicles of the Kings of Iuda and Israel*, being written by men inspired with the Spirit of God, instruct vs chiefly, in that which is most requisite for vs to know... Had the expedition of *Xerxes* (as it was foretold by *Daniel*) been written by some Prophet after the captiuitie: wee may well beleue that the counsaile of God therein, and the executioners of his righteous will, should haue occupied either the whole or the principall roome in that narration. Yet had not the purpose of *Darius*, the desire of his Wife, and the businesse at *Sardes*, with other occurrents, been the lesse true, though they might haue bene omitted, as the lesse materiall: but these things it had bene lawfull for any man to gather out of profane Histories, or out of circumstances otherwise appearing, wherein hee should not haue done iniurie to the Sacred Writings... (1.537-8).

To justify focusing on second causes and thus writing a conjectural, profane account of 2 Kings 8, Raleigh imagines an alternative, sacred version of Persian history. Such an account would leave out Herodotus's juicy details about Xerxes' private life, and yet the sacred account would not preclude the writing of a secular alternate—that is, Herodotus, who has confusingly enough, become within the counterfactual, the hypothetical alternative.<sup>222</sup> The weirdest slippage in the passage is the heterodox ease with which Raleigh imagines the biblical canon counterfactually expanding: he sees the Bible and Herodotus not so much as authorities but as genres, modes of writing history between which one could pivot.

#### **IV. Case Study 1: Nature, Plausibility, and Authorship:**

Raleigh distinguishes between first and second causes, then, to motivate and defend a methodological pluralism about history-writing. His concept of nature is oddly flexible. Although he is frequently read as if he were propounding a coherent science, he

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<sup>222</sup> This move is common to counterfactual-history novels. Think of the role of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* within Philip K. Dick, *The Man in The High Castle* (New York: Putnam, 1962), as well as the discussions of history in Ward Moore, *Bring the Jubilee* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1953). See also Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).



is instead plotting a pathway through divergent sources. Furthermore, I will now argue, that pathway depends heavily on the concept of plausibility—that is, not whether a particular historical narration corresponds to the facts, but whether it has the feeling of doing so, whether an account of it reads as if were true. “Nature” in Raleigh’s hands finally delimits social consensus rather than ontology; it helps him organize and structure his multiple sources, even as he stages his own, individual authorship over and against those sources.

Raleigh’s meditation on whether Noah received astrological warning of the flood illustrates the odd flexibility of his concept of nature. Refuting those who would identify Noah’s flood with other ancient flood stories (like those involving Ogyges and Deucalion), Raleigh argues that while the other floods were natural, “the floud of NOAH was supernaturall, though some say it might haue beene foreseene by the Starres” (1.105). Had advance warning of the flood been legible in the night sky, the worry seems to be, it could not have been supernatural, since the stars would not only have been “signes, but also working causes, by strength receiued from the first cause, which is God himselfe.” Such astrological, natural causation threatens to scuttle Raleigh’s criterion for categorically distinguishing the biblical flood from others.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> The problem is also discussed in Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin...* (Printed by John Legat, Printer to the University of Cambridge, 1605), 90-91. Willet’s treatment confirms two important points about Raleigh. First, since he cites the same sources as Raleigh and admits that they are “cited by *Pererius*,” it seems likely that Raleigh too encountered D’Ailly and Parisiensis through Pererius—or perhaps through Willet himself. Second, more broadly, Willet’s extremely terse treatment of the problem contrasts usefully with Raleigh’s elaborate, complex account. Willet dispatches the problem simply, asserting “This raine then was not caused onely or chiefly by ordinarie and natural causes, as by the constellation of the stares,” and bringing as evidence both biblical verses and the fact that astrological influences can only be local (an argument Raleigh was to make in the *History*). Willet’s simple treatment brings into relief Raleigh’s

Against this challenge, Raleigh insists that the universal flood could not have resulted from “natural causes and accidents”:

That vniuersall flood (in the time of *Noah*) was powred ouer the whole face of the earth by a power aboue nature, and by the especiall commandement of God himselfe, who at that time gaue strength of influence to the Starres, and abundance to the Fountaynes of the deepe: whereby the irruption of waters was made more forcible, then any abilitie of nature could effect, or any second causes by whatsoeuer vnion could performe, without receiuing from the Fountayne of all power, strength, and faculties supernaturall (1.105).

For Raleigh, “supernatural” does not mean an inexplicable, arbitrary act of God’s will.

Even as he is denying a naturalistic explanation of the flood, Raleigh is rationalizing God’s workings, imagining not a dictator ruling by fiat but an engineer tinkering with the cosmic ratios. Raleigh’s God, to whatever extent he can manage it, performs exclusively quantitative miracles, amplifying the stars’ “strength of influence” and supplementing subterranean waters’ “abundance.” To the extent there is evidence that the biblical flood was supernatural, it too is quantitative (there’s just too much water): a “power aboue nature” seems, in Raleigh’s hands, to have become less an ontological than a numerical category.<sup>224</sup>

Raleigh is at once loosening the floodgates of an uncontrollable, mysterious miracle and then measuring exactly, and even attempting to explain, the resulting flow. The inexplicable and the explanation coexist comfortably in this passage, as when Raleigh reverses course, suggesting that a purported astrological conjunction is immaterial to question of the Flood’s causes:

But in a word, as it might please God, that in the course of his vnsearchable wisdom this coniunction should at such time be: so did he (as aforesaid) adde vigour and facultie, and gaue to euery operation increase of vertues, violent eruptions to Springs and Fountaynes, commanding them to cast out the whole

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rhetorical tricker (see below), suggesting that the *History*’s logical involutions on this point reflect not the complexity of the question but a purposeful obfuscation.

<sup>224</sup> The quantification of nature is of course a classic marker of the scientific revolution. See Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 57-64.

treasure and heape of their waters; taking retention from the cloudes, and condensing ayre into water by the ministerie of his Angels, or howsoever else best pleased his Al-powerfulnesse (1.106).

That is, the conjunction might have been observable without having causal efficacy; God's unlimited agency insures that the appearance of ordinary, secondary causation is itself plausibly a special miracle. (We are not far from the modern, Creationist argument that God planted dinosaur bones to test Christians' faith in Genesis.) The sentence contradicts itself, first positing God's "vnsearchable wisdom," then promptly searching out exactly God's mechanisms (though even Raleigh waffles on whether God works through the infusion of energy or the transcend "command"), and finally retreating back, first into the personified magic of the angels, and then further still, into the arbitrary mystery of God's omnipotence. If such a sentence does not quite sustain Hill's view of the secular, mechanical rationalist or Trevor-Roper's view of the pious, providential Christian, nor can it be maintained (as Greenblatt does) that Raleigh is unconsciously incoherent. Rather, the sentence seems to court this incoherence, an indeterminacy drowning the boundaries between natural from divine causation, earth and heaven.

While God's miraculous intervention both authorizes and requires violations of physical, natural law, Raleigh nonetheless wants to sustain the Flood's plausibility: its being at once imaginable and impossible within natural constraints. After astrology, Raleigh tackles an objection from the opposing direction, namely, that since "God doth not create any thing of new; (for God resteth the seuenth day: (that is) he did not then after create any new *species*)... all the earth and aire had not waters sufficient to couer the habitable world fifteen cubits aboue the highest Mountaynes" (1.106). As stated, the challenge is flimsy. First, the parenthetical providing biblical proof for the major premise seems to permit God to create new particulars, which would include enough water to

drown whole galaxies; second, as Raleigh notes, the major premise itself is dubious (“Of this proposition, whether God hath so restrayned himselfe or no, I will not dispute”—well, why not?).

Rather, the objection provides the pretext for Raleigh to introduce a remarkable calculation, proving the natural waters sufficient to account for the Deluge. Since the world’s highest mountains, Raleigh reasons, are no taller than thirty miles, and the earth’s center some 3500 miles beneath its surface, the “*fountaynes of the great deep*” from which the water came are easily sufficient to cover the entire world. Furthermore, the earth is surrounded by far more than thirty miles of air, from which God could easily “condense but so much of this ayre as euery-where compasseth and embraceth the earth” as was necessary for the Deluge. The calculation, it should be noted, undermines profoundly the logic of the preceding section. If it is eminently plausible that the earth be covered by its own waters, the magnitude of those waters can hardly prove that God supernaturally intervened. At one moment near the end, Raleigh gets carried away with his naturalization, insisting that condensation is a “change familiar in those elements.” Given this well-known property, Raleigh suggests, “it will not seeme strange to men of iudgement, yea but of ordinarie vnderstanding, that the Earth (God so pleasing) was couered ouer with waters without any new Creation.” This is to prove too much, and Raleigh catches himself in the parenthetical (“God so pleasing”), without which his explanation would have undone the sharp distinction between the biblical and other ancient floods.

Raleigh repeatedly courts this indeterminacy, in part because he is interested in nature less as the fixed ontology than as the porous boundaries of the social consensus, or

what is plausible. Having answered the objection about a new creation, he oddly returns to the supposed astrological conjunction, changing tack completely:

Lastly, for the opinions of *Gulielmus Parisiensis*, and *Aliacensis*, to which I may adde *Berosus* and others, That such a coniunction there was, foreshewing that destruction by waters which followed; and that by the word *Catarractae coeli*, or Windores of heauen, was meant this coniunction; there needes no other answer then that obseruation of *Ludouicus Viues*, who affirmeth that by the grauest *Astrologian* it was obserued, that in the yeere 1524 there should happen the like coniunction, as at *Noahs* floud, then which (saith he) there was neuer a more fayre, drie, and seasonable yeere: the like destruction was prophecied of the yeere 1588. But *Picus Earle* of *Mirandula* proueth that there could not be any such coniunction at that time (107).

The argument arrives so suddenly and unexpectedly, it might well have dropped from the windows of heaven. Raleigh had initially argued that the astrological conjunction is consistent with God's direct intervention, since *ex hypothesi*, *everything* is consistent with the abrogation of the laws of nature by an omnipotent God. But if he felt all along that the astrological conjunction in question was bunk, why not avail himself of that far stronger refutation of *Gulielmus Parisiensis* and company?<sup>225</sup> Further, even if Raleigh wanted to cover all of his bases, why place this refutation here, oddly separated from the main astrological section by several long paragraphs on whether a new creation was necessary?

Raleigh at once entertains and ridicules astrology because the *History* is not invested in a coherent account of nature. That explains Raleigh's insertion of 1588, the weather of which could not have been a concern of Vives, who was by then forty eight years dead. Raleigh is plainly thinking of the Armada, whose extraordinary defeat involved both prophetic expectations of collective ruin spectacularly falsified, which

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<sup>225</sup> Note that a parallel tradition appears in Bavli Brekhot 59a: "When the Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted to bring the Flood to the world, He took two stars from *Kima* and brought the flood to the world. And when He wished to fill it, He took two stars from *Ish* and filled it... And let God create two other stars? 'There is nothing new under the sun' (Ecclesiastes 1:9)." Especially with the Ecclesiastes quotation, the similarities to Raleigh's treatment is striking: more work is required to know if the Talmud influenced either Pererius or his medieval sources.

would confirm the paragraph's skeptical thrust, and arguably the most memorable rainstorms of Elizabethan England, which oddly fulfilled the astrologers' predictions. The superfluous addition of 1588 thus reads as a wry equivocation, through which Raleigh quietly declines to adjudicate astrology's ultimate truth.

Nature is indeterminate because it marks the edges of the plausible (that which "will not seeme strange to men of iudgement, yea but of ordinarie vnderstanding"), defined in social rather than ontological terms. Raleigh splits his discussion of the astrology because he has an ulterior literary purpose: constructing Genesis 7:11 as obscure in a way that he, Raleigh, is uniquely suited to explain. The verse reads, "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened" (KJV). Raleigh introduces Parisiensis's astrological conjecture as in part responding interpretively to the mystery of the phrase, "windows of heaven," rendered in the Septuagint and then in Latin as "*Catarractae coeli*," with "the word (*Catarractae*) signifying flowing downe or coming downe." Raleigh repeatedly construes the astrological conjunction as an exegesis of "catarractae," and he adds a marginal note to reinforce the philological point:

The word *καταπράκτης* properly signifieth any place of stoppage, against which the force of the water being naturally carried downewards, dasheth and breaketh, of *ὑρασσω* *allido* or *frango*. Hence, because windores doe not only open but also shut, the word hath been expounded (Windores) fo<sup>r</sup> barres or floud gates (105).

The note is confused: *καταπράκτης* signifies not a stopping-point but a flood or waterfall, which makes nonsense of his explanation of the English. Indeed, what was "Englished" as windows was not the Greek but the Hebrew, "*arubot hashamayim*," since "ארובה" just

means “window.”<sup>226</sup> Moreover, the phrase does not seem to have bothered the commentators.<sup>227</sup>

Raleigh has, in short, constructed an artificial mystery, which (on his telling) has prompted ungrounded astrological speculation, but which he is now uniquely able to solve. Immediately after reporting Pico’s and Vives’s refutations of astrology, Raleigh concludes this part of his discussion of the Flood:

To conclude, I finde no other mysterie in the word *Catarractae coeli*, then that the cloudes were meant thereby: *Moses* vsing the word *Windores of Heauen* (if that be the sense of the word) to expresse the violence of the raynes, and powring downe of waters. For whosoeuer hath seene those fallings of water, which sometimes happen in the *Indies*, which are called the Spowts (where cloudes doe not breake into drops, but fall with a resistlesse violence in one body) may properly vse that manner of speech which *Moses* did; That the windores or floud-gates of heauen opened: (which is) That waters fell, contrarie to custome, and that order which we call natural (107).

The passage brings together my two central themes in reading Raleigh: the staging of individual authority against the commentarial tradition, and the slipperiness of Raleigh’s empirical conception of nature. First, notice how, without both the mistaken Greek, which Raleigh waved ostentatiously before his readers, and the commentarial tomfoolery about astrology, New World waterspouts would be strictly irrelevant to Genesis 7:11—on a plain reading, not a terribly obscure verse. The argument about astrology is riddled with inconsistencies because astrology was never the point; Raleigh has fabricated the controversy to make seeing Guiana indispensable to reading Genesis. Indeed, even to *writing* Genesis, since to “properly vse that manner of speech which *Moses* did” requires one to have seen what Raleigh saw: this is Moses as Elizabethan explorer. But characteristically, Raleigh’s singular authority parasitically feeds on the rejected, mocked

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<sup>226</sup> See Ecclesiastes 12:3, Isaiah 60:8, and Hosea 13:3.

<sup>227</sup> See Luther, 2.95: “what Moses calls windows are nothing else than openings in the sky.” Calvin ignores it, and Lyra writes simply, “*id est finestae, Loquitur hic metaphorice*” (154). Ainsworth comments that “*sluices, flood-gates of heaven*” would be acceptable alternatives, and notes only that the phrase “denoteth the extraordinary violent falling of the waters from above” (G3v).

corpse of the commentarial commons. Reading this episode synthetically requires paying attention to the interplay between the plural, scholastic past and the singular, authorial empiricist.

Second, that empiricism is itself peculiarly slippery. The passage settles on a vision of a Flood “contrarie to custome, and that order which we call natural.” Nature is thus finally social, a reification of collective expectations without sharp metaphysical or scientific boundaries. Scratch the supernatural, and you find merely the strange. Indeed, the Indies themselves take on a magical, impossible quality, as the place where “cloudes doe not breake into drops, but fall with a resistlesse violence in one body”—a place where the ordinary rules are suspended by the unlimited, absolute force of “resistlesse violence.” If nature is custom, then the Indies, as much as the Flood, are excepted from natural law. Indeed, mentioning them reconfigures Raleigh’s broader argument, since the accumulated evidence that the various floods of classical antiquity were natural now proves to have been unsatisfactory and partial: who is to say that another record of a universal, supernatural flood does not survive somewhere in Guiana?

These two points are connected, of course. The *History*’s empiricist ambition to represent the world directly has its literary correlate in an unquestioned, individual authorship: the title-page Raleigh, a solitary subject removed from the messy, social business of history and thus capable of providing an objective, definitive perspective—a view, so to speak, from nowhere. Thus it follows that in complicating the singularity of Raleigh’s biographical speaker by showing how it is constantly written against and in dialogue with an interpretive community of previous commentators, I am also necessarily complicating his conception of nature, showing how the relation of supernatural and



nature, the exception and the rule, emerges in parallel with the concepts of individual author and intellectual tradition.

#### IV. Case Study 2: Raleigh's Indian Fig and the Origins of Biblical Fiction

Because nature in the *History* ultimately signifies plausibility, rather than truth, Raleigh is liberated to entertain and narrate plausible untruths—stories, like the astrologically predictable flood, which might have been so but are not. In the following section, I look more closely at one such story, which revolves around what Raleigh takes to be an ultimately spurious identification of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Extending my argument about Raleigh's concept of natural plausibility, I argue that Raleigh's text inadvertently creates and then denies the reality of stories that nonetheless remain seemingly well motivated. The enterprise of biblical history, at least on Raleigh's terms, produces as its necessary correlate biblical fiction..

In his treatment of the Trees of Knowledge and of Life, Raleigh seems to be at his most hard-headedly skeptical, empirical, and factual. Raleigh first insists that the Tree of Life literally existed:

But of what kind or *Species* this Tree of Life was, no man hath taken on him to teach: in which respect many haue conceiued, that the same was not materiall, but a meere *Allegorie*, taking their strength out of *Salomon*, where Wisedome is compared to the Tree of Life, and from other places, where also Christ is called the Tree of Life, and out of the *Apocalypsis*, *I will giue to him that ouer commeth, to eate of the Tree of Life, which is in the Paradise of God*. But to this place S<sup>t</sup>. *Augustines* answere may suffice, (which is) That the one doth not exclude the other, but that, as there was a terrestriall *Paradise*, so there was a celestially... in this place the sense of the Scripture is manifest. *For God brought out of the earth euery tree faire to sight, and sweet to taste; the tree also of Life in the midst of the garden: which sheweth, that among the trees, which the Earth by Gods commandement produced, the tree of Life was one, and that the fruit thereof was also to be eaten* (66-7).

In suggesting that allegorical interpretations spring from uncertainty over the Tree's species, Raleigh mistakenly interprets a deep, theological disagreement as an attempt to answer an exceedingly narrow, literal-minded question. Origen and Maimonides, to quote two examples, were not exercised by botanical worries, but by the basic irrationalities of

the myth they inherited, as well as the blatant conflicts between Genesis 1 and 2.<sup>228</sup> Raleigh's scriptural proof also evidences his inability to take the allegorical position seriously. Since Genesis 2:9 includes the Tree of Life among the other created trees, the argument seems to run, it must be as literal as they are. But presumably no allegorist maintained the existence of a literal Paradise and a figurative Tree. (Depending on the radicalism of their allegory, they could either read Genesis 1 as also allegorical or more simply, decouple that chapter's literal creation of the trees from the figurative Paradise sequence.) The passage betrays a concern with literal, physical trees so deep as to exclude not only the possibility of allegory but also the ability to read the Genesis story in totality.

Stubbornly attached to the concrete, real particular, Raleigh replaces exegesis with empiricism. The first three chapters of the *History* focus on traditional exegetical and theological questions, recognizable to anyone who had read, say, Augustine's *De Genesi Ad Litteram*: the meaning of "Heaven and Earth" (1.1.4), the nature of the created light (1.1.7), in what sense man was created in God's image (1.2.1). But after asserting the Tree of Life's literal existence, Raleigh turns to the question of the Tree of Knowledge's species, which exiles *The History* from the sheltered groves of scholastic commentary to the wilds of the New World. The Dutch Humanist Goropius Becanus, Raleigh reports, identifies the Tree as "*Ficus Indica; The Indian Fig-tree*" (67).<sup>229</sup> The comically over-

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<sup>228</sup> See the discussion of early disputes over whether the story was literal or figurative in Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 64-98.

<sup>229</sup> Anthony Grafton discusses Raleigh's use of "his own experience" to refute Becanus, but he notes that Raleigh "took his solution from another ancient text," namely Philo's. Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992), 208. While I share Grafton's skepticism about the extent to which the New World disrupted textually-based, traditional modes of inquiry, I am further arguing here that in a text such as Raleigh's, the interplay between

confident Becanus, who Raleigh writes elsewhere “thought his owne wit more Giganticall then the bodies of Nimrod or Hercules,” is frequently the target of the *History*’s scorn (81). (Sometimes deservedly: he is most famous for claiming that Adam and Eve spoke Brabantic Dutch, a claim flattering to his more gullible compatriots but risible to everyone else),<sup>230</sup> and here Raleigh excoriates him because he “giueth himselfe the honor to haue found out the kinde of this Tree, which none of the Writers of former times could euer ghesse at, whereat *Goropius* much maruaileth.” In fact, Raleigh replies, Becanus exceeds the past only in self-aggrandizement (“But as he had an inuentie braine, so there neuer liued any man, that beleeued better thereof, and of himself”). In fact the identification of the Tree as *ficus indica* dates back *Moses Bar-cephas*, “aboute sixe hundred yeeres before *Becanus* was borne,” and even Bar-cephas is just copying other late antique authorities.

Ridiculing Becanus’s self-delusion implicitly emphasizes Raleigh’s genuine originality, which consists not just in offering a new exegetical suggestion but in

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personal experience, empiricism, and the individual author, on the one hand, and commentarial tradition, on the other, needs to be understood at least in part as a discursive effect created by the text itself, rather than an essential binary.

<sup>230</sup> Henri A. Krop attempts to recuperate Becanus, showing how his project was reasonable in the context of Dutch Humanism and was taken seriously by Grotius, Leibniz and others. See “The Antiquity of the Dutch Language: Renaissance Theories on the Language of Paradise” in *Narratives of Low Countries History and Culture: Reframing the Past*, eds. Jane Fenoulhet, Lesley Gilbert (London: UCL Press, 2016), 108-24. On Becanus’s significance in the history of linguistics, see Thijs Weststeijn, “From hieroglyphs to universal characters: Pictography in the early modern Netherlands,” *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 61 (2011), 238-280: 249; Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95-103; G. J. Metcalf, “The Indo-European Hypothesis in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms*, ed. Dell H. Hymes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 233-257; Maurice Olender, “Europe, or How to Escape Babel,” *History and Theory* 33.4 (1994), 5-25:13-18.

disrupting the entire scholastic framework. Raleigh first lists ancient descriptions of the *ficus indica*:

This Tree beareth a fruit of the bignesse of a great peaze, or (as *Plinie* reporteth) somewhat bigger, and that it is a tree, *se semper serens; Always planting it selfe*; that it spreadeth it selfe so farre abroad, as that a troupe of horsemen may hide themselues vnder it. *Strabo* saith, that it hath branches bending downewards, and leaues no lesse then a shield. *Aristobulus* affirmeth, that fiftie horsemen may shaddow themselues vnder one of these trees. *Onesicritus* raiseth this number to foure hundred. This tree (saith *Theophrastus*) exceedeth all other in bignesse, which also *Plinie* and *Onesicritus* confirme: to the trunk of which, these Authors giue such a magnitude, as I shame to repeate.

These descriptions of the *ficus indica* relate only tangentially to the focus of the chapter; they do not, strictly speaking, bear on the question of the Tree of Knowledge's identity.

Each report outdoes the next ("somewhat bigger," "raiseth this number to foure hundred," "exceedeth all other in bignesse"), and measuring comparanda paint the Banyan tree (likely Pliny's *ficus*) with a heroic, martial aura ("troupe of horsemen," "leaues no lesse then a shield"). The classical authors cited combine, like a gnarled grove formed by the hardened aerial roots of a Banyan, into a new mythical structure, entangled with but nonetheless differentiable from the biblical trunk. In Raleigh's telling, Becanus seems to have chosen the *ficus indica* in large part because it is magical and mythic.

Having cultivated this classical myth (which by necessity exists as a unity only through the secondary, scholastic act of collection), Raleigh proceeds to chop it down, in the process offering his New World exploration as a genuine novelty, in exemplary opposition to Becanus's fakery. "But it may be," he writes, "they all speake by an ill-vnderstood report." Against that report, Raleigh pits his first-hand observation:

For this Indian Fig-tree is not so rare a plant, as Becanus conceiue, who because he found it no where else, would needes draw the garden of Paradise to the Tree, and set it by the Riuer Acesines. But many parts of the world haue them, and I my selfe haue seene twentie thousand of them in one Valley, not farre from Paria in America. They grow in moist grounds, and in this manner: After they are first shot vp some twentie or thirtie foote in length (some more, some lesse, according to the soile) they spread a very large top, hauing no bough nor twigge in the trunk or stemme: for from the vtmost end of the head branches there issueth out a gummie iuyce, which hangeth downe-ward like a cord or sinew, and within a few Moneths reacheth the ground; which it no sooner toucheth but it taketh roote, and then being filled both from the top boughes, and from his owne proper roote, this cord maketh it selfe a Tree exceeding hastily.

Raleigh's conflation of his Guiana with Eden is often and aptly noted.<sup>231</sup> Here it manifests in the hyper-fertile, slightly eroticized "moist grounds" ("there went up a mist from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground" Genesis 2:6), which the phallic Fig-tree impregnates with its "gummie iuyce" emitted from "the vtmost end of the head branches." The fantasy of "*se semper serens*" reproduction associates the *ficus* with the creating God as well as Adam birthing Eve, while its shape connects it with the serpent. But the deeper allusion to Genesis 2 lies not in these overt, imagistic echoes but in the force of the passage as a whole. By providing his own description of the *ficus*, that is, Raleigh is imagining himself as Adam in the Garden, newly naming the fauna (indeed, that may be why Raleigh's *ficus indica* is imagined as so mobile, less plant than animal).

Raleigh's desire to trumpet his own novelty, over and against his scholarly forbears, explains the broader peculiarity of the passage's structure and logic. The chapter forms a chiasmus:

- (A) Becanus's identification of the Tree of Knowledge as the *ficus indica*.
- (B) Classical descriptions of the remarkable properties of the *ficus indica*.
- (B') Raleigh's evaluations and explanations of these descriptions in light of his supposed observation of the *ficus indica* in the New World.
- (A') Raleigh's return to Becanus and refutation of his supposed proofs.

The natural question about this ring-structure is: why is the middle necessary at all?

Indeed, after he concludes his discussion of the New World "*ficus indica*," he writes, "but to returne to *Goropius Becanus*. This tree (saith he) was good for meate and pleasing to the sight, as the tree of Knowledge of good and euill is described to be" (68). That is, the entire comparison between the Old World authorities and Raleigh's New World

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<sup>231</sup> See for instance Stephen Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 158: "When he came to describe Eden in the *History*, his imagination turned repeatedly to what he himself had seen in Guiana."

experience is basically tangential; the argument itself requires only Raleigh's testimony, "that they beare any such huge leaues, or any such delicate fruit, I could neuer finde, and yet I haue trauailed a dozen miles together vnder them." This passage is, on a larger scale than usual, an instance of his characteristic enthusiasm for the parenthetical interjection. Furthermore, the whole logic of Raleigh's critique of Becanus is peculiar, since he does not object to the similarity of Becanus's *ficus indica* to the biblical account. Rather, on the basis of direct observations of New World trees, he denies Becanus has correctly described the *ficus indica*: "For my selfe... I neither find this tree, sorting in body, in largenesse of leaues, nor in fruit to this report." But why does Raleigh think that the tree he saw is Becanus's *ficus* at all? If his tree is so different from the *ficus indica*, the simplest explanation is that it is not one.<sup>232</sup> Raleigh needs this leap of logic to make his experiences in Guiana relevant. In a manner consonant with his treatment of the allegorists, his argument also depends on an infatuation with the concrete particular and a consequent insensitivity to the broader sense of a report or telling—an inability to see the forest for the tree.<sup>233</sup>

Ironically, though, what makes Raleigh's intense literalism memorable is not his empirical successes, but its incidental production of fictional story. In his debunking,

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<sup>232</sup> As best I can reconstruct, it certainly was not. The classical authorities and Becanus seem to be discussing the *Ficus benghalensis* or "Indian banyan," which is an Old World species. It is hard to know what Raleigh is thinking of. The oysters seem reminiscent of the mangrove (the genus *Rhizophora*), while the propagating roots could belong to any number of the several hundred American *ficus* species.

<sup>233</sup> Raleigh here is caught in the basic problem of empiricism, namely that the same evidence can always be related either to the identity of the object or its properties, making strict falsification logically impossible. Philosophically, see W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1951): 20-43, which inspired Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1962).

Raleigh transforms the classical botany into a dubious “report,” in the sense of “that which is generally or commonly said; rumour, gossip; hearsay.”<sup>234</sup> By analogy, think of Lucretius’s recounting and dismissal of the Phaeton tradition, or Milton’s retelling of Mulciber’s daylong fall from heaven, which abruptly ends, “thus they relate, / Erring.”<sup>235</sup> In both cases, and in Raleigh’s as well, rejecting a tradition as fact produces as a by-product a new fiction. This new story is freed from the constraints of veracity and therefore creatively boundless and more fanciful.<sup>236</sup> In Raleigh’s case, Pliny and company are consigned to a semi-mythical state, irrelevant to the factual question of the Tree’s identity and yet nonetheless imaginatively vivid. (Tellingly, details of the fig that Raleigh relates but then unambiguously denies seem to have influenced Milton’s description of Eden’s fig-trees; the fiction proves more memorable than the history.)<sup>237</sup>

Moreover, Raleigh himself seems to foreground the significance of the Edenic *ficus indica* specifically as fiction. Having concluded one section by sharply rejecting Becanus’s identification, Raleigh oddly begins the next, “Yet in this I must doe Becanus

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<sup>234</sup> “report, n.” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, January 2018) Accessed online 3.4.2018 at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162917>.

<sup>235</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 1.746-47. For Milton’s reworking of Lucretius here, see David Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 63-93, especially 81-83.

<sup>236</sup> See Daniel Shore, “Why Milton Is Not an Iconoclast,” *PMLA* 127.1 (2012), 22–37, who argues, “Far from destroying idols, Milton seeks to capture and preserve them under judgment, investing them with poetic care even as he hollows them out from the inside, thereby refashioning them as the instruments of their own disenchantment” (23).

<sup>237</sup> See C. A. Patrides’s editorial comments in *Sir Walter Raleigh, The History of the World* (1614), ed. C. A. Patrides (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1971), 38: “Milton’s debt to Raleigh extends also to *The History of the World*... especially in the description of the Indian fig-tree... whose leaves are plucked by Milton’s Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness.” See also the comparison of Raleigh and Milton in Jeffrey Shoulson, “The Embrace of the Fig Tree: Sexuality and Creativity in Midrash and Milton,” *ELH* 67 (2000), 873-903.

right, that he hath very wittily allegorized this Tree, allowing his supposition of the Tree it selfe to be true” (69). The allowance is very peculiar, following as it does a detailed refutation of that very supposition. The passage suggests an alternate conception of allegory to the one with which Raleigh began. Rather than being the typological fulfillment or fixed signified of a real piece of biblical history, here “allegory” seems to name the “wittily” poetic construction of similitudes. Notably, in the sequence of allegorical comparisons that follow, the terms by which Raleigh connects vehicle and tenor constantly shift:

As this Tree (saith he) so did Man grow straight and vpright towards God, vntill such time as he had transgressed and broken the Commandement of his Creator; and then like vnto the boughes of this tree, he began to bend downward, and stouped toward the earth, which all the rest of Adams posteritie after him haue done, rooting themselues therein and fastning themselues to this corrupt world. The exceeding vmbriousnesse of this tree, he compareth to the darke and shaddowed life of man, through which the Sunne of iustice being not able to pierce, we haue all remained in the shaddow of death, till it pleased CHRIST to climbe the tree of the Crosse for our enlightning & redemption. The little fruit which it beareth, and which is hard to finde among so many large leaues, may be compared (saith he) to the little vertue, and vnperceiued knowledge among so large vanities, which obscure and shaddow it ouer. And as this fruit is exceeding sweet, and delicate to the taste and palate: so are the delights and pleasures of the world most pleasing, while they dure. But as all those things which are most mellifluous, are soonest changed into choller and bitterness: so are our vanities and pleasures conuerted into the bitterest sorrowes and repentances. That the leaues are so exceeding large, the fruit (for such leaues) exceeding little, in this, by comparison we behold (saith he) the many cares and great labours of worldly men their sollicitude, their outward shewes, & publike ostentation, their apparent pride and large vanities; and if we seeke for the fruit, which ought to be their vertuous and pious actions, we finde it of the bignesse of the smallest peaze; glorie, to all the world apparent; goodnesse, to all the world inuisible. And furthermore, as the leaues, body, and boughes of this Tree, by so much exceede all other Plants, as the greatest men of power and worldly abilitie surpass the meanest: so is the little fruit of such men, and such trees, rather fitting and becomming the vnworthiest Shrub, and humblest Bryar, or the poorest and basest Man, then such a flourishing statelinesse, and magnitude. Lastly, whereas Adam, after he had disobayed God, and beheld his owne nakednesse and shame, sought for leaues to couer himselfe withall, this may serue to put vs in minde of his and our sinnes, as often as we put on our garments, to couer and adorne our rotten and mortall bodies: to pamper and maintaine which, we vse so many vncharitable and cruell practices in this world.

“(saith he),” “he compareth to,” “may be compared (saith he),” and then the absence of a mediating term, concluding with “this may serue to put vs”—the shifting sequence foregrounds the ambiguity of both the likeness and its origin. Who is responsible for these likenesses: God, Becanus, or Raleigh, who admits to editing and condensing (“because his discourses are exceeding ample, I haue gathered [them] in these few



wordes”)? The allegory too constantly shifts, growing in on itself like the *ficus*'s aerial roots. First those hanging boughs are humans, who stoop to root themselves in sin, then they morph into sin, blocking God's light, plunging us into shadow and obscuring the virtuous fruit with their large leaves, except that soon enough that same fruit figures ephemeral earthly delights, while the leaves then become the cares, labors, and ostentatious displays of worldly men, and so on. Beneath the metaphors between the arboreal and human worlds lies the suggestion of another, more magical literary trope, a personification in which Becanus's mythical *ficus* flows, shifts and moves as if it were itself an animate person.

Like the insistent, inconstant speech tags, the shifting meanings of the tree emphasize that this “allegory” is a crafted, artistic metaphor, rather than anything inhering in the Tree itself. As Debora Shuger argues of Elizabethan sermons, we see here the transition between an account of figuration in which similarity has evidentiary force and one in which it is split from questions of truth and functions instead rhetorically.<sup>238</sup> In reproducing the allegory *after* debunking its factual basis, Raleigh at once denies the allegory's status as evidence for Becanus's botanical claim and implicitly assigns it a discursive status that, his prefatory comment notwithstanding, is insulated from questions of fact. Becanus's allegory becomes Raleigh's metaphorical conceit.

Raleigh has reworked Becanus's allegory into fiction in another, deeper sense as well. The Dutch scholar had indeed included a list of allegorical observations about the *ficus indica*, but he did so to substantiate his identification of it as the Tree of Knowledge. Raleigh obscures the argumentative significance of the allegories by dividing them from

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<sup>238</sup> Debora Kuller Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 17-69.

the historical question proper, placing them in their own section, and beginning and ending that section with their poetic quality (“wittily allegorized”) and homiletic function (“this may serue to put vs in minde”). But in the original, they appear at the end of, but clearly within, the argument itself.

Indeed, the “*symbola arboris Paradisi*” are one of two answers to a natural question or objection arising from Becanus’s confident identification of the Tree. “But perhaps [the reader] will ask something,” Becanus admits, “Why did God command the abstention from *this* tree, more than another?”<sup>239</sup> To be sure, Becanus does concede that this question “goes beyond the limits of history” (“*Hoc quamvis historiae limites egrediatur*”), but it nonetheless needs to be answered, lest the identification of the *ficus indica* seem bizarre, arbitrary, and thus suspect. (Moreover, that identification is itself one of Becanus’s proofs that Paradise was in India, a claim important to the broader historical and genealogical arguments of *Origines Antwerpianae*; Becanus can thus hardly afford to leave this small question unanswered.)

After giving several practical reasons why God found the *ficus indica* a convenient choice, Becanus turns to what will become, in the *History*, the sequence of allegorical likenesses:

The [reasons] would be enough, if we should look only at the accord of this tree with the narration of Moses. But since, beyond the bare and simple truth, which we have uncovered, this history preserves the highest secrets (*altissima arcana*), it will be worthwhile besides these things to indicate with a few words, through which it is seen that this tree was most apt not only with respect to historical matters, but also to symbolic matters, in the fruit of which the first parents are said to have transgressed the law of God.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> “*Sed rogabit fortasse quisquam, quare Deus ab hac arbore potius abstinendum praeceperit, quam ab alia?*” Joannes Goropius Becanus, *Origines Antwerpianae, sive Cimmericorum* (Antwerp, Christophor Plantinus, 1569), 498.

<sup>240</sup> “*Atque haec quidem satis essent, si ad solam arboris cum Mosis narratione convenientiam spectaremus. Verum quia historia haec praeter nudam & simplicem veritatem, quam aperuimus, altissima condit arcana, non erit citra operaepretium paucis*

Becanus distinguishes the tree's practical and secret appropriateness conceptually, but he sees *both* as evidence. Although this section is certainly the source for Raleigh's allegory, as the likenesses adduced correspond neatly, Becanus writes not about "allegories" but about "secrets"—that is, not so much formal, literary similarities belonging to an idealized interpretive space as bits of arcane code through which God reveals particular, quite concrete secrets.

Indeed, Becanus seems to require the secrets on evidentiary grounds, since the practical properties recommending the *ficus indica* are necessarily somewhat generic (e.g. its small, rare fruit was unlikely to be sought out by accident)<sup>241</sup> and thus incapable of justifying God's choice of this exact species. Since secret allegory, by contrast, can make use of the *ficus indica*'s wildest and most specific features, it can confirm its perfect and singular appropriateness. The propagation of its excreted aerial roots, for instance, provides a horrifying figure for the sexual propagation of Adam's sin through his seed (501). Many trees have small fruit; relatively few reproduce in ways that suggest a seminal emission. Through secret allegory, that property can be made into evidence for Becanus's argument, even though it contributes in no way to the historical narrative of Genesis 2 and 3. Far from being a witty or instructive fiction, allegory here is matter-of-factly evidentiary, which is why Becanus concludes this section by writing:

To he to whom therefore neither suitable exposition of history, nor the certain divine concordance of secrets will be enough to believe that *ficus* was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to him I do not

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*ea indicare, quo crenature, non historicos tantum, sed symbolicos etiam hanc arborem aptissimam fuisse, in cuius fructu primi parentes legem Dei transgressi dicerentur,”* 500.  
<sup>241</sup> “*At quali rogo pomo? Exiguo & raro, ita vt propter paruitatem contemni, & ob raritatem non quaeri debuerit,*” 499.

know what at last will be enough. I do not write for the obstinate-brained, but for those, who are guided by reasons elegantly cohering among themselves.<sup>242</sup>

The secret allegories do not follow from the claim that the tree was a *ficus*, nor can they be detached from it as a witty conceit. Rather, they evidence that claim, and they are as deeply entangled with the concrete, physical arguments of historical reasoning.<sup>243</sup>

Raleigh, then, has rewritten Becanus's arguments and evidence as imaginative, metaphorical play. In part, then, this episode in the *History* records a rationalization: the subjection of commentarial fantasy to empirical testing, as well as the gradual demythologization of the Tree, of which Raleigh finally argues we have no knowledge. Yet this familiar account of Raleigh's hard-headed empiricism misses the way in which the text produces a *more* magical, self-consciously literary fiction precisely from the material it rejects as history.<sup>244</sup> Effects like this one seem too heavily wrought to be purely accidental. Rather, they reflect, as I suggested in the introduction, Raleigh's

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<sup>242</sup> "Cui ergo nec historiae apta exposition, nec arcanorum divina quaedam consonantia satis erit ad credendum, hanc fuc lignum scientiae boni & mali fuisse, ei nescio quid tandem satis fit futurum. Obstinatis cerebris non scrib, sed illis, qui rationibus inter se concinne cohaerentibus ducuntur," 505.

<sup>243</sup> See also Thomas Browne, who writes that Becanus, "reviving the conceit of Barcephas, peremptorily concludeth [the Tree] to be the Indian Fig-tree; and by a witty Allegory labours to confirm the same." *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* 7.1 in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. 2, ed. Simon Wilkins (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1852), 210. Browne interestingly runs together Becanus's original ("to confirm the same") and Raleigh's rewriting ("witty Allegory"); he had probably read both.

<sup>244</sup> Robert Mayer links seventeenth-century history and the early novel, arguing, "The historiographical discourse of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England (what I shall call Baconian historiography) featured a taste for the marvelous, a polemical cast, a utilitarian faith, a dependence on personal memory and gossip, and a willingness to tolerate dubious material for practical purposes, all of which led to the allowance of fiction as a means of historical representation." *History and the Early English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4. Although my argument has important areas of overlap with Mayer's, I find his opposition of historiographical modes overly schematic, ignoring how fictive imagination and the hard-headed empiricism constitute each other in Raleigh (and, I think Bacon); I also highlight the question of Raleigh's relationship to past discourses and the commentarial commons.

attempt to introduce literary authorship into a relatively non-authorial discourse, to bend the truth-seeking and textually parasitic structures of commentary into a form that is distinctly personal and individual. But regardless of their origins, they also show how, alongside and even out of the new demands Humanism and the Reformation made on the biblical text's literal exactitude, there emerges a mode of biblical fiction invested in departing from the truth and using the Bible as a departure-point for imagination rather than fact.

## V. Tradition and the Individual Commentator

The two cases I have discussed in detail (Parisiensis and company on the Flood astrology, Becanus and friends on the Tree as *ficus indica*) at once resonate with and complicate a recent trend in literary histories of the novel. Classic histories of the novel, particularly Ian Watt's, tried to account for the rise of the novel's "formal realism," that is, its detailed, plausible representation of everyday life.<sup>245</sup> By contrast, newer studies have emphasized the novel's "fictionality"—its production, as Catharine Gallagher argues, of "believable stories that did not solicit belief."<sup>246</sup> Gallagher's argument emerged in part from a newly all-encompassing historicism, in which not only categories like realism, but even the "fact/fiction" distinction itself were, as Lennard Davis writes, "not to be taken as simply logical, self-evident ways of classifying narrative, but are to be seen

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<sup>245</sup> See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 32: "Formal realism is... the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience."

<sup>246</sup> Catharine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality" in *The Novel Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 336-363: 340. See also Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

as themselves subjective and highly contextualized.”<sup>247</sup> To be sure, some uncertainty hangs around the project of historicizing “fictionality”;<sup>248</sup> Michael McKeon, for instance, reaffirms Watt’s focus on realism and claims that what Gallagher takes to be new was “traditional, one of the assumptions that is customary in the tacit practice of story telling... and made explicit only when challenged.”<sup>249</sup>

Raleigh’s recasting of Becanus’s arguments about the Tree’s identity as “witty allegory,” I would suggest, provides an early example of fiction coming into being: material similarly plausible to other stories Raleigh does tell, their truth-claims sharply and preemptively rejected by Raleigh, and thus demanding neither assent nor incredulity. More broadly, Raleigh’s account of primary and secondary accounts, despite or precisely in virtue of its philosophical inadequacy, proves a machinery for manufacturing fictions: rival accounts of the world that are logically and empirically unfalsifiable, yet plainly contradictory, such that Raleigh’s deciding between them inevitably leaves a literary residue, plausible fictions like the alternative history in which Noah’s flood was the result

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<sup>247</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 8. Davis himself argued that the “news/novels matrix,” which provided writers incentives either to shelter scandalous claims under the guise of fiction or to pass off their literary compositions as true, created the modern category of “fiction.” See also Ian Duncan’s discussion of the relation between novelistic fiction and Humean empiricism. *Scott’s Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 116-19 and 123-27.

<sup>248</sup> Indeed, such historical work has unfolded in parallel with an ongoing dispute over how to understand “fictionality” in the trans-historical terms of narratology and philosophy. See John R. Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” *New Literary History* 6.2 (1975), 319-332; Dorrit Cohn, “Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective,” *Poetics Today* 11.4 (1990), 775-804 and *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and Gérard Genette, “The Pragmatic Status of Narrative Fiction,” *Style* 24.1 (1990), 59-72.

<sup>249</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 746n159. See also the essays in Michael McKeon, ed., *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), part 9.

of astrological conjunction rather than divine fiat. Raleigh's *History* thus suggests that critics of the eighteenth-century novel have been right to see early novelistic fiction as distinctive not merely for its realism but also for its renegotiation of the boundaries between truth and falsehood—even as that renegotiation seems to have significantly earlier roots than has been recognized.

In dating fiction earlier than Gallagher and others would, I am also proposing a new causal account of how fiction came to be. First, as Raleigh processes his plural commentarial ingredients—Becanus, Moses Bar-cephas, Pererius, Berosus, Parisiensis, and D'Ailly, to name only those discussed above—into a singular finished project, and as he stamps that product with his authorial brand (despite its being composed of materials that are largely both fragmentary and derivative), fiction emerges as a by- or waste-product, like the excess trimmings that necessarily accumulate on a factory floor.

In this sense, Raleigh's biblical fictions emerge out of the same intellectual moves that pre-occupied Luther and Calvin in the preceding chapter: the need to imagine a simple, unitary text that nonetheless enfolds commentarial, second-order thinking and interpretation into itself. The early Reformers, of course, were motivated by a theological paradox, whereas Raleigh is motivated by a parallel literary or authorial dilemma. Nonetheless, in both cases, the generic pressures they faced produced a biblical history that was newly literarily striated, one internally and hierarchically organized into differentiated layers, most strikingly a narrator's voice sorting through and reflecting upon the materials presented—and in Raleigh's case, separating truth from falsehood.

Second, Raleigh's *History* suggests a counter-intuitive account of the relation between plausible fiction and the supernatural. Especially on older accounts a crucial

feature of plausibility was the suspension or even outright rejection of the supernatural realm, particularly as an object of representation. Anglo-American historians like Watt and McKeon imagine the novel's realism opposing and replacing the supernaturally saturated genre of romance.<sup>250</sup> This claim fits within a broader theoretical analysis, in which, as Georg Lukacs put it pithily, "the Novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God."<sup>251</sup> Histories of novelistic form are often informed by broad cultural narratives about secularity and religion.

But plausible fiction, within the *History*, seems to emerge not so much from the repudiation of religion as from a particular manipulation of religious tradition. Biblical commentary had always involved the weighing of evidence, testing of a story's coherence and likelihood, comparison of parallel constructions of events; and insofar as commentators constantly disagree, commentary collections implicitly produce rival versions of a narrative, most of which are plausible but false. Raleigh, interestingly, does not just collate commentaries (as were Raleigh's commentarial contemporaries, like Ainsworth and Willet, as well as his sources, particularly Pererius); he also wrestles their multiplicity into the presentation of a singular narrative line. Although he deploys these

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<sup>250</sup> Writers and critics commonly hold that there is something anti-religious about the novel as a genre... Novels tell the stories of ordinary individuals amidst their material and social relationships, repudiating the transcendental frames of reference within which allegories, romances, and epics forge their meanings." Justin Neuman, "The Novel Against God: Questioning the Form's Inherent Secularism," *Culture* 3.2 (2009), 8-11. See also Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 120 (e.g.): "Doctrines of literary realism, which rise from the ruins of the claim to historicity, reformulate the problem of mediation for a world in which spirituality has ceased to represent another realm to which human materiality has only difficult and gratuitous access, and has become instead the capacity of human creativity itself."

<sup>251</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 88.



commentarial traditions in a novel way, Raleigh's Baconianism—as well as the supposed opposition between such empiricism and commentarial tradition—often seems a pose, a literary effect of the text rather than its explanation. In fact, in constructing the *History*—and thus also in constructing its fictions—Raleigh seems to have relied heavily on both the substance and forms of biblical commentary.

### Chapter 3: “Lawrels for the Conquered”: The Unreliable Narrator of

#### Cowley’s *Davideis*

In the invocation of *Davideis*, his unfinished biblical epic, Abraham Cowley claims that religious poetry can colonize for Christianity the powerful but dangerous resources of classical epic:

Guid my bold steps with thine old *trav’elling Flame*,  
In these untrodden paths to *Sacred Fame*;  
Lo, with *pure hands* thy heav’only *Fires* to take,  
My well-chang’d *Muse* I a chast *Vestal* make!  
From earths vain joys, and loves soft witchcraft free,  
I consecrate my *Magdalene* to Thee!  
Lo, this great work, a *Temple* to thy praise,  
On polisht *Pillars* of strong *Verse* I raise!  
A *Temple*, where if *Thou* vouchsafe to dwell,  
It *Solomons*, and *Herods* shall excel.  
Too long the *Muses-Land* have *Heathen* bin;  
Their Gods too long were *Dev’ils*, and *Vertues* Sin;  
But *Thou*, *Eternal Word*, hast call’d forth Me  
Th’ *Apostle*, to convert that *World* to *Thee*;  
T’ unbind the charms that in slight *Fables* lie,  
And teach that *Truth* is *truest Poesie*.<sup>252</sup>

Whether Cowley wrote these words as a young man in the 1630s or several decades later, the sentiment would have been familiar, even conventional.<sup>253</sup> In comparing his poem to the temple, Cowley is comparing it to *The Temple* as well,<sup>254</sup> implicitly invoking

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<sup>252</sup> In Abraham Cowley, *Poems: Miscellanies, The Mistress, Pindarique Odes, Davideis, Verses Written on Several Occasions*, edited by A. R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 285: 1.27-42. Cited by book and line number, using the lineation of “The Abraham Cowley Text and Image Archive” at <http://cowley.lib.virginia.edu> Notes cited by page and note number.

<sup>253</sup> See Frank Kermode’s assertion that portions (and perhaps all) of the poem were written after 1650. “The Date of Cowley’s *Davideis*” *The Review of English Studies* 25.98 (1949), 154-158, who responds to Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 357. I provide evidence below that some passages engage with the Civil War, though I am agnostic about how to date the poem and whether it was revised.

<sup>254</sup> Readers would have recognized the allusion to Herbert’s bestseller because writers imitating him often invoked *The Temple* in their titles. See for example Richard Crashaw, *Steps to the temple: sacred poems, with other delights of the muses* (London: Printed by T.W. for Humphrey Moseley, 1646) and Christopher Harvey, *The synagogue, or, The*

Herbert's sanctification of metaphysical lyric as a model for his own redemption of epic. Indeed, Cowley's mission to the poets considerably predates Herbert and has its antecedents in what Lily Campbell calls the sixteenth century's "use of the Bible to combat the influence of the new paganism and the new secularism which accompanied the rediscovery of ancient works of literature and art."<sup>255</sup>

But who is converting whom in this invocation? "Untrodden paths to Sacred Fame," for instance, seems to import a classical boast to a religious realm in which it is inappropriate, placing Cowley into competition with the Biblical authors. In the notes he appended to his poem, he seems aware of this awkwardness and hedges: "I hope this kind of boast (which I have been taught by almost all the old *Poets*) will not seem immodest; for though some in other languages have attempted the writing a *Divine Poem*; yet none, that I know of, has in English" (266n3). But the note's modesty is disingenuous, as is clearly implied by the appearance of the same boast in the Latin translation Cowley produced of Book I of *Davideis*: there it is plainly not about the English.<sup>256</sup> Indeed, even in the English, the possibility that Cowley is outstripping sacred predecessors recurs in his hope that his poem will exceed the Israelite temples, a possibility elaborated implicitly in his notes. There, Cowley defends his reference to the "first and last" temples "very much superior to that of *Zorobabel*"—which Cowley omits in the poem—"in

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*shadow of the temple Sacred poems, and private ejaculations. In imitation of Mr. George Herbert* (London: Printed by I. L. for Phil. Stephens, 1640).

<sup>255</sup> Lily Campbell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), vii.

<sup>256</sup> "Your attending flame, / once leader of the Israelites in their long wanderings. / May it direct my bold steps towards the unknown limit / and may it conduct them through the not commonplace airs of sacred fame." ("Tua flamma ministra / Isacidum longis ductrix erroribus olim / Dirigat audaces ignoto in limite gressus, / Producatque sacrae non trita per avia fama.") Accessed at <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/david/text.html>.

Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

riches and significance”; the claim that “of all three the last was the most stately” thus finds a tradition of artistic supersession within the history of the temples his poem claims to best (267n4).

Ironically, the very couplet in which Cowley announces his mission to the gentile poets (“But Thou, Eternal Word, hast call’d forth Me / Th’ Apostle, to convert that World to Thee”) reflects also a hubristic *agon* with his greatest Christian predecessor. The note clarifies that Cowley is claiming special revelation parallel to St. Paul’s,<sup>257</sup> but also that “This is more fully explained in the Latin Translation.” Indeed, the Latin differs substantially from the English which it ostensibly renders:

<p><b>English</b>          But <i>Thou, Eternal Word</i>, hast call’d forth Me          Th’ <i>Apostle</i>, to convert that <i>World</i> to <i>Thee</i>;          T’ unbind the charms that in slight <i>Fables</i> lie,          And teach that <i>Truth</i> is <i>truest Poesie</i>.</p>	<p><b>Latin</b>          But you, eternal word, have called me by voice,          As a new Paul struck with an uncommon light,          I advance to convert the vast worlds of the Muses          And to open unknown heaven to the belated poets.          Oh, may it be that the sacred rivers purge their monsters          purge themselves of both base plants and extreme filth          And bring forward the noble fountains of liquid truth.<sup>258</sup></p>
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In the Latin, Cowley explicitly compares himself to Paul and claims he has received a similar revelation. Perhaps he found it safest to boast in a dead language, but perhaps he also found the classical language conducive to the most dangerous reshaping of sacred history into epic conventions, that is, of St. Paul into a rival poet. Indeed, the Latin generally construes poetry not just as the target of conversion, but also as an agent itself.

<sup>257</sup> “To be made an *Apostle* for the conversion of *Poetry* to *Christianity*, as *S. Paul* was for the conversion of the *Gentiles*; which was done not onely by the *Word*, as *Christ* was the *Eternal Word* of his *Father*, but by his becoming a *Particular Word* or *Call* to him” (267n5).

<sup>258</sup> “Sed tu me, verbum aeternum, tu voce vocasti, / novus insolito percussus lumine Paulus, / Prodeo Musarum immensos convertere mundos, / Et coelum seris ignotum aperire poetis. / Ut iuvat, o, purgare suis sacra flumina monstris! / Ut vili purgare alga, caenoque profundo, / Et liquidi ingenuos fontes inducere veri!”

The “rivers” cleanse *themselves*, though even before this cleansing, they were already “sacred.” Indeed, the whole the metaphor implies that Cowley is clarifying, rather than modifying, their flow of truth. Further, heaven is opened to the poets not as salvation but as subject matter. In short, while the pious English superficially subordinates poetry to Christian truth, beneath its surface lies the suggestion that it is the other way around, that poetry is reconfiguring Christianity.

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The suspicion that biblical epic would, as Marvell worried about Milton, “ruin... the sacred truth to fable and old song” has long haunted biblical epic. But I do not intend to argue that Cowley was secretly of the poets’ party without knowing it. Rather, I think he was ostentatiously highlighting the intense duality of the genre, and I want to ask why he would choose to foreground its awkwardness. Cowley’s poem, as Abraham Stoll, Timothy Dykstal, and Joseph Wallace have argued, invites that question. In particular, the complex assemblage of English, notes, and Latin draws attention to the poem’s ungainly mingling of two traditions.<sup>259</sup> The reader encounters a text split against itself,

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<sup>259</sup> For Timothy Dykstal, the notes evidence Cowley’s crippling “hesitancy to assert classical (and pagan) ideals against the values of his often-conflicting Christian rationalism,” an “epic reticence” which explains why Cowley is merely a precursor to Milton. “The Epic Reticence of Abraham Cowley,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 31.1 (1991), 95-115: 96. Abraham Stoll places Cowley in the context of an emerging seventeenth-century discourse about monotheism and sees the notes as correcting the poetry’s slide towards paganism; the notes work “to undo the immediacy of the narrative, and to deconstruct the sense of narrative presence.” *Milton and Monotheism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 61. Joseph Wallace sees the notes and poem working together to draw the reader from poetry to history. The notes are thus “a crucial part of the poetic project, functioning as a revisionary argument about the nature of poetry and its role in the reformation of cultural traditions.” “True Poetry and False Religion in Cowley’s *Davideis*,” *The Review of English Studies* 66.277 (2015), 895-914:896.

constantly reformulating and modulating its statements.<sup>260</sup> Broadly, these critics see Cowley as a rationalist, using a split narrative pedagogically, to alert readers to the dangers of various religious errors. While I follow them in observing the tensions between poem and notes and between narrative invention and ultimate truth, I think they mistakenly assume that a writer of biblical epic *had* to confront such a tension. Cowley, on this account, is making the worst of a bad situation, and his poem's central, theological theme is the generic tension of biblical epic.

By contrast, I argue that Cowley consistently inflates the conflict between classical poetry and biblical truth, especially in programmatic moments like the invocation to the Muse and the 1656 Preface to his collected poetic works. First, I examine and refute the implicit assumption behind theological readings of Cowley: a sharp, essential and formal difference between the Bible and classical literature. Such differentiations are inherently misleading, and they require the effacement of the particularities of the biblical text. The Bible and Homer do not naturally suggest themselves as opposites. The choice to portray them as such is always just that, a choice. I insist that we need to rethink a binary that informs much criticism on biblical epic. Rather than taking it for granted as an opposition early modern authors inherited, we should ask how and for what reasons a writer constructed the opposition.

Second, I turn to Cowley himself, arguing that he emphasizes the contradictions of biblical epic for political reasons. His Preface does indeed imagine biblical epic as an internally divided genre. But, I argue, the Preface does not make sense of the work itself,

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<sup>260</sup> By contrast, Robert Hinman defends the essential unity of the poem and is endnotes as attempts to impose “order” on his material. *Abraham Cowley's World of Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 227–66.

particularly its notes. To explain the Preface's poetic theory, I argue, we have to turn to a third, largely repressed term: politics. As a recently imprisoned Royalist, Cowley had strong incentives to distance his poetry from real, controversial politics and history. Cowley's conception of poetry, and his concerns with reality and fantasy, are deliberately crafted to afford him a neutral, apolitical poetic space under a hostile regime.

The essay's third section reads the *Davideis* in the light of Cowley's earlier political epic, *The Civill Warre*, arguing that Cowley's concerns with truth and fantasy emerge out of a specifically Royalist poetics of the ordinary and normal, a rejection of republican zealotry and sublime flights of fancy.<sup>261</sup> As discussed below, my reading attempts to bridge historicist readings of *The Civill Warre* with theological readings of the *Davideis*. The *Davideis* retreats from the political battlefield, a move legible largely in the terms of *The Civil Warre*: for the earlier poem's hard-headed Royalist realism, the *Davideis* substitutes an apolitical, fantastical space of poetry that presents no threat to the regime.

In a conclusion, I place my argument about Cowley in the context of my broader concerns with biblical commentary and narration. While the *Davideis* and its notes are obviously indebted to the Renaissance commentary tradition, previous account of that debt have been too limited, focusing exclusively on the theological and philological ideas Cowley inherited. Instead, I claim that commentary afforded Cowley newly complex models of narration, and that he used the mediated, interrupted structure of text and commentary to produce a narrator and commentator who are both radically unreliable.

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<sup>261</sup> My account complicates the frequent critical assumption that Royalists are neo-classical, mythological, and fantastical. See my discussion and critique below of David Norbrook on this point.

**“In sacred poetry who has succeeded?”<sup>262</sup>**

In understanding Cowley’s conjuncture of classical and biblical literatures as forced and awkward by design rather than necessity, I am rejecting two assumptions that animate much discussion of biblical epic, and often of religious poetry more broadly. First, classical and biblical literatures are stable, inherited categories clearly in tension with each other. Further, this tension is supposed to be about more than conflicting cultural norms, theological doctrines, or histories. To be clear: I have no doubt, and neither did early moderns, that on those terms, the Bible and Homer clash violently. Rather, the argument runs, “biblical epic” is an oxymoron because classical poetry and the Bible differ *formally*. Different rules govern their composition, they work differently upon readers, and they aim at incommensurate, separate goals. Second, the authors of biblical epic (it is alleged) intend to harmonize these disparate modes, or to yoke poetry into the service of divinity, such that when Athens and Jerusalem fail to congeal into an orderly whole, the consequent misfits announced the undesired but inevitable return of the repressed antithesis. Against these two positions, I claim, first, that in order to present the Bible and classical poetry as sharply and cleanly opposed, critics routinely have to efface the particularities of the two corpuses, hiding the moments in which they are in fact quite similar. Such contrasts are often better understood as cultural or religious interventions than as literary typologies, which posit particular definitions of terms like “religion” or “poetry” that do not arise from the sources themselves. Second (in the case

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<sup>262</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets* vol. 2 (London: Nathaniel Cook, Milford House: 1854), 84.



of Cowley), I argue that to write biblical epic is often to produce the contradiction one is claiming to resolve.<sup>263</sup>

An early, and influential example of the analysis I am rejecting can be found in Samuel Johnson's criticism on the *Davideis*. In his *Lives of the Poets*, he writes:

Sacred history has been always read with submissive reverence, and an imagination overawed and controlled. We have been accustomed to acquiesce in the nakedness and simplicity of the authentick narrative, and to repose on its veracity with such humble confidence as suppresses curiosity. We go with the historian as he goes, and stop with him when he stops. All amplification is frivolous and vain; all addition to that which is already sufficient for the purposes of religion seems not only useless, but, in some degree, profane.

Such events as were produced by the visible interposition of divine power are above the power of human genius to dignify. The miracle of creation, however it may teem with images, is best described with little diffusion of language: "He spake the word, and they were made."<sup>264</sup>

On Johnson's account, Scripture demands passive, accepting readers. If a poets imagine additional details, or even worse, compose alternate, embellished poetic accounts, then they profanely arrogate the role of the divine author. This account of Bible reading, of course, makes nonsense out of biblical commentary. Had Luther regarded amplification as vain, he would hardly have produced eight volumes of lectures. Had Cowley suppressed his curiosity, he would have had to refrain from writing not only the *Davideis* but also its copious notes. But there is a further objection to Johnson's argument here. For if the ideal form of the creation story is a single sentence in Psalm 148, then the elaborate, rhythmic first chapter of Genesis itself impiously elaborates. On any reading that opposes religion to poetry, the Bible profanes itself from its very beginning.

### **The Voice from Nowhere? Auerbach's Evasion of Biblical Writing**

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<sup>263</sup> By analogy, it has always seemed to me that the main function of interdisciplinary meetings in academia is precisely to produce and rehearse the disciplinary lines that their initiators bemoan, lines that do not naturally inhere in humanistic study and become visible only in the staged failure to cross them.

<sup>264</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.

Indeed, accounts of the tension between the Bible and poetry regularly rewrite the biblical text to do so. Such revisions occur even in otherwise theologically and literarily sophisticated readers. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, for instance, certainly does not reject out of hand the possibility of biblical literature.<sup>265</sup> On the contrary, *Mimesis* is frequently cited as an early paradigm for modern study of the Bible as literature.<sup>266</sup> For Auerbach, the Bible, in contrast to classical Greek literature, invests ordinary, humble human experience with ultimate significance. In the broader arc of *Mimesis*, Biblical style bequeaths humanist realism its concern with everyday reality and the individual.<sup>267</sup> Nonetheless, "Odysseus' Scar," the famous essay with which *Mimesis* begins,

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<sup>265</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

<sup>266</sup> See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 17 and Steven Weitzman, "Before and After *The Art of Biblical Narrative*," *Prooftexts* 27 (2007), 191–210: 196.

<sup>267</sup> For recent treatments of Auerbach, see Avihu Zakai, *Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: The Humanist Tradition in Peril* (New York: Springer, 2017). Zakai argues that while Auerbach's early work on Dante (*Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review Books, 2007)) grouped Judaism with Oriental, allegorizing mystification against Homeric particularity, Auerbach reversed his views in response to the denigration of the Hebrew Bible by Aryan philology. For Zakai, Auerbach's essay "Figura" (in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11-76) and *Mimesis* thus defend Hebrew humanism against the Nazi assault. James I. Porter, by contrast, argues that "the main substantive theses of *Mimesis* were already in place in Auerbach's earliest publications from 1921 and 1929, from his dissertation to his Dante book, as was Auerbach's Judaizing philology" although he shares with Zakai a shift in emphasis from earlier post-colonial readings of *Mimesis*, which remove "the sting from Auerbach's pointed and even strongly Jewish critical writing, while at the same time glossing over its unmistakable political cast in the context of German National Socialism." *Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology*, *Critical Inquiry* 35.1 (2008), 115-147: 140 and 137. See also "Auerbach, Homer, and the Jews" in eds. Susan A. Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia, *Classics and National Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 235-57. For earlier work, see Edward W. Said, "Secular Criticism," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5–9 and "Erich Auerbach, Critic of the Earthly World," *Boundary* 2.31 (2004), 11–34, as well as Aamir R. Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1998), 95–125.

exaggerates the opposition between Homeric and Biblical literature.<sup>268</sup> Even if Biblical style will inform nearly all subsequent Western literary history, Auerbach denies the Bible itself status as a poetic, literary object, smoothing over its own compositional history. In recuperating the Hebrew Bible and insisting upon its distinctiveness, Auerbach attributes to it an unsustainably alien, foreign essence.<sup>269</sup>

At the center of “Odysseus’ Scar” are paired close readings of an episode in the *Odyssey*, in which the hero’s scar is recognized by his housekeeper Euryclea, and the Elohistic account of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. Auerbach differentiates the Elohist from Homer in several ways. I want to focus upon the question of the narrative’s truth, for there Auerbach advances claims strikingly similar to Johnson’s. In particular, they share the belief that the Bible insists upon its own historicity. “Without believing in Abraham’s sacrifice,” Auerbach writes, “it is impossible to put the narrative of it to the use for which it was written,” since its “religious intent involves an absolute claim to historical truth.” Further, the Bible claims priority over other true stories and “insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy” (14-5). By contrast, Homer “does not need to base his story on historical reality,” since his goal is not “to subject us” to God but merely to entertain us and “to bewitch the senses.” His story “ensnares us, weaving

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<sup>268</sup> On the classical side, see the critiques cited in Porter (2008), 137n45.

<sup>269</sup> Thus, while Robert Alter praises Auerbach for “showing more clearly than anyone before him how the cryptic conciseness of biblical narrative is a reflection of profound art, not primitiveness,” he points to the strongest methodological objection to *Mimesis* generally, its suggestion that the short passages Auerbach analyzed are typical of the works in which they appear: “An arresting starkness of foreground, an enormous freight of background, are beautifully illustrated in the story of the binding of Isaac which Auerbach analyzes, but those terms would have to be seriously modified for the psychologically complex cycle of stories about David, for the deliberately schematic folktale frame of the Book of Job, or for a late (in part, satirical) narrative like Esther, where in fact there is a high degree of specification in the foreground of artifacts, costume, court customs, and the like” (Alter 1981, 17).

its web around us, and that suffices him” (13). Further, just like Johnson, Auerbach understands the intended truthfulness of Biblical narrative as sharply restricting its authors’ imaginative freedom:

The Biblical narrator was obliged to write exactly what his belief in the truth of the tradition (or, from the rationalistic standpoint, his interest in the truth of it) demanded of him—in either case, his freedom in creative or representative imagination was severely limited; his activity was perforce reduced to composing an effective version of the pious tradition (14).

Exactly as in Johnson’s argument, the “nakedness and simplicity of the authentick narrative” precludes “amplification” and certainly modification. And just as in Johnson, the distinction seems to me *prima facie* unsupportable. The claim that a biblical writer could not have included something merely to entertain seems only marginally less implausible than the corresponding claim that Homer had no intentions for readers except that they be entertained.

To be sure, Auerbach deviates radically from Johnson as concerns the *consequences* of the Bible’s claim to veridicality. For Auerbach, the Bible’s “claim to absolute authority” is intimately connected with its being “fraught with ‘background’ and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning” (15). Where Johnson attributes to the biblical reader “humble confidence” and “repose,” Auerbach argues that the Biblical stories, unlike Homer, “require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them.” In fact, the Bible is the source of all interpretation in and of Western literature. For Auerbach, the Bible subjects us not into simple acceptance, but into a ceaseless quest for the hidden God who motivates, directs, and orients the story. Despite this difference, Auerbach does share with Johnson a sense that the biblical text’s demand to be taken as the truth essentially excludes the author’s creative, imaginative freedom.

Just like Johnson, Auerbach has to efface the process of biblical composition in order to support the dichotomy between the Bible and invention. The supposed “severe limits” on the “freedom in creative or representative imagination” of the Biblical narrator are naturally harder to maintain when one examines the multiplicity of the biblical sources, and the different ways in which individual authors imagined their subjects. (Note how Auerbach splits into speaking of the singular “narrator,” avoiding the plural “authors,” which would highlight this inconvenient fact.)<sup>270</sup> To speak of the biblical “style” becomes more difficult when one can contrast J’s creation story with P’s, since the two obviously differ not only with respect to content but also stylistically and formally. A great deal of what Auerbach says about, for instance, the biblical disinterest in detailed description of the physical world is simply false of P’s description of the Tabernacle, which has the meticulous, loving eye for detail of an interior decorator.

But Auerbach, like much of the literary criticism of the Bible he foreshadows, deliberately sidesteps the process of composition of the biblical texts with which he is concerned.<sup>271</sup> In his conclusion, he writes, “we have taken them as finished products, as they appear in the texts; we have disregarded everything that pertains to their origins” (23). To some extent, Auerbach’s approach reflects his polemical purposes. Since at least the eighteenth century, philology had been used by German Protestant academics and

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<sup>270</sup> To be sure, Auerbach does admit that the biblical writers vary in their treatment of materials. My claim is thus not that he has no answer to the multiplicity of sources; it is that his answer is a weak one. Moreover, the idea that the various authors subordinated their personalities entirely to what they perceived to be religious truth seems significantly less plausible once one has done the work to identify the remarkably specific and various ways in which they told their stories.

<sup>271</sup> See for instance “A Literary Approach to the Hebrew Bible” in Alter, 2008: 3-22, as well as James Kugel’s critique in “Apologetics and ‘Biblical Criticism Lite’” an appendix to *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), published online at <http://www.jameskugel.com/apologetics.pdf>.

theologians to depict the Old Testament as primitive and archaic, a movement that Nazi scholars radicalized.<sup>272</sup> Treating the biblical texts as finished products thus helps Auerbach rebuff what has been called the “Higher Anti-Semitism” of source criticism.<sup>273</sup>

Auerbach’s end-run around biblical criticism recuperates the sophistication of the biblical text by re-describing the Bible’s apparent compositional flaws as its most profound stylistic characteristics. Having argued that biblical characters (unlike, supposedly, Homeric heroes) change over their lives, Auerbach counters the objection that “the biographical element of the Old Testament often springs from the combination of several legendary personages”—that, in other words, Jacob merely looks psychologically dynamic because we are reading several different authors’ Jacobs. The objection “does not apply,” Auerbach counters, “for this combination is a part of the development of the text” (18). That is, since Auerbach is claiming that the Bible uniquely introduces into literature “the concept of historically becoming” (23), all the better if that concept originates in the historical becoming of the text itself. Indeed, conflicting authors, editors, and redactors may be uniquely capable of producing the “cross-currents... friction, all that is casual, secondary to the main events and themes, everything

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<sup>272</sup> See Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 182-223; Jon D. Levinson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 1-33; and most saliently, Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). See also “The Crisis of German Philology: Aryan Philology and the Elimination of the Old Testament,” in Zakai, 2017: 37-50. Naomi Seidman traces this German tradition all the way back to Luther’s translation of the Hebrew Bible. See *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 115-53.

<sup>273</sup> See also Aaron Koller’s remarks in his review-essay on “Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*” *History of Religions* 51.3 (2012), 282-289: 286.

unresolved, truncated, and uncertain” that Auerbach celebrates as the Bible’s concept of history (19). The history of the text becomes the text’s invention of history.

The trouble is that Auerbach, who asserts without proof the severe limits on the biblical writer’s imagination, has essentially rendered his point tautological by assimilating the text’s compositional process into its message. Of course there can be no invention in the writing of Auerbach’s Bible, since *a priori* the text’s “various components”—and indeed the writing of those components—“all belong to one concept of universal history and its interpretation” (17). Historical critics frequently complain that literary readers treat the biblical text in its finished form.<sup>274</sup> Auerbach does something more sophisticated, in that he assimilates the rocky compositional process itself into the meaning and significance of the canonical unity. Unlike, say, Northrop Frye, Auerbach is thus not ignoring historical criticism; it matters, on his account, that the Bible is a composite text assembled over a long time from disparate sources.<sup>275</sup> But he is denying

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<sup>274</sup> In addition to Kugel, 2008 see Joel S. Baden, “The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128.2 (2009), 209-224. For the other side, see for instance Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch: Eight Lectures* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961) and Shimon Bar-Efrat, “Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative,” *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980), 154-73 and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). See also the synthesis of John Barton, “Historical Criticism and Literary Interpretation: Is There Any Common Ground?” in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Studies in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Paul M. Joyce, and Davie E. Orton (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 3-15. See also Robert Alter, “A Peculiar Literature,” in *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 1-25, in which Alter (to my eyes) moderates some of his earlier claims about the primacy of literary reading over historical criticism.

<sup>275</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002). It is interesting to note the almost exact parallel between historical critiques of Frye’s approach to the Bible and Michael McKeon’s argument that Frye’s approach to genre more generally is problematically ahistorical. See Michael McKeon,

the individual compositional acts meaning on their own terms as acts of writing or invention. They derive their significance only from the fact that they enter into the larger, unified history of the Bible.

An example may help clarify my point. Auerbach's very first observation about Genesis 22 is that its opening "startles us when we come to it from Homer," because the text provides no setting: "Where are the two speakers? We are not told" (8). Indeed, Auerbach is right enough about Genesis 22:1 ("And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him: 'Abraham'; and he said: 'Behold, here I am'"), and he emphasizes the point twice more: "Where he [Abraham] is actually, whether in Beersheba or elsewhere, whether indoors or in the open air, is not stated; it does not interest the narrator, the reader is not informed" (8), "Whence he [Abraham] comes, we do not know, but the goal is clearly stated" (10). As the last example indicates, the supposed absence of initial setting is of some importance to Auerbach. It evidences not merely the Elohist's concision and his disdain for elaborate physical detail, but the underlying directionality of biblical narrative. For Auerbach, Bible stories remain undeveloped because they demand that the reader interpret them in light of their divine fulfillment.

The trouble is that, on the Elohist's account, we know exactly where Abraham is in Genesis 22:1: Beersheba. That is where he goes after the sacrifice ("So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba," Genesis 22:19). The simple sense is that he is returning from whence he came, as no reason is given to think he is migrating. Further, he was in

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*The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 6-16.



Beersheba when he expelled Hagar and her son (since they wander “in the wilderness of Beersheba,” 21:14), and that is surely an E narrative.

The confusion—on which Auerbach’s observation rests—comes only because of the end of Genesis 21. There, Abraham negotiates a pact with the Philistine king Abimelech, having rebuked him because his servants had been stealing from Abraham’s well (in Hebrew, “*be’er*”), which is clearly *Beersheba*. The final verses discuss

Abraham’s location:

32 When they had made a covenant at Beersheba, Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, left and returned to the land of the Philistines. 33 Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. 34 And Abraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the Philistines (21:32-34, NRSV).

The text must be composite. Verse 32 excludes Beersheba from Philistine territory, because Abimelech and Phicol leave the former for the latter. Verse 33 then places Abraham in Beersheba, presumably *outside* Philistine territory. But then, without any indication of movement, verse 34 places Abraham *inside* Philistine territory. What gives? E. A. Speiser takes verse 33 to be an insertion from J (though he expresses uncertainty about all three verses).<sup>276</sup> Baruch Schwartz thinks that the entire story (21:22-34) is a doublet combining E and J material. On his account, verses 31-3 are J and verse 34 is E. In *both* accounts, Abraham concludes the episode in Beersheba, and J and E disagree

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<sup>276</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Anchor, 1964), 158-61.

only on whether Beersheba is inside (E) or outside (J) Philistine territory.<sup>277</sup> Clearly one could solve the problem in other ways.

I am not committed here to a particular compositional history of these verses. Rather, I think the above analysis raises two problems for Auerbach. First, Auerbach emphasizes a literary feature (the absence of an initial setting), but that feature is an accidental result of compilation history. The initial E text seems to have been, on all accounts, perfectly clear that 22:1 takes place in Beersheba. Moreover, the supposedly teleological nature of Biblical narrative evaporates, given that the Binding of Isaac plots not a journey from an unknown place to the Mountain of God, but a loop-trail that starts and ends in the same place. This critique is familiar from longstanding arguments between advocates of literary and source-historical methodologies.

Second, these verses suggest a more basic point about writing narrative, namely, that writers—however orthodox and whatever their beliefs—cannot escape invention. The Elohist, I take it, had neither a deep polemical interest nor a historical commitment to where Abraham was in Genesis 22:1 or whether Beersheba was in Philistine land.<sup>278</sup> Nevertheless, in writing a narrative, he introduces the “extra” details that are the inevitable consequence of producing a story. That is to say, once we focus upon (what little we can know of) the writing of the Bible, rather than assimilating that writing into the text under the vague rubric of “history,” it becomes clear that the Elohist differs from other imaginative writers only in degree. Some points—perhaps even all the important ones—in the story may be E’s givens, to which he feels historically or doctrinally

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<sup>277</sup> Baruch Schwartz, private correspondence.

<sup>278</sup> Or more precisely, J *might* have cared about Beersheba being historically Israelite. But E surely could have had no polemical interest in denying that point.

committed. But in writing a narrative text, writers can never confine themselves to what they know to be true. The Talmud observes that there is no dream without insignificant element; the example of Beersheba shows that this insignificance is a structural necessity of narrative.<sup>279</sup> No narrator or mediator can tell a story in perfect conformity with a predetermined message or history. The invention of the narrative inherently places its own demands upon the writer, demands identical with those faced by the writer of a fiction.<sup>280</sup>

### **Moses (Maimonides) and Monotheism: Historicizing the Bible**

Johnson and Auerbach's problematic move recurs in contemporary criticism, including Abraham Stoll's recent treatment of Cowley in *Milton and Monotheism*. Stoll frames his book with Samuel Johnson's complaints about whether Milton's spirits are immaterial or material. Johnson takes the former option to be theologically correct but imaginatively impoverished ("immateriality supplied no images").<sup>281</sup> Stoll sees the tradeoff between imaginative energy and strict monotheism not as Milton's fault but as the key to his poetry: "rather than finding the poem's struggles with ontology an inconvenience, I suggest viewing them as an index to Milton's commitment to monotheism." Later, he writes, "this tension between pure abstraction and the need for

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<sup>279</sup> bBerakhot52a-b, cited in Rashi on Genesis 37:10 in *Torat Hayyim: Hamishah Humshei Torah*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1993), 146.

<sup>280</sup> My argument here resembles Hayden White's in the introduction to *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 1-42, in that both of us want to blur the line between historical and fictional forms of narrative. But whereas Hayden emphasizes the inescapability of emplotment, I am focusing on the inevitability of arbitrary acts of invention and fabrication.

<sup>281</sup> Johnson, 108.

concrete divinity is the central disruption felt in monotheistic narrative.”<sup>282</sup> Stoll richly grounds this tension in an intellectual history of seventeenth-century England’s preoccupation with “monotheism,” and the corresponding rationalization and abstraction of Christian theology (6-9).

But somewhat weirdly, Stoll does not seem to appreciate fully the significance of this history. In one mood, he provides a “history of the concept of monotheism in the seventeenth century,” showing how English scholars and divines newly emphasized God’s unity, categorical difference from pagan deities, and ineffability (10). Even the English word “monotheism” itself turns out to be a seventeenth-century invention. The intellectual history in *Milton and Monotheism* suggests that “the emergence of... one of comparative religion’s most basic terms”—monotheism—“has largely been taken for granted” (10). Such a history might expose significant, under-studied discontinuities in the history of Christian theology.

But elsewhere, Stoll himself seems to take “monotheism” as an ahistorical, essential category. “The concept of a single God creates a number of problems for narrative, he writes in his introduction, “in the *Bible* as well as in *Paradise Lost*” (emphasis added, 11). Stoll uses Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, and in particular its portrayal of Israel’s God as both the pure, monotheistic Aton and the impish, anthropomorphic Aton, as an allegory for monotheism’s paradoxical dependence on false representations to communicate its truths. The trouble is that, as Stoll’s book documents, “monotheism” is in some sense historically specific. If many Christians believed in a

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<sup>282</sup> Abraham Stoll, *Milton and Monotheism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 5 and 13. Note that Stoll also concludes his introduction with Johnson: “It is precisely such a struggle [between philosophy and revelation] that Samuel Johnson noticed in Milton” (23).

singular God before the term emerged, it is not at all clear they understood such a belief to be in tension with narrative representation, as Stoll does and Milton seems to have.

Further, it is not clear the biblical authors were monotheists in *any* sense. Clearly, there are a number of related issues here—monotheism and polytheism, aniconism and representation, orthodoxy and heterodoxy—and the literature on them is vast and complex. Stoll cites Jan Assmann on the “Mosaic distinction,” which biblical monotheism supposedly introduced, between true and false religion.<sup>283</sup> But Assmann himself limits much of what he says about this distinction to the Deuteronomist, surely the most “monotheist” of the Pentateuchal authors.<sup>284</sup> Indeed, Yehezkel Kaufmann’s whole conception of the Israelite “monotheist revolution,” and the biblical audience’s consequent popular monotheism, finds few takers among current biblical scholars.<sup>285</sup> Following the theoretical lead of Catharine Bell and Talal Asad, some scholars doubt whether even the Deuteronomist and Deutero-Isaiah distinguish sharply between “true” and “false” religion.<sup>286</sup> Further, even if Kaufmann was right, Israelite monotheism was

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<sup>283</sup> Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2: “What seems crucial to me is not the distinction between One God and many gods, but the distinction between truth and falsehood in religion, between the true god and false gods, true doctrine and false doctrine, knowledge and ignorance, belief and unbelief.”

<sup>284</sup> For this point, I am indebted to Richard J. Bernstein’s review of Assman’s two books in the *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature* 8.1 (2009/2010), accessed online at [brynmawr.edu/bmrc/BMRCL2010/Of%20God%20and%20Gods,%20The%20Price%20of%20Monotheism.htm](http://brynmawr.edu/bmrc/BMRCL2010/Of%20God%20and%20Gods,%20The%20Price%20of%20Monotheism.htm) on 10/8/17.

<sup>285</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel, from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 131n. See also the restatement of Kaufmann and summary of the dispute in Benjamin D. Sommer, “Monotheism and Polytheism in Ancient Israel” in *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 145-75.

<sup>286</sup> Nathaniel B. Levtow, *Images of Others: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel* (Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 6. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford:

not the sort of Maimonidean rationalism that Stoll has in mind. As Benjamin Sommer shows, the Pentateuchal authors unanimously agreed that God had at least one body (they differed on the question of secondary incarnations).<sup>287</sup> Reading Exodus 20 and the Second Commandment, one may be tempted to posit a biblical aniconism that is radical and universal. But any such account will founder on Exodus 25's instruction to place icons of Cherubim in the sanctuary. Further, there is no evidence that any of the biblical authors considered *verbal* representation to parallel visual representation, such that they could have appreciated the *aporia* of monotheistic narrative.<sup>288</sup> In short, as far as the Bible is concerned, aniconism about narrative is an anachronism.

Stoll thus peculiarly slips between using "monotheism" to designate a particular, seventeenth-century discursive formation, which often does seem to evidence the literary aniconism that drives his analysis of Milton and his contemporaries, and a generalized, religious essence deriving from the Bible. Like Johnson, Stoll thus imposes the abstractions of later religious thought onto the Bible, creating the illusion of a sharp formal conflict between classical literature and biblical religion.<sup>289</sup>

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Oxford University Press, 1992), 13-29 and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 64-5.

<sup>287</sup> Sommer, 1-12.

<sup>288</sup> See the discussion in Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, "Idolatry and Representation" in *Idolatry*, translated by Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37-67.

<sup>289</sup> In some cases, this imposition leads to some rather bizarre conclusions. A long section on the afterlife of Genesis 18 in *Paradise Lost* beautifully shows how *Milton* uses the biblical passage to agonize over the paradox of a perfect God's role in narrative (101-42). But Stoll preposterously attributes this paradox to Genesis 18 itself, insisting, "it becomes clear how narratively illogical and rigorously defiant of a unified conception of the [divine] being(s) the text is" (123). Given a seventeenth-century theology, Genesis is indeed illogical and confused. The logical conclusion to be drawn here is not that one has

Stoll falls squarely within the tradition I am critiquing, and his work illustrates the consequences of that tradition for the interpretation of seventeenth-century poetry, in this case Cowley. Because Stoll believes that monotheistic narrative is eternally, essentially divided against itself, he treats Cowley as necessarily bound by that tension. Showing how Cowley depends on John Selden's scholarship in comparative religion, Stoll argues that the poetic text of the *Davideis* advances imaginatively attractive truth-claims about polytheistic deities, while the notes undercut those truth-claims with Seldenian skepticism. By first imagining pagan gods and then dispelling their reality, Cowley models monotheistic narrative's doubled motion (52-62).

Although Stoll's model produces an elegant account of the *Davideis*, it leads to forced readings of both the poem and Cowley's literary development. First, the pattern of error and correction that Stoll rightly locates in the *Davideis* is actually *too* pervasive for his theory to explain. That is, the notes correct the poem on points that have nothing to do with monotheistic narrative. For instance, as Stoll discusses, Cowley's poem inexactly mentions the "Eight hundred" years between Benjamin and Saul, and then his note registers the mistake: "not exactly: but this is the next *whole number*, and *Poetry* will not admit of *broken ones*" (Cowley 1.320 and n23, in Stoll, 61). But first, this correction has nothing to do with monotheism. The chronological discrepancy has no theological consequences. Second, as indicated by the second part of Cowley's note, which Stoll omits, the correction has nothing to do with narrative: "Indeed, though it were in prose, in so passionate a speech it were not natural to be punctual." It is Saul, having just woken from a nasty dream in which Envy took "the reverend shape... Of *Father Benjamin*"

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identified a constitutive paradox of the Bible, but that one has misidentified the theology of the biblical author.

(1.240-41). Understandably upset, Saul excitedly fudges the dates. Thus there is no disruption to what Stoll calls the “coherence of the storyworld” (62), for the lapse is not the narrator’s but a character’s, who is behaving exactly as he would in real life. In imagining the notes fostering “a critical and historical perspective on the assertions of narrative,” Stoll slips between the narrator’s associations and Saul’s.

In so doing, Stoll misses the oddity of Cowley’s choice to flag Saul’s statement as erroneous. Not only is Saul a character, whose utterances cannot affect the truth of the diegesis, but also in this case, it is not even clear that he is wrong. Early modern biblical chronologies varied widely, because of the text’s internal contradictions and lack of specificity, and “eight hundred” is not demonstrably worse than any other singular number.<sup>290</sup> Note that Cowley does not give the “real” number in his note. He could not have, because he could not have known it. As I will argue in greater detail below, Cowley is not caught here in the bind of monotheistic narrative. Instead, he is actively seeking to distance his poem from history and historical accuracy. He is not stuck with the problem of monotheistic narrative; he is consciously crafting that problem.

Not only do Stoll’s close readings sometimes raise questions about his broader thesis, but he also imposes his own, theoretical concerns on Cowley’s career. On the one hand, Stoll shows, Cowley contributed a prefatory poem to William Davenant’s *Gondibert* that celebrated Davenant’s replacing “Gods, Devils, Nymphs, Witches, and Giants” with “Men and Manners” as the subject of epic.<sup>291</sup> For Stoll, Cowley’s approval of this change “constitutes a rejection of... the polytheism of the classical world” (51).

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<sup>290</sup> See Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* vol. 2 *Historical Chronology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), esp. 262-67.

<sup>291</sup> Sir William Davenant, *Gondibert: An Heroick Poem* (London: Printed for John Holden, 1651), E3.



On the other hand, despite Cowley's praise of disenchanting epic, his own 1656  *Davideis*  includes any number of gods, including both an invocation to the muse (which Davenant explicitly rejected as too pagan) and a demonic council. Stoll suggests that Cowley realized, "the total exclusion of the gods would be an exemplary kind of monotheism, but it may not make for sufficiently interesting, and therefore effective, narrative" (55). In other words, having realized that  *Gondibert*  was dull reading, Cowley turned from disenchanting realism to the doubled structure of fanciful poetry and truthful footnotes discussed above.

The trouble with this story is that, at every step along the way, "monotheistic narrative" seems the incorrect rubric for examining Cowley's admittedly contradictory attitude towards the supernatural. First of all,  *Gondibert*  is not a Christian poem. It is a secular poem, about a Lombard duke. Davenant advocates more realistic, "more natural, and... more useful" poetry on the grounds that previous inventions "exceed the  *worke* , but also the  *possibility*  of nature" (cited in Stoll, 46-7). True, Davenant objects more to the marvelous in Tasso and other Christian poets than in Homer and Virgil. But Davenant's "Christian" means "modern." The ancients believed nonsense, but Tasso ought to have known better. Indeed, as Stoll himself shows, Davenant's position in his preface is basically Hobbesian: skeptical, materialist, and realistic.

Correspondingly, Cowley's praise of Davenant's realism is largely  *not*  theological; it is political. Stoll omits the crucial stanza of the dedicatory poem:

By fatal hands whilst present Empires fall,  
Thine from the grave past Monarchies recall.  
So much more thanks from humane kinde does merit  
The Poets Fury, then the Zelots Spirit.  
And from the grave thou mak'st this Empire rise,  
Not like some dreadfull Ghost t' affright our Eyes,  
But with more beauty and triumphant state,  
Then when it crown'd at proud Verona sate.

So will our God re-build Mans perish'd frame,  
And raise him up much better, yet the same:  
So God-like Poets doe past things rehearse,  
Not change, but heighten Nature with their Verse.

Cowley and Davenant were Royalist exiles together in Paris, and Cowley's poem barely hides its royalism. The "fatall hands" are those which executed Charles, and Davenant's poetic "fury"—a Renaissance commonplace alluding ultimately to Plato—is playfully contrasted with Puritan anger, a common target of Royalist critique.<sup>292</sup> Cowley praises *Gondibert's* historical realism (its choice to "past things rehearse") as a conservative response to revolution, a sober rejection of disorderly, disruptive republican poetics. Cowley hints at a monarchic restoration to parallel God's raising man "up much better, yet the same," but he carefully distinguishes such a change from the violent, revolutionary poetics of the supernatural, which would produce "some dreadfull Ghost t' affright our Eyes." Good poets do "not change, but heighten Nature." (Cowley may also have been reassuring the Parliamentary government that Davenant's poem is innocuous, since Davenant had been captured and imprisoned.) For Cowley, Davenant's historical realism eschews the imaginative excesses of the zealous, enthusiastic revolutionaries. Monotheism is Stoll's concern, not Cowley's.

Indeed, turning to the *Davideis*, it becomes clear how foreign Stoll's theological paradox is to Cowley's motives for introducing the supernatural. Cowley nowhere says that the gods are necessary to make poetry entertaining. The quotation Stoll adduces from Cowley's 1656 Preface in fact proves the opposite:

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<sup>292</sup> See Jennifer Britnell, "Poetic Fury and Prohetic Fury" *Renaissance Studies* 3.2 (1989), 106-114. On the dispute over zealotry, see Jason P. Rosenblatt, "Andrew Marvell, Samuel Parker, and the Rabbis on Zealots and Proselytes," in *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 112-35.

Are the obsolete threadbare tales of *Thebes* and *Troy*, half so stored with great, heroic and supernatural actions (since *Verse* will needs *finde* or *make* such) as the wars of *Joshua*, of the *Judges*, of *David*, and divers others? Can all the *Transformations* of the *Gods*, give such copious hints to flourish and expatiate on, as the true *Miracles* of *Christ*, or of his *Prophets*, and *Apostles*? what do I instance in these few particulars” (14)?

Cowley here asserts that one does *not* need to invent new supernatural elaborations for the biblical material. And indeed, despite Dryden’s dismissal of Cowley’s dedicatory poem to *Gondibert* (“’tis true he has resembled the old epic poetry to a fantastic fairy land; but he has contradicted himself by his own examples”),<sup>293</sup> in fact Cowley largely follows the procedure described in his Preface.

True, the *Davideis* mentions “Beelzebub, Moloch, Astarte, Baal, and Dagon” (Stoll, 54). But the poem almost never commits itself to these gods’ existence. Some gods are mentioned in characters’ speech, as when Envy tells Saul, “Not *Baal* or *Moloch* would have us’d thee so” (1.278); others refer to their cult objects (of which no monotheist ever denied the existence), as when, in David’s prophetic dream, Josiah purges Judah of idols: “In his *own Fires Moloch* to ashes fell... / Like end *Astartes horned Image* found / And *Baals spired stone* to dust was ground” (2.667-70). As far as I can tell, Cowley’s diegesis asserts the existence of supernatural agencies other than God (or God’s angel) in just one place: the demonic council and dispatching of Envy to provoke Saul, with which the poem begins.

Now this passage is one of the poem’s most famous (Dryden himself mocked it in *Mac Flecknoe*),<sup>294</sup> and it is more than two hundred lines long, so it cannot be dismissed as a momentary oversight. But neither can it be maintained, on the basis of one episode, that

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<sup>293</sup> George Williamson, *Milton and Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 106.

<sup>294</sup> See A. L. Korn, “*Mac Flecknoe* and Cowley’s *Davideis*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 14 (1951), 99-127.

Cowley is just constantly tempted by the diversions and entertainments of polytheistic narrative, or that the ambivalent invention of such marvels constitutively structures his poem. Rather, I will argue, Cowley has a specific purpose in starting his poem with this deliberately outrageous, fantastical episode: to emphasize the *Davideis*'s fictive qualities and thus distance his poetry from real politics and history. But to understand why that is so requires two steps. First, I will read carefully Cowley's 1656 Preface and the *Davideis* to tease out Cowley's poetics—the crucial context for which, I argue, is political rather than religious. Second, I will return to Hell, tracking how this anomalous passage makes its way from Cowley's earlier, aborted political epic, *The Civil War*, into the *Davideis*. Cowley, I argue, deliberately reworked his earlier Royalist propaganda to present his poetry as fabulous, ahistorical and apolitical—to carve out poetic space for himself under Cromwell's hostile regime.

### **Cowley's Formalist Poetics as Response to Political Vulnerability**

Cowley provides his most extended critical reflection on *Davideis* in the preface to his 1656 *Poems*. I want to make three points about the Preface. First, it contains a clear account of how classical poetry and Christianity can cooperate as, respectively, biblical epic's form and content. That is, Cowley claims to treat the book of Samuel as his source for reliable information and narrative (the *fabula*) and Virgil as his *miglior fabbro*, his guide to poetic technique: meter, simile, narrative structure, and the like. Cowley's sharp division is distinctive, in that other theorists of divine poetry (I briefly discuss Sidney and Milton) had no need of its sharp polarization. Second, the account is quickly falsified by comparison with Cowley's *Davideis*, which not only constantly imports classical *content*, but also (through the notes) imagines that both the Bible and classical literature are

complex mixtures of content and form. Third, Cowley had personal reasons for espousing a peculiarly detached, apolitical conception of poetry. In the mid-1650's, Cowley was wisely concerned to avoid being identified as a Royalist and was attempting to create for himself a space for poetry immune to political censure. His account of the distinction between poetry and religion is not best read as an attempt to reconcile opposed categories, but rather as the construction of that opposition to give a particular sense to one of the terms.

The final pages of Cowley's preface tackle the question of biblical epic directly. Despite their light, joking tone, they offer a clear critical split: poetry is form, and religion is content. Cowley begins, "I come now to the last part, which is *Davideis*, or an *Heroical Poem* of the *Troubles of David*, which I designed into *Twelve books*; not for the *Tribes* sake, but after the pattern of our Master *Virgil*" (11). This alternative leaves out the possibility that the biblical story might offer its own literary forms or structures, instead contrasting the *Aeneid's* literary structure with the number of the tribes, a piece of historical trivia. Indeed, the logic here is implicit in his explanation of *Davideis*; it is not a poem based on 1 and 2 Samuel, but rather on the events witnessed therein; the Bible's status as literary text is erased. Similarly, Cowley writes that he intended to stop before David's coronation:

Because it is the custom of *Heroick Poets* (as we see by the examples of *Homer* and *Virgil*, whom we should do ill to forsake to imitate others) never to come to the full end of their Story; but onely so near, that every one may see it; as men commonly play not out the game, when it is evident that they can win it, but lay down their Cards, and take up what they have won.

But 1 and 2 Samuel do continue to David's coronation. There is no question of imitating them; they are merely sources of information, or as Cowley writes "noble and fertile Arguments." By contrast, Homer and Virgil provide the aesthetic rules, figured here as a

game: playful forms, abstracted from real life, in the service of poetic *agon* rather than divine truth.

The split between form and content proves crucial to Cowley in defending the idea of divine poetry. After describing how David is an excellent poetic subject, Cowley writes:

When I consider this, and how many other bright and magnificent subjects of the like nature, the Holy Scripture affords, and proffers, as it were, to Poesie, in the wise managing and illustrating whereof, the Glory of God Almighty might be joynd with the singular utility and noblest delight of Mankind: It is not without grief and indignation that I behold that Divine Science employing all her inexhaustable riches of Wit and Eloquence, either in the wicked and beggarly Flattery of great persons, or the unmanly Idolizing of Foolish Women, or the wretched affectation of scurril Laughter, or at best on the confused antiquated Dreams of senseless Fables and Metamorphoses. Amongst all holy and consecrated things which the Devil ever stole and alienated from the service of the Deity; as Altars, Temples, Sacrifices, Prayers, and the like; there is none that he so universally, and so long usurpt, as Poetry. It is time to recover it out of the Tyrants hands, and to restore it to the Kingdom of God, who is the Father of it (12).

Scripture supplies the subject, poetry the “wise managing and illustrating whereof.” True, Cowley give Poetry a Divine father. But by insisting that the theft of poetry from divine service predated (and was more effective than) the usurpation of ritual forms—a usurpation which, since Augustine, had been imagined as taking place very early in Genesis<sup>295</sup>—Cowley suggests that she was quickly and completely estranged from her father and thus presumably played no role in the writing of Scripture. Poetry is imagined here as craft, technique, and form, which function irrespective of the object; she serves a master, whether God or Satan, who determines her purpose. Cowley has no objection to profane poetry qua poetry (the bad stuff still exemplifies poetry’s “inexhaustable riches of Wit and Eloquence”), but merely insofar as it glorifies inappropriate objects.

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<sup>295</sup> See the extended discussion in Jonathan Sheehan, “Sacred and Profane: Idolatry, Anti-quarianism, and the Polemics of Distinction in the Seventeenth Century,” *Past and Present* 192 (August 2006): 37–66, who traces the histories of idolatry from Augustine through Cowley’s time.

This point is important because, as Cowley sees it, the crucial innovation of *Davideis* is not to translate the Bible into English, but to do so using the formal techniques of ancient epic. Thus he argues that those techniques are detachable from their uses in pagan poetry, that they are forms adaptable to any content:

All the *Books* of the *Bible* are either already most admirable, and exalted pieces of *Poesie*, or are the best *Materials* in the world for it. Yet, though they be in themselves so proper to be made use of for this purpose; None but a good *Artist* will know how to do it; neither must we think to cut and polish *Diamonds* with so little pains and skill as we do *Marble*. For if any man design to compose a *Sacred Poem*, by onely turning a story of the *Scripture*, like Mr. *Quarles's*, or some other godly matter, like Mr. *Heywood* of *Angels*, into *Rhyme*; He is so far from elevating of *Poesie*, that he onely abases *Divinity*. In brief, he who can write a *prophane Poem* well, may write a *Divine one better* ; but he who can do that but ill, will do this much worse. The same fertility of *Invention*, the same wisdom of *Disposition*; the same *Judgement* in observance of *Decencies*, the same lustre and vigor of *Elocution*; the same modesty and majestie of *Number*; briefly the same kinde of *Habit*, is required to both ; only this latter allows better *stuff*, and therefore would look more deformedly, if *ill drest* in it (13-4).

Against the tradition of close biblical paraphrases represented by Francis Quarles, Cowley suggests that divine and profane poetry be held to the same aesthetic standard, a standard independent of message or content. Cowley understand form as “habit,” a style of dress strictly separable from the body, which presents it well without altering its substance in any way. This formalist conception of classical poetry and its value guarantees that it will not profane sacred material.

Just as Cowley pronounces his high regard for the form of classical poetry, he judges its mythical content harshly and condescendingly. In his preface, Cowley historicizes the mythical portions of classical poetry:

Besides, though those mad stories of the Gods and *Heroes*, seem in themselves so ridiculous; yet they were then the *whole Body* (or rather *Chaos*) of the *Theologie* of those times. They were believed by all but a few *Philosophers*, and perhaps some *Atheists*, and served to good purpose among the *vulgar*, (as pitiful things as they are) in strengthening the authority of *Law* with the terrors of *Conscience*, and expectation of certain rewards, and unavoidable punishments. There was no other *Religion*, and therefore *that* was better then *none at all*. But to us who have no need of them, to us who deride their *folly*, and are wearied with their *impertinencies*, they ought to appear no better arguments for *Verse*, then those of their worthy *Successors*, the *Knights Errant* (13).

On this reading, Virgil and Ovid were already divine poets, who happened to have inherited pitiful divinities. The poets’ “mad stories” are opposed to sober philosophy;

Cowley wants to emphasize that the authority of the former derive entirely from their technical craft (as he says earlier, to make “some rich crops out of these grounds”), rather than their material or substantive ideas.

The preface’s intense formalism is distinctive, and it contrasts with other available critical models of divine poetry. First, notice how different Cowley’s treatment of divine poetry is from Sidney’s. To be sure, Sidney sometimes seems to define poetry formally, as Cowley does here. In such a mood, he describes the rhetorical devices of David’s psalms:

The holy David’s Psalms are a divine poem... it is fully written in metre, as all learned Hebricians agree, although the rules be not yet fully found... what else is the awaking his musical instruments, the often and free changing of persons, his notable prosopopoeias, when he makes you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts’ joyfulness and hills’ leaping, but a heavenly poesy.<sup>296</sup>

Even here, Sidney differs from Cowley. Though the latter would concede David’s use of poetic effects, he does not list them, emphasizing as he does the Bible’s content rather than form. More importantly, Sidney deviates from this technical definition of poetry elsewhere in the *Apology*; he also defines poetry as “invention” (in the Renaissance sense, not necessarily *de novo*, and to Sidney, the truth or falsehood of the invention is not the point),<sup>297</sup> which leads to a broader, non-formalist account of poetry:

The other is of Nathan the prophet, who, when the holy David had so far forsaken God as to confirm adultery with murder, when he was to do the tenderest office of a friend, in laying his own shame before his eyes,—sent by God to call again so chosen a servant, how doth he it but by telling of a man whose beloved lamb was ungratefully taken from his bosom? The application most divinely true, but the discourse itself feigned; which made David (I speak of the second and instrumental cause) as in a glass to see his own filthiness, as that heavenly Psalm of Mercy well testifies (115).

Based on this passage, Sidney’s grounds for separating, as Cowley does, between those books of the Bible which are “exalted pieces of Poesie” and those which are “the best

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<sup>296</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 99.

<sup>297</sup> “A feigned example has as much force to teach as a true example” (110).



Materials in the world for it” could not be purely formal. For Sidney here, poetry consists rather in invented narrative in imitation of ideal truths. Sidney would have to differ from Cowley on two grounds. First, 1 Samuel could not be ignored as a poetic model merely because it is historical prose. Second, the English poet could not imitate pagan models simply by dividing their (good) forms from their (bad) contents, since Sidney see the two as linked. Cowley’s sense of the ideological emptiness of formal virtuosity similarly contrasts with Milton (albeit in a note published nearly two decades after Cowley’s 1656 preface), who proudly calls his free verse “ancient liberty recover'd to heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing.”<sup>298</sup> On Milton’s account, formal techniques always carry ideological and political significance.

If Cowley’s sharp division is thus distinctive and controversial, it is also extremely implausible as an account of *Davideis*. Not only is the poem full of classical learning, but such learning is frequently presented as the underlying, true content of classical poetry’s mythology. For instance, early in Book I, Cowley locates the underworld “Beneath the dens where unfletcht Tempests lye, / and infant Winds their tender Voyces try” (1.75-6). The note explains the intellectual pedigree of this subterranean wind-cave:

That the *Matter* of winds is an *Exhalation* arising out of the concavities of the Earth, is the opinion of *Aristotle*, and almost all *Philosophers* since him... In those concavities, when the *Exhalations* (which *Seneca* calls *Subterranean Clouds*) overcharge the place, the moist ones turn into water, and the dry ones into *Winds*; and these are the secret *Treasuries*, out of which God is in the Scripture said to bring them. This was also meant by the *Poets*, who feigned that they were kept by *Aeolus*, imprisoned in deep caves,

—*Hic vasto rex Aeolus antro  
luctantes ventos tempestatesque sonoras  
imperio premit ac vinclis et carcere frenat.*<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 291.

<sup>299</sup> *Aeneid* 1.52-54: “Here in this vast cave, the king Aeolus presses into his dominion the struggling winds and noisy storms, and he restrains them with chains and imprisonment.”

Upon which methinks, *Seneca* is too critical, when he says, *Non intellexit, nec id quod clausum est, esse adhuc ventum, nec id quod ventus est, posse claudi; nam quod in clauso est, quiescit, & aeris statio est, omnis in fuga ventus est.*<sup>300</sup> For though it get not yet out, it is wind as soon as it stirs within, and attempts to do so. However, my Epithete of *unfletcht Tempests* might pass with him; for as soon as the *wings* are grown, it either flies away, or in the case of extream resistance (if it be very strong) causes an *Earthquake*... (267-8n9).

In this dense note, Cowley explains the natural philosophy behind his couplet; correlates this philosophy with the Scriptural account, presumably of Psalm 135:7 and Jeremiah 10:13;<sup>301</sup> correlates it further with Virgil's description of Aeolus's cave, in which the winds are imprisoned; defends Virgil against Seneca's objection; and maintains that even Seneca would have approved of Cowley's parallel construction.

This note describes a critical theory of pagan epic and of Cowley's own practice at odds with the Preface. First, Cowley introduces into his poem natural philosophy he understands not just as Aristotelian, but also Virgilian. Whereas in the Preface, Cowley explains mythological passages in classical epic as reflecting the false opinions of the day, in opposition to the skeptical philosophers, here the poets present a figurative rendering of real, philosophic truth. In so doing, they distort that truth no more than does the Bible, since Scripture's description of God taking the winds from God's treasuries is similarly figurative. This conflation of Virgil and Scripture requires significant work on Cowley's part, since he has to ignore verses like Job 38:22 and Deuteronomy 28:12 which imagine these storehouses as containing rain and snow as well—impossible on Aristotle and Seneca's model. The alignment of Scripture and Virgil suggests, first, that the falsehoods in the latter derive not from his mistaken inherited content, but rather

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<sup>300</sup> “He did not understand: neither that which is closed in is the wind, nor is that which is the wind able to be closed in. For that which is inclosed is resting and is a standing of air, [but] all wind is in flight.”

<sup>301</sup> Respectively, “He causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings for the rain; he bringeth the wind out of his treasuries” and “he maketh lightnings with rain, and bringeth forth the wind out of his treasuries” (KJV).

function poetically (as falsehood does in Sidney) to represent the otherwise hard-to-grasp and, second (again, like Sidney) that Scripture itself is poetic. Where the Preface contrasts Scripture and Poetry, the notes imagine both as allegorical literatures encoding but also rhetorically opposed to philosophy's dry truths; where the Preface insists, "not so great a *Lye* to be found in any *Poet*, as the vulgar conceit of men, that *Lying* is *Essential* to good *Poetry*" (13), the notes insist that mythical figuration is essentially poetic and unproblematic; and where the Preface imagines adorning God's word with Virgil's techniques, the notes clearly have a far messier theory of how to split "divine poetry" into its constituent parts.<sup>302</sup>

Examples like this one could be easily multiplied. Nor do they reflect Cowley's particular innovation. The suggestion that, as Jean Seznec writes, myths "are merely the expression in fable of moral and philosophical ideas, in which case the gods are allegories" originated in skeptical antiquity and became a commonplace of Christian scholarship.<sup>303</sup> Christian attempts to synthesize biblical and pagan literatures were various and, to be sure, they clearly privileged the former over the latter. Euhemerism, for instance, which posited that the pagan deities were originally heroic men falsely taken for gods,<sup>304</sup> emphasized strongly the erroneous components of paganism. But even euhemerism insisted on the historical kernel in pagan mythology, which could be isolated. As Walter Raleigh writes, "as a skilfull and learned *Chymist* can aswell by separation of visible

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<sup>302</sup> Other examples abound. See e.g. 268nll, where Cowley discusses the size of Hell and concludes with the supposed concordance between Aeschylus and Scripture.

<sup>303</sup> Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara Sessions (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 4.

<sup>304</sup> See John Daniel Cooke, "Euhemerism: A Mediaeval Interpretation of Classical Paganism" *Speculum* 2.4 (1927), 396-410.

elements draw helpful medicines out of poyson... so, contrarie to the purposes and hopes of the Heathen, may those which seeke after God and Truth finde out euey where, and in all the ancient Poets and Philosophers, the Storie of the first Age... amply and liuely exprest.”<sup>305</sup> And while universal histories often emerged from the effort to buttress the Christian tradition, the “chemical” techniques applied to classical literatures soon rebounded on biblical stories, allegorizing and rationalizing their mythic elements.<sup>306</sup> “The recalibration of the authority of sources,” Nicholas Popper writes of sixteenth-century historicism, “led scholars to devise historicist interpretations that undermined the sacrality of Scripture.”<sup>307</sup>

In short, when Cowley allegorizes the Psalms and conflates their account with Virgil’s, he is participating in a broad-based, European scholarly movement. That movement not only took classical sources far more seriously as sources of truth than does Cowley’s Preface; it also came to apply the same interpretive techniques to Scripture and the classics. In Renaissance universal history, “monomyth,” and euhemerism, the strict division between biblical content and poetic form thus collapses—as it does in Cowley’s endnotes. Why, then, does Cowley advance such a theory in the Preface? The evidence of Sidney and Milton (and the negative evidence that the same distinction is absent from prefatory materials of other biblical epics in the period)<sup>308</sup> is sufficient to render it

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<sup>305</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World* (London: Printed for Walter Burre, 1614), 84.

<sup>306</sup> See Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah, Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

<sup>307</sup> Nicholas Popper, *Walter Raleigh’s History of the World and the Historical Culture of the Late Renaissance* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>308</sup> Hutchinson, in fact, advances the more obvious, Sidneian defense that “a great part of Scripture was originally written in verse” against those who “think Scripture profaned by

unlikely that Cowley is anxious primarily about profanation, and the conflict between the Preface and the notes cast doubts on his sincerity as well.

The Preface's poetic formalism is best understood as an attempt to hollow out an neutral, apolitical space for poetry. Cowley constantly associates the writing of poetry with leisure and repose. "For a man to write well," he writes in explanation of his planned literary retirement, "it is necessary to be in good humor; neither is *Wit* less eclipsed with the unquietness of *Mind*, then *Beauty* with the *Indisposition of Body*" (8). One needs to rest to access poetry because the product is imagined in calmly ordered, aesthetic terms. Poetry "requires so much serenity and chearfulness of *Spirit*; it must not be either overwhelmed with the cares of *Life*, or overcast with the *Clouds of Melancholy* and *Sorrow*, or shaken and disturbed with the storms of injurious *Fortune*; it must like the *Halcyon*, have *fair weather* to breed in" (7). In particular, the civil war ("the late unhappy War," 5) has impeded Cowley's writing: "if *wit* be such a *Plant*, that it scarce receives heat enough to preserve it alive even in the *Summer* of our *cold Clymate*, how can it choose but wither in a long and a sharp *winter*? a warlike, various, and a tragical age is best to *write of*, but worst to *write in*" (7). The vegetal metaphor imagines poetry as a delicate, passive object of environmental shifts. Furthermore, the membrane between poetry and history is, as it were, semi-permeable: art may incorporate as subject matter, and is certainly vulnerable to, politics, but it does not shape history. Cowley's Preface

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being descanted on in numbers." Lucy Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, edited by David Norbrook (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 5.

describes poetry as orderly, restful, and formal to distance his art from political turbulence.<sup>309</sup>

This de-politicizing agenda is most clearly developed in the Preface's discussion of why Cowley chose to suppress his aborted epic about the English Civil War.

I have cast away all such pieces as I wrote during the time of the late troubles, with any relation to the differences that caused them; as among others, *three Books of the Civil War it self*, reaching as far as the first *Battel of Newbury*, where the succeeding *misfortunes* of the *party* stopt the *work*; for it is so uncustomary, as to become almost *ridiculous*, to make *Lawrels* for the *Conquered*. Now though in all *Civil Dissentions*, when they break into open hostilities, the *War of the Pen* is allowed to accompany that of the *Sword*, and every one is in a maner obliged with his *Tongue*, as well as *Hand*, to serve and assist the side which he engages in; yet when the event of *battel*, and the unaccountable *Will of God* has determined the controversie, and that we have submitted to the conditions of the *Conqueror*, we must lay down our *Pens* as well as *Arms*, we must *march* out of our *Cause* it self, and *dismantle* that, as well as our *Towns* and *Castles*, of all the *Works* and *Fortifications* of *Wit* and *Reason* by which we defended it. *We* ought not sure, to begin our selves to revive the remembrance of those times and actions for which we have received a *General Amnestie*, as a favor from the *Victor*. The truth is, neither *We*, nor *They*, ought by the *Representation of Places* and *Images* to make a kind of *Artificial Memory* of those things wherein we are all bound to desire like *Themistocles*, the *Art of Oblivion*. The *enmities* of *Fellow-Citizens* should be, like that of *Lovers*, the *Redintegration* of their *Amity*. The *Names of Party*, and *Titles of Division*, which are sometimes in effect the whole quarrel, should be extinguished and forbidden in peace under the notion of *Acts of Hostility*. And I would have it accounted no less unlawful to *rip up old wounds*, then to *give new ones*; which has made me not onely abstain from printing any things of this kinde, but to burn the very copies, and inflict a severer punishment on them my self, then perhaps the most rigid Officer of *State* would have thought that they deserved.<sup>310</sup>

This passage's odd *paralepsis* involves Cowley in a performative contradiction. If both the Civil War and Cowley's *Civil War* are best forgotten, then why mention them?

Cowley was probably writing not to explain the absence of this poem but to defend his having written it at all. After his April 1655 arrest on suspicion of royalist subversion,<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Cowley's sense of order is a critical commonplace. See for instance Hinman, 1960. I am arguing that the *Davideis* imagines poetic order as separate from the world—as an alternative to it, and that his formalism results from his despair in politics. If, as Robert Kilgore argues, in Cowley's poem the "Davidic poet gains a touch of magic... that changes the natural world, overcomes the 'wild rage' of enemies, and re-tunes 'disorder' into harmony," poetic impositions of order in the *Davideis* always remain temporary and seem curiously disconnected from its political plot. ("The Politics of King David in Early Modern English Verse," *Studies in Philology* 111.3 (2014), 411-41: 416). Orderly poetry compensates for, rather than fixes, a disorderly world.

<sup>310</sup> A. Cowley, *Poems* (London: Printed for Humphrey Moseley, 1656), [a]4-[a]4v.

<sup>311</sup> See Alexander Lindsay, "Cowley, Abraham (1618–1667)," *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Accessed on 8/7/2017 at [oxforddnb.com/view/article/6499](http://oxforddnb.com/view/article/6499).

Cowley was all too aware of the dangers of his predicament. By comparing his writing to weapons (e.g., “the *War of the Pen* is allowed to accompany that of the *Sword*,” “we must lay down our *Pens* as well as *Arms*”),<sup>312</sup> Cowley implicitly characterizes them as crafted, technical objects—totally detachable from their author. Without renouncing his Royalist sympathies, Cowley suggests that his destruction of his own poem proves that he is no threat. He implicitly offers the punishment he claims to have inflicted upon his work as a symbolic substitute for the real violence he no doubt feared.<sup>313</sup> Ironically, Cowley’s essay in the “*Art of Oblivion*” turned, after the Restoration, into an “*Artificial Memory*” of the Interregnum, and this passage was itself suppressed in Thomas Sprat’s 1668 edition of the *Poems*, from which most subsequent editions derive. Nonetheless, it illustrates how political pressures produced Cowley’s distinctive understanding of poetry in 1656: a set of formal techniques, deployable for any given political purpose, and most importantly, clearly detachable from the poet himself.

### **“Music has brought us together”: Cowley’s Calming Poetry and its Limits**

Cowley’s vision of a poetic space menaced by politics and struggling to maintain its autonomous order recurs within the text of  *Davideis*. In an episode in Book I based on 1 Samuel 19:18-24, David flees to Naioth, which Cowley imagines as a prophets’ “*Colledge*” (1.663) “by *Samuel* built, and mod’rately endow’ed” (1.665), with “*Schollars, Doctors and Companions* here / Lodg’ed all apart in neat small chambers”

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<sup>312</sup> Ironically, this conceit is itself derived from *The Civil War*, in which Cowley writes of the role of poets like himself: “unapt themselves to fight / They promised noble pens the Acts to write.” Abraham Cowley, *The Civil War*, ed. Allan Pritchard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 79: 1.231-32. Cited hereafter by book and line number.

<sup>313</sup> Cowley was very likely lying. That is, either he did not destroy his manuscript or, as I consider more likely (see below), at least one copy thereof had left his control, perhaps motivating his anxiety about the poem here. See Pritchard, 3-11.

(1.679-80), a library of “few choice *Authors*” and regular lectures (1.707). The Bible imagines no such college (just a “company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as appointed over them”), and Cowley admits the details he invents—the modest but tasteful architecture, the central fountain, the skin-covered beds and golden-roofed chapel or “synagogue”—sound like a retrojection, “as if I had taken the pattern of it from ours at the *Universities*.” Nonetheless he defends his account:

But the truth is ours, (as many other *Christian* customs) were formed after the example of the Jews. They were not properly called prophets, or foretellers of future things, but Religious persons, who separated themselves from the business of the world, to employ their time in the contemplation and praise of God; their manner of praising him was by singing of Hymns and playing upon Musical instruments... They are called by the *Chaldee Scribes*, because the laboured in reading, writing, learning and teaching the Scriptures (278-9n47).

The note compares Cowley’s imagined college with English universities, and it suggests as well monasteries (“Religious” is used here in its original sense of “belonging to a monastic order”)<sup>314</sup>—spaces and people who have retreated from the world. But the references to both music and writing link the prophets’ college as well with poetry.

The prophets’ college turns out to be essentially a poets’ college, a peaceful, literary cloister. Though the prophets study mathematics, astronomy, biology, the other sciences of “Great *Natures* well-set *Clock*” (1.743), and all manner of written materials containing “*Stars, Maps, and Stories*” and “Wise wholesome *Proverbs*” (1.726-27),

*Davideis* clarifies that all these are secondary to music and poetry:

These *Arts* but welcome *strangers* might appear,  
*Musick* and *Verse* seem’d *born* and *bred* up here;  
Scarce the blest *Heav’ en* that rings with *Angels* voyce,  
Does more with constant *Harmony* rejoyce.  
The sacred *Muse* does here each brest inspire;  
*Heman*, and sweet-mouth’d *Asaph* rule their *Quire*:  
Both charming *Poets*, and all strains they plaid,  
By artful *Breath*, or nimble *Fingers* made (1.761-68).

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<sup>314</sup> "religious, adj. and n." *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2017). Accessed online on August 23, 2017 at [www.oed.com/view/Entry/161956](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161956).



The conflation of music with poetry is consistent within  *Davideis*. David is both “best poet” (1.3) and “the great *Musician*” (1.516), and in an excursus on music and poetry, Cowley insists on their inseparability: “Though no man hear’t, though no man it rehearse, / Yet will there still be *Musick* in my *Verse*” (1.467-68). The emphasis on poetry’s musicality here fits neatly within Cowley’s formalism, since it pushes aside poetry’s semantic or representational capacities in favor of its rhythm and sound. The voice here is collapsed into the “breath,” an instrument for producing sounds (like the fingers on a lyre) rather than words or meanings.

In the continuation of the episode, it is poetic form rather than content that is highlighted. In the biblical original, successive bands of Saul’s emissaries are overcome by “the Spirit of God, and they also prophesied” (1 Samuel 19:20) until Saul goes himself, whereupon he is subject to the same prophetic impairment, until he finally “stripped off his clothes, and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night” (1 Samuel 19:24). Though the story is concise, it is nonetheless remarkable that Cowley inverts its main theme, namely the loss of kingly or even civil decorum before the raw, untamable force of the divine spirit. In his retelling, Saul does not strip, shedding only his *royal* vestments and pretensions “His Kingly robes he laid at *Naioth* down, / Began to *understand* and *scorn* his *Crown*” (1.909-100).

Moreover, prophesying is represented as peaceful, quieting activity:

They came, but a new spirit their hearts possest,  
 Scatt’ring a sacred calm through every brest:  
 The furrows of their brow, so rough erewhile,  
 Sink down into the dimples of a *Smile*.  
 Their cooler veins swell with a peaceful tide,  
 And the chaste streams with even current glide.  
 A sudden *day* breaks gently through their eyes,  
 And *Morning-blushes* in their cheeks arise.  
 The thoughts of war, of blood, and murder cease;  
 In peaceful tunes they adore the *God of Peace* (1.893-902).

We have no idea what the prophets are singing when Saul's men enter, and there is no sense that the "Troop" respond to a particular poetic passage or idea. Rather, poetry is imagined as rhythmically, somatically calming (their "cooler veins swell with a peaceful tide," for instance).

Much of what the prophets generally sing (the flood, the destruction of Sodom, and Israelite history from Egypt to Canaan) is downright violent, and it is odd to imagine the soldier, upon hearing that "show'rs, strange as their Sin, of *fiery rain*, / And scalding brimstone, dropt on *Sodoms* head" or that "In his [Pharoah's] gilt chariots amaz'ed *fishes* sat, / And grew with corps of wretched *Princes* fat," relaxing and forgetting his "thoughts of war, of blood, and murther" (1.839-40, 843-4). Indeed, the same history of the Exodus from Egypt, when narrated by Envy to Saul in a dream earlier in Book I (1.27-60), provokes him to "Terror," "show'rs of cold sweat," and "wrath" (1.315-20). The contrast underscores that the power of poetry is never in its particular content. Rather, the prophets' poetry works because its form—in particular, its peaceful, regular rhythms—work on the body to detach it from politically troublesome affects.

In part because the prophets' poetry works only formally, its effect is temporary. The *Davideis* offers no vision of poetic persuasion or rhetoric. As soon as the sun rises the following morning, so does Saul, from the night's "restless labors":

For in *Sauls* breast, *Envy*, the toilsome *Sin*,  
Had all that night active and ty'rannous bin,  
She'expell'd all forms of *Kindness*, *Vertue*, *Grace*;  
Of the past day no footstep left or trace (2.4-8).

The biblical text leaves it unclear how long Saul's naked prophesying lasts, since 1 Samuel 20 shifts its focus to David, returning to Saul only at the New Moon feast. The *Davideis* insists on its being brief and traceless (the torturous Latinate syntax leaves "or

trace” dangling after its verb, connection this ephemerality to signs and writing).<sup>315</sup> The point is even sharper in the poem’s handling of the biblical scenes in which David plays for Saul. In Samuel, there are two such scenes. In the first, Saul’s “evil spirit” is caused when Samuel anoints David and “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.” Saul does not know what has happened and experiences an inexplicable madness, which David cures, such that “the evil spirit departed from him” (1 Samuel 16:13-14, 23). This procedure is regularized, and in Chapter 18, *after* David’s conquests of Goliath, Jonathan, and the Israelite women, “the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, and he prophesied in the midst of the house: and David played with his hand, as at other times: and there was a javelin in Saul’s hand. And Saul cast the javelin” (1 Samuel 18:10-11). Note that *this* time, Saul’s rage is about David and the music is unsuccessful.

Strikingly, the *Davideis* conflates the episodes (strictly it records the second) by imagining that Saul throws the javelin directly *after* David has succeeded in calming him:

...*Man*, is all o’*re* *Harmonie*.  
*Storehouse* of all *Proportions!* *single Quire!*  
 Which first *Gods Breath* did tunefully inspire!  
 From hence blest *Musicks* heav’*enly* charms arise,  
 From *sympathy* which *Them* and *Man* allies.  
 Thus they our *souls*, thus they our *Bodies* win,  
 Not by their *Force*, but *Party* that’s within...  
 Thus when two *Brethren strings* are set alike,  
 To *move* them *both*, but *one* of them we *strike*,  
 Thus *Davids Lyre* did *Sauls* wild rage controul.  
 And tun’d the harsh disorders of his *Soul* (1.470-482).

...  
*Sauls* black rage grew softly to retire;  
 But *Envys Serpent* still with him remain’d,  
 And the wise *Charmers* healthful voice disdain’d.  
 Th’ unthankful *King* cur’d truly of his fit,     520  
 Seems to lie drown’d and buryed still in it.

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<sup>315</sup> Coincidentally, the OED’s first record use of “trace” in the sense of “a sign or mark” is Cowley’s: “With Oblivions silent stroke deface / Of foregone Ills the very trace.” “trace, n.1.” *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2017). Accessed online on October 29, 2017.

From his past madness draws this wicked use,  
To sin disguis'd, and *murder* with *excuse*:  
For whilst the fearless youth his cure pursues,  
And the soft *Medicine* with kind art renews;  
The barb'arous *Patient* casts at him his *spear* (1.517-26).

Robert Kilgore has observed that “the therapeutic power of David’s music for Saul is a Renaissance commonplace.”<sup>316</sup> But Cowley’s version, in making the therapy’s success and Saul’s violence contemporaneous, provides a bleak and restricted version of this theme. Because poetic music works mechanically through harmonic resonances or “sympathy,” the king can be physically cured (which he is *not* in 1 Samuel 18) and yet remain psychologically unchanged. At Naioth, David gets a short respite from Saul’s rage, but in this incident, he is given only the time required to sing his psalm. Poetry cannot influence, even if it can interrupt, politics. It is a mathematical form separate from and helpless before the brutal facts of history.

**“Reality has a well-known Royalist bias”: Conservative Realism and the Sublime**

Cowley’s preface and notes suggest that he is purposely staging the conflict between poetry and the Bible for political ends. That suggestion also makes sense of his primary insertion of fantastical material into the *Davideis*: the council in Hell and Envy’s envoy to Saul. This passage implicitly undergirds readings of Cowley as caught in the generic paradox of Biblical epic. Yet such readings consistently ignore the passage’s two peculiar features. First, only here do polytheistic, supernatural forces intrude upon the narrative in sustained fashion. What Wallace, Stoll, and Dykstal take to be typical of the poem is in fact exceptional. Second, only here does Cowley borrow an extended block of

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<sup>316</sup> Kilgore, 414. See also John Hollander, *the Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500-1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 239 and Anne Lake Prescott, “‘Formes of joy and art’: Donner, David, and the Power of Music,” *John Donne Journal* 25 (2006), 3-36.

text from his earlier, aborted epic *The Civill Warre*. Why is this moment particularly preserved?

Through tracing the episode's role in both poems, I argue that these two points are related. Cowley's visit to Hell emerges initially for political reasons, as part of a distinctly Royalist distinction between the ordinary, smoothly functional world of traditional hierarchy and the extraordinary, apocalyptic forces of collective delusion. When Cowley repurposes the incident for the *Davideis*, politics remain central. In reshaping of material from *The Civile Warre*, Cowley is implicitly withdrawing his earlier work, writing a poetic corollary to the Preface's retraction of his earlier epic. Recycling the Hell sequence serves two purposes. For those few readers familiar with the earlier poem, it allows Cowley to renounce concretely his earlier commitments and rework the poetry they generated in an depoliticized form. For a broader readership, it allows him to insist that his poetry is separable from and irrelevant to political life. Hell becomes, in the *Davideis*, an escape from history into poetry.

Looking back at the incident's earlier form, in *The Civill Warre*, weakens the theological contexts frequently adduced for the *Davideis*'s flirtation with polytheism. In the earlier poem, though Cowley was deeply concerned with ecclesiastical and sectarian fights, he took no interest in theology, philology, or comparative religion. Begun in mid-1643 and abandoned shortly after Royalist hopes for a quick victory were dashed in the First Battle of Newbury (September 20, 1643), *The Civill Warre* mixes political propaganda, military reporting, and epigrammatic wit, producing something in between the *Pharsalia* and *Pravda*. Its world is as realistic as *Gondibert*'s (or even more, focusing as Cowley does on the present), its lines dense with nouns designating real things:

noblemen on each side, significant battlegrounds, military tactics and types of ordinance and arms.

Insofar as biblical or classical allusions enter the poem, they do so as enriching similes and echoes, whose significance lie in their suggestive value and depend not at all upon their veridicality. In a typical conceit, Cowley imagines the stars peering down upon and judging rebel corpses:

Noe gentle *Starres* their chearfull glories rear'd  
Ashamd they were at what was donne, and fear'd:  
Lest wicked men their bold excuse should frame  
From some strong *Influence* given their rayes by Fame.  
To *Duty* they, *Order* and *Law* incline,  
They who nere err'd from one æternall Line,  
As just the ruine of these men they thought,  
As *Sisera's* was, 'gainst whom themselves they fought.  
Still they Rebellions end remember well,  
Since *Lucifer* the *Great*, that shining *Captaine* fell (1.299-308).

The idea that the stars fought against Sisera derives from Judges 5:20: "They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera." The verse appears in Deborah's song and is poetry (note its neat parallelism). In context, it is plainly hyperbolic and is followed by another poetic expression of the same idea: "The river of Kishon swept them away." But Cowley is invoking the biblical text playfully and hypothetically, as a statement about whom the stars would support on the supposition that they had real agency, without caring one way or the other about the truth of that supposition.

Cowley may be skeptically joking about astrology, which had acquired Parliamentary overtones by the early 1640's,<sup>317</sup> but he does not care to clarify whether he

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<sup>317</sup> See Nicolas H. Nelson, "Astrology, *Hudibras*, and the Puritans," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37.3 (1976), 521-536; H. R. Plomer, "English Almanacs and Almanac-Makers of the Seventeenth Century," *Notes and Queries* 6.12 (1885), 243-44, 323-24, 383-4, and 462-63; and Patrick Curry, "Astrology in the Interregnum," in *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (New York: Polity Press, 1989), 19-45.

means to disenchant the stars or enlist them as allies. To ask that would miss the point, as would trying to parse ontologically the allusion to Lucifer (is he a star, fallen angel, or pagan personified deity?). Cowley treats Sisera and Lucifer exactly as he does, say, Vulcan's forge ("*Hambden* whose Braine like *Ætnas* Shop appear'd," 1.384) or the Uranids ("Vast was their *Army* and their *Armes* were more, / Then th'Host of *Hundred-handed Gyants* bore," 1.441-2). Astrology, biblical and classical texts, Christian and pagan myths—Cowley coats their varying epistemological rough spots with the varnish of the Metaphysical "as if," using them indiscriminately as literary conceits without fussing about their truth.

Despite the lightness of his tone, Cowley has a deliberate political purpose in ontologically marginalizing the marvelous and separating the fantastic conceits of his witty, literary commentary from his sober, realistic reporting of the war. From the poem's start, Cowley describes his opponents as overly credulous and imaginative. Perversely, even Puritan iconoclasm is imagined as *poesis*:

To what with Worship the fond *Papist* falls,  
That the fond *Zealot* a curst *Idoll* calls.  
So twixt their double madnes heres the odds,  
One makes false *Devills*, t'other makes false *Gods* (1.31-35).

Zealotry is here understood (just as in Cowley's *The Puritan and the Papist*) as the Catholic's twin: both overly invested in illusions and incapable of Cowley's cool, deflationary sanity. *The Civill Warre* notably contains no sustained, philosophical royalist argument, because of what David Norbrook calls Cowley's "suspicion of political and religious debate."<sup>318</sup> Instead, Cowley insists that the rebels are not merely morally mistaken but also deluded or mad. Of the Grand Remonstrance, Cowley complains that

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<sup>318</sup> David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics 1627-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 89.

Parliament invented the sickness they claimed to diagnose: “What strang wild Feares did every morning breed? / Till a strange *fancy* made us sicke indeed” (1.118-19). Against the threat of such fancy, Cowley deploys a conservative realism.<sup>319</sup> He does not argue that Parliamentary astrology (or millenarianism, for that matter) is ungrounded, but instead he dismisses it lightly as fanciful conceit. As he later would in praising *Gondibert*, Cowley is pitting the matter-of-fact reality of royalist tradition against “the Zelots Spirit” and its attempt to “change nature.”

Placed in the context of the poem’s conservatism, Cowley’s turn to Hell in Book 3 does not violate his poetic design but rather realizes his fears about the revolutionary imagination. For Norbrook, “Cowley’s Hell is a kind of political unconscious of royalist panegyric”; when Essex relieved Gloucester and the Parliamentary army at Newbury, Cowley “abandons a basically historical narration and turns to myth,” overwhelmed by historical forces he has repressed and discounted (84). But this analysis overlooks the poem’s persistent worries about delusion, which significantly precede the disastrous First Battle of Newbury and Book 3. Book 2 opens directly before the Battle of Hopton Heath in March, 1643, and while that battle itself was indecisive, both March and the late summer month in which Cowley was presumably writing Book 2 were moments of

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<sup>319</sup> I am contradicting here a strain in the criticism which contrasts a fanciful, Royalist neoclassicism with a Parliamentary realism. See for instance Norbrook, who writes, “May’s prose is colored by a poetics of liberty which carries with it a certain suspicion of the mythologizing and demonizing flights characteristic of Cowley’s Royalist poetics” (90). Norbrook’s analysis of *The Civill Warre* runs together two senses of “mythology.” Cowley certainly does present a flat, simplistic account of a battle between good and evil, but he largely does not introduce supernatural entities into the narrative, except insofar as his opponents’ overactive imaginations bring them to life.



royalist optimism.<sup>320</sup> Nonetheless, Cowley begins the book with an extended description of Alecto, a character drawn from the *Aeneid* Book 7.

In Virgil's intellectually sophisticated treatment, the traditional fury had been transformed into a "personified abstraction," an allegory for strife, violence deceit who mixes "concrete characteristics and ontological ambiguity."<sup>321</sup> While Cowley reproduces Virgil's use of Alecto as a figure for civil war, he modifies the figure. Jettisoning her long personal interactions with Amata and Turnus, Cowley democratizes strife and represents it as flowing throughout England:

For dire *Alecto*, ris'en from *Stygian* strad,  
Had scattered *Strife* and *Armes* though all the Land.  
In a black hollow Clowd, by ill Windes driven,  
Shee sat; oreshadow'ed *Earth* and frighted *Heaven*.  
Thus like *Triptol'emus* through wide aire shee rode;  
And all the fertile glebe with discords sow'ed.  
The fatal seede still dropt she as she went,  
And her owne cloudes with a shrill *Trumpet* rent.  
Great *Brittaines* aged *Genius* heard the sound,

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<sup>320</sup> See Pritchard, 16-17. There is a persistent tendency in the criticism of *The Civill Warre* to treat the defeat of Charles as implicit evidence of the aesthetic unworkability of Cowley's poetic scheme. In this vein, David Trotter declares the poem's "rhetorics even more intractable than its subject matter." *The Poetry of Abraham Cowley* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979), 14. Norbrook agrees, and moreover seems to fault Cowley for exactly those inconsistencies and open-ended generic qualities which he takes as liberal virtues in republican literature. But there is little justification for such teleological reading, and Nigel Smith rightly suggests, "There is nothing inherently wrong with *The Civil War* as we have it. It is an original, inventive, and exciting project upon which history literally foreclosed." *Literature & Revolution in England, 1640-1660* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 208-9. I further agree with Smith that much of the poem's "doubleness" reflects the "dividing dynamics of its own components," though the elements with which I am concerned here (primarily, reality and fantasy) differ somewhat from his generic and tonal concerns (209).

<sup>321</sup> Dunstan M. Lowe, "Personification Allegory in the *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Mnemosyne* 4.61.3 (2008), 414-435: 415. See the theoretical background on ancient allegory in Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). On Alecto's as a figure of civil unrest, see Richard Heinze, *Virgil's Epic Technique*. Trans. Hazel and David Harvey and Fred Robertson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 148-151. See also the discussion in David Quint, "Virgil's Double Cross: Chiasmus and the *Aeneid*," *The American Journal of Philology* 132.2 (2011), 273-300.

Shooke his gray head, and sunck into the ground.  
The'astonisht *Plowmen* the sad noyse did heare,  
Look'ed up in vaine, and left their worke for feare.  
Pale *woemen* heard it from afar, and prest  
The crying *Babes* close to their panting brest (2.5-18).

Instead of targeting or working through specific Latin elites, Cowley's Alecto directly appeals to ordinary working people. The Royalist poet cannot bring himself to represent explicitly the workings of public persuasion, and he uses the trumpet to bleep out the possibility of subversive speeches. Still, they seep through the simile of Triptolemus teaching the Grecians agriculture, which at once implies Alecto's communicative, even pedagogic function; the receptive audience she finds ("all the fertile glebe"); and that audience's laboring, lower-class character. Her connection with a rebellious commons recurs when "Hasting's sword" menaces the Parliamentary generals Gell and Brereton:

...when thowsand fates it bore  
On the keene point; when from his dropping blade  
Warne *Soules* reek'd out, and *mists* around him made  
Just as the Sword raisd it selfe up to'his pray,  
In a blind Clowd she snatcht them both away.  
Let now (said Shee) lesse villaines fill their roome,  
Theise have a *Race* of *Mischeifes* still to come (2.24-30).

Although the incident rehashes the epic trope of a goddess saving her favored warrior by whisking him away in a cloud (as Aphrodite saves Paris from Menelaus in the *Iliad*), Cowley naturalizes the cloud: it is just the bloody mist sprayed from the countless unnamed subordinates interposing themselves between the Parliamentary leaders and Hasting's blade. That is, in Cowley's hands both Alecto and the supernatural suspension of the ordinary course of personal combat become ways of imagining the menace of a democratic political commons, the impersonal, unthinking (on this reactionary account) collective forces that threaten to render irrelevant the personal valor of a hero like Hastings.

Throughout *The Civill Warre*, then, Cowley contrasts a conservative, epistemologically firm ordinary world with the disruptive, sublime force of a deluded public. That is, when the poem breaks the ontological norms of everyday life, it does so just to the extent that the rebels have broken the epistemological norms of ordinary politics.<sup>322</sup> Hell is no exception. It is indeed introduced as a supernatural, mythical place:

Beneath the silent Chambers of the Earth  
Where the Suns fruitfull beames give Metals birth.  
Where hee the growth of fatall Gold does see,  
Gold, which above more Influence has then Hee.  
Beneath the dens, where unflecht Tempests ly,  
And infant Windes their tender voyces try.  
Beneath the mighty Oceans wealthy caves;  
Beneath th'ætternall Fountaine of all waves,  
Where their vast Court the mother waters keepe  
And undisturb'd by Moones in silence sleepe.  
There is a place, deep, wondrous deepe below,  
Which genuine night and horror does oerflow (2.365-76).

The repeated words (“beneath,” “where,” “deep”) not only give the poetry a chant-like, ritual quality but also emphasize the place’s abstraction. Hell is primordial and subterranean, existing entirely outside of real geography. Hell is a not-place, where the real flows of water and wind are replaced by the abstract “oerflowing” of night and horror, a space without geographical limits: “Noe bound controules th’unwearied space” (2.377).

Cowley marks this mythological world as radically discontinuous with our own world because it emerges out of the minds of the rebels; it is, within the world of the world, a fantasy. On Cowley’s account, the trigger for Hell is not the Royalist defeat at Newbury but the Parliamentary defeat at Bristol and the consequent siege of Gloucester:

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<sup>322</sup> In a sense, Cowley’s poetics thus offer a Royalist interpretation of and response to the republican sublime. On the tradition associating the sublime with republicanism, see Norbrook, 197-99, as well as Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between The Lines* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 258-76 and Neil Hertz, “A Reading of Longinus,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1983), 579-96.

Th'Imperiall Hoast before proud *Gloc'ester* lay;  
From all parts *Conquest* did her beames display.  
*Feare, Sadnesse, Guilt, Despaire*, at *London* meete;  
And in black Smoakes fly thick through ev'ery Street.  
Their best Townes lost, noe Army left to fight!  
*Charles strong in Power, invincible in Right!*  
If hee march up, what shall these wreathes doe?  
They're trowbled all; and Hell was troubled too (2.357-364).

On the poem's account, the mythological space of Hell emerges smoothly from the Parliamentary predicament: Conquest's light becomes the sun from which Hell is shielded, and the black smoke clogging London's streets become the underworld's darkness. Cowley's poetry wavers between describing the rebels from the outside and focalizing the narration through them. Thus, the near-total italicization of "*Charles strong in Power, invincible in Right*" distinguishing its clear Royalist slant from the statements that reflect the other side's view ("Their best Townes lost, noe Army left to fight"). Hell's consternation does not just echo Parliamentary frustration; rather, the former emerges out of the latter as an externalized, infernal rendering of a totally wayward thought process.

In other words, Hell's fantastical, unrealistic character correlates closely with, and in some sense results from, the Parliamentary coalition's overwhelming delusions. Hell is ideology, as becomes clear when its Tyrant sends them out into the world:

The subtle Feinds themselves through London spread;  
Softly, as Dreames, they steale into'every head  
There unawares the powers of Soule suprize,  
Whilst each at rest, unarmd, and fearlesse lies  
The Will they poyson, and the Reason wound (3.9-13).

The poem ties their illusory, dream-like status to their deluding, dream-inducing effects. Cowley very carefully underlines Hell's unreality, in part by refusing to give its Tyrant (Satan) plausibility of character. Milton's council, which postdates and perhaps responds to Cowley, and which I introduce just by way of contrast, attributes its demons internally

coherent, if radically erroneous, processes of cognition and perspectives. Cowley's Satan is a comic-book demon, who makes no pretense of being in the right. "Shall wee sit tame and still," he asks, "Suff'ring a Cause soe'unjust to thrive so ill" (2.528-29)? He contradicts himself blatantly: The rebels are "our bold Confederates" (2.525) and "The Cause is ours" (2.536), but then they are the demons' victims, whom they will attack like the "Plagues that scourgd old Pharaos pride" (2.601). This Satan does not seriously dissent from God's perspective, and he concludes: "The rest... Leave to th'aeternall Justice, and to Mee" (2.616-17). The two, we take it, may joust rhetorically but ultimately cooperate: this is the Satan of Job, not God's adversary but rather God's entrapper and prosecutor.

In refusing to grant Satan realistic integrity as a character, Cowley implies that rebellion's claims cannot be taken seriously on their own terms, absent a colossal cognitive misalignment or madness. The same point emerges in the contrast between Hell and London. From a stylized, abstract world with a single, dominating speaker, a place that, despite its unreality, has a powerful mythological force, the demons emerge into a comical, contradictory, venial London and assemble a ragtag army: "base Mechanicks, and the Rout" (3.40), children sent by "frantick Woemen" (3.45), "greedy Tradesmen" (3.51), "bald and gray-hair'ed Gownemen" (3.53). The turn to satire has seemed to early readers to be undignified and to puncture the poem's Augustan neo-classicism,<sup>323</sup> but this misses the sharp contrast between these comic figures and the mythic Hell. Cowley is disillusioning Rebellion, presenting a grand hyperbolic image and then its tawdry,

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<sup>323</sup> See Smith, 208, who defends Cowley's generic hybridization.

confused reality. In Hell, Satan speaks for all and brooks no disagreement; London, by contrast, is consumed by the arguments of “those whom wee a Synod call”:

The Repræsenting Body of them all.  
Such quarreling Sects, Spirits of soe different kind,  
Nothing but loved Rebellion could have joined.  
Such was that Host, soe various to behold,  
That quarterd in the might Arke of old.  
Whilst they around the common danger see,  
The Lions, Beares, Wolves, Tygers, all agree.  
Each had a sev’erall forme, and sev’erall Name,  
And when theise met, oh then the Deluge came (3.189-200).

Cowley playfully destabilizes the comparison to the ark, first correlating sects with species, but then suggesting that each species itself internally variegated (a point emphasized by his catalogue’s repeated noting of internal contradictions in the sects’ theologies),<sup>324</sup> and finally dissolving the comparison into the chaos of the flood. Cowley’s treatment of the sects belies an all-too-frequent critical association between iconoclasm, disenchantment, and the Puritan left. Royalists too can disillusion and disenchant, and throughout *The Civill Warre*, Cowley stages a struggle against popular delusion, expansive revolutionary zeal, and the consequent fantasies of the marvelous. The final satire of the London masses represents his deliberate return to reality as he saw it, a reality in which his opponents’ ideas had lost their potency to enchant.

### **Politics and Fantasy in the *Davideis***

Though *The Civill Warre* and the *Davideis* have each received critical attention, they are infrequently read together. For all of our talk of how religion permeated early modern political argument and visa versa, an implicit scholarly divide between state and church seems to have assigned Cowley’s earlier poem to work on mid-century political history (like Smith’s and Norbrook’s) and the later epic to accounts of divine poetry and

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<sup>324</sup> See for instance 3.88-94 and 3.112-18.

biblical epic (like Stoll's, Wallace's, and Dykstal's). In particular, as discussed above, the author of the  *Davideis*  presents himself largely apolitically, as a witty antiquarian struggling to reconcile his piety and his erudition. But reality and fantasy emerge as themes in  *The Civill Warre*  as part of a Royalist polemic, even though the political valences are rendered largely invisible by the theological and academic contexts readers of the  *Davideis*  tend to foreground.<sup>325</sup>

If the  *Davideis*  seems remote from the Royalist polemics of  *The Civill Warre* , that reflects Cowley's intentions. In Book 4, Cowley has David narrate to the king of Moab, Samuel's description of the powers of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8. The speech allows Cowley to repeat within the poem the rhetorical surrender of the Preface, though it also delineates the narrow, limited terms on which Cowley is prepared to renounce his Royalism. In the original biblical passage, Samuel prophesies that the king "will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots... your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers, and... your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants" (vv. 11-13, KJV), had provoked heated debate between Royalists, who saw it as divine legitimation of extensive monarchic power, and republicans (or at least those who would limit royal

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<sup>325</sup> In some sense, my argument itself might be accused of reinstating the opposition between politics and religion. I think, though, that this paradox is the result of Cowley's choices and poetic development, rather than of my analytic presuppositions. That is, Cowley seems to me to have deliberately crafted images of religion and poetry as spheres intellectually insulated from political history and debates, such that to reintroduce politics into the  *Davideis*  is to reintroduce a term alien to that poem's philosophical structure. Cowley is a hard but interesting poet to study because he is crafting a distinction that would have seemed idiosyncratic and peculiar to his contemporaries, but which feels quite natural to modern readers.

power), who saw it as a bleak description of tyranny.<sup>326</sup> The debate was famous, and it would have read as a political litmus test during the interregnum. Cowley's David understands Samuel as in the latter camp, and he prefaces his paraphrase of the biblical text with a cautionary note:

Cheat not your selves with *words*: for though a *King*  
Be the mild Name, a *Tyrant* is the *Thing*.  
Let his power loose, and you shall quickly see  
How mild a thing *unbounded Man* will be (4.228-231).

This David, who insists on the king's fallible humanity and the speciousness of legitimate words which conceal tyrannical things, sounds like Milton in his prose tracts.

In his note, Cowley continues in this republican vein:

It is a vile opinion of those men, and might be punished without *Tyranny*, if they teach it, who hold, that the *right of Kings* is set down by *Samuel* in this place. Neither did the people of *Israel* ever allow, or the *Kings* avow the assumption of such power, as appears by the story of *Ahab* and *Naboth*.<sup>327</sup> Some indeed did exercise it, but that is no more a proof of the *Right*, then their *Practise* was of the *Lawfulness* of *Idolatry*. When *Cambyses* had a mind to marry his *Sister*, he advised with the *Magi*, whether the *Laws* did permit it; who answered, that they knew of no *Law* that did allow it, but that there was a *Law* which allowed the King of *Persia* to do what he would. If this had been the case with the Kings of *Israel*, to what purpose were they enjoyned so strictly the perpetual reading, perusing, and observing of the Law (*Deut. 17.*) if they had another *particular Law* that exempted them from being bound to it (396n16)?

Even as he reassures the republican authorities that he has renounced his previously strident Royalism, Cowley winks at his savvier readers. The interjection about the justness of punishing those who openly espouse absolutism interrupts the basic rejection of that doctrine, and calls into question its sincerity. Is absolute monarchism a "vile opinion," or is it merely an opinion Cowley knows will the state will not tolerate? Is the

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<sup>326</sup> See Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 23-57. In the Renaissance, the debate crystallized around the Talmudic dispute over this passage, in which Rabbi Yossi reads the passage as delineating the king's rights and Rabbi Judah reads it as an attempt to frighten the people (and, on the more radical reading of the *sugya*, perhaps to dissuade them of their desire for a king). See Bavli Sanhedrin 20b and Yair Lorberbaum, *Disempowered King: Monarchy in Classical Jewish Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 37-96.

<sup>327</sup> Tosafot raises the same objection to Rabbi Yossi's absolutism. See the comment on Bavli Sanhedrin 20b, s.v. "*melekh mutar v'khu*."



ensorship of the Long Parliament really “without *Tyranny*,” or is that key-word an allusion back to David’s speech and a warning not to cheat ourselves with words? The comparison to Cambyses similarly unsettles the passage’s overt political theory, suggesting both legal relativism (whatever Samuel meant, English law may not follow not ancient Israel’s) and the curious predicament of the magi, who not unlike Cowley, had better find a way to appease the current sovereign. Further, returning to the poem, Cowley has the King of Moab object to David’s attack on monarchy:

Methinks (thus *Moab* interrupts him here)  
The good old *Seer* ’gainst *Kings* was too severe.  
'Tis *Jest* to tell a *People* that they're *Free*,  
*Who*, or *How many* shall their *Masters* be  
Is the sole doubt; *Laws* *guid*, but cannot *reign*;  
And though they *bind* not *Kings*, yet they *restrain*.  
I dare affirm (so much I trust their *Love*)  
That no one *Moabite* would his speech approve.  
But, pray go on (4.264-72).

David’s fleeing Saul to Moab may encode Cowley his own experience as a Royalist exile in France. For such exiles, foreign regimes offered spaces to critique English politics. But by attributing monarchism to Moab, Cowley incorporates such external havens almost extra-territorially into the poem, giving Royalism a voice while retaining plausible deniability, since the foreign king’s voice is plausibly non-authorial.<sup>328</sup> That said, Moab’s utterance is itself ironized, since the dutiful disavowal of Samuel by Moabites might well prove not their love for their ruler, but their fear of his censorship. Indeed, when David replies, “’Tis true, Sir” and suggests that Samuel was expressing not the usual, but the worst form of kingship, it is impossible to tell whether he genuinely agrees or is just

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<sup>328</sup> “Some great writers might have state certain important truths quite openly by using as mouthpiece some disreputable character: they would thus show how much they disapproved of pronouncing the truths in question. There would then be good reason for our finding in the greatest literature of the past so many interesting devils, madmen, beggars, sophists, drunkards, epicureans and buffoons.” Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research* 8.1/4 (1941), 503.

afraid of Moab, on whose hospitality he relies. That is, when the *Davideis* most directly and explicitly addresses politics, it does so paradoxically and ironically. Cowley at once renounces his infamous Royalist commitments and, gesturing to his precarious position, insinuates that his renunciation cannot be taken seriously. Whatever the *Davideis* is saying, Cowley insists that for reasons of self-preservation, it simply cannot say anything about politics.

### **Use Your Illusion: Hell as Escape from Politics in the *Davideis***

Within this context, the Hell passage borrowed from *The Civill Warre* functions at as a palinode of the earlier poem's argument about reality and delusion. For some readers, this effect would have been perhaps intensely specific and concrete. There is good reason to suspect that at least some of Cowley's readers in 1656 would have been familiar with the earlier poem. First, if Cowley had thought his draft of *The Civill Warre* had remained private, he would hardly have devoted a passage in the 1656 Preface to announcing its destruction. Why raise the specter of his own Royalism unnecessarily? Second, though the manuscript evidence is confusing, the existence of multiple early copies of the text, and the 1679 pirated publication of Book 1, attest to the poem's fascination and perhaps circulation (Pritchard, 56-67). Even if only a few readers of the *Davideis* would be comparing it to *The Civill Warre*, depending on who they were, they might easily exercise tremendous influence over, say, whether Cowley was to be arrested again.

Whether pandering to that audience or simply grappling with the experience of defeat, Cowley rewrites the council in Hell to defang its intense Royalism. In the place of Rebellion, the fallen spirits' "great Sonne, and Sire; which kindled first, now

blowes th'æternall fire," (2.401-2), Cowley substitutes a depoliticized "Envy." Both (pace the couplet above) are female allegorical monsters described in gruesome detail and indebted to Spenser. At Envy's "breast stuck *Vipers* which did prey / Upon her panting heart" (*Davideis*, 1.157-58). Meanwhile, Cowley emphasizes Rebellion's hypocrisy ("Faire seem'd her hew, and modest seemed her guise... Her wicked Mouth spoke proud and bitter things... Thowsand wild Lyes from her bold lipps there came," *TCW*, 2.406-415). But both passages derive equally from Spenser's representation of Envy in *The Faerie Queene* 5.12.29-34.<sup>329</sup> Both claim Korah's rebellion as their triumph (*Davideis*, 1.206-10; *TCW*, 2.423-32). Yet Envy neutralizes the historically specific, political sin of Rebellion. While the two poems' catalogues of biblical villains are quite similar, the *Davideis* obviously omits the figures from English history, or indeed any figure from outside the biblical canon.

Moreover, Hell is represented here not as the natural outgrowth of the real-world's antagonists' torments—and thus plausibly merely an externalizing, allegorical representation of their delusions—but as contrasting with and opposing Saul's mental states. As the poem opens, Saul's malice has been "O'recome by constant Virtue, and Success" (1.44), albeit largely for tactical reasons:

He grew at last more weary to command  
 New dangers, than young David to withstand  
 Or Conquer them; he fear'd his mastring Fate,  
 And envy'd him a Kings unpowerful Hate (1.45-48).

The key word here is "envy," being used deliberately in the peculiar sense of "to... refuse to give (a thing) to (a person)."<sup>330</sup> While the first half of the line seems momentarily to

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<sup>329</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, edited by A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977), 617.

<sup>330</sup> "envy, v.1." *OED Online*. Accessed online on October 29, 2017.

impute to Saul envy of David's success (an envy which is real enough), it actually reports Saul's self-restraint and control of those feelings. Cowley tortures his verb in this way to sharpen the contrast between Saul and his demonic counterparts. This sharply revises *The Civill Warre*, in which the description of Hell was introduced by its similarity to the rebels ("They're trowbled all; and Hell was troubled too"). Compare the passage immediately preceding the same description in the *Davideis*:

He [Saul] old kind vows to *David* did renew,  
Swore constancy, and meant his oath for true.  
A general joy at this glad news appear'd,  
For *David* all men *lov'd*, and Saul they *fear'd*.  
*Angels* and *Men* did *Peace*, and *David* love,  
But *Hell* did neither *Him*, nor *That* approve;  
From mans *agreement* fierce *Alarms* they take;  
And *Quiet* here, does there new *Business* make (1.63-70).

Here, Hell opposes not merely God's favorite, but also the antagonist, who sincerely makes peace. Nothing in either the source material or the continuation of Cowley's plot demands this moment of real concord between Saul, David, Heaven and the people. Note how Cowley gives us access to Saul's psychology to underscore the sincerity of the vows: however we make theological sense of Hell's alarms, they cannot originate in Saul's mind. Generations of readers, from Johnson to Stoll, have felt Cowley's Hell to be so *real* and thus so ontologically problematic because he takes great pains to deny the possibility of its merely externalizing the real world's psychology.

Cowley's assertion of Hell's independence from Saul's mind correlates with his neutralization of Hell's politics. Hell does not embody a specific historical delusion and error; it is an external, apolitical source of evil. The *Davideis* seems to imagine this episode as politically instructive and then foreclose the possibility. That is, Saul's self-restraint seems to critique Charles, whose intemperate suppression of Parliament paradoxically strengthened its rebellion:

... Well did [Saul] know,  
 How a tame *stream* does wild and dangerous grow  
 By unjust force; he now with wanton play,  
 Kisses the smiling Banks, and glides away,  
 But his known Channel stopt, begins to roare,  
 And swell with rage, and buffet the dull shore.  
 His mutinous waters hurry to the *War*,  
 And *Troops of Waves* come rolling from afar.  
 Then scorns he such weak stops to his free source,  
 And overruns the neighboring fields with violent course (1.51-60).

The epic simile has a clear application to England. Cowley seems to imagine momentarily a counterfactual sovereign both more cunning and more temperate than Charles, who might have avoided rebellion. In contrast to the familiar Virgilian image of the sovereign calming a storm,<sup>331</sup> and the similar royalist trope of the obedient river as paradigm for the obedient subjects,<sup>332</sup> Cowley here articulates a vision of the subjects' "tameness" as including dissent and disorder ("wanton play" that tests the boundaries of propriety) and wise, *laissez-faire* royal rule that refrains from overly pressing the people. This commentary may be a sop to his republican readers, or it may be Cowley's genuine, rueful reflections on his king's mistakes. But crucially, the politics of the episode are nipped in the bud by Hell. For whatever the wisdom of Saul's restraint, it is no match for supernatural forces, demons which transcend the political order. The entire sphere of politics here seems becomes the plaything of cosmic, demonic forces entirely untethered to Saul or David's choices.

The *Davideis* thus renounces the conservative realism of *The Civil Warre*. The later poem insists upon the existence of extraordinary, supernatural forces far in excess of

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<sup>331</sup> *Aeneid*, 1.148-15. See David Quint, "The Virgilian Coordinates of *Paradise Lost*," *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 52 (2004), 177-197.

<sup>332</sup> See the apostrophe to the Thames in *TCW* 1.337-44 and Trotter's perceptive commentary: "The ordered circulation of river and sea, the one paying tribute to the other, is emblematic of the proper state of society—an equilibrium of elements disturbed by the 'rebells busie Prife'" (13).

ordinary experience. It renounces the outright critique of radical delusion, and moreover it uses the demonic other to eliminate the possibility of deriving political or historical morals from its narrative (since its narrative is ultimately out of its characters' hands). Against the pedantic, rationalist view advocated by Stoll and others, I would suggest that Cowley in the *Davideis* despairs of describing a recognizably real, human world. Perhaps, facing a world turned upside down, he simply felt that delusion had achieved so much social purchase as to be immune to disillusionment. Perhaps his personal survival simply demanded the repeated renunciation of political or historical ambitions. Regardless, he offers his readers a literally outlandish response to Interregnum England, a beautiful fairytale insulated from reality.

#### **“That crystal land”: Cowley, Narration and Biblical Commentary**

On my account of the *Davideis*, the poem oddly resembles Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Both works combine a poem with extensive, scholarly comedy. Both feature deeply unreliable narrators. I have been arguing implicitly, and want to say explicitly here, that, as in *Pale Fire*, the unreliability extends in a sense not merely to the narrator of the base-poem (as previous critics have argued), but also to the secondary, commentarial persona. In the Preface, Cowley is crafting a performed, stylized authorial figure whose account of the poem is dubious and self-interested. He may not intend us to see through that performance, yet sometimes it becomes very hard to ignore it. In a very small note on the couplet, spoken by God to his emissary, “Yet bid him go securely when he sends; / 'Tis Saul that is his Foe, and we his Friends” (1.409-10), “Cowley” writes, “*Friends* in the plural, as an intimation of the *Trinity*; for which cause he uses sometimes *We*, and sometimes *I*, and *Me*” (274n30). Of course “friends” here intimates no more than that

Cowley wanted a word to rhyme with “sends,” and it is difficult not to read this note as a little joke, a winking suggestion that the scholar’s pedantry is affected and performed but not completely sincere.

The broader claim of this chapter is that the Preface and notes craft this scholarly person to redirect readers’ attentions away from politics and frame the poem within an apolitical, ahistorical space of narrative imagination. That is, Cowley the commentator is (like the famously bad annotator of *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote) also part of the show. I have also argued that Cowley (at least in 1656) resembles Nabokov because both were deeply conservative men, surprised and defeated by a revolution and driven from their countries. Although Cowley’s exile and defeat were only temporary, history seems to have haunted and traumatized him as much as it did Nabokov. Both writers responded to this trauma with a formalism that sharply distinguished their crystalline aesthetic structures from a messy, political reality.

While the Nabokov comparison illuminates Cowley’s life and work, the difference between the two provokes a broader question: What does it mean that Cowley produced *his* formalist, history-evading poem-and-commentary ensemble from the Bible? I would give two related answers. First, Cowley’s use of the Bible confirms a broad claim of this book, namely that heightened commentarial attention to the figure of the biblical narrator produced in biblical epic narrators at once more fully realized and more separate from the authors. Implicit in Luther’s conception of the narrating minister, for instance, is the possibility of unreliable narration. Cowley realizes that possibility spectacularly. This chapter, then, treats intensively one moment in a longer history of

novelistic narration that attempts to show the novel's continuities with and debts to early modern theology.

Second, Cowley and Nabokov teach us not only about epics and novels, but also about commentary itself: its association with questions about indirection and mediation, its inevitable production of a divided consciousness in the reader, the space it opens for a provisional, hypothetical, or distanced relation to history and the world. Cowley's auto-commentary suggests that, through the pervasive usage of Renaissance commentaries, the Bible itself became a source for a certain intellectual skepticism, a sense of being at once inside and outside of a particular cultural milieu, political regime, or faith-commitments. We do often not think of the Bible as a source of aesthetic distance. Not only the particular fundamentalisms of our contemporary present render such a vision surprising, but also a background assumption that, as in Christopher Hill's account, seventeenth-century regarded the Bible primarily as a source of "authority," that is, grounding for particular, controversial claims, and that the century witnessed a secularization that stripped the Bible of that authority.<sup>333</sup> Hill's account captures a very broad, and intuitively compelling, account of how to do things with the Bible in the seventeenth century. I would suggest that Cowley suggests that, at least for a few intellectual elites, the Bible, and more the Renaissance, commentarial Bible, functioned precisely in the opposite way, helping to imagine a fictive world quite free of grounding, authority, or firm commitments.

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<sup>333</sup> Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and The Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 3-47.



## Chapter 4: Miltonic Accommodation, Rhetoric, and Narration

High matter thou injoinst me, O prime of men,  
Sad task and hard, for how shall I relate  
To human sense th' invisible exploits  
Of warring Spirits; how without remorse  
The ruin of so many glorious once  
And perfet while they stood; how last unfould  
The secrets of another World, perhaps  
Not lawful to reveal? yet for thy good  
This is dispenc't, and what surmounts the reach  
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,  
By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,  
As may express them best, though what if Earth  
Be but the shaddow of Heav'n, and things therein  
Each to other like, more then on earth is thought?  
—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5.563-76<sup>334</sup>

What we've got here is a failure to communicate.  
—Captain, *Cool Hand Luke*

Asked by Adam for a “full relation” of the war in Heaven, Raphael balks. First, he worries, can one communicate such spiritual, heavenly matters to corporeal, earthly humans? This question, which underlies traditional theologies of accommodation, has long concerned Milton's readers as well.<sup>335</sup> Neil Graves divides critics of *Paradise Lost* between those, like Johnson, who, “blissfully unaware of accommodation,” attack its “depiction of God” and those who appropriately account for “the theological problems of accommodation and their implications for a poet depicting scriptural material.”<sup>336</sup> Those

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<sup>334</sup> In William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: Modern Library, 2007). Cited hereafter in-text by book and line number.

<sup>335</sup> For two recent studies on Milton and accommodation, see Victoria Silver, *Imperfect Sense: The Predicament of Milton's Irony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Abraham Stoll, *Milton and Monotheism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009). See also David Quint, “Light, Vision, and the Unity of Book 3,” in *Inside Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 93-122.

<sup>336</sup> Neil D. Graves, “Milton and the Theory of Accommodation,” *Studies in Philology* 98.2 (2001), 251-272: 255. Graves cites a series of hermeneutically oriented predecessors, including Hugh R. MacCallum, “Milton and Figurative Interpretation of the Bible,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 31 (1961-62): 397-415; William Shullenberger, “Linguistic and Poetic Theory in Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*,” *English Language Notes* 19 (1982): 262-78; and Marshall Grossman, “Milton's Dialectical Visions,”

in the latter camp frequently quote Raphael's program of "lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" to defend Milton's epic—particularly the representations of God in Book 3 and the war in Heaven in Book 6—from those in the former camp's charge of blasphemous, crude anthropomorphism.<sup>337</sup> "The confusion of spirit and matter which pervades the whole narration of the war of heaven fills it with incongruity," Samuel Johnson writes, in a famous example of such attacks, "and the book in which it is related is, I believe, the favorite of children, and gradually neglected as knowledge is increased."<sup>338</sup> Moreover Graves describes how "accommodation" has shifted from naming an excuse for Milton's apparent infelicities to an account of his distinctive theology and hermeneutics. In particular, in the last thirty years, critics (including Graves himself) have read Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* more seriously and consequently wrestled with Milton's monism and what it implies about accommodation.

Yet Raphael hesitates for two other reasons as well: he is not sure "how without remorse" to remember the "ruin of so many glorious," and he worries that heaven's

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*Modern Philology* 82 (1984): 23-39. Yet it seems to me that the best context for his argument that Milton posits a "synecdochic relationship between [accommodated] image and subject" (272) is increasing scholarly attention to Milton's monism, which entails a rejection of the dualistic metaphysics accommodated symbolism seems to imply. For Milton's monism, see Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton among the Philosophers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); and D. Bentley Hart, "Matter, Monism, and Narrative: An Essay on the Metaphysics of *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Quarterly* 30.1 (1996), 16-27.

<sup>337</sup> See C. A. Patrides, "*Paradise Lost* and the Theory of Accommodation," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 5.1 (Spring 1963), 58-63; Roland M. Frye, *God, Man, and Satan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 7-13; and James Holly Hanford, "That Shepherd Who First Taught the Chosen Seed': A Note on Milton's Mosaic Inspiration," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 8 (1939), 58-63.

<sup>338</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109. Of course Johnson, whether consciously or not, is recycling a classic pedagogic metaphor for accommodation, with origins in 1 Corinthians 11-12.

secrets are “Perhaps / Not lawful to reveal.” These reasons have their inherent interest and peculiarity. How come Raphael does not know the relevant laws, after all? What are they teaching them in heaven these days? And why is he so worried about expressing remorse? Yet these questions have been largely sidelined in studies of accommodation. Understandably so, for they concern the rhetorical, and not ontological, problems facing Raphael. Those obstacles he faces in virtue of trying to communicate divine truth to finite humans, Raphael straightforwardly shares with God, scripture and Milton; such passages are easily tied to *De Doctrina* and used as proof-texts in constructing Milton’s theology. By contrast, Raphael’s emotional and legal anxieties belong specifically to his individual situation (properly, that is, how he is situated) as a speaker: “for how shall *I* relate,” with the metrical stress cluing us in that this is Raphael’s problem, not an abstract, universal condition.

Raphael’s doubts are rhetorical in another sense as well, for they pertain to the public sphere of politics and law.<sup>339</sup> Milton would, of course, have had a clear model for a recently concluded civil war “not lawful to reveal.” In the 1660 Act of Oblivion, Charles II, in order to “bury all seeds of future discords and remembrance of the former, as well in his own breast as in the breasts of his subjects one towards another,” had declared it an actionable offense to “presume maliciously to call or allege of, or object against any other person or persons, any name or names, or other words of reproach, any

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<sup>339</sup> On the public character of rhetoric and the results for literary criticism of this fact, see Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) and *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 1-13 and 243-49.

way tending to revive the memory of the late differences, or the occasions thereof.”<sup>340</sup>

The Act of Oblivion had saved Milton’s hide, and he was not likely to have forgotten it.<sup>341</sup>

Raphael thus seems to be wrestling with Milton’s political situation, especially when he references the Act’s exact terms in Book 6, writing of the mass of fallen angels, “Nameless in dark oblivion let them dwell” (6.380). In this context, the ambiguity of “how without remorse” seems ironic. Contextually, Raphael must be using the word in its alternate, now obsolete sense of “sorrow, pity, compassion.”<sup>342</sup> That is, he is struggling to control his inappropriate compassion for the once-glorious fallen angels. Yet the primary sense of “remorse” has always included guilt and regret, and Milton seems consequently to have afflicted Raphael with doubts that seem more appropriate to the poet than the angel: since the official line is that I sinned grievously in rebelling, how can I tell my story without either running afoul of the new regime or falsely defaming my cause? Further, all the theological hand-wringing about what exactly is meant by Earth being “but the shaddow of Heav’n” may miss the point. That is, Raphael may be hinting not at an obscure Neo-Platonic or monist doctrine, but simply at the poem’s reverse allegory in using earthly similitudes to express an ontologically ineffable War in Heaven that in turn *really* signifies the politically unspeakable Civil War. But note how these ironies do not establish a universal communicative problem shared by Raphael and Milton. Quite the opposite—Raphael’s side won, Milton’s lost, and however the equivalence works, it does

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<sup>340</sup> Charles II, “1660: An Act of Free and Generall Pardon Indemnity and Oblivion,” *Statutes of the Realm*: volume 5: 1628–80 (1819), 226–34.

<sup>341</sup> See Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 398-407.

<sup>342</sup> “remorse, n.” *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Accessed online at [www.oed.com/view/Entry/162286](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162286), May 9, 2018.

not do so straightforwardly. “Remorse” thus accommodates, so to speak, Raphael’s concerns to Milton’s situation, but like all accommodations, in bridging their differences it makes those differences ever more conspicuous.

Historically minded critics have, of course, explored in detail both what Milton might have been up to in narrating a heavenly Civil War and how specifically he might have been negotiating the Act of Oblivion.<sup>343</sup> But that scholarship has largely developed separately from the ever-expanding literature on Miltonic accommodation, which largely isolates theological problems concerning revelation and the accurate representation of the divine from the human, political forces that impinge upon and shape communication.<sup>344</sup> Scholars focusing upon accommodation have, for instance, emphasized Milton’s short discussion of scriptural accommodation in *De Doctrina*—one of two places in which he uses the word itself. But in so doing, they have ignored the other, political context in

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<sup>343</sup> See, for instance the discussion of the “good old cause” in Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between The Lines* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 258-76. As early as 1961, William Empson gestured at the problems of interpretation raised by the Restoration context when he writes of Milton’s first readers that “they would not be at all sure how far the author meant the devil’s remarks to be wrong”; they might have said, “We were astonished that his life was spared, until we found him meekly ascribing to Satan his own political opinions.” *Milton’s God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 82. See also David Norbrook, “Introduction: acts of oblivion and republican speech-acts” and “*Paradise Lost* and English republicanism,” in *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-23 and 433-96. For discussions of how another republican intellectual handled the dilemmas posed by the Act of Oblivion, see David Norbrook, “Memoirs and Oblivion: Lucy Hutchinson and the Restoration,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 75.2 (2012), 233-282.

<sup>344</sup> The classic work on censorship and early modern literature is Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). For the Act of Oblivion specifically, see Randy Robertson, *Censorship and Conflict in Seventeenth-century England: The Subtle Art of Division* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010). For an alternative perspective on these questions, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

which he discusses accommodation (see below). More broadly, they have neglected the history of the word's political usage throughout the Civil War period, to propose and imagine a series of tenuous alliances or compromises—whether between Charles and Parliament, as moderates urged, or between Parliamentary Congregationalists and Presbyterians struggling to find grounds for political cooperation.<sup>345</sup> This lexical history reflects, I will argue, a lively polemical discourse which made traditional ideas of God's condescension to human beings models for human compromises both practical and rhetorical.

This historical material thus undermines William Madsen's contention, "It is therefore difficult to understand what it means to say that Milton uses the method of accommodation in *Paradise Lost*, since he would hardly arrogate to himself a mode of understanding and expression that he denies to the human authors of the Bible and reserves for God alone."<sup>346</sup> As I will show, seventeenth century readers—including Milton—understood accommodation, like any number of other divine actions, as susceptible of imitation. That is, even before the Restoration, the theological and political pressures on Raphael cannot be neatly divided.

In politicizing Miltonic accommodation, I also want to shift the focus from figuration to narration—that is, from timeless, abstract questions about signification to

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<sup>345</sup> See Ernest Sirluck, "Congregationalists and the Argument for Accommodation," in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton vol. 2 1643-1648* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 65-73.

<sup>346</sup> *From Shadowy Types to Truth: Studies in Milton's Symbolism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 74. See also Paul Cefalu, "Incarnational *Apophatic*: Rethinking Divine Accommodation in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in Philology* 113.1 (2016), 198-228: 207n27.

historically particular, politically fraught stories and problem.<sup>347</sup> Ordinary readers have long pondered whether Milton's God has a physical body, or in what sense a real Satan battles with an allegorical Death in Book 2.<sup>348</sup> A theory of Miltonic accommodation promised answers to such questions. In its most theoretical mode, it additionally promised scholars a place for Milton in larger debates about the Reformation and signification (that is, did the Protestant attitude towards symbolism and allegory inaugurate a new figural regime?)<sup>349</sup> and, from the 1960's onward, in the discipline-wide arguments initiated by deconstruction about representation, metaphor, and reality. Although Stanley Fish does not discuss accommodation specifically, for instance, his work constantly imagines the theological impossibility of expressing divine truth in human terms as the seventeenth century's *différance*. Accommodation allows Fish to put Milton and company into conversation with post-structuralism.<sup>350</sup> Yet subsuming

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<sup>347</sup> I am inspired here by Naomi Seidmann, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1-36, which attempts to reorient a different but related conversation about translation, and particularly Bible translation, from "theory" to "narrative."

<sup>348</sup> See Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers*, 168-94, which draws on Anne Ferry, *Milton's Epic Voice: The Narrator in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) and Arnold Stein, *Answerable Style: Essays on Paradise Lost* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1953), 157-58. See also Victoria Kahn, "Allegory and the Sublime in Paradise Lost," in ed. Annabel Patterson, *John Milton: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 185-201; Philip J. Gallagher, "'Real or Allegoric': The Ontology of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*," *ELR* 6 (1976): 317-35; and Stephen M. Fallon, "Milton's Sin and Death: The Ontology of Allegory in *Paradise Lost*," *ELR* 11 (1987): 329-50.

<sup>349</sup> See for instance Malcolm Mackenzie Ross, *Poetry and Dogma: The Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century English Poetry* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969) and more recently, Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

<sup>350</sup> Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998) and *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

accommodation under *the* problem of representation often effaces historical particularity. Instead of generalized *différance*, I will be concerned here with the differences between individual speakers—the dilemmas and rhetorical situation that makes Raphael’s accommodations *his*, the specifically republican political theology that Milton articulates. That is, I will be focusing not on figures but on speakers, and I analyze accommodation from the perspective of narratology and rhetoric, not of hermeneutics.

The argument has two halves. First, I develop a theological-political language of accommodation through reading Civil War polemic.<sup>351</sup> I show how the word exploded in popularity and significance in the middle of the seventeenth century, and how debates over it entangled theology and politics. Milton participates in this argument, and in the divorce tracts, he develops a distinctively republican theory of accommodation, one that deemphasizes hierarchical condescension in favor of a double egalitarian rhetoric, which both collapses some of the divisions between God and humans and emphasizes the conversational accommodations of a human polity.

From the early prose, I then turn to *Paradise Lost*, the reader of which, I argue, in encountering the poem’s narrator, is taught how to grapple with the rhetorical accommodation of the defeated poet. The prose I consider in the first half of the essay ultimately provides a prehistory for what I argue is one of the poem’s most striking effects: the rich characterization of its narrator, and the ironic separation that gradually emerges between that narrator and the poem’s author. Reading the invocations that architecturally structure Milton’s epic, I argue that that narrator struggles repeatedly with

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<sup>351</sup> For Milton’s relationship to the seventeenth century’s “revolution in reading,” see Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).



the compromises and sacrifices required to engage his audience under the pressures of the Restoration. Understanding this struggle as one of the poem's ongoing dramas provides a fresh twist on common, if now controversial, arguments that Milton's later poetry surrenders or renounces the political involvements of his youth. *Paradise Lost* does enact a political surrender, but it does so in a self-conscious, highly dramatized way, one calculated to heighten Restoration readers' consciousness of the pressures producing that surrender and force them to look beyond it.

### **“Men are now upon accommodating”: Divine and Human Compromise in the 1640s**

An English reader in the early 1640s would have heard in “accommodation” something more than theology, just as an American reader in the early twenty first century would hear in the phrase “nuclear option” something more than physics.<sup>352</sup> The word referred primarily, as an 1643 Royalist news pamphlet had it, to the “Peace, and ... Accommodation that is to be made between the King and his Parliament.”<sup>353</sup> In 1642, an anonymous London petition requested of Parliament that they “speedily tender His Majesty, according to His Royall Intimations, such Propositions for Accommodation, as He may in Honour, and with safety to the whole Kingdome accept.”<sup>354</sup> By tracing the interrelated religious and political arguments over compromise in the 1640s, I expand the range of sources that inform discussions of Miltonic accommodation, arguing that Milton

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<sup>352</sup> My interest in the overlapping semantic fields of accommodation is paralleled in Heather M. Ackerman, “Accommodation Fetishism” (unpublished dissertation, Arizona State University, 2017), though my concerns are considerably narrower than hers; she is writing a history of the word generally, where I am tracing a particular political-theological problem about negotiating ideological diversity.

<sup>353</sup> Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Happy news to England sent from Oxford...* (1642), [A1].

<sup>354</sup> *The citizens of London their petition to both Houses of Parliament for peace* (London: Printed for John Johnson, 1642).

himself understood human problems of political coalition and rhetorical address as intimately tied to God's accommodations.

Note that “accommodation” in the petition refers, as it does in its exegetical and theological uses, to something at least theoretically linguistic. Like a covenant or a contract, an accommodation involves a text. Indeed, the debate over whether Parliament and Charles ought to reach an accommodation—and who was to blame for their failure to do so—frequently became a debate about language itself.<sup>355</sup> In the first place, the word “accommodation” achieved a new notoriety. It came to signal a moderate style, such that when Thomas Povey describes the “true character of a Moderate man” in his 1643 pamphlet advocating compromise, he imagines him as “one that would have Peace, not as an effect of War, but of an Accommodation.”<sup>356</sup> Not only do the bulk of its appearances in published works between 1640 and 1643 appear in political contexts, but those appearances, based on an EEBO search, roughly quadruple *all* instances of the word between 1600 and 1630.<sup>357</sup> Moreover, the debate over the desirability of peace quickly took a linguistic turn. Parliamentary answers to calls for accommodation frequently argued that a bad peace, in the words of one answer to the London petition, did not

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<sup>355</sup> In this sense, the debate over accommodation fits within what Victoria Kahn describes as the linguistic turn of seventeenth century English political theory. See *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>356</sup> Thomas Povey, *The moderator expecting sudden peace, or certaine ruine* (London, 1642 [1643]), 18.

<sup>357</sup> I searched on <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search>, using the parameters, “Keyword(s): accommodation; Date: 1600 to 1630” and “Keyword(s): accommodation; Date: 1640 to 1643,” on July 24, 2018. The former produced “151 hits in 75 records,” the latter “986 hits in 391 records.” I used records, rather than hits, because they were the more conservative measure. My count indicated that more than 300 of those 391 were about accommodations between Parliament and the King (or factions within Parliament—see below). Of course the corpus expanded rapidly during the period, but not sufficiently to invalidate this search as rough, first-order estimate.

“deserve *the name of Accommodation*,” since vagueness on the basic question of who was to judge whom “must prove inevitable confusion in the end” (emphasis mine).<sup>358</sup> Those Parliamentarians who did not want to be seen as rejecting accommodation insisted, as did an anonymous 1642 pamphlet, that “Hee which hates the name of an Accommodation as it has been used of late to signifie a totall submission, may love a true Accommodation in it selfe.”<sup>359</sup> Rather than bringing the two sides together, the word “accommodation” had become itself a new battleground in the Civil War.

On the other hand, at least some Puritan, Parliamentary circles declined to haggle over the meaning of accommodation, instead declaring it a dirty word. A 1643 Royalist pamphlet parodied these arguments:

*Accommodation* is not the Language of *Canaan*, and therefore cannot conduce to the Peace of *Ierusalem*... *Accommodation* is a Latine word, the Language of the Beast, for it is derived from *Commodum*. which signifieth profit, and you know all, the Popes Religion is for profit, or else from *Commodus*, who was a Roman Emperour, and a persecutor of the Church.<sup>360</sup>

The rigidity with which this imaginary Puritan dismisses the word “accommodation” confirms linguistically the pamphlet’s charge, namely that he is dogmatically unaccommodating. He is literally incapable of recognizing historical change, in that he assumes—philologically inaccurately—that etymologies fix meanings. The word “accommodation” becomes a Royalist beachhead, the site for a critique of Puritan fanaticism and intransigence.

By the mid-1640s, a second question of “accommodation” had emerged, namely, whether a compromise could be found between Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

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<sup>358</sup> Anon, *An answer to the London petition* (1642), 4.

<sup>359</sup> Anon, *Accommodation cordially desired and really intended*... (London, 1642), 5.

<sup>360</sup> Anon, *Accommodation discommended as incommodiouvs to the Common-wealth*... (“Printed in the Yeare [1643], LONDON, Of Peace, would not heare”), 3-4.

The latter, as Ernest Sirluck writes, began in the fall of 1642 to request an “‘accommodation’ or permission for orthodox (Calvinist) non-separating Congregationalists to form ‘gathered churches’ outside the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian system of church organization which they expected Parliament to establish” (*CPW* 2:66). In November 1645, Parliament approved “An Order... concerning a Committee for Accommodation in Matters of Difference concerning Church Government,” after which accommodation was not just the subject of pamphlets: it was state business.<sup>361</sup>

The moderate Congregationalists initially used the term “accommodation” to avoid the less popular “tolerance,” on the theory that the latter concerned differences of doctrine, whereas the former referred only to questions of organization—that is, whether an otherwise orthodox church might exist outside the control of the Assembly (see *CPW* 2:65-73). Although the distinction was ultimately untenable, it proved attractive. Many, regardless of their particular beliefs, would have agreed with the Presbyterian George Gillespie when he wrote in 1645 (by which point his party was offering to concede the earlier Congregationalist demands in a desperate attempt to stave off the sects), “I had rather goe two miles in an Accommodation... then one mile in a Toleration,” concluding, “O that God would put it in your hearts to cry downe Toleration, and to cry up Accommodation!”<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons*, Volume 4 [December 25, 1644 through December 4, 1646] (H. M. Stationery Office, 1803), 342.

<sup>362</sup> George Gillespie, *Wholesome severity reconciled with Christian liberty* (London, Printed for Christopher Meredith 1645), 36 and 40.

Compromise was naturally attractive because it offered an alternative to the stark decision; if the sovereign decides on the state of exception, accommodation evades it.

Earlier, in the debate over accommodation with Charles, a Parliamentary writer wrote:

All Controversies are determined either by the Dye of Force, and chance of War ... or else they are concluded by Lawes justly interpreted, or else there is a middle way (which we call Accommodation) and that is commonly when to avoid the mischiefe of the Sword, and the uncertaine intricacie of Judgement, both parties by mutuall agreement condiscend equally to depart from the rigor of their demands on either side, and so comply, accommodate, and meet together upon termes as equall as may be.<sup>363</sup>

Accommodation manufactured the possibility of reconciliation, thus allowing one to choose not to choose. Thus, this writer weakens his seemingly inevitable “either... or” binary with the oddly tentative third clause, which leaves undetermined whether there *is* a middle way or not. Similarly, Samuel Bolton, trying in 1646 to make sense of the difference between toleration and accommodation, explains, “Some would have a toleration or an allowance for lesser differences only. Others doe rather desire an accommodation, then a toleration, and that differences may rather be healed and composed, then allowed, and tolerated among us.”<sup>364</sup> That is, accommodation treats the difference as temporary and aims not at coexistence but convergence. Toleration would commit Bolton to a long-term diversity of (in this case) religion; accommodation lets him fudge the point.

But accommodation was not just appealing as stop-gap measure. Sometimes, it could even rise from the pragmatic into the theologically sanctioned sphere. Roger Williams writes of the establishment of the Parliamentary committee on accommodation, “God had lately put it into the heart of the Parliament, to consider the just and mercifull

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<sup>363</sup> *Accommodation cordially desired and really intended*, 21.

<sup>364</sup> Samuel Bolton, *The arraignment of error* (London, Printed for Andrew Keme, 1646), 254.

accommodation of tender Consciences,” having established by scriptural proofs that God prefers the majority to gently “carry the hearts and votes of all men along with you.”<sup>365</sup> If Williams imagines the accommodating impulse as emanating from God, Bolton goes further, imagining human accommodations as imitating Christ’s sacrifice. He writes, “this accommodation is not impossible: if indeed it were, God doth not binde us to the seeking after it... He that reconciled man to God, is able to reconcile man to man.”<sup>366</sup> Here, strikingly, Christ’s intercession between God and humans is imagined as a model for the human compromises of ecclesiastical politics.

Bolton’s usage represents a rare positive link between God’s and human beings’ accommodations—a link, I will argue, which is crucial to understanding Milton’s prose from the first half of the 1640s. Similarly, an anonymous pamphleteer in 1642 defended the letting of rooms to Anabaptists by punning on “accommodation” and arguing,

But *Christ Jesus* received us, *whiles as bad as those in question...* to *Union* and *Communion* with *himself*, and with his *Saints*; which is the greater grace, countenance and accommodation... *Ergo, we* and *they* are bound... to receive one another to *Civil* and *Moral Communion*, grace, countenance and accommodation.<sup>367</sup>

But God was more frequently invoked in political and ecclesiastical contexts not as authorizing but impeding accommodation.<sup>368</sup> A hardline, anonymous response to Povey

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<sup>365</sup> Roger Williams, *A paraenetick...* (London: Printed for Henry Overton, 1644), 3. For the history of tender consciences, see Esther Yu, “Tears in Paradise: The Revolution of Tender Conscience,” *Representations* 142.1 (2018), 1-32.

<sup>366</sup> Bolton, 349.

<sup>367</sup> Anon. *Reasons humbly offered in justification of the action of letting a room in London-House unto certain peaceable Christians, called Anabaptists*, 7.

<sup>368</sup> See also George Gillespie’s comment in his long Presbyterian treatise during the toleration controversy in *Aarons rod blossoming...* (London, Printed by E. G. for Richard Whitaker, 1646), 181: “Though in other particular, occasional circumstances of times, places, accommodations, and the like, the same light of nature and reason guideth both Church and State; yet in things properly Spiritual and Ecclesiastical, there is not near so much latitude left to the Presbytery, as there is in civil affairs to the Magistrate.” Though

in 1643 insisted that in his attempt to “*acommodate this difference by some middle way,*”

Povey

takes it for granted, that there are but two parties offended, the King, and his friends; the *Parliament* and their friends: That is a great mistake, for all the *Powers* in Heaven and Hell are parties here, and offended greatly ... all these he hath left out of the Treaty, the *Father* and the *Sonne* ... wee could have an easie passage, if the Peace sought for were a mans Peace, in his hands to give; or the sword, we would have sheathed, mans sword; we could then make up the difference by an *Accommodation*. But the Peace is GODS *Peace* ... we know no way in the world how to accommodate it, but by making Peace with God (who is offended) removing what is grievous to his Eyes and by breaking downe that which breaks *His heart; zach. 6.9* The Answer will be *No Peace* till *God* be at peace; till we have made His *Christ* our *Friend*.<sup>369</sup>

Interlaced through this argument are biblical quotations, and they cumulatively suggest that because God’s word is clear and inflexible, no room remains for human compromise.

“We can accommodate a peace with them,” the author concludes, “upon no better termes, then we can make peace with the Devill” (14).

Yet even when God is invoked as an obstacle to political accommodation, the logic can take strange, heterodox directions. William Greenhill, for instance, in the first, 1645 volume of his commentary on Ezekiel, rehearses familiar worries about

having peace with our adversaries; there’s much ado about peace; wee all say peace, but give us leave to be wary when wee make a peace, when wee dwell among Thorns and Scorpions... wee may have peace with men, but there are those amongst us, who, if we look not to it, will make war with God.<sup>370</sup>

Yet, Greenhill, a learned clergyman familiar with accommodation’s traditional theological sense (as when he writes, in the same book, of “the manifold wisdom of God

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Gillespie is writing more precisely about one particular point, the argument is the same: when God is involved, human hands are tied.

<sup>369</sup> Anon, *A suddaine answer to a suddaine moderatour* (London, 1642 [1643?]), 7-9.

<sup>370</sup> William Greenhill, *An exposition of the five first chapters of the prophet Ezekiel, with useful observations thereupon* (London: Printed for Benjamin Allen, 1645), 267-68.

and Christ in accommodating symbols so near to the truth,”),<sup>371</sup> supports his argument with a very curious scriptural proof:

*Moses*, Exod. 32.10. held Gods hands, *Moses* is a man that hath power in earth and in heaven; hee is a man, that when there is a danger, can go up to the heavens, and so put the Lord to it, that he saith, *Let mee alone, that I may destroy this wicked people, and I will make thee a great nation*; he would have hired him to have come to an accommodation; men are now upon accommodating, but a *Moses* will not accommodate; no, not with God himself, when his people are in danger, but he will have a blessing upon good terms, hee will have Gods wrath removed, and a reconciliation between heaven and earth, or else *Moses* will never be quiet with God (267).

Greenhill’s model for rejecting an accommodation is Moses, who refuses to accommodate God’s desire to destroy the Israelites for the sin of creating the golden calf. The analogy verges on blasphemous incoherence, since God in Exodus corresponds to God’s enemies in the present. But further, it highlights Moses’ contradictory role. Ironically, in refusing to accommodate God, he is forcing God to accommodate God’s people, tempering divine justice with concessions to their frailty.

Although Greenhill’s take on accommodation is an oddity, it does highlight several points important to my broader argument. First, if the theological and political senses of “accommodation” often presented themselves concurrently to writers in the 1640’s, those senses could, like waves in a pool of water, variously either amplify or cancel each other, resulting in complex theological-political patterns of interference. Second, accommodation often becomes, as it were, a three body problem, which places a mediator—like Moses—between the parties to be reconciled. Rejections of accommodation like Greenhill’s often turn on the negotiators’ obligations to the people they represent, whether that means God, whose commands one may not traduce or, in this case, the safety of Moses’ people before God. The corresponding worry is that Moses

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<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.



will be “hired” by God, that the people’s representatives might be bought off by Charles. If “Christ” in these texts names the optimistic harmony between previously opposed figures, “Moses” personifies compromise’s attendant dilemmas, contradictions, and difficulties. As Milton’s treatment of accommodation in his prose of the 1640s intervenes in the ongoing argument about accommodation, I would suggest, it invests intense significance in this figure of Moses and his rhetorical mediations.

### **Milton’s Reformation of Accommodation**

Milton plainly thought peace with Charles hopeless: “If accommodation had succeeded upon what terms soever,” he wrote retrospectively in *Eikonoklastes*, “such a devilish fraud was prepared, that the King in his own esteem had been absolv’d from all performance” (*CPW* 3:526). Yet this hardline position did not entail a rejection of accommodation conceptually. Quite the contrary, Milton’s early Civil War prose (I focus on his first divorce tract) struggles to articulate an alternate account of accommodation, a republican model in which compromises and mediations between reasonable equals at once substitutes for and precludes the legitimacy of the pragmatic deal-making Milton finds so distasteful. Both human beings and God, on Milton’s view, accommodate their audiences so as to reform them into virtuous communities. Insofar as republican accommodation becomes, as it is for Greenhill, a question not of condescension from on high but of mediating, representing, and rendering coherent a public, accommodation then also provides a language for thinking through the problem of the literary intermediary, the speaker or narrator.

Although it does not contain the word “accommodation,” the *Doctrine* is centrally concerned with the problem. Matthew 19 seems to indicate that Moses’ permission of

divorce to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 24 accommodates their weaknesses and thus does not apply to Christians. But Milton must repudiate that reading:

[B]e it yeelded, that in matters not very bad or impure, a human law giver may slacken something of that which is exactly good, to the disposition of the people and the times: but if the perfect, the pure, the righteous law of God, for so are all his statutes and his judgements, be found to have allow'd smoothly without any certain reprehension, that which Christ afterward declares to be adultery, how can we free this Law from the horrible endightment of being both impure, unjust, and fallacious (*CPW* 2:284).

In arguing that God's law cannot compromise with weakness, Milton is overturning the basic, traditional premise of accommodation, namely that divine perfection has yielded to human frailty. Thus he nearly eliminates the legal category of "dispensation" (*CPW* 2.299), for God cannot legislate rule-breaking. Throughout his analysis of Deuteronomy, Milton insists that God accommodates not our moral weakness but only our natural, human limits. Requiring perfection of humans, he writes, would not be "equal or proportionable to the strength of man" (*CPW* 2:326), whereas God's laws "are equal, easy, and not burdensome; nor do they ever crosse the just and reasonable desires of men, nor involve this our portion of mortall life, into a necessity of sadnes and malecontent, by Laws commanding over the unreducible *antipathies* of nature" (*CPW* 2:342). Milton understands legal accommodation not as graceful condescension but as mere fairness.

This conception of accommodation, I would argue, is implicitly republican. God's supposed concessions are repeatedly figured as bad, tyrannical governance. "What could be granted more either to the fear, or to the lust of any tyrant, or politician," Milton asks rhetorically, "then this authority of Moses thus expounded" to issue a blanket permission of sin (*CPW* 2.284). Permitting divorces against God's law would be "doing evill, and such an evil as that reprobat lawgiver did, whose lasting infamy is ingrav'n upon him like a surname, *he who made Israel to sin*" (*CPW* 2.291)—a reference to Menasseh that

further associates the form of accommodation Milton rejects with monarchic tyranny.

Even God has no arbitrary power, being bound to the Mosaic covenant:

[T]he law is [God's] revealed will, his complete, his evident, and certain will; herein he appears to us as it were in human shape, enters into covenant with us, swears to keep it, binds himself like a just lawgiver to his own prescriptions, gives himself to be understood by men, judges and is judged, measures and is commensurate to right reason; cannot require less of us in one part of his Law than in another, his legal justice cannot be so fickle and so variable, sometimes like a devouring fire and by and by connivent in the embers, or, if I may so say, oscillant and supine (*CPW* 2:292).

There is a very strong parallel between Milton's arguments here and in debates over whether Charles's sovereignty was absolute or limited by contract. Milton all but eliminates God's personal authority, which is irrelevant: "the hidden ways of his providence we adore & search not." In its place, he offers us the law itself as a divine incarnation ("herein he appears to us as it were in human shape"), an imaginative conceit Milton doubles down on in applying anthropomorphic descriptions ("like a devouring fire and... connivent in the embers") not to God but to God's "legal justice."

*The Doctrine* constantly personifies the Law: "if the Law allow sin, it enters into a kind of covenant with sin"—note the bizarreness of this conceit, which has the Mosaic covenant itself covenanting!—"and if it do, there is not a greater sinner in the world than the Law it self" (*CPW* 288).<sup>372</sup> The suggestion is that we take divine law as our

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<sup>372</sup> This point builds on the argument made by feminist critics that, as Victoria Kahn puts it, "Milton famously sees self-cruelty as a trap specifically for the husband," such that he "makes the wife into a dangerous supplement" and understands the "marriage covenant" fundamentally between "man and God." Victoria Kahn, "'The Duty to Love': Passions and Obligation in Early Modern Political Theory," in *Rhetoric & Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 243-69: 255. See also Mary Nyquist, "The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity in the Divorce Tracts and in *Paradise Lost*," in *Re-membering Milton*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York: Methuen, 1988), 199-227 and Stanley Fish, "Wanting a Supplement: The Question of Interpretation in Milton's Early Prose," in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*, ed. David Lowenstein and James Grantham

sovereign, rather than a divine monarch. Of course this incarnation itself involves divine condescension. Milton is thus distinguishing between two types of accommodation. Bad, monarchical accommodation imagines an Occamist, personal God choosing capriciously and emphasizes the gap between God's perfection and our moral degeneracy. By contrast, good, republican accommodation imagines God as open to human contest and debate (God "judges and is judg'd") through a shared, legible text. Milton understands the former account of God as untenably pagan:

[God] often pleads with men the uprightnesse of his ways by their own principles. How should we imitate him els to *be perfect as he is perfect*. If at pleasure hee can dispence with golden Poetick ages of such pleasing licence, as in the fabl'd reign of old *Saturn* (*CPW* 2:298).

In proving that God must follow human justice, Milton depends on the premise of God's imitability. Against the tyrannical sequence of Gods depicted in (say) Ovid's representation of Saturn's Golden Age and Jupiter's coup, Milton offers a rule-following, humanly just God who can be emulated. Moreover, as the allusion suggests, this divine

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Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 41-83. These arguments also grow out of the notable homoeroticism of *The Doctrine*, particularly the allegory of *eros* and *anteros*. See Annabel Patterson, "No meer amatorious novel?" in *John Milton*, ed. Annabel Patterson (New York: Longman, 1992), 87-102. Indeed, in some moments Milton seems to imagine his woe-begotten hero unhappily stuck with a legal, rather than a fleshly, wife, as when he sadly finds himself "without fault of his train'd by a deceitfull bait into a snare of misery, betrai'd by an alluring ordinance, and then made the thrall of heavines & discomfort by an undivorcing Law of God" (*CPW* 2.260), or when he complains of a "pretended reason... as frigid as frigidity it self" (*CPW* 2.269), comparing a relationship with law to the sexless marriage that constituted one of canon law's few grounds for divorce. In such cases, women in the text, as if possessed by Milton's bogey, disappear entirely into metaphors. There is no contradiction in Milton's personification of Divine Law being at once republican and sexist.

comprehensibility extends to God's acts of poetic and legal writing. If God's literary creativity must follow human norms, it follows that it too can be imitated.<sup>373</sup>

In accommodating humans, then, God enters into human community and law, becoming a bounded, constitutional monarch. But Milton's theological republicanism is not just thematic. It also explains the *Doctrine*, in terms David Norbrook draws from Quentin Skinner and J. L. Austin, as a "speech-act."<sup>374</sup> In the dedicatory epistle to Parliament which accompanied the second, 1644 edition of *The Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce*, Milton argues that Mosaic accommodation and authorship provide a model for Parliament. "Yee have now in your hands a great and populous Nation to Reform," Milton tells Parliament, "a people as hard of heart as that Egyptian Colony that went to *Canaan*" (*CPW* 2:226-27). The analogy might seem intended to suggest that the Mosaic dispensation of divorce, accommodated as it was to Israelite weakness, also fits England, but Milton rejects that argument and stigmatizes it as Papist: "But that opinion, I trust, by then this following argument hath been well read, will be left for one of the mysteries of an indulgent Antichrist, to farm out incest by, and those his other tributary pollutions" (*CPW* 2:227). Milton's point is that Mosaic accommodation, if understood as a

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<sup>373</sup> In Aaron Lichtenstein's division, then, this moment in the *Doctrine* firmly belongs on the side of deformity—that is, the aspiration to imitate, rather than to submit to, God. See *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 31-96.

<sup>374</sup> Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, 10-11. See James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 1988), 29-132. See also J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962). The sharpest critique of Skinner is Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1984), 49-76.

concession to weakness, cannot provide a model for “Reformation” but can only further entrench that weakness.

But the force of this argument is not a rejection of Mosaic accommodation—the interpretation of which is indeed the tract’s central concern—but rather a redefinition and deepening of it. Parliament’s members, whom Moses addresses as “Judges and Lawgivers, and yee whose Office is to be our teachers” (*CPW* 2:227) are supposed to follow Moses: “Doubt not, worthy Senators, to vindicate the sacred honour and judgment of *Moses* your predecessor, from the shallow commenting of Scholasticks and Canonists” (*CPW* 2.230). Moses is Parliament’s “predecessor” because, unlike the “scholastic” Westminster Assembly (whose authority the 1644 Preface dramatically rejects), he represents for Milton moral and religious insight free of ecclesiastical mediation: Moses and not Aaron—or more provocatively, Moses and not Christ—Parliament and not the Assembly.<sup>375</sup> As a result, vindicating Moses’s honor does not just mean upholding his statute; more profoundly, it requires Parliament to imitate his actions, “Doubt[ing] not after him to reach out your stedy hands to the mis-inform’d and wearied life of man” (*CPW* 2:230).

This ideal represents an alternative account of accommodation to human weakness, one compatible with the goal of reformation:

Let the statutes of God be turn’d over, be scann’d a new, and consider’d; not altogether by the narrow intellectuals of quotationists and common placers, but (as was the ancient right of Counsels) by men of

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<sup>375</sup> The same can be said of Ezra, a parallel figure who, in his policy of mass divorce for Israelites married to foreigners, had no “other commission for what he did, then such a general command in *Deut.* as this”—i.e., the verses in the New Testament requiring divorce from idolaters—“nay not so direct as this; for he is bid there not to marry, but not bid to divorce, and yet we see with what a zeal he was the author of a general divorce between the faithfull and unfaithfull seed” (*CPW* 2.262). This passage, added in the 1644 edition (i.e., the one addressed to Parliament) stresses the possibility that a human legislator may legitimately use reasoning about the purpose of divine law to extend it.

what liberall profession soever, of eminent spirit and breeding joyn'd with a diffuse and various knowledge of divine and human things; able to ballance and define good and evill, right and wrong, throughout every state of life; able to shew us the waies of the Lord, strait and faithfull as they are, not full of cranks and contradictions, and pit falling dispences, but with divine insight and benignity measur'd out to the proportion of each mind and spirit, each temper and disposition, created so different each from other, and yet by the skill of wise conducting, all to become uniform in vertue (*CPW* 2.230).

This exhortation extends the goal of *imitatio dei* to accommodation. Parliament's qualifications notably parallel that which is best about God's law, namely, its ability, through wisdom and goodwill, to bring together and elevate an audience of diverse intellectual and moral capabilities.<sup>376</sup> That in itself is notable, given the scholarly insistence to treat the Bible's accommodation as a uniquely divine prerogative.

But moreover, note the confusion this parallel introduces into the analogy: do Parliament, "joyn'd with a diffuse and various knowledge," correspond to God the speaker or to the human, fallen audience ("each mind and spirit, each temper and disposition, created so different each from other")? In some sense, of course, they are both, that being, as Geoffrey Hartman argued, the ambivalent situation of the interpreter.<sup>377</sup> Their liminality registers in the passage's hypertrophic production of verbal pairs: "spirit and breeding," "diffuse and various," "ballance and define", "good and evill," "right and wrong" and so on. In the terms of this book, they are Moses, mediating between "divine and human things." So is Milton, who appropriates for himself the traditional medical metaphors of accommodation when he

undertakes the cure of an inveterate disease crept into the best part of humane societie... with no smarting corrosive, but with a smooth and pleasing lesson, which receiv'd hath the vertue to soften and dispell rooted and knotty sorrowes; and without enchantment if that be fear'd, or spell us'd, hath regard at once both to serious pittie and upright honesty (*CPW* 2:241).

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<sup>376</sup> On the idea that the "burden" of biblical interpretation falls variously on different readers depending on their abilities, as well as more broadly on Milton's version of "experimental reading," see Dayton Haskin, *Milton's Burden of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 86.

<sup>377</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, "The Recognition Scene of Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 4.2 (1977), 407-416: 412.

To be sure, it is possible to construe the passage in purely human, natural terms, since the literary spoonful of sugar which helps the medicine go down is a commonplace of rhetorical and poetic traditions stretching back to Quintilian and Lucretius. Yet I would insist that in the *Doctrine*, Milton fuses these classical, rhetorical traditions with the theology of God's accommodation. Here, Milton heightens the parallel between himself and God through the strange, apophatic suggestion that his argument might have magical powers ("without enchantment if that be fear'd, or spell us'd"). This suggestion perhaps arises because Milton recognizes the seeming impossibility of offering, as he does, an accommodation that concedes nothing to sinfulness. Regardless, it emphasizes the strength of *Doctrine*'s commitment to *imitatio dei* that Milton, even jokingly, suggests that his rhetoric acts miraculously.<sup>378</sup>

While the *Doctrine* offers an expansive, almost deiform role for its human, republican legislators, it correspondingly humanizes its divine characters. Obviously this humanization manifests in Milton's consistent choice of the rationalist branch of the *Euthyphro* dilemma. More interestingly, it also affects how Milton handles Christ, whose comment on the law in Deuteronomy—"Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives"—inconveniently obstructs Milton's argumentative path. Milton, employing an irony native, as I discuss in my introduction, to Matthew 19 and the concept of accommodation itself, argues that it is Christ, not Moses, who more blatantly bends his words to his human audience:

The occasion which induc't our Saviour to speak of divorce, was either to convince the extravagance of the Pharises in that point, or to give a sharp and vehement answer to a

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<sup>378</sup> For the workings of reading as therapy in the divorce tracts, see Peggy Samuels, "Duelling Erasers: Milton and Scripture," *Studies in Philology* 96.2 (1999), 180-203.



tempting question. And in such cases that we are not to repose all upon the literall terms of so many words, many instances will teach us: Wherin we may plainly discover how Christ meant not to be tak'n word for word, but like a wise Physician, administring one excesse against another to reduce us to a perfect mean: Where the Pharises were strict, there Christ seems remisse; where they were too remisse, he saw it needfull to seem most severe: in one place he censures an unchast look to be adultery already committed: another time he passes over actuall adultery with lesse reproof then for an unchast look; not so heavily condemning secret weaknes, as open malice: So heer he may be justly thought to have giv'n this rigid sentence against divorce ... to lay a bridle upon the bold abuses of those over-weening *Rabbies*; which he could not more effectually doe, then by a countersway of restraint curbing their wild exorbitance almost into the other extreme; as when we bow things the contrary way, to make them come to their naturall straitnesse (*CPW* 2:283).

As Christ seemed to relativize Moses, Milton relativizes Christ, invoking in the process the traditional tropes of accommodation—the importance of circumstance to interpretation, the emphasis on the audience vulgarity, the medical metaphor.

Yet in emphasizing Christ's accommodation, Milton also renders accommodation thoroughly literary. Israelite vulgarity had always provided a general, continual context for Moses' lawgiving, whereas here, Christ's words are connected to a particular "occasion," a single set of circumstances or narrative moment.<sup>379</sup> Moreover, his motives are not transparent: he aims either to "convince" (that is, to prove sinful) the Pharisees' loose sexual morals or to rebut their dialectical trap. That is, this Christ has an individual interiority not fully ascertainable by his actions—God become character. Indeed, Christ's statements themselves recursively become the occasion of new, different "countersways": while it possible to read the contradictory curvatures of the Rabbis' sexual morality as all preceding Christ's interventions, the ongoing back-and-forth of the passage ("where...

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<sup>379</sup> On the relationship between circumstances and character, see Lorna Hutson, *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

where...,” “in one place... another time...”<sup>380</sup> reads as if he were first pushing them to one extreme, then correcting course but overcompensating, and so on. Most remarkably, Milton’s Christ even seems to speak ironically:

[T]he Pharises cite the Law, but conceale the wise and human reason there exprest; which our Saviour corrects not in them, whose pride deserv’d not his instruction, only returns them what is proper to them; *Moses for the hardnesse of your heart suffer’d you*, that is, such as you *to put away your wives*; and *to you he wrote this precept* for that cause, which (*to you*) must be read with an impression, and understood limitedly of such as cover’d ill purposes under that Law: for it was seasonable that they should hear their own unbounded licence rebukt... But us he hath taught better, if we have eares to hear. (*CPW* 2:307).

The Pharisees have tortured Moses’ sense, and Christ fittingly replies in a matter that they will misunderstand. Indeed, his statement must be *read* with an ironic emphasis on “to you”—ironic because he means that Moses really intended his divorce law for everyone *but* them, that is, the opposite of what he says—but there is no indication that Christ spoke it that way.<sup>381</sup> After all, their pride did not deserve his instruction. I linger on this representation of Christ as ironist because it is so deeply literary, and because it exemplified how Milton’s reading of the Gospels produces such a richly characterized, individualized sense of Christ as speaker.

Ultimately, then, the *Doctrine*’s Christ seems a smaller, less heroic character than its Moses. That is, while the tract confidently announces that God never bends the truth, the more slippery, deceitful forms of accommodation re-enter in the treatment of

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<sup>380</sup> On antithesis and balance in the divorce tracts, see Reuben Sanchez, “‘The middling temper of nourishment’: Biblical Exegesis and the Art of Indeterminate Balance in *Tetrachordon*,” *Milton Quarterly* 29.1 (1995), 1-12.

<sup>381</sup> On the Miltonic Christ as ironist, see Victoria Kahn, “Job’s Complaint in *Paradise Regained*,” *ELH* 76.3 (2009), 625-660: 650.

Christ.<sup>382</sup> Below, I will suggest that this slippery, ironic Christ has significance for how we read *Paradise Lost*. But first, I want to emphasize how, placed in the context of the tracts I considered above, the *Doctrine* participates in a broader conversation, constitutively new to its revolutionary moment of political instability and parliamentary power, about how and within what limits a religious-political leader might appeal to and lead a public. Moses has a fresh, virtuous audience; were he placed in a world of intractably corrupt institutions, he would speak as ironically as Christ. Second, while accommodation always implicitly places divine proclamations into a narrative context, Milton's treatment of Christ intensifies the characterization of Christ as speaker. His psychology, the circumstances of his speech, the scene and unfolding of the narrative—all are crucial to interpreting his words, and Milton consequently depicts them in some detail. In the interpretation of the Gospels, the general, theological questions of speaker and audience become minutely particularized, and we see exegesis transforming itself into a form of literary criticism. We see as well, of course, a rhetorical plan for accommodating a hostile audience—one that would soon become all too relevant to the post-Restoration Milton.

### **“Truth Shall Retire”: *Paradise Lost*'s Narrator and its Politics**

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<sup>382</sup> This privileging of Moses may contribute to many readers' impression of Milton's Hebraism. See Matthew Arnold, "A French Critic on Milton," *The London Quarterly Review* 143 (1877), 98-107 and his remarks on "Hebraism and Hellenism" in Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) in ed. Stefan Collini, *Arnold: Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 126-38. See also Jason Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). I discuss Milton's Hebraism at length in Raphael Magarik, "Milton's Phylacteries: Textual Idolatry and the Beginnings of Critical Exegesis," *Milton Studies* 57 (2016), 31-61.

More than twenty years after publishing *The Doctrine*, John Milton found himself, roughly speaking, in the rhetorical position of Christ before the Pharisees. In the wake of the Restoration, he confronted an audience manifestly uninterested in his radical ideas on ecclesiastical structure, marital law, or most saliently, republican governance. Further, he no longer encountered readers as an honored member of the republican government, a first among theoretical peers, even one of the lawgivers. Rather, he wrote as a virtual outlaw, standing before authorities whom he regarded as basically illegitimate and yet whose *de facto* power over his life and liberty he must have recognized.

How exactly Milton handled this transition, and consequently how we are to relate his late poetry to his early prose, constitutes the chief problem of his literary biography. Readers of Milton's masterpiece have long been frustrated by the poem's apparent inconsistency with everything else we know of Milton's politics.<sup>383</sup> How did a committed republican write a poem extolling cosmic hierarchy and attacking rebellion? How did a polemicist, vigorously involved in public debate, write a poem that seems finally to counsel quietism?<sup>384</sup> These questions have provoked long, ongoing debate among Milton's readers, who have repeatedly had to choose between the poem's and the poet's apparent commitments. The first option entails imagining either a rebellion on the part of the poet's royalist subconscious<sup>385</sup> or an undocumented change of heart and

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<sup>383</sup> See Blair Worden's discussion of the "distance between the two Miltons, the polemicist and the poet." *God's Instruments: Political Conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 355.

<sup>384</sup> For the "quietist" reading of *Paradise Lost*, see, for instance, David Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 212-49.

<sup>385</sup> See Malcom M. Ross, *Milton's Royalism: A Study of The Conflict of Symbol and Idea in The Poems* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1943).

resignation following the Restoration;<sup>386</sup> the second requires hunting for marginal evidence of subversion and downplaying some of the poem's central themes.<sup>387</sup>

While my interest in the formal question of *Paradise Lost*'s narrator emerges from my broader contention that early modern readings of the Bible make possible an ironic sophistication in the relation between author and narrator, in the case of Milton, an additional, political question is thus at stake. I am suggesting that the choice between Milton's politics and his poetry is illusory:<sup>388</sup> the poem *does* narrate a story of political resignation and concession to circumstance, but it does so not as an absolute, but as the history of one particular narrator. *Paradise Lost* encourages us to read that story in conjunction with an absent, inferred political context, ambivalently describing its narrator's development as at once an accommodation to deplorable circumstances and a fall into them.

The four invocations to *Paradise Lost* collectively describe a narrator, whose presence animates and orients the broader poem.<sup>389</sup> But that character, judged by these

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<sup>386</sup> In this vein, scholars try to trace shifts rightward in Milton's prose, which would then anticipate the late poetry. See, for instance, Paul Hammond, *Milton and the People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, "Milton: Political Beliefs and Polemical Methods, 1659-60," *PMLA* 74 (1959): 191-202.

<sup>387</sup> See also Mary Ann Radzinowicz, "The Politics of *Paradise Lost*," in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth Century England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 204-29.

<sup>388</sup> Note that I *am* not saying that the choice is a false one because the poem is fundamentally ambivalent, or because it evades our interpretive paradigms altogether. For the first argument, see Jonathan Goldberg, "Dating Milton" in *John Milton*, ed. Annabel Patterson (New York: Longman, 1992), 24-31 and John Rumrich, "Uninventing Milton," *Modern Philology* 75 (1990) 249-65. For the latter, see William Kolbrener, *Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>389</sup> This is in itself a remarkable feature of the poem. Barbara Lewalski notes of these "four extended Proems" that their "length and personal reference are without precedent in earlier epics." *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishingm 2003), x. In

introductory passages, changes significantly and consistently.<sup>390</sup> At first audaciously reaching for sublimity and unlimited by circumstances of place and time, he gradually accepts the limitations of his contingent context, individual proclivities, and sociopolitical situation.<sup>391</sup> As if he were walking down an alley that grew progressively narrower, the narrator's reach gradually contracts, becoming at once more precise and more claustrophobic. In other words, the Miltonic narrator—and the ambiguity of that adjective's sense is precisely what is at stake here—is not just a character, but also one whose evolution is itself being implicitly narrated.

### **The Short-Lived Miltonic Sublime: Book 1**

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addition to the studies of these proems cited in the introduction to this chapter, see also Talbot Wilson, "The Narrator of *Paradise Lost*: Divine Inspiration and Human Knowledge," *The Sewanee Review* 79.3 (1971), 349-59. Wilson does recognize that "the narrator is not Milton, but a dramatic character who directs the action of the poem" (359). Indeed, this point is frequently made to defend Milton against E. M. W. Tillyard's critiques of these "personal intrusions." (See *Studies in Milton* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1964]). But this literature on the proems—and on the Miltonic narrator more broadly—misses two points. First, it fails to *explain* where the artistic innovation Lewalski identifies comes from. Second, it gives an altogether boring account of the Miltonic narrator's work as essentially supporting, emphasizing, and relating material already present in the poem. The effect is to reduce a novel and strange literary phenomenon into a safe, dull one. See also Jane Melbourne, "The Narrator as Chorus in *Paradise Lost*," *SEL* 33.1 (1993), 149-65, who argues that the poem's epic's narrator was originally to be its tragic chorus and that this genesis explains many of its peculiarities. For more on *Paradise Lost*'s use of dramatic technique and narration, see Ann Baynes Coiro, "Drama in the Epic Style: Narrator, Muse, and Audience in *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 51 (2010), 63-100.

<sup>390</sup> Philip Edward Phillips also sees the invocations as telling a narrative, though he focuses on their gradual Christianization of the muse and largely ignores the question of the narrator *visa-vis* Milton. *John Milton's Epic Invocations: Converting the Muse* (London: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2000).

<sup>391</sup> Critics have long recognized the parallels between this narrator and the character of Satan. See especially William G. Riggs, *The Christian Poet in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: university of California Press, 1972), chapter 1 and David Quint, "Fear of Falling: Icarus, Phaethon, and Lucretius in *Paradise Lost*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57.3 (2004), 847-881.

The main thing to be said about the narrator who speaks in the invocation to Book 1, and who thus introduces the poem, is that we hardly know anything about him. Like its classical precedents, *Paradise Lost* opens not with its speaker but its subject: “Of Mans First Disobedience” precisely parallels “Achilles’ baneful wrath,” “The man... that many a way,” or “Of arms and of the man” (1.1).<sup>392</sup> The men in question are the heroes, not the poets: the classical invocation, prioritizing the material over the speaker, seeks to adapt the latter to the former. “What in me is dark / Illumin, what is low raise and support,” the speaker asks the Spirit, “That to the highth of this great Argument / I may assert Eternal Providence / And justify the ways of God to men” (1.22-26). That first “to” ought to indicate the scale of Milton’s assertion, and yet it reads awkwardly, almost as if it denoted the purpose or even, as the word does when it reoccurs two lines later, the audience. Thus the speaker prays to be flexible enough to stretch to his argument, in several senses.

Such stretching entails a placeless, limitless wandering. He bounces between the peaks of Sinai, Zion, and Helicon, none of which provide any sense of fixity. Sinai’s top is secret not only because it is, as Alistair Fowler writes, “set apart (Latin *secretus*) and concealed by storm clouds,” but also because no one knows where it is—or even whether to call it “Sinai” or “Oreb.”<sup>393</sup> And while he invites his muse, “if Sion Hill / Delight thee more, and Siloa’s Brook that flow’d / Fast by the Oracle of God,” the footing proves similarly slippery (1.11-13). You cannot step in the same river twice, or even, in this

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<sup>392</sup> Ed. Jan Parker, *Chapman’s Homer: The Iliad and The Odyssey* (New York: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2000), 5 and 425.

<sup>393</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alistair Fowler (Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1971), 42. Note that while Milton exploits the contradictory biblical sources, Fowler harmonizes them: “either on Mount Horeb... or on its lower part, Mount Sinai.”

invocation, sit by it for the space of two lines. That is because the divine oracle, or poetry itself, is figured as a dynamic, flowing stream, one that erodes the very banks that hold it. Thus, no sooner has Milton declared (of Sion, or of Siloa—hard to say which), “I thence / Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song,” then it turns out that this very song “with no middle flight intends to soar / Above th’ Aonian Mount” (1.14-15). Even Milton’s language swings, as if on a hinge, from what precedes it to what follows (“Of Mans First Disobedience, and the *Fruit* / Of that Forbidden Tree”; “who first taught the chosen Seed, / *In the Beginning* how the Heav’ns and Earth / Rose”), performing syntactically the speaker’s dizzying itinerary. The invocation will permit the reader no resting point, or stable location: there is, so to speak, no thence thence.

The narrator respects time as little as he does place. This point is well-known as concerns Milton’s borrowing from Ariosto the line, “Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime” (16), which ironizes itself at the same time as it forces the question of *Paradise Lost*’s relation to its biblical source.<sup>394</sup> That is, the promise to outstrip predecessors seems to require the narrator to forget his predecessors. But in fact this problem of temporality appears even earlier, when Milton refers to Moses:

Sing Heav’nly Muse, that on the secret top  
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire  
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,  
In the Beginning how the Heav’ns and Earth  
Rose out of Chaos ... (6-10)

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<sup>394</sup> For Milton’s debt to Ariosto generally, see James H. Sims, “Orlando Furioso in Milton: Heroic Flights and True Heroines,” *Comparative Literature* 49 (1997), 128-50. For a recent meditation on the line (which cites and critiques its antecedents), see Daniel Shore, “Things Unattempted... Yet Once More,” *Milton Quarterly* 43.3 (2009), 195-200.



The trouble is that, by Renaissance standards, Moses was *not* the first to teach Israel about creation. Rather, most commentators thought,<sup>395</sup> they inherited some account of creation orally, which Moses committed to writing, supplemented, and corrected. As Calvin writes, Moses

does not transmit to memory things before unheard of, but for the first time consigns to writing facts which the fathers had delivered as from hand to hand, through a long succession of years, to their children. Can we conceive that man was so placed in the earth as to be ignorant of his own origin, and of the origin of those things which he enjoyed? No sane person doubts that Adam was well-instructed respecting them all. Was he indeed afterwards dumb? Were the holy Patriarchs so ungrateful as to suppress in silence such necessary instruction? Did Noah, warned by a divine judgment so memorable, neglect to transmit it to posterity? ... Therefore, we ought not to doubt that The Creation of the World, as here described was already known through the ancient and perpetual tradition of the Fathers.<sup>396</sup>

The pre-Sinaitic knowledge of creation, which dates back to Hellenistic sources, helped buttress scriptural authority, yoking revelation to tradition.<sup>397</sup> To be accurate, Milton's poetry would need quotation marks ("who first taught the chosen Seed, / 'In the Beginning'"), since Moses first teaches Israel not the story of creation, but only this exact text. The moral I draw from this slippage is that the ambitious claims to literary priority in the invocation (the word "first" appears six times in the poem's opening thirty three lines) are premised on the willful dismissal of literary context. Milton's dismissal of Ariosto is patterned on Moses's dismissal of his literary predecessors.

The invocation thus transcends the particulars of geography and history, both sacred and classical, reaching toward a placeless, limitless sublime. (The physical descriptors that matter most here are those used metaphorically: "the *highth* of this great

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<sup>395</sup> See Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 24-25.

<sup>396</sup> Calvin, *Commentary to Genesis*, 23-24.

<sup>397</sup> See, for instance, Louis H. Feldman, "Moses in Midian, According to Philo," *Shofar* 21.2 (2003), 1-20 and "Josephus' Portrait of Moses," *JQR* 82.3/4 (1992), 285-328.

Argument” and “th’ *upright* heart” which the Spirit prefers “*Before* all Temples,” emphasizes mine.) David Norbrook and Annabel Patterson have argued that the Miltonic sublime is republican, because it resists convention and transcends existing hierarchies.<sup>398</sup> True enough, and yet invoking the sublime raises more problems than it solves, because the Longinian sublime is momentary and has, almost by definition, no purchase on narrative itself. As John Hall’s 1652 Longinus puts it:

And whereas the *vivacity* of Invention, the *harmony* and *order* of Disposition cannot be discerned out of *one* or *two* clauses, but difficultly make themselves appear in a generall *Survey* of the whole fabrick; *Height* wheresoever it *seasonably* breaks forth, bears down all before it like a whirlwind, and presently evidences the *strength* and ability of the speaker.<sup>399</sup>

The sublime intrudes momentarily upon the reader’s consciousness. It cannot characterize an entire work, and it arises out of the particulars of isolated image, figure, or authorial choices. *On Great Writing* never analyzes entire works or plots; instead it quotes numerous particular passages. Indeed, the treatise itself has often seemed to lack a structure, such that, as Neil Hertz writes, “it is remarkably easy to lose one’s way” in it, “to find oneself attending to a quotation, a fragment of analysis, a metaphor—some interestingly resonant bit of language that draws one into quite another system of

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<sup>398</sup> Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines*, 256-72 and Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, 19 and 137-41.

<sup>399</sup> *Peri hypsous, or Dionysius Longinus of the height of eloquence*, trans. John Hall (London: Printed for Francis Eaglesfield, 1652), III. I am using Hall because Milton would have known his translation, and because criticism on the seventeenth-century sublime has focused on it, but it should be compared with Longinus, *On Great Writing*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1991).

relationships.”<sup>400</sup> Longinus even displays a prejudice against narrating (in the terms of Jamesian criticism, “telling”),<sup>401</sup> as when he writes

We may perceive by the *Odysses*... *great minds in their declination stagger into Fabling*... the *Iliads* written in the *strength and exaltation* of his spirit were wholly full of *life and action*; But the *Odysses* solely abound with *Narrations* which is the *property* of old Age, so that in them a man may compare *Homer* to the *setting Sun* (XIX).

In moments of the sublime, the narrator disappears, and the reader encounters the represented events as if directly. Similarly, although the “republican sublime” provides an appealing account of particular moments within *Paradise Lost*, it necessarily does so, first, by extracting those moments from the broader narrative, and second, by losing track of the process of narration itself. By contrast, I would argue that to interpret the sublimity of the invocation to Book 1, we need to read the passage against its successors.

### **Book 3: The Blind Bard Reconsidered**

When we turn to Book 3, the sublime, soaring figure of Book 1 is reduced somewhat, saddled with Milton’s most obvious personal limitation: his blindness. Less obviously, in invoking his blindness, Milton is engaging as well his political situation. Already by 1654, Milton’s opponents had begun describing his blindness as a punishment from God, leading him to devote significant space, in the *Second Defense*, to refuting the claim that “I am now undergoing this suffering as a penance” (CPW 4:587). Although his argument there anticipates the later poem’s upbeat opposition of physical blindness and

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<sup>400</sup> Neil Hertz, “A Reading of Longinus,” *Critical Inquiry* 9.3 (1983), 579-596. Hertz is responding to W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Vintage, 1957), 101.

<sup>401</sup> See the debate between Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921) and Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1983). Lubbock’s position derives from (though it grossly oversimplifies) Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner, 1957), 94.

spiritual sight, he seems nonetheless shaken by this claim, admitting that he wishes “it were... possible to refute this brutish adversary on the subject of my blindness, but it is not possible. Let me bear it then” (*CPW* 4:584). Moreover, he oddly concedes the causal link between his writing and his blindness, since despite being in danger of “the virtual loss of my remaining eye,” he sacrificed his sight to write his republican tracts, knowing that “if I should undertake this task, I would shortly lose both eyes” (*CPW* 4:588). While rejecting the characterization of his blindness, then, Milton nonetheless accepted his opponents’ connection between it and his republican writing.

Writing in particular: Royalists, in mocking Milton’s blindness, always targeted Milton not just as a republican but specifically as an author. They frequently conjoined Milton’s blindness with the burning of his books, correlating what they supposed to be his divine and human punishments. James Heath, for instance, mentions in an aside “one *Milton*, since stricken with blindness... who wrote also against... *Eikon Basilike*, in an impudent and blasphemous Libel, called *Iconoclastes*, since deservedly burnt by the Common Executioner.”<sup>402</sup> In observing that Milton’s books were burnt by an executioner, Heath evidences the wish many Royalists must have felt to see Milton himself burnt—a desire for bodily violation his blindness seemed to fulfill. Similarly, the semi-anonymous J. T., writing in 1662, crowed that Milton had been “wonderfully” punished, “who writ the seditious Anti-monarchical Book against the Kind, in answer to Learned *Salmasius*, stricken blind soon after, and could never since by any art, or skill, either recover his sight, or preserve his Books from being burned by the hands of the

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<sup>402</sup> I. H., *A Brief Chronicle of the Late Intestine Warr in the Three Kingdoms of England, Scotland & Ireland...* (London: J. Best for William Lee, 1663), 435.

common Hang-man.”<sup>403</sup> As above, the “hangman” suggests that blindness is a kind of substitute execution, and this punishment is associated with the destruction of Milton’s texts. J. T. plays further with the link, which seems to have become something of a convention, by emphasizing the impotence of Milton’s “art,” that is, his craftsmanship, to preserve himself either corporeally or literarily. In both Milton’s own writing and Royalist critiques, blindness does not just acquire political overtones but also names the vexed conjunction between Milton’s physical body and his body of work.

The invocation to Book 3 thus encodes hints of Milton’s dilemma after the Restoration and asks what poetry can emerge out of such a political dilemma. A great deal that is otherwise peculiar in the invocation makes good sense when placed in this political context. For instance, the narrator’s question of light, “May I express thee unblam’d?” (3.3), which commentators struggle with, proposing various possible dangers: of “being judged”—for unspecified reasons—“blasphemous or improper,”<sup>404</sup> of hubris in assuming direct divine inspiration,<sup>405</sup> of uncertainty “how to address this holy light,”<sup>406</sup> of misconstruing the relationship between the various components of the Godhead,<sup>407</sup> of bungling a point in speculative metaphysics,<sup>408</sup> and so on. The diversity of these explanations evidences their collective weakness: if not for the anachronism,

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<sup>403</sup> I. T., *The Traytors Perspective-glass...* (London 1662), 21-22.

<sup>404</sup> Eds. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: Random House, 2007), 360.

<sup>405</sup> Dale G. Priest, “Toward a Poetry of Accommodation: The Invocation to Book III of *Paradise Lost*,” *The South Central Bulletin* 41.2 (1981), 112-14: 112.

<sup>406</sup> Louis Martz, “*Paradise Lost*: The Realms of Light,” *English Literary Renaissance* 1.1 (1971), 71-88: 73.

<sup>407</sup> Marshall Grossman takes this reading for granted (!) in “Dialectical Visions,” 30-31.

<sup>408</sup> See John B. Broadbent, *Some Graver Subject: An Essay On Paradise Lost* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), 141

someone would have suggested that Milton was uncertain whether light is a particle or a wave.

I would argue that the blame here is personally political, rather than abstractly theological: “May *I* express thee unblam’d,” as indeed the stress falls. Milton’s readers would have known of their narrator’s blindness, which he understood as a problem of theodicy. If God was not punishing Milton for republicanism, how else to explain his suffering? The *Second Defense* had entertained a possibility that was *genuinely* blasphemous: that contemplating “those ancient bards and wise men of the most distant past” who were afflicted with blindness, their contemporaries “preferred to blame the very gods than to impute their blindness to them as a crime” (*CPW* 4:584). Milton immediately recoils from the possibility that God punishes publication of state secrets (“But God himself is truth! . . . It is impious to believe that God is grudging of truth or does not wish it to be shared with men as freely as possible”). Yet, as an alternative to denying God’s involvement altogether, the possibility that God had erred must have lingered on the margins of Milton’s mind, as did his enemies’ worrying suggestion that Milton’s previous “expression” had proven blameworthy.

Milton’s question thus reflects not a generic modesty *topos* but a particular, sharp anxiety. This anxiety resurfaces in his imagined parallels for himself. I do not cease from writing poetry, “nor sometimes forget,” the narrator says,

Those other two equal’d with me in Fate,  
So were I equal’d with them in renown,  
Blind *Thamyris* and blind *Mæonides*,  
And *Tiresias* and *Phineus* Prophets old (3.32-36).

The problem here is that two plus two does not equal two (Bentley: “What more ridiculous than to say *Those other Two*, and afterwards to name FOUR?”).<sup>409</sup> The latter pair, whom Milton discusses in detail in the *Second Defense*, seems to have been tacked on as an afterthought, as if what the narrator never forgets (in the strict, weird sense of “nor sometimes forget”), much as he would like to, is the association of his blindness with impropriety. These lines seem bursting with precisely the aspersions Milton was previously so concerned to counter. In mirroring so closely “Those other two equal’d with me in Fate,” in “So were I equal’d with them in renown,” the narrator forces us to consider that these two parallel equalities might be related more than coincidentally. Further, Milton bizarrely leads with Thamyris, about whom all we know is that his blindness punishes his hubris. Thamyris appears in an aside to the catalogue at the start of the *Iliad*:

Dorium, where the Muses met Thamyris the Thracian and made an end of his singing, even as he was journeying from Oechalia, from the house of Eurytus the Oechalian: for he vaunted with boasting that he would conquer, were the Muses themselves to sing against him, the daughters of Zeus that beareth the aegis; but they in their wrath maimed him, and took from him his wondrous song, and made him forget his minstrelsy.<sup>410</sup>

Milton’s choice of Thamyris is doubly perplexing because, unlike the other three named figures, he is stripped not only of his sight but also of his inspiration. He dies in ignominy, his poetry lost (yet another sense of “nor sometimes forget” would be “to forget always”).

Why does Milton pick Thamyris? I think he does so because he is a character within Homer’s (that is, Mæonides’s) poem, an intradiegetic model for a poet. That is,

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<sup>409</sup> Bentley, 78.

<sup>410</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray (Cambridge, M.A., Harvard University Press, 1924), 2.591-4. Accessed online at <http://www.theoi.com/Text/HomerIliad2.html>.

while I would not presume to delineate the degree to which Milton consciously arranged these anxieties, nor am I making a psychoanalytic argument primarily about the contents of Milton's subconscious. Rather, I am suggesting that the narrator's invocation stages these anxieties as a dramatic spectacle, and that in so doing Milton the poet begins to pry himself away from Milton the narrator, to come to look at himself from the outside.

Milton hints at this separation with Thamyris, but he does so more powerfully by linking his narrator's speech here to a character's later in the poem. In the continuation of the invocation, the narrator at once consoles himself and bemoans his isolation:

Then feed on thoughts, that voluntarie move  
Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful Bird  
Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid  
Tunes her nocturnal Note. Thus with the Year  
Seasons return, but not to me returns  
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,  
Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,  
Or flocks, or heards, or human face divine (3.37-44).

The parallel is to Eve, in Book 4. When Adam tells her that their bedtime has arrived, she replies, "With thee conversing I forget all time, / All seasons and thir change, all please alike" (4.639-40). Eve's weird use of "seasons"—seasons are a result of the Fall (10.641-707)—can be defended as meaning "times of day,"<sup>411</sup> but Milton used it, I think, as the first of several links between Eve's speech and the invocation to Book 3. Next, Milton recycles "the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn," which Eve imaginatively expands with details into two phrases, beginning "Sweet is the breath of morn" and "sweet the coming on / Of grateful Eevning milde" (4.641 and 646-47). If all this temporal sweetness were not enough, Milton further parallels his narrator's "vernal bloom, or Summers Rose" with

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<sup>411</sup> See eds. Stephen Orgel, and Jonathan Goldberg, *The Oxford Authors John Milton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 881.



Eve's "herb, tree, fruit, and flour" (4.644); even the nightingale, to whom the narrator compares himself, resurfaces when Eve celebrates "silent Night / With this her solemn Bird" (4.647-48).

But the strongest link between the two moments is yet to come. For, having listed the beauties of the natural world, Eve then explains that though there were birds in the sky, she would never have heard them singing were it not for Adam:

But neither breath of Morn when she ascends  
With charm of earliest Birds, nor rising Sun  
On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, floure,  
Glistring with dew, nor fragrance after showers,  
Nor grateful Eevning mild, nor silent Night  
With this her solemn Bird, nor walk by Moon,  
Or glittering Starr-light without thee is sweet (4.650-656).

Technically, Eve is producing a powerful analogue to the final crescendo of the narrator's lament. For as in Eve's speech, it is the "human face divine" whose loss the narrator feels most deeply. But more importantly, through having Eve deliver nearly the same description of natural beauty twice, Milton calls attention to its quality as a crafted, literary text. Obviously and immediately quoting herself, Eve alerts us that Milton is, more subtly and at a remove of one thousand lines of poetry, doing the same.

In the invocation to Book 3, then, the narrator's status shifts in two concurrent, related ways. First, he reveals and frets over his blindness—a weakness that contemporaries specifically tie to his republican polemicizing. But second, the authorial Milton relativizes the narrating Milton, carefully situating him as a constructed character within the poem, rather than its generating creator. Both shifts diminish the narrator, at once introducing questions about his moral and literary fitness and relativizing his ontological status within the poem. They thus anticipate Book 7's invocation, which

begins, “Descend from Heav’n” (7.1). Readings of the poem’s architectural structure often offer this invocation as a turning point: from heavenly spirits to earthly humans, from martial epic to the Christian Fall narrative, and so on.

### **Just How “Unchang’d” is the Narrator of Book 7?**

Book 7’s opening does not just punctuate the poem like a semicolon. More importantly, it continues the process of qualifying the narrator, exposing his literary and moral limitations and distancing him from the author. And it does so in ways that develop the political subtexts of Book 3, suggesting that Milton’s limited, fallible character narrator in crucial ways concedes to or accommodates his new political circumstances. The narrator’s fretting over his blindness, I have suggested, would have summoned these circumstances to the Restoration reader’s mind, but here they are made explicit:

Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole,  
More safe I Sing with mortal voice, unchang’d  
To hoarce or mute, though fall’n on evil dayes,  
On evil dayes though fall’n, and evil tongues;  
In darkness, and with dangers compast round,  
And solitude (7.23-28).

Here, “darkness” figures both the narrating Milton’s physical disability and his political predicament. Moreover, for the first time, he explicitly situates his writing among his peers’ “evil tongues.” In a sense, this newfound candor appropriately fits the passage’s descent to earth, the narrator’s “Native Element” (7.16)—a vexed adjective in *Paradise Lost*, which has, especially Satan’s republican rhetoric, a proto-nationalist, political sense (see e.g. 1.634, 5.790, and 5.863).<sup>412</sup> The narrator ironically claims that the humble, earthly materials of the epic’s second half, which “yet remains unsung, but narrower

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<sup>412</sup> For the question of Milton and nationalism, see the essays in eds. David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens, *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

bound / Within the visible Diurnal Spheare” (7.21-22), in fact it is the “Heav’n of Heav’ns” which he “presum’d” to represent (7.13) which was safer to Milton than his native element. Chronicling the War in Heaven risks blasphemy, after all, but chronicling the War in England would have all but ensured execution.

Anne Ferry thus seems over-optimistic when she argues that “all the cycles in the poem of descent and reascent, loss and restoration, departure and return are fully and finally harmonized for the reader and *for the narrator*” (emphasis mine).<sup>413</sup> In reading the poem as smoothly unified, aesthetically harmonious object, Ferry has to exclude the troubling ruptures of history, and in particular, the problem the Restoration poses for the narrator. This problem becomes particularly acute precisely in Book 6, not because the heavenly conflict allegorizes the English Civil War, but rather because legally and politically, the narrator is not permitted to allegorize his political situation, or to represent it in terms acceptable both to him and his potential censors. Republican defeat thus remains an untellable absence, the darkness visible around which the narrator’s characterization crystallizes. The dangerous subject of civil war explains why the invocation to Book 7 seems so obviously haunted by the threat of violence from its listeners:

...still govern thou my Song,  
*Urania*, and fit audience find, though few.  
But drive farr off the barbarous dissonance  
Of *Bacchus* and his Revellers, the Race  
Of that wilde Rout that tore the *Thracian* Bard  
In *Rhodope*, where Woods and Rocks had Eares  
To rapture, till the savage clamor dround  
Both Harp and Voice; nor could the Muse defend  
Her Son. So fail not thou, who thee implores:  
For thou art Heav’nlie, shee an empty dreame (7.30-39).

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<sup>413</sup> *Milton’s Epic Voice*, 43.

The politics of this passage are signaled clearly enough by “govern.” The narrator is asking his muse to establish for his poetry a small zone of extraterritoriality, an island of poetry amid a sea of barbarism. Bacchus’s revelers have been stripped of their gender, even though their sexual resentment at Orpheus is central to Ovid’s version of the story. Here they seem more like Royalist cavaliers, members of the same fraternity as “the Sons Of Belial,” who “flown with insolence and wine,” haunt the nighttime streets of “luxurious Cities” like Restoration London (1.498-502).

But the politics of the passage come into sharp relief only when it is compared with two of its predecessors, namely its source in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Milton’s earlier narration of the same incident in *Lycidas*. For while in the 1638 poem, Milton does mention the rout’s “hideous roar” (61), when reprising the story nearly three decades later, he adds a crucial detail from the Ovidian source. In Ovid, Orpheus’s song initially *does* defend him, because when a Thracian woman pelts him with lances and stones, the lance merely bruises without piercing him, and the stone, “vanquisht with his sweete / and most melodius hamronye, fell humbly at his feete / As sorye for the furious act it purposed.”<sup>414</sup> Indeed, the “sweetnesse of his song” would have

appeas'd all weapons, saving that the noyse now growing strong  
With blowing shalmes, and beating drummes, and bedlam howling out,  
And clapping hands on every syde by Bacchus drunken rout,  
Did drowne the sownd of Orphyes. Then first of all stones were  
Made ruddy with the prophets blood, and could not give him eare (11.15-20).

I quote the Golding translation, incidentally, not merely because Milton might have read it, but also because he seems to be influenced by its specific phrases: the non-obvious use

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<sup>414</sup> *Ovid’s Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation of 1567*, ed. John Frederick Nims (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 273: 11.11-13. Cited hereafter in-text by book and line number.

of “drown” (which foreshadows Orpheus’s body consignment to the Hebrus river) for the Latin “obstrepuere,” the personifying giving of ears to the rocks and stone, and more.

In both (Golding’s) Ovid and *Paradise Lost* (“where Woods and Rocks had Eares / To rapture, till the savage clamor dround / Both Harp and Voice”) then, we have not the generic narrative of poetry’s impotence before material force, but rather a contest between two types of poetic expression. This later Miltonic narrative encodes not *Lycidas*’s worry that poetry makes nothing happen, but rather a concern precisely with the potency of poetry. The propaganda of the victors, the poem worries, can mute the engaged, effective form of political expression of the younger Milton, a man who, to borrow language from the *Metamorphoses*, “never till that howre / Did utter woordes in vaine, nor sing without effectual power” (11.41-42). Even as the zeugma of “drowned” personifies his enemies’ poetry as the performers—and not just enablers—of Orpheus’s murder, so too the metonymic use of “voice” for his person recalls the similar slide earlier in this invocation, when the narrator boasted, “More safe I Sing with mortal voice, unchang’d / To hoarce or mute.” There, the transferring of the epithet “mortal” emphasized the dangers to which the narrator’s poetry specifically subjects him.

The narrator’s comparison of himself to Orpheus, then, situates his own poetry in a hostile discursive society, a world of poetry and polemic dominated by his foes. In that context, “unchang’d” starts to ring rather hollowly. *Paradise Lost* is, after all, manifestly not a second edition of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, but in some sense a change, a concession. And indeed, as in the invocation to Book 3, here too the invocation ends with a winking acknowledgement of the narrator’s own fictionality: “So fail not thou, who thee implores,” the narrator concludes, “For thou art Heav’nlie, shee an empty

dreame.” In a sense, this last line repeats the Miltonic move by which a pagan tale is told and then denied historicity, as when Mulciber’s fall is beautifully narrated, only to be sourly dismissed, “thus they relate, / Erring” (1.746-47). And yet here the logic is more vexing, for the narrator tells Orpheus’s story himself (Mulciber’s story is tagged as indirect discourse by “they fabl’d”). Indeed, the narrator seems to commit himself to the (short-lived) magical efficacy of Orpheus’s music (“Woods and Rocks had Eares / To rapture”) and thus his muse. In telling the story of his own predecessor as if it were true, only to reveal jarringly that it is an empty dream, the narrator models the fictive creation of a fictive creator. Orpheus, like Thamyris, thus forces the reader to contemplate the Miltonic narrator’s own fabrication.

### **Book 9: “I now must change”**

*Paradise Lost*’s final invocation, which precedes the actual Fall, weaves together the several threads I have drawn out in the preceding analysis: the increasing prominence of biographically specific detail about the narrator, attention to poetic makers who are themselves imagined and who consequently suggest the narrator’s fictional status, and gradual downward slide from Book 1’s epic sublime coordinated with the ever-tightening noose of implied political duress. But as the resultant tapestry emerges complete from the loom, I can (and need to) consider the alternative to the theory I have been proposing. That alternative, which Anne Ferry developed, was the first comprehensive theory of the poem’s narration. It is this: while the poem *does* tell us the narrator’s story in concert with that of the Fall, it does so not just to imbricate him in that Fall but also to offer him as part of its redemptive correction. He is finally “a narrator who is fallen but redeemed like the blind bard, a creature limited like a bird but capable of flight and endowed with

the power of heavenly song,” such that “everything in the poem is contained within the circle of the narrator’s vision.”<sup>415</sup> On this view, I have been consistently tracing the first, ironic move in the poem’s construction, or rather its demotion, of its narrator, and then ignoring his corresponding, compensatory elevation to the stature of inspired prophet.

Fortunately, this problem is raised directly at the start of Book 9. The narrator explicitly raises doubts about his own inspiration: he will likely fail, the invocation concludes, “if all be mine, / Not Hers”—that is, his Muse’s—“who brings it nightly to my Ear” (9.46-47). Moreover, the invocation opens by foregrounding the loss of contact between human beings and the divine in the wake of the Fall:

No more of talk where God or Angel Guest  
With Man, as with his Friend, familiar us’d  
To sit indulgent, and with him partake  
Rural repast, permitting him the while  
Venial discourse unblam’d (9.1-5).

The beginning of the invocation imagines the Fall as foreclosing just the sort of inspiration its end deems necessary for the poem’s success. (If we were unsure whether to read these two moments against each other, “unblam’d” in line 5 returns us to the narrator’s anxious question of light in Book 3, “May I express thee unblam’d?,” thus linking Adam’s lost intercourse with Raphael to the Miltonic narrator’s desired colloquy with his divine Muse.) Having noticed this juxtaposition, the reader still must decide which passage is to predominate: does the narrator’s inspiration repair the alienation introduced by the Fall, as Ferry would have it, or, as I am arguing, does Heaven’s

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<sup>415</sup> Ferry, 181 and 179. I think it is noteworthy that while Ferry devotes significant attention to the invocations and premises her central argument on an analysis of them, she all but ignores the preface to Book 9 (as well as the discussion of Orpheus in Book 7!), discussing only the moment in which the narrator describes himself as inspired (9.20-24), without any of the surrounding material which calls that inspiration into question.

“distance and distaste, / Anger and just rebuke, and judgement givn” after the Fall call into question that inspiration (9.9-10)?

To answer this question, we need to be exact about what the narrator requests of his “Celestial Patroness.” Like the suffering, humble saint who, having died and arrived in heaven, can only think to ask for a warm roll with fresh butter every morning, the narrator has a surprisingly modest request: “answerable style” for his “unpremeditated Verse” (9.20, 24). To be sure, for a Renaissance writer, style was itself a rich, politically and theologically loaded term,<sup>416</sup> and yet in this context, the request reads as weirdly modest. First, the sphere of the muse’s involvement seems to have drastically contracted: imagine if the first invocation had triumphantly concluded, “What in me is dark / Illumin, what is low raise and support / That to the highth of this great Argument / I may compose appropriately elegant verse.” Second, the muse has been rendered irrelevant to the central concern of this invocation. Even as he asks for *stylistic* assistance from his muse, he frets not over style but over *argument*—that is, his choice of Christian over classical subject matter. The narrator admits himself “Not sedulous by Nature to indite / Warrs, hitherto the onely Argument / Heroic deem’d” (9.27-29), and then he argues that they are “Not that which justly gives Heroic name / To Person or to Poem” (9.40-41). Why sideline the muse entirely from the passage’s central meta-poetic thrust, its argument about argument?

For two interrelated reasons, I would suggest. First, that meta-argument is ultimately about the narrator himself, and his role in the poem. In the lines just quoted,

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<sup>416</sup> In this context, see Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) and Debora Shuger, “Conceptions of Style,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 176-86.



one would imagine that the “Person” who merits the heroic name is the poem’s protagonist. But that hero cannot be one of *Paradise Lost*’s protagonists, since “the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom / Unsung” (9.31-33) has at best an incidental place in the vignettes of Books 11 and 12. Adam and Eve, that is, are not Christian martyrs; their story is rather “tragic,” composed of “foul distrust, and breach / Disloyal on the part of Man” (9.6-7). Rather, in the passage’s continuation, it comes to seem the speaker is the poem’s hero: “higher Argument / Remaines, sufficient of it self to raise / That name” (9.42-43). The echo of the parallel, concluding lines of Book 1’s invocation (“what is low [in me] raise”) underscore the obvious sense in which the narrator seems concerned with his own, literary heroism. Book 9 features only one long-suffering, Christian hero in which the invocation invests so much meta-poetic energy: the narrator himself.

But—and this is the second reason the muse has been separated out from the question of the poem’s argument—the narrator’s Christian heroism has been constructed in large part in response to the failure of inspiration, the collapse of the possibility that divine truth might be directly realized in the world. The Christian heroic role the narrator imagines for himself is entirely passive. Vengeance is God’s, says Milton, such that the violence, indeed the heroic action, which pagan epic attribute to Achilles, Turnus, Neptune and Juno properly belong only to God, who alone may manifest “Anger and just rebuke.” By contrast, the narrator here constantly imagines himself as passive and coerced by circumstance: “I now *must* change / Those Notes to Tragic,” “*Sad* task, *yet* argument / Not less but more Heroic,” and so on. Reluctantly driven by circumstance, the narrator also dwells on his own belatedness, his delaying: “this Subject for Heroic Song /

Pleas'd me long choosing" (9.25-26), he says, worrying at the end lest "an age too late, or cold / Climat, or Years damp my intended wing / Deprest" (1.44-46). By situating himself and his poem geographically and temporally, the narrator raises the question of his political context. The "cold Climate," which Milton also discusses in Reason of Church Government (*CPW* 2:53), reflects an Aristotelian tradition associating cold Northern countries with intellectual torpor.

Given the political themes that haunt the invocations, he seems to be asking: how can I write a heroic epic here and now, in this hostile and servile England? Moreover, there is a fine paradox at play in these lines. While on the one hand, the narrator worries that his weaknesses will damn the epic, on the other hand, the form of heroism that he is attempting to practice—"Patience and Heroic Martyrdom," Christian faith before adversity—*requires* him to be distanced from the muse, to experience doubt and uncertainty, indeed to see oneself, as do the Christian heroes like Abdiel in Book 5 and the various beleaguered heroes of Books 11 and 12, as all but defeated.

What I am suggesting is that the *Paradise Lost*'s oft-noted transformation of the epic genre correlates with a more complex, ambivalent, and dark transformation of its epic narrator. The soaring, sublime revolutionary of Book 1 is gradually replaced, over the course of the invocations, with a self-doubting, restrained narrator. This narrator gradually makes us aware of the constraints of his political and social context. He correspondingly retreats from the grand pronouncements and epic ambitions of the poem's opening, towards a political quietism whose primary purpose is to shelter himself from danger. Moreover, he finally sees his poetic mission not so much as receiving the muse's influence as proceeding without clear, guaranteed access to it. The function of

this narrator, then, is not to offer an inspired, redeemed perspective on our fallen world. Rather, it is to unsettle us as readers, to make us conscious of the limits that have been placed on the narrator and the concessions they have entailed. In a sense, then, the narrator's imperfection is the poem's sharpest political statement. Aristotle suggests in the *Politics* that an ideal society is one in which the virtue of the good man and the excellent citizen are identical: the authorial Milton offers the weakened, limited, uninspired version of himself as narrator as an index of just how far his own society had strayed from the ideal.

### **Conclusion: Raphael's Mosaic Narration**

In the preceding pages, I have made two arguments. On a historical level, I have argued that Milton's ideas about rhetorical accommodation audiences were molded by broader, theological-political arguments about the possibility of compromise and coalition across difference. That polemical discourse, in Milton's hands, helped generate the idea of richly characterized, dramatically situated narrator. In the second half of the chapter, I have examined closely *Paradise Lost's* chief example of such a narrator, arguing that the poem's epic narrator is related far more complexly and ambivalently to its implicit author than has previously been recognized. That in turn has produced a basically ironic interpretation of the poem's turn to political quietism and spiritual retreat.

But one cannot help but wonder: who would be narrating *Paradise Lost* if the republican regime had stabilized itself in the late 1650s, ousting Richard Cromwell and reinvigorating parliamentary rule? That is, Milton's crucial insight—that the situation of the speaker in place and time can be regarded not merely from the statesman's perspective of rhetorical composition or the commentator's of hermeneutics and

interpretation, but also as the literary blueprint for a newly sophisticated narrative structure—takes only one, tragic form in the ironized unreliability of *Paradise Lost*'s epic narrator. What forms of narration might victory have inspired? Put in the terms of the first half of my argument, if the epic narrator correlates neatly with the *Doctrine*'s Christ tested by the Pharisees, how would the *Doctrine*'s Moses have narrated an epic poem? What if the narrator did not gradually curtail his ambitions, and his exemplar remained, not the long-suffering Christian martyr but rather, as it was in Book 1, “that Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed”?

In the broadest sense, this question remains unanswerable. Yet *Paradise Lost* contains multiple narrators, and one of the most prominent, Raphael, does in fact fit the bill: un-fallen, he has also recently enjoyed the victory of his side in pitched Civil War. Raphael, that is, is Moses to the epic narrator's Christ. While I must defer a full account of the poem's narrators to another essay, I want in closing to return to Raphael (with whom, as I always do, I began). By examining one, telling moment in Raphael's narration, I want to suggest that the literary structure of the sophisticated, fictional narrator, who has been fully imagined as a character and situated contingently in a story, has a broader application than the bind Milton found himself in after the Restoration—that is, that while I have been tracing a particular line of argument about *Paradise Lost*'s invocations and its politics, I am also discussing one of its characteristic literary structure, with applications throughout the poem.

The moment of which I am thinking occurs in one of the poem's most puzzling scenes. On the second day of heaven, when Satan unveils his invention of gunpowder and the canon, he does so by “scoffing in ambiguous words,” that is, a sequence of puns

riffing on the confusion of words with ordinance. The episode is bizarre and has provoked wide critical disagreement.<sup>417</sup> As early as 1732, Bentley writes, “These passages, of Satan and Belial’s insulting and jesting Mockery, have been often censur’d,” though he defends the puns based on their Homeric parallel.<sup>418</sup> I would suggest that Satan conflates words and weapons because he does not ultimately recognize the distinction.

Introducing the cannons, he says

Vanguard, to Right and Left the Front unfould;  
That all may see who hate us, how we seek  
Peace and composure, and with open brest  
Stand readie to receive them, if they like  
Our overture, and turn not back perverse;  
But that I doubt, however witness Heaven,  
Heav’n witness thou anon, while we discharge  
Freely our part; yee who appointed stand  
Do as you have in charge, and briefly touch  
What we propound, and loud that all may hear (6.558-567).

Satan pretends to offer peace, in a series of puns that really refer to firing the cannons, like the use of “overture” for “aperture, hole” and the deceptively literal senses of “charge” and “touch” (Fowler, 336-37). He thus resembles Charles, who repeatedly

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<sup>417</sup> Stella Revard takes the puns as evidence of Satan’s fallenness: “Satan with his irony has fragmented meaning so that things no longer are what they appear to be.” “Milton’s Critique of Heroic Warfare in *Paradise Lost* V and VI,” *SEL* 7.1 (1967), 119-139: 137. Stanley Fish reads the sequence as evidence that “the absurdity of the battle is at its height” and thus that “all the angels, good and bad, are props in a gigantic stage setting constructed for the sole purpose of providing a moment of glory for God’s only begotten son.” *Surprised By Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 193. John Wooten takes the point to be the gap between Raphael (whom he thinks incapable of recognizing the joke) and fallen angels and humans. “The Poet’s War: Violence and Virtue in *Paradise Lost*,” *SEL* 30.1 (1990), 133-150. Kent Lehnhof thinks that “the relentless puns and the transparent . . . suggest the degree to which Milton follows his medieval predecessors in using obscenity to disparage the devil.” “Scatology and the Sacred in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” *ELR* 37.3 (2007), 429-449: 431. The problem with most of these theories—and most particularly Fish’s—is that they provide a satisfactorily pious account of the episode as a whole at the expense of any account of Satan’s motives, turning him into a puppet for his own humiliation.

<sup>418</sup> Bentley, 204.

offered peace on terms that Parliamentarians like Milton insisted were insincere. Satan's ostensible vocabulary purports to address his listeners as volitional interlocutors, but instead treats both them and language as objects to be handled forcibly. He intends the word "composure," for instance, to be taken to mean "a negotiated accord," but he actually means the purely alchemical mixture of elements in gunpowder. He jokingly hopes that the angels will "turn not back perverse," which last adjective seems morally evaluative but really describes their anticipated physical contortions. In other words, Satan, like a good Hobbesian, reduces language to its brute materiality here. The irony of the passage is that his deceit requires him to hold communication and weaponry separate, even as his speech-act weaponizes itself and collapses the distinction.

The element of deceit is easily missed, since the reader easily assimilates these puns to the longer speeches after the cannon-fire, where everyone feels the jokes' full impact. But it is crucial in recognizing the meta-poetic import of this moment—its significance, as I will explain, for Raphael's broader narration to Adam. For Raphael emphasizes Satan's successful dissimulation, when he relates that the fallen angels, following Satan's instruction, "to our eyes discoverd new and strange, / A triple mounted row of Pillars laid / On Wheels" (6.571-73). Raphael, who had just recently said, "Up rose the Victor Angels... in Arms *they* stood" (5.525-26, emphasis mine), abruptly switches to the first person plural, which he uses only one other time in Book 6. He does so here to capture the perspective of the uncomprehending angels. Their confusion stands out, because Raphael generally narrates omnisciently, as when he explains, directly before Satan's speech, that Satan surrounded "his devilish Enginrie" with "shaddowing Squadrons Deep / To hide the fraud" (6.553-55). Indeed, describing the cannons as pillars

turns out to be, as it were, a first-person free indirect style,<sup>419</sup> which, returning to his retrospective omniscience, Raphael immediately qualifies: “(for like to Pillars most they seem’d / Or hollow’d bodies made of Oak or Firr / With branches lopt, in Wood or Mountain fell’d)” (6.573-75). The narrated-about Raphael resembles no one more than Adam, who, listening to Raphael’s story about the strange, incomprehensible War in Heaven, is repeatedly accommodated with just such resemblances: the march of the angels compared to the birds reporting to Adam to be named, (6.73-76), for instance, or Satan’s fall compared to the collapse of a mountain (6.195-98). They are so similar because Satan’s linguistic play and manipulation of the truth is directly relevant to Raphael’s narrating project. (Indeed, when Satan hides the cannon by “shadowing” it, Raphael uses the pivotal word of his prefatory remarks to Adam—“what if Earth / Be but the shaddow of Heav’n,” 5.574-75). Facing the cannons, Raphael is a listener who has been badly, misleadingly accommodated.

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<sup>419</sup> On some narratologies, “first-person free indirect style” is an oxymoron. Since the point of free indirect style is to incorporate first-person perspectives into third-person prose without explicitly announcing that switch, the argument runs, a necessary condition for FIS’s existence is third-person narration. I do not agree, and my “as it were” above is largely an act of cowardice. First, as I say above, Book 6 largely *is* narrated in the third-person, notably and oddly so. But even if it were not, the narrating Raphael and the narrated-about Raphael occupy such radically different epistemological standpoints on this point that there has to be *some* term for unannounced, even if subsequently flagged, switches from the former’s omniscience to the latter’s limited focalization. Only either methodological dogmatism or a Satanic taste for the invention of terminological monstrosities would lead someone to insist on withholding a perfectly good, existing term for the subtle, sneaky movement into a character’s perspective. See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), and Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982). As I read it, Banfield’s inclusion of “represented perception” would allow my example here to fit the bill (2).

This analogy between the narrated-about Raphael and Adam, on the one hand, and narrating Raphael and Satan, on the other, explains the significance of Satan and Belial's jesting after the cannon volley. The demonic puns were bad enough from the beginning, but this second round has the additional fault of superfluity: the food is so bad, and the portions so large. But Milton needs to align Satan and Belial with Raphael, as speakers who are describing (so the former think) recent victories in the angelic civil war. Moreover, their puns antithetically parallel Raphael's accommodating discourse, since both are defined by a duality of meaning: where Satan's puns constantly foreground the distance between his two meanings, Raphael's "lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" narrows the gap. In punning jestingly at their enemies, Belial and Satan establish interpretively the differences between friend and enemy. The latter, for instance, jokes that their "terms... stumbl'd many, who receives them right, / Had need from head to foot well understand" (6.624-25); ironically, the deceptive, interpretive meaning of "understand" is true, since the good angels did not understand Satan's puns. Like a demonic parody of Jesus's parables, the ambiguity separates the goats from the sheep. "Not understood, this gift they have besides," he continues, "They shew us when our foes walk not upright" (6.626-27). Demonic puns depend on the unbridgeable gap between meanings to define who is on the joke and who out.

If Satan's wordplay divides and alienate opponents, Raphael's ambiguities constantly collapse supposedly opposed poles. Even his puns work this way, as when, after offering to liken "spiritual to corporal forms," he adds provocatively:

...though what if Earth  
Be but the shaddow of Heav'n, and things therein  
Each to other like, more then on earth is thought (5.573-76).



The trick here is “shadow,” which is frequently taken as Platonic vocabulary: “It was a fundamental doctrine of Platonism,” Fowler explains, “that the phenomenal world bears to the heavenly world of Ideas the same relation as shadow to reality” (293). Yet such a dualist correspondence is irreconcilable with Milton’s monism. Raphael intends also a literal shadow: earth is heaven’s shadow because it is located below it and at further remove from the sun. The Platonic similarity between heaven and earth obscures in its shadow a monist relationship of contiguity. Celestial and terrestrial things are “like” not because they correspond allegorically, but because they are made of the same stuff. The pun, in appearing to use “shadow” metaphorically but actually using it literally, itself collapses metaphor into metonymy; its double-sense performs what Raphael declares, namely the closeness of heaven and earth, “more then on earth is thought.”

Indeed, Raphael’s accommodation, which he makes explicit in a series of interruptive direct addresses to Adam, often works in just this way. Like someone trying to sell a destination cruise to cautious travellers, he makes a big fuss of Heaven’s exotic foreignness while subtly suggesting it will basically be what you already know.

Describing Satan and his army’s march and the vastness of the “Regions they pass’d,”

Raphael explains that they are

...Regions to which  
All thy Dominion, Adam, is no more  
Then what this Garden is to all the Earth,  
And all the Sea, from one entire globose  
Stretcht into Longitude (5.750-54).

The math seems clear enough here:  $\frac{\text{Size}_{\text{All thy dominion}}}{\text{Size}_{\text{Regions they pass'd}}} \leq \frac{\text{Size}_{\text{this Garden}}}{\text{Size}_{\text{Earth+Sea}}}$ . As in Stanley

Fish’s analysis of an analogous comparison involving Satan’s wand,<sup>420</sup> Raphael’s point

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<sup>420</sup> *Surprised by Sin*, 23.

seems to be the inequality. “Think of the largest ratio you can,” he is saying to Adam, “and you still cannot even grasp how much larger heaven is than earth.” Yet the terms of the comparison undermine this apparent attempt to impress Adam with heaven’s expansiveness. First, through his comparison between terrestrial magnitudes, Raphael is implicitly suggesting to Adam that the accommodative project “to set forth / Great things by small” (6.310-11) is itself a recognizably human, earthly activity. Moreover, it turns out that even just the earthly comparison is slippery, since the globular Earth and Sea have to be compressed dimensionally even to be compared to the Garden. How many dimensions? Commentaries want “stretcht into Longitude” to describe a Mercator-like projection from a three-dimensional manifold to a planar surface (see e.g. Fowler, 304)—a projection which, by the way, necessarily distorts some of the distances involved. But no matter how long you squint at the *OED*, “longitude” stubbornly refuses to extend into a second dimension; like a deranged topologist, Raphael seems to be asking Adam to imagine pulling earth like putty until it becomes an infinitely thin straight line. The absurdity underscores the utterly everyday, quotidian presence of the incomparable: sure, these Heavenly regions are unthinkably large, but then, you can hold infinity in the palm of your hand.

More could be said about Raphael’s similes. What interest me here is the resurfacing of the younger Milton’s convictions about accommodation. Such accommodation reflects not the hierarchical condescension of a transcendent superior (here, Satanic rhetoric), but the shared rhetorical plane of a lawful, egalitarian *polis*. Further, it does not license divine lying or double-speech; instead, it rigorously demands truth, circumstantially calibrated but never twisted. Moreover, against critical

representations of Raphael's narration as somehow boring, flat or traditional,<sup>421</sup> I would emphasize that odd moment of first-person free indirect style, in which Raphael exposes his own misunderstanding precisely to align himself with his human audience. Angelic and unfallen though he may be, Raphael remains nonetheless unmistakably a character-narrator: influenced and occasionally misled by his circumstances, he speaks with a voice profoundly shaped by his own story. Moreover, precisely that story allows him to connect with Adam, to empathize with his bewilderment and to find a way nonetheless to make himself understood. Yes, the unreliability of the characterized, situated narrator can provide an ironic strategy of misdirection and oblique truth; yet it can also assist in the shared, fallible and yet earnest project of egalitarian communion and communication.

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<sup>421</sup> Ferry, 70 et seq.; Melbourne, 150 and 153.

## Chapter 5: On Becoming a Narrator: Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder*

Lucy Hutchinson's biblical epic *Order and Disorder* is frequently compared to *Paradise Lost*, especially since Hutchinson's poem was first fully published in 2001.<sup>422</sup> She seems haunted by Milton's Bogey, for next to his verse pyrotechnics and theological daring, Hutchinson's retelling of Genesis often seems restrained and rigidly orthodox. She pointedly refuses his inventions of new narrative and sticks more closely to the biblical text. *Order and Disorder*'s first Canto makes a point of not providing details of what preceded creation (which Milton discusses at length): "What dark Eternity hath kept concealed / From mortals' apprehensions, what hath been / Before the race of time did first begin, / It were presumptuous folly to inquire" (1.38-41).<sup>423</sup> Similarly, writing about the angelic revolt, she insists:

But the circumstances that we cannot know  
Of their rebellion and their overthrow  
We will not dare t'invent, nor will we take  
Guesses from the reports themselves did make  
To their old priests, to whom they did devise  
To inspire some truths, wrapped up in many lies (4.43-7).

Both moments rebuke Milton. The second targets his catalogue of demons, and particular its reliance on John Selden's comparative demonology, which collects and collates material from Aramaic and Greco-Roman sources.<sup>424</sup> The specificity of these critiques

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<sup>422</sup> Lucy Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, ed. by David Norbrook (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). Cited throughout in-text by canto and line.

<sup>423</sup> On this point, she follows Calvin (and a longer orthodox tradition). "We cannot and should not go behind God's act of creation in our speculation." John Calvin, *The Institutes of The Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1.14.1. Accessed online at <http://www.reformed.org/books/institutes>. Cited hereafter in-text.

<sup>424</sup> See Jason Rosenblatt, *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74-92 as well as the discussion in Abraham Stoll, *Milton and Monotheism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 25-72.

highlights the importance of Milton's epic (and its theological flaws) to her. Passages like these lay the groundwork for later criticism's opposition between the two poets.

The contrast extends beyond such specific allusions. Whereas Milton presents his poem as an act of epic audacity, Hutchinson focuses intensely on her own limitations. While a biblical epic frequently begins with a modesty topos, hers is particular developed, because it focuses upon her particular regret and shame at having translated Lucretius. She begins the poem by aligning her mind's deficiencies with the chaos that preceded God's harmonious creation:

In these outgoings would I sing his praise,  
But my weak sense with the too glorious rays  
Is struck with such confusion that I find  
Only the world's first Chaos in my mind,  
Where light and beauty lie wrapped up in seed  
And cannot from be from the dark prison freed  
Except that Powere by whom the world was made  
My soul in her imperfect strugglings aid,  
Her rude conceptions into forms dispose  
And words impart which may those forms disclose (1.21-30).

Her reference to "Seed" alludes to Lucretius, since *semina rerum* is one of his central terms for atoms. By equating Lucretian seeds with a prison, Hutchinson immediately clarifies her rejection of his philosophy. Indeed, this passage expresses obliquely her poem's broader project. In her preface, she announces her goal explicitly. She wants to recover the Christianity she compromised by translating Lucretius's heretical philosophical epic:

These meditations were... fixed upon to reclaim a busy roving thought from wandering in the pernicious and perplexed maze of human inventions; whereinto the vain curiosity of youth had drawn me to consider and translate the account some old poets and philosophers [i.e. Lucretius] give of the original of things" (3).

In aligning divine creation, poetic creativity, and personal renovation, Hutchinson invokes a commonplace of sacred epic (compare Milton's "What in me is dark / Illumin, what is low raise and support" and Cowley's "Such was *Gods Poem*, this *Worlds new Essay*").<sup>425</sup> Whereas Milton admits either to a vague, generalized sense of human limitation or to his physical blindness, as in his epic's second invocation (3.1-35), Hutchinson confesses a particular, biographical history of a spiritual "dark prison." She is more invested than Milton is in her own, particular depravity as her poem's starting point—a humility seemingly correlated with the fact that, unlike Milton, her poem does not promise "to soar / Above th' Aonian Mount" or pursue "things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime" (*PL* 1.14-16).

But frequent critical recognition of Hutchinson's disavowal of Miltonic imagination has ignored the subtler reworking of *Paradise Lost* in the modesty topos above. There, Hutchinson *does* discuss the pre-creation past, insofar as she finds "the world's first Chaos in my mind." Indeed, she seems to allude to Lucretius by way of Milton. As several readers have noticed, Milton's pre-creation Chaos draws heavily on *De Rerum Natura*, and thus when Hutchinson places the Lucretian seeds before creation, she is thinking of Milton's Lucretius.<sup>426</sup> Indeed, Hutchinson's "dark prison" also recalls

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<sup>425</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 1.22-3 and Abraham Cowley, *Poems: Miscellanies, The Mistress, Pindarique Odes, Davideis, Verses Written on Several Occasions*, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 253: 1.451. Cited by book and line number, using the lineation of "The Abraham Cowley Text and Image Archive" at <http://cowley.lib.virginia.edu/>. Notes cited by page and note number.

<sup>426</sup> See e.g. David Quint, "Fear of Falling: Icarus, Phaethon, and Lucretius in *Paradise Lost*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57.3 (Autumn, 2004), 847-881; Katherine Calloway "Milton's Lucretian Anxiety Revisited," *Renaissance and Reformation* 32.3 (Summer, 2009), 79-97; and John Leonard, "Milton, Lucretius, and 'the Void Profound of

*Paradise Lost* Book 1, in which Satan bemoans “this dark opprobrious Den of shame, / The Prison of [God’s] Tyranny,” reinforcing this passage’s connection to Milton (1.58-9). Thus, Hutchinson’s meditation on her own chaotic interior *does* allow her to imagine the pre-creation past (as Milton does), even if only metaphorically. In its retelling of the creation of light, Hutchinson’s poem exploits her biographical fall into translating Lucretius to imagine, however hazily, the world before creation.

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In more than just this small detail, the dichotomy between Milton, the imaginative visionary, and Hutchinson, the orthodox scribe, has been vastly overstated. Against the critical tradition opposing the two, I argue that by drawing on precisely the most orthodox elements of her Calvinist, Reformed theology, Hutchinson accessed what she saw as a distinctive, visionary insight into the biblical text. Yet because her special insight paradoxically springs from her sense of her own depravity and limitation, it cannot produce the lavish, ornate inventions of entirely extra-biblical or obviously authorial narrative. Rather, her subtle manipulations of allegory, typology, and finally, narrative perspective highlight how her own experiences allow her distinctive knowledge of God.

Hutchinson’s poetics derive from her distinctly Calvinist notions of divine accommodation, and particularly what Edward Dowey calls the “correlate structure” of Calvinist theology. On Dowey’s account, Calvin radicalizes the traditional Christian idea

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Unessential Night,” in *Living Texts: Interpreting Milton*, ed. K.A. Prui and C.W. Durham (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2000); and Phillip Hardie, “The Presence of Lucretius in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Quarterly* 29.1 (1995), 13-24. Scholars debate whether *Paradise Lost* alludes to Lucretius to refute and contain him (Quint) or whether allusions to him significantly subvert the poem’s explicit Christian commitments (Leonard).

that a perfect God accommodates God's word to limited humans. Christian theologians have long employed accommodation as an interpretive tool, particularly to explain the apparent barbarisms of the Mosaic law and to resolve specific textual problems. In part, his humanist training expanded the range of textual problems to be solved. More importantly, accommodation had traditionally focused on the Old Testament and had viewed the relevant human weaknesses as primarily those of the vulgar Israelites. But Calvin's Protestant commitment to the incommensurability of human beings and God, and particularly to the inescapable corruption of human faculties, led him to see accommodation as a necessary, ubiquitous feature of revelation.

As a result of these shifts, Calvin accords accommodation a central place in his epistemology. For Calvin, believers must oscillate endlessly between how they know themselves and how they know God. For Calvin, one continually struggles to understand God's perfection and human weakness by comparing the two and reflecting on the enormity of the gap. In this system, human depravity perversely becomes an epistemological asset, one on which much of his religious system rests. Since our ideas of God are accommodated to our weakness, that weakness distorts the rays of God's illumination like a funhouse mirror: understand the perverse curvature of our fallen nature, and one can reconstruct the divine light in its original form.

This epistemology shapes the writing of *Order and Disorder* and, in particular, a riddle that has long puzzled Hutchinson's readers: if the Bible is perfectly expressed, its every word divinely inspired, then what remains for a human poet? A Reformed Puritan like Hutchinson was bound to believe, as Calvin had proclaimed, that:

Since no daily responses are given from heaven, and the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance, the full



authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized, unless they are believed to have come from heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them (*Institutes*, 1.7.2).

Though the point is debated, Calvin, as Edward A. Dowey argues, seems to have “held a mechanical or literal dictation theory of the writing of the Bible,” as evidenced by his frequent use of phrases like “*dictante spiritu sancto*” and passages in which “Calvin describes the actual mechanics of inspiration in terms of dictation.”<sup>427</sup> Thus, Calvin’s disciple Theodore de Beza, introducing his play *Abraham Sacrifiant*, rejects the inclusion of material “devised of man’s braine contrarie to the Scripture.”<sup>428</sup> Standard doctrine affirmed that God’s authority lay behind each of Scripture’s words. For instance, English Calvinist William Ames wrote in his popular theological treatise, *The Marrow of*

*Theology*:

In all those things made known by supernatural inspiration, whether matters of right or fact, God inspired not only the subjects to be written about but dictated and suggested the very words in which they should be set forth. But this was done with a subtle tempering so that every writer might use the manner of speaking which most suited his person and condition.<sup>429</sup>

Ames’s second sentence, to which I will return, complicates the meaning of a Reformed dictation theory. In claiming that the original writers of biblical texts—prophets like Isaiah and Moses—left an imprint on those texts’ styles, or rather that the Holy Spirit adopted their personal styles, Ames unmistakably humanizes the Bible’s final form.

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<sup>427</sup> Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 99, 92. More generally, see 90-106. See also David L. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 26-32. Dowey summarizes the literature for and against the claim that Calvin believed in a dictation theory of revelation.

<sup>428</sup> Theodore Beza, *Abraham Sacrifiant*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1577), quoted in Peter C. Herman, *Squitter-wits and Muse-haters: Sidney, Spenser, Milton and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 229.

<sup>429</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. by John Dykstra Eusden (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1983), 186.

Nonetheless, the initial, straightforward theological claim would seem to restrict severely the artistic creativity an orthodox poet could employ in handling the Genesis material.

Ames's dogmatics sharpens the problem of Hutchinson's authority in *Order and Disorder* considerably, since Hutchinson understood herself to be a good Calvinist. But in fact, critics have faced the problem of authority in all of Hutchinson's works, not just her sacred poetry. Hutchinson was the first female author in English to produce works drawing on classical learning, political involvement, and biblical expertise.<sup>430</sup> But each of her three major works—a translation of *De Rerum Natura*, a biography of her husband Colonel Hutchinson, and *Order and Disorder*—parasitically draws upon a male authority. Given these dependencies, how and in what sense is Hutchinson an author?

On the one hand, second-wave feminist critics have often claimed that writing afforded Hutchinson an escape from the gendered limitations of her domestic life.<sup>431</sup>

Sandra Findley and Elaine Hobby, for instance, celebrate her construction of an authorial

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<sup>430</sup> Dale Spender situates Hutchinson as a progenitor of the novel. See *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* (London: Pandora Press, 1986), 31-2.

<sup>431</sup> More recent feminist scholarship has questioned whether the strong distinction between public and private assumed by these scholars accurately accounts for the situation of Renaissance English women. Ironically, as Margaret J. M. Ezell argues, such scholarship (and Virginia Woolf's famous essay *A Room of One's Own*) may have inadvertently reified the exclusion of Renaissance women from the literary sphere in the attempt to recover them. See *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), as well as subsequent strands in the criticism that argue that the dominant culture contained conflicting gender roles and perhaps even assigned merit to artistic production in gentlewomen. See e.g. Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 107: "For women of certain social ambitions, writing was neither unusual not straightforwardly transgressive, but one of many acceptable means of advancing family fortunes."

“‘I’ who can stand outside [her] marriage.”<sup>432</sup> Susan Cook goes further, arguing that the *Memoirs* tell Hutchinson’s “own story as much as [they] tell that of her husband” and “create an authorial subjectivity that emphasizes her existences within the biography of her husband.”<sup>433</sup> On the other hand, Hutchinson memorably describes herself as her husband’s “shadow” in the *Memoirs*,<sup>434</sup> and David Norbrook describes *Order and Disorder* in his introduction as “a secondary form of writing, one whose main aim is not to tell a story but to summarize it” (xxv).<sup>435</sup>

As noted above, the frequent comparison between *Order and Disorder* and *Paradise Lost* has tended to emphasize Hutchinson’s austere, Puritan rejection of Milton’s fabulous inventions. Indeed, Sarah C. E. Ross argues that biblical paraphrase—which was often written by women, largely remained in manuscript, and usually “meditated” upon, rather than fictively expanding, the biblical text—provides a better context for Hutchinson’s poem than does biblical epic.<sup>436</sup> Similarly, Robert Wilcher

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<sup>432</sup> Sandra Findley and Elaine Hobby, “Seventeenth-Century Women’s Autobiography,” in *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Francis Barker (Colchester, Essex: Hewitt Photo-Lith, 1981), 26. See also Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women’s Writing 1649-88* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 79: “There are two ‘Lucy Hutchinsons’ in the *Life*: a ‘she’ who is a devoted wife, dutiful to her husband in all things and pleased to be so; and an ‘I’ who is the author, the creating artist who stands outside the relationship.” Quoted in Goldberg, 300n24.

<sup>433</sup> Susan Cook, “‘The Story I most particularly intend’: the narrative style of Lucy Hutchinson,” *Critical Survey* 5.3 (1993), 271-77: 272 and 276.

<sup>434</sup> Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, ed. N. H. Keeble (London: Everyman, 1995), 32. But see N. H. Keeble, “‘But the Colonel’s Shadow’: Lucy Hutchinson, Women’s Writing, and the Civil War,” in *Literature and the English Civil War*, ed. Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 227-47 at 246n39.

<sup>435</sup> For similar sentiments, see Robert Wilcher, “‘Adventurous song’ or ‘presumptuous folly’: The Problem of “utterance” in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Lucy Hutchinson’s *Order and Disorder*,” *The Seventeenth Century* 21:2 (2006), 304-314.

<sup>436</sup> Sarah C. E. Ross, “Epic, Meditation, or Sacred History? Women and Biblical Verse Paraphrase in Seventeenth-Century England,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in*

distinguishes between the first five cantos, published in 1679, which cover the Creation and the Fall, include God as a central character, and have high theological stakes, and the fifteen cantos left in manuscript, which cover less mythological, more human-centered material later in Genesis. He reads the former as straight-laced biblical paraphrase, in the fashion of Frances Quarles, but in the latter, he identifies the imaginatively expansive and racy generic markers of romance.<sup>437</sup> Much of the criticism of *Order and Disorder* seems to emphasize one of the title's two terms at the expense of the other; she is either bucking patriarchy and asserting her own authority, or she is dutifully following the demands of orthodoxy. Wilcher's reading cleverly splits the difference: Hutchinson is both an orderly, obedient Puritan woman (in Books I-V) and a disorderly, authorial individual (in Books VI-XX).

By contrast, I argue that authorship provides the wrong framework for evaluating *Order and Disorder*. In the context of seventeenth-century English biblical writing, Norbrook's category of "secondary writing," and its implicit opposition to authorial creation, is misleading. Reading Hutchinson's treatment of Genesis 1-3, I argue that she takes considerable literary license not only with Esau's lusts and Sarah's beauty (as Wilcher shows) but also with more divine material. But that license expresses itself not so much in the imagination of new material as in the arrangement, explanation, and refashioning of the biblical verses themselves. Hutchinson's creativity is recognizable in her affinities not with Milton, but with commentators like Calvin and Henry Ainsworth.

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*Early Modern England, c. 1530-1700*, ed. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Willie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed online at [oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199686971.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199686971-e-30](http://oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199686971.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199686971-e-30).

<sup>437</sup> Robert Wilcher, "Lucy Hutchinson and Genesis: Paraphrase, Epic, Romance," *English* 59 (2010), 25-42.

In particular, the Reformed use of accommodation suggested that the Bible, though authored by God, has human narrators who mediate the text for its human audience; its styles, as Ames writes, and also I think its perspectives, derive directly from God but are patterned to reflect the personalities and situations of human narrators.

I suggest that Hutchinson, in keeping with Reformed views of accommodation, imagined herself as an alternate narrator for Genesis's core material.<sup>438</sup> Since she understood the particulars of Genesis's narration to reflect the encounter between God and a particular human, those particulars were at once divinely authored and relative to a specific audience (that is, the human scribe or prophet). Accommodation thus licensed her to rewrite its material so as to preserve the text's doctrinal commitments and historical claims while modifying its tone and narration. In Ames's language, Hutchinson took it upon herself to imagine Genesis in the "manner of speaking which most suited [her own] person and condition." In particular, by gendering her narrator female, Hutchinson believed she could access a originally female, yet potentially universal experience of fallen humanity. Rather than choosing between "Order" and "Disorder," I read the two terms in dialectical tension: Hutchinson's particular fall affords her unique, redemptive theological insights.

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<sup>438</sup> Miltonists have used accommodation in various ways to posit that Milton ironizes his narrator, whose statements reflect only partial truth. See William G. Madsen, *From Shadowy Types to Truth, Studies in Milton's Symbolism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Victoria Silver, *Imperfect Sense: The Predicament of Milton's Irony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Abraham Stoll, *Milton and Monotheism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), and David Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 93-122. But these all accounts see God's accommodations as models for the poet's own writing. By contrast, I am suggesting that Hutchinson saw herself not as an accommodator, but as a medium for someone else's (that is) God's accommodation

My argument below has three steps. First, I discuss the history of accommodation, showing how Calvin draws on the most radical strands in the late antique and medieval theological traditions. Calvin's thinking on accommodation significantly complicates his dictation theory discussed above, since while God authors every word of Scripture, God does so in a way that imitates the style of the biblical book's writer (here I mean "writer" in the limited sense of the person who physically wrote the book), essentially crafting a human narrator or distinct author of each biblical book. Second, I review Hutchinson's theorization of her own literary practice. Rather than sharply dividing between Hutchinson as her husband's shadow, a passive character in someone else's story, and Hutchinson as an independent, imaginative author who generates new material, I argue that we should understand Hutchinson as a narrator, whose agency consists in the selection and presentation of another author's work and who places her parasitic relation with that author front and center. Turning to the biblical stories of *Order and Disorder*, I argue that Hutchinson imagines herself as a specifically female narrator, and I show how this narration involves considerable revision of the canonical text. Finally, I turn to the poem's remarkable slippages between narrator and characters, which emphasize the important results of an alternative narrative perspective.

### **The Hardness of Your Hearts: Matthew and the Early Accommodation Tradition**

The Christian doctrine of accommodation is at least as old as the New Testament itself.<sup>439</sup> For instance, in Matthew 19, Jesus tells a group of Pharisees that, based on

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<sup>439</sup> The literature on accommodation is now large. See Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). Accommodation shows up in non-Christian late antiquity as well. Ford Lewis Battles and others cite, for instance, passage in Philo about anthropomorphism ("God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,"

Genesis 2:24, divorce is forbidden (“Have ye not read, that [God] said, ‘For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?’ [Genesis 2:24] Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:4-6).<sup>440</sup> When the Pharisees ask how he squares this prohibition with the Mosaic law of divorce in Deuteronomy 24, Jesus replies:

Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery (Matthew 19:8-9, KJV).

Jesus’ substantive conclusion, that divorce is permitted only in cases of adultery, would likely have been unexceptionable. The position is identical to Beit Shammai’s in the Mishnah, where it is presented as a plain-sense reading of Deuteronomy.<sup>441</sup> But strikingly, Jesus chooses instead to argue that Moses modified the law because of the Israelites’ weakness. The Mishnaic parallel shows the Jesus need not have justified his position on such radical grounds. Unlike Beit Shammi, he deliberately opens the possibility that the entire Mosaic code might be similarly relativized. Indeed, the episode contains multiple types of accommodation, for it continues:

His disciples say unto him, “If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.” But he said unto them, “All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it

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*Interpretation* 31 (1977), 19-38). Others have argued that the Church fathers draw on the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition (which had long been concerned with howhere. See especially John Reumann, *The Use of oikonomia and Related Terms in Greek Sources to about A.D. 100 as a Background for Patristic Applications*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1957) and “Oikonomia as ‘Ethical Accommodation’ in the Fathers, and its Pagan Backgrounds,” *Studia Patristica* 3.1 (1961), 370-79.

<sup>440</sup> Here and elsewhere, I follow the King James Version except when otherwise noted.

<sup>441</sup> See Mishnah Gittin 9:10 in *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah*, ed. Hanokh Albeck (Tel Aviv: Dvir Co., 1955), 304.

is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Matthew 19:10-12, KJV).

Rhetorical accommodation, which Jesus first uses as a historical explanation for Deuteronomy, now extends to Jesus' contemporaries, only some of whom are capable of receiving the full, anti-marriage implication of his words. Indeed, though Jesus defends his overturning of Deuteronomy by reference to Genesis, if those able to become "eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" ought to do so, then indeed not only Deuteronomic divorce but also Edenic matrimony seems a conditional dispensation. Once a given scriptural passage is relativized as an accommodation, *all* Scripture is, at least potentially, open to a similar dismissal.

Accommodation thus contains within itself a radical, destabilizing attitude to scriptural authority. But its uses in late antique Christianity often reflect only Jesus' initial, limited account of accommodation as motivated specifically by the *Jews'* weaknesses. In particular, the Church Fathers faced a dilemma in the gap between the Old Testament's rituals and sacrificial laws and the New Testament's disposal of those laws. But if God intended to suspend the Mosaic code, why had God commanded it at all? One solution interpreted Mosaic laws as figures or types that anticipated their fulfillment in Christ.<sup>442</sup> But others, like the second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr, understood the Mosaic ritual laws to be accommodations. As such, Justin says to his Jewish interlocutor Trypho, Christians could safely ignore "the fleshly circumcision,

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<sup>442</sup> See, famously, Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11-76. In particular, Auerbach writes, "the figural interpretation changed the Old Testament from a book of laws and a history of the people of Israel into a series of figures of Christ and the Redemption" (52).



and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts.” These were, Justin explains, alluding to Matthew, “enjoined you... on account of your transgressions and *the hardness of your hearts*” (emphasis added).<sup>443</sup> As Stephen Benin shows, those who preferred to explain the Mosaic law through accommodation, rather than through allegory or figure, frequently understood that law code to be largely a response to the construction of the golden calf, which showed how attached the Israelites were to pagan rites, necessitating a “prophylactic device to prevent the Israelites from reverting to idolatry.”<sup>444</sup>

The developmental, historical character of much early discourse about accommodation is evident in the metaphors used to explain the concept.<sup>445</sup> For instance, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (1 Corinthians 3:2, KJV).<sup>446</sup>

Imagining the accommodated audience as children became a central trope of accommodation discourse, the implication being that earlier teachings were developmentally appropriate, simplified versions of truths later to be related in full detail. A similar metaphor imagines God as the doctor and the accommodated as sick people.

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<sup>443</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo* Chapter 18, in A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). Access online on 8/30/2017 at [oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1969](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1969).

<sup>444</sup> Benin, 28. One indication of the centrality of Mosaic sacrifice law to late antique Christian discourse about accommodation is that Benin’s book, the only full-length scholarly study of accommodation, was adapted from a dissertation about Jewish and Christian accounts of sacrifice (*Thou Shalt Have No Other God before Me: Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Thought*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley, 1980)).

<sup>445</sup> This historical quality is emphasized by Amos Funkenstein, who argues that early modern historicism developed in part from ideas about accommodation. See *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 202-90.

<sup>446</sup> See also Hebrews 5:12.

Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, explains the Mosaic code's compromise with

Israelite weakness in these terms:

And therefore like a tutor or physician He partly removes and partly condones ancestral habits, conceding some little of what tended to pleasure... For it is no easy matter to change from those habits which custom and use have made honorable. For instance, the first [covenant] cut off the idol, but left the sacrifices; the second, while it destroyed the sacrifices did not forbid circumcision. Then, once men had submitted to the curtailment, they also yielded that which had been conceded to them... Paul is proof of this; for having at one time administered circumcision, he advanced till he could say, "and I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I suffer persecution?" (cf. Gal. 5). His former conduct belonged to the temporary dispensation, his latter to maturity.<sup>447</sup>

Gregory's historicism is evident in this passage's elaboration of an essentially static likeness (God as healer, humans as patients) into a compact narrative, a developmental sequence. The metaphor of illness, unlike that of childhood, implies that the weakness to be accommodated is an acquired, unnatural fault. "Those habits which custom and use have made honorable" are historical accidents rather than essential facts. But more generally, sick people can heal and children generally mature. By accommodating, God does not just condescend to human beings, he modifies us so as to eventually render his condescension obsolete. These metaphors of childhood and illness, as Benin shows, are ubiquitous in late antique discussion of accommodation.<sup>448</sup> Early patristic accommodation, then, largely domesticated Matthew's radicalism, accepting Jesus's historical contextualization and consequent dismissal of the Mosaic covenant without

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<sup>447</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes in Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Graeca* vol. 35-6, ed. Jacques Paul Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857-1912), 31, 25. Translated and quoted in Benin, 42.

<sup>448</sup> Thus, for example, Basil the Great writes, "medical imagery was near at hand" (Benin, 35), Eusebius thinks the Israelites are "like infants and invalids" (21), Origen speaks of a "language adapted for infants and nurslings" (13), and Theodoret reads sacrifices as "a medication to keep the Jews free from idolatry" (71). See also the discussion of Augustine (98).

positing the more destabilizing possibility that Christian religious discourse itself might be constantly accommodated.

### **Augustine Unites Accommodation and Typology**

The Church Fathers do not only employ accommodation to explain the Israelites. Some see it as a response to generalized human, rather than just Israelite, weakness and thus do not restrict God's accommodations temporally or historically.<sup>449</sup> John of Chrysostom and others use accommodation to explain Jesus's style of teaching,<sup>450</sup> while Origen and Athanasius of Alexandria imagine the incarnation itself as a perfect God's accommodation to imperfect humans.<sup>451</sup>

While these theologians all applied accommodation to specific details of Christian theology, Augustine went a good deal further. By placing God's accommodation within his broader, Platonic theory of signs, Augustine collapses the distinction between accommodation and typology. For Martyr and others like him, accommodation provides an alternative to typology. Typology (or allegory) posits a deeper, eternal meaning for Old Testament events, such that even if a particular ritual's outward form is dispensable, its meaning is perennial.<sup>452</sup> Those who saw circumcision as typologically foreshadowing

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<sup>449</sup> See, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa's allegorical discussions of the "coats of skin" God provides Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:21 in Benin, 39.

<sup>450</sup> See Benin, 69.

<sup>451</sup> Origen: "The incarnate Lord, like the written revelation in inspired Scripture, is a veil that must be penetrated. It is an accommodation to our present capacities in life" (quoted in Benin, 11). As Benin explains, "For Athanasius, the Incarnation was an act of accommodation, not an act of promotion as he understood the Arians to assert" (25).

<sup>452</sup> Auerbach is concerned, in both "Figura" and the Dante chapter of *Mimesis*, to distinguish figures from allegories: "I stress the fact that a figural schema permits both its poles—the figure and the fulfillment—to retain the characteristics of concrete historical reality, in contradistinction to what obtains with symbolic or allegorical personifications, so that figure and fulfillment—although the one 'signifies' the other—have a significance which is not incompatible with their being real" (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality*

baptism could derive details about the relevant, later Christian rite from its type: that baptism should be performed on babies or that those lacking baptism were excluded from the church. By contrast, if circumcision or sacrifices were merely accommodations, then when no longer necessary, they retain no more interest than a teacher's simplified heuristic would to an educated adult or a physical therapy program would to a healthy athlete.

Augustine maintains the Christian reading of Old Testament rituals as accommodated to the Israelites' weakness and uses traditional metaphors for this accommodation. But placed in the broader context of his thought, accommodation takes on a new significance. He writes in *De Vera Religione*:

Whoever denies that both Testaments come from the same God for the reason that our people are not bound for the same sacraments as those by which the Jews were bound and still are bound, cannot deny that it would be perfectly just for one father of a family to lay one set of commands upon those for whom he judged a harsher servitude to be useful, and a different set on those whom he deigned to adopt into the position of sons... whoever thinks in this way may find difficulty in explaining how a single physician prescribes one medicine to weaker patients through his assistants, and another by himself to stronger patients, all to restore health.<sup>453</sup>

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in *Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 195). But in the context of accommodation discourse, the more important distinction is between explanations of Old Testament events or laws that correlate them with permanently relevant signifieds at all and explanations that assign them merely instrumental, temporary purposes.

<sup>453</sup> *De Vera Religione*, CSEL 77, ed. Gunther Weigel (Vienna: CSEL, 1961), 17:34 (translation Benin, 98): "Quisquis autem ideo negat utrumque Testamentum ab uno Deo esse posse, quia non eisdem sacramentis tenetur populus noster, quibus Iudaei tenebantur vel adhuc tenentur; potest dicere non posse fieri ut unus paterfamilias iustissimus aliud imperet eis quibus servitutem duriores iudicat, aliud eis quos in filiorum gradum adoptare dignatur... potest qui hoc putat perturbari, si unus medicus alia per ministros suos imbecillioribus, alia per seipsum valentioribus praecipiat ad reparandam, vel obtinendam salutem."

Tell-tale metaphors of God as *paterfamilias* and doctor reinforce the argument here about God's accommodation. Yet by the logic of Augustine's metaphors, *both* Christians and Jews receive commands that are, to different extents, accommodated.

Augustine not only expands accommodation to cover Christian rituals, he also places accommodation within the context of his Platonic theory of signs. Jewish sacrifices, he writes, "in one and various ways all signified the one sacrifice which we now celebrate. Now that this sacrifice has been revealed... those are no longer binding as an act of worship, but retain their authority as a sign."<sup>454</sup> Crucially, Augustine understands this form of signification as precisely analogous to language. He claims, for instance, that those who "suppose that these visible sacrifices are suitable for other Gods, but that for the one God... only the invisible... sacrifices are proper" err because they "do not realize that the visible sacrifices are symbols of the invisible offerings, *just as spoken words are symbols of things*" (emphasis added).<sup>455</sup> Similarly, by comparing the Jewish sacrifices to the rhetorician's elegant variation, Augustine explains how these sacrifices, despite their complexity and multiplicity, all ultimately signify Christ's sacrifice: "This one sacrifice was prefigured by many rites, just as many words are used to refer to one thing."<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> *Contra Faustum* 12:9, in Benin, 102-3.

<sup>455</sup> *City of God* 10:19, translated in Benin, 104. "Qui autem putant haec visibilia sacrificia diis aliis congruere, illi vero tamquam invisibili invisibilia et maiora maiori meliorique meliora, qualia sunt purae mentis et bonae voluntatis officia: profecto nesciunt haec ita signa esse illorum, sicut verba sonantia signa sunt rerum."

<sup>456</sup> *City of God* 10:20, in Benin, 104. "Huius veri sacrificii multiplicia variaque signa erant sacrificia prisca sanctorum, cum hoc unum per multa figuraretur, tamquam verbis multis res una diceretur."

Crucially, Augustine maintains that all signs fail to capture God, since all signs present themselves in imperfect, human communicative systems.<sup>457</sup> “Even the divinely given signs contained in the holy Scriptures,” he writes in *De Doctrina Christiana*, “have been communicated to us by the human beings who wrote them.”<sup>458</sup> God is “unspeakable” but also “should not be called unspeakable, because even when this word is spoken, something is spoken.”<sup>459</sup> Augustine concludes that we are permitted to talk about God only through God’s (accommodating) permission. Significantly, situating accommodation in a linguistic, hermeneutic register, as opposed to using metaphors from pedagogy and medicine, renders accommodation not merely universal but necessarily, metaphysically so. Indeed, Augustine consistently equates Jewish and Christian sacraments ontologically: they are “material symbols... nothing else than visible speech (*verba visibilia*), which, though sacred, is changeable and transitory.”<sup>460</sup> Indeed, Augustine struggles to *differentiate* Jewish and Christian sacraments and show why the latter are superior; in *Contra Faustum*, he tellingly compares them to “the form of the verb” changing according to tense: Jewish sacrifices refer prophetically to the true sacrifice in the future, Christ’s passion constituted that sacrifice in (what was) present, and Christian rites refer backwards to Christ’s sacrifice to the past.<sup>461</sup> Although I am using the term “typology” to capture the metaphorical relationship that obtains between

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<sup>457</sup> For Augustine’s theory of signs more generally, see B. Darrel Jackson, “The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*,” *Revue d’Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 15:1-2 (1969), 9-50 and R. A. Markus, “St. Augustine on Signs,” *Phronesis* 2.1 (1957), 60-83.

<sup>458</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), II:II, p. 31.

<sup>459</sup> *On Christian Doctrine*, II:VI, p. 10.

<sup>460</sup> *Contra Faustum* 19:16, in Benin, 107.

<sup>461</sup> *Contra Faustum*, 19:16, 20:21.

Old and New Testament rites, Augustine's account of God's accommodations through signs differs from standard typological thinking in at least one crucial respect. It is not that Jewish sacrifices are the signifiers and Christian rites the signified. Rather, *both* Jewish and Christian rites signify the Christ event; they are ontologically, if not religiously, equivalent.<sup>462</sup>

By connecting accommodation with hermeneutics and language, Augustine ensures that God's past accommodations remain useful for the present. Even when the historical situation and thus the accommodated signifiers have changed, they still reveal the nature of the signified. They do so because Augustine rejects purely arbitrary signification and believes that signs resemble their objects. While he admits that *signa data* ("given," as opposed to "natural" signs) derive their authority from human convention ("People did not agree to them because they were already meaningful; rather they became meaningful because people agreed to use them"), he nonetheless insists,

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<sup>462</sup> This account does indeed run up against Augustine's explicit statement, "The sacraments of the old law only promised a Savior, whereas ours give salvation." *Proem.* in Ps. 73, quoted by Calvin (*Institutes*, 4.14.26), who has no other recourse than to say that Augustine is being "hyperbolic." When dealing with the Scholastics, by contrast, Calvin can forthrightly admit, "The Scholastic dogma... by which the difference between the sacraments of the old and the new dispensation is made so great, that the former did nothing but shadow forth the grace of God, while the latter actually confer it, must be altogether exploded" (4.14.23), though he thus runs afoul of numerous Pauline texts (Col 2:17, Heb 9:12, Heb 8:4-5, and others) that disparage rituals from the old dispensation. He can only maintain that they do not mean what they say: Paul "does not speak simply, but by way of reply." Calvin is consistently pursuing a theologically radical idea on which Augustine waffles, namely that sacraments are merely metaphorical. Indeed, Calvin's consistent radicalism has consequences, famously for his theory of the Eucharist, but also in numerous smaller details. For instance, Aquinas (*Summa*, III<sup>a</sup> q. 68 a. 9) had claimed that paedobaptism effects spiritual rebirth and the remission of original sin acquired through carnal birth. The practice is so important that in circumstances of great need, it may be performed even by a lay woman. By contrast, Calvin can mount only a weak defense of paedobaptism, which he does *not* regard as necessary for salvation or effective of it. Thus, he concludes that *even* in cases of extremity, women cannot perform infant baptism, since it has merely symbolic significance.

“everyone aims at some degree of similarity when they use signs, make signs as similar as possible to the things which are signified.”<sup>463</sup> Thus no sign has merely historical or conventional authority; sacraments used to signify God’s presence predictably reveal something about that presence. By assimilating accommodation into a broader theory of typology and of signs, Augustine deemphasizes the historical obsolescence of God’s accommodations to the Israelites, since they remain hermeneutically useful even after their abrogation as law. Instead of focusing on what separates Israelite religion from Christianity, he emphasizes their similarities to each other and to the underlying spiritual reality.

### **Calvinist Accommodations: Conviction, Exegesis, and Epistemology**

If Augustine transformed the doctrine of accommodation by placing it in a universal, semantic context, early Reformers connected it with a strong theory of human depravity. In particular, Calvin uses the term with two distinctly new, radical emphases. First, like other Reformers, Calvin believed in the weakness of the fallen will and the resulting impossibility of fulfilling the law. He thus thought that the Mosaic covenant accommodated the Israelites not by presenting them with statutes that they could fulfill, but perversely by giving them laws that they would *fail* to obey, thus alerting them to, or “convicting” them of, their fallenness. As a result, Calvin linked Mosaic law even more directly to universal fallenness than had Augustine and deemphasized the unique historical circumstances of the Israelites. Second, Calvin understood the principle of accommodation to be of central epistemological significance. For Calvin, the logic of

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<sup>463</sup> *On Christian Doctrine*, II:XXIV-XXV, p. 53.



accommodation means that careful inspection of one's fallen self contributes uniquely to knowledge of God.

On the standard account of Mosaic accommodation, God accommodated the vulgar Israelites, weakened spiritually, with easier laws adapted to their low spiritual state. Calvin rejects this account entirely, because fallen humans are utterly incapable of keeping God's law or attaining salvation thereby:

If we were to try to do perfectly all that God commands, we would find God revealing just what a grievous state of condemnation we are in, by bringing our failure to the forefront... But if we pause to place our lives alongside his commandments, we will find that although it appears that God is willing to be so kind and indulgent towards us as to reward us if we serve him and keep his law, the purpose of this is to plunge us deeper into the pit in which we already find ourselves by nature.<sup>464</sup>

Because Calvin takes salvation to be *sola gratia*, he cannot endorse the traditional view that the Mosaic law compromises between divine perfection and human weakness.

Rather, the Mosaic law is perfect:

But in order that a sense of guilt may urge us to seek for pardon, it is of importance to know how our being instructed in the Moral Law renders us more inexcusable. If it is true, that a perfect righteousness is set before us in the Law, it follows, that the complete observance of it is perfect righteousness in the sight of God; that is, a righteousness by which a man may be deemed and pronounced righteous at the divine tribunal... The only thing, therefore, remaining for him is, from their excellence to form a better estimate of his own misery, while he considers that the hope of salvation is cut off, and he is threatened with certain death. On the other hand, those fearful denunciations which strike not at a few individuals, but at every individual without exceptions rise up; rise up, I say and, with inexorable severity, pursue us; so that nothing but instant death is presented by the Law (*Institutes*, 2.7.3).

Calvin denies the traditional understanding of accommodation ("Therefore, let us hear no more of a proportion between our ability and the divine precepts, as if the Lord had accommodated the standard of justice which he was to give in the Law to our feeble

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<sup>464</sup> John Calvin, "We All Stand Condemned by the Law: Galatians 3:11-12," in *Sermons On Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 266-83.

capacities,” *Institutes*, 2.5.7). The law is perfect. Nonetheless, it is accommodated to our weak natures, just in a different, somewhat perverse fashion. The law has been fitted to our weakness so as to reveal it: “The Law is a kind of mirror. As in a mirror we discover any stains upon our face, so in the Law we behold, first, our impotence; then, in consequence of it, our iniquity; and, finally, the curse, as the consequence of both” (*Institutes*, 2.7.7). The metaphor of the mirror suggests that the Law *is* peculiarly fitted to fallen humans, such that we see our weakness reflected in it. But Calvin’s understanding of accommodation is also distinctive and new. Unlike the doctor’s pill or the *paterfamilias*’s laws, the mirror works therapeutically only through a process of conscious self-reflection.

Calvin’s ideas about accommodation are novel in two ways then: first, they collapse of the distinction between historical epochs, and second, they posit a distinctive epistemological pattern associated with accommodation. Calvin at once places knowledge at the center of his theology (since the only path to salvation is to realize that we are fallen) and insists that God is absolutely incomprehensible and inescapably accommodated in God’s every manifestation to human.<sup>465</sup> Human weakness thus plays a peculiarly important role in our quest for knowledge of God, because only through this limitation can we appreciate God’s accommodations. Thus, Calvin begins the *Institutes*:

Almost the whole of our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and produces the other. For in the first place no man can look at himself but he must immediately turn to the contemplation of God in whom he lives and moves... Again, it is plain that no man can arrive at the true knowledge of himself without having first contemplated the face of God and then descended to an examination of himself (1.1.2).

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<sup>465</sup> See Dowey, 3-18.

The metaphor of the mirror, though not explicitly invoked, underlies this passage.

Humans learn theology through a dialectical, reflective process in which they bounce between an ungraspable God and their own experiences.

For Calvin, not only is the God we know through both creation and Scripture accommodated to us, but that accommodation implies, in Edward Dowey's phrase, the "correlative character" of Calvin's epistemology: "the intimate connection that exists between the knowledge of God and of ourselves" because "God did not accommodate himself to man's capacities as a funnel accommodates a stream of fluid to a small opening, but in such a way that the instrument of accommodation (creation, 'ourselves') is implicated in what is transmitted."<sup>466</sup> That is, for Calvin, the accommodative device is first used by God to reach us, but then remains as an epistemological tool for us.

Indeed, this self-reflective logic, as well as Calvin's metaphor of the mirror, applies not only to the initial, phenomenological grasps towards theology but also to Calvin's view of Scripture. Calvin writes:

That invisible God, whose wisdom, power, and justice, are incomprehensible, is set before us in the history of Moses as in a mirror, in which his living image is reflected. For as an eye, either dimmed by age or weakened by any other cause, sees nothing distinctly without the aid of glasses, so (such is our imbecility) if Scripture does not direct us in our inquiries after God, we immediately turn vain in our imaginations.<sup>467</sup>

Scripture at once mirrors God and corrects human vision of the created world. The striking shift in metaphor (Scripture is first a mirror, then spectacles) corresponds to the correlative character of Calvin's epistemology, for Scripture is at once where and how we see God's reflection.

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<sup>466</sup> Dowey, 18-24. It is important to note, as Dowey does, that for Calvin, self-contemplation *involves* contemplating the world; the operative opposition is between self and God, not self and world.

<sup>467</sup> *Institutes*, 1.14.1. See also Benin, 188 and 277n63.

Further, as becomes explicit in Hutchinson's version of Calvin, both metaphors apply equally well to ourselves, albeit in distorted forms. For Hutchinson follows Augustine and Calvin. Like the former, she extends accommodation from its historical, local origins into a hermeneutic, universal system. Like the latter, she renders human weakness a central epistemological tool in apprehending God (as per Calvin). She innovates by constructing not just a hermeneutics or epistemology, but also a narratology, from those theological ideas.

### **“Fitted in all things to our fallen state”: Hutchinson on Accommodation and Types**

In tracing the role of accommodation in *Order and Disorder*, I first discuss an important instance of accommodation discourse in the poem, in which God instructs Adam and Eve in animal sacrifice and then fashions them clothes from the victims. The passage shows Hutchinson's knowledge of and engagement with classic tropes of accommodation. In deeply Calvinist fashion, Hutchinson sees the trigger for accommodation not as Israelite history but as fallen human depravity, and she collapses the distinction between the Sinaitic and Edenic covenants.<sup>468</sup> Moreover, *Order and Disorder* presents a dual, typological structure for understanding God's accommodations, in which God's curses paradoxically heal human sinfulness. Hutchinson thus accepts both Augustine's conflation of accommodation with typology and Calvin's universalization of

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<sup>468</sup> In Calvin scholarship and later Reformed theology, this equation is sometimes called the Mosaic “republication” of the Adamic covenant. See e.g. Michael Brown, “The Covenant of Works Revived: John Owen on Republication in the Mosaic Covenant,” *Confessional Presbyterian Journal* 4 (2008), 151-62. There is substantial debate about whether Calvin himself embraced republication, though certainly his theology made it a newly plausible possibility. See John Murray, “The Adamic Administration” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977) and O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980), but also Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

Israelite-specific accommodations. In the second section, I explain how accommodation for not just explain particular divine acts, but also provides her with a distinctive theological epistemology. For Hutchinson, as for Calvin, reflecting upon human weakness is central to understanding and decoding God's will and word. In the third section, I develop the consequences of this paradox for the narration of *Order and Disorder*. The poem, I claim, takes its narrator's femaleness, as defined by God's pronouncement after the Fall, to be at once a curse and a promise. In both those aspects, Hutchinson's gender necessarily and usefully conditions her particular accommodation of Genesis.

The richest discussion of accommodation in *Order and Disorder* occurs as God both curses and comforts Adam and Eve after the fall. In cursing them, God creates a covenant appropriate to their newly fallen state, not only imposing "the penalties of our offence" but also providing "precepts and rules of new obedience, / Fitted in all things to our fallen state / Under sweet promises that ease their weight" (5.210-12). It is striking that this fallen disposition includes provisions like sacrifices (absent from the biblical account), which early Christians had seen not as a universal accommodation after the fall, but as Mosaic accommodation to particular Israelite weakness.<sup>469</sup> Thus, God teaches the first couple "to expiate their heinous guilt / By spotless sacrifice and pure blood spilt," a stopgap measure until "the intended Lamb of God was slain" (5.271-72, 274).

The poem associates the granting of sacrifice with classic instances of divine accommodation. To give Adam and Eve sacrifices, God "Put off the judge's frown and

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<sup>469</sup> The contrast here with Milton, who at least on Jason Rosenblatt's reading, considered the Mosaic code to have been the natural law of *prelapsarian* Eden, is very sharp. See *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3–12.

reassumed / A tender father's kind and melting face" (5.269-70), switching from one affected, anthropomorphic role to another as needed by God's weak human audience. The attention to physical expression emphasizes the underlying unreality of these roles: God no more is a judge or father than God has a frown or face. Further, the switch echoes the biblical language Hutchinson most directly associated with accommodation in her short theological treatise:

Whereas God is sayd sometimes in Scripture, to be angrie, to grieve, repent, or the like, these are but phrazes accommodated to weake humane capacity, when God changes his administrations to men, according to the immutable and unchangeable councill of his owne will; for if God were liable to those passions, he could not be God... The Scripture sometimes mentions the eies, face, mouth, arme, hands, and heart of God, to make us thereby apprehend, according to our capacity, his knowledge, providence, favour, power, workes, and will; yet few are now so grosse, as thereby to conceive him to have bodily members... when passions are attributed to God in Scripture, wee are to understand them after the same manner as we doe members, not properly, but to insinuate his acts more intelligibly to our dull humane capacities, which are unapt to conceive things out of their common roades of bodily sence.<sup>470</sup>

The treatise reasons that just as descriptions of God's corporeality are clearly accommodations, so too are God's passions. Similarly, *Order and Disorder* links God's shifting between anthropomorphic roles (judge and teacher) to foreground accommodation, which is a central theme of God's provision of sacrifice and clothes.

In opposition to those Church Fathers who saw sacrifices as an historical or particular accommodation to the Israelites, Hutchinson, in claiming that sacrifices were divinely instituted at Eden, universalizes traditional Christian ideas about Jewish vulgarity. Her treatment of sacrifices is typical of her broader attitude towards Pentateuchal law: Hutchinson conflates the Edenic and Mosaic covenants. Her

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<sup>470</sup> See Lucy Hutchinson, *On the Principles of the Christian Religion* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1817), 15 & 16. This sentence reflects the sole explicit invocation of accommodation in the treatise, though, as I discuss elsewhere, the Calvinist epistemology of accommodation is everywhere present.

understanding of accommodation thus sidelines the historicist, anti-Jewish rationale of early Christian writers discussed in the first portion of this chapter. For instance, she strikingly connects the flaming sword (Genesis 3:22) with the fire on Sinai during the theophany (Exodus 19:16-18):

May we not liken to this sword of flame  
The threatening law which from Mount Sinai came  
With such thick flashes of prodigious fire  
As made the mountains shake and men retire  
Forbidding them all forward hope that they  
Could enter into life that dreadful way? (5.305-310)

Hutchinson compares the flaming sword not to the flaming mountain, but to the Mosaic law itself. She is drawing on Calvin, for whom God did not accommodate the sinful Israelites by offering them attainable, lower standards; that would verge on Pelagianism and invest ritual with an unacceptably Catholic power. Hutchinson's Calvinist God thus accommodates the Israelites by disciplining them with unattainable laws that "convict" them—that is, inspire recognition of their depravity. That is, just as the curses imply a promises and a covenant, indeed the entire Mosaic covenant is a curse (like the flaming sword, it excludes them from salvation), which merely elaborates upon the curse of expulsion from Eden.<sup>471</sup> For Hutchinson, God's directive analyzes into three contradictory but interrelated components: a curse, a command, and a promise.

The quasi-typological likeness with which Hutchinson links Sinai and Eden itself grows out of postlapsarian accommodation For Hutchinson, typology is itself a

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<sup>471</sup> This point is emphasized by Hutchinson's marginal note, which cites Hebrews 12:7: "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?" The line from Hebrew mobilizes paternal metaphors to suggest accommodation (God is treating you as a child and thus adapting to your weakness), but in a way that fits perfectly a Calvinist conception of God's legal accommodation: the law is tailored to fallen humans so that in failing to fulfill it, they will be chastened.

postlapsarian accommodation to the weakness of fallen intellectual capacities.

Conversely, God's act of accommodation is expressed most clearly through typology.

After Adam and Eve sacrifice animals, God tailors clothes from the carcasses, in a passage that weaves together accommodation and typology:

The skins of the slain beasts God vestures made  
Wherein the naked sinners were arrayed,  
Not without any mystery, which typified  
That righteousness that doth our foul shame hide (5.277-80).

This elaboration of Genesis 3:21 relies heavily upon the idea of accommodation. First, the entire procedure is framed within a familiar medical metaphor for accommodation:

As when a rotting patient must endure  
Painful excisions to effect his cure,  
His spirits we with cordials fortify,  
Lest, unsupported, he should faint and die,  
So with our parents the Almighty dealt (5.281-5).

The clothes, like the cordials, do not redeem; they merely allow the weakened recipient to survive the surgery (that is, the curses that result from the fall).<sup>472</sup> The clothes are a divine accommodation: they fortify Adam and Eve from the "painful excisions" of the Fall in several senses. Literally, the "thin fig-leaves" they devise in Canto 4 "were too slight and thin" to ward off "the keen air's quick piercing shafts." Cursed nature will kill them without God's help, such that the clothes represent a compromised, accommodated form of the curse (4.249-253). Spiritually, the "vestures," which come from sacrificial victims

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<sup>472</sup> Interestingly, the poem also echoes Lucretius, whom Hutchinson translated and who himself grapples how human writers accommodate themselves to un-philosophical audiences. In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius famously compares his pleasing poetry to honey superadded to wormwood so as to induce sick children to drink: "sed veluti pueris absinthia taetra medentes / cum dare conantur, prius oras pocula circum / contingent mellis dulci flavoque liquore, / ut puerorum aetas inprovida ludificetur / laborum tenus, interea perpotet amarum / absinthii laticem deceptaque non capiatur" (1.931-50, reiterated in 4.8-25).



typify the “righteousness that doth our foul shame hide,” namely Christ’s imputed grace; just as Adam and Eve put on the sacrificial animals’ hides, so too Christians assume Christ’s righteousness, which remains external their fallen nature. Thus, the clothes represent God’s ultimate accommodation of human sin: Christ’s sacrifice and mediation between Divine perfection and human weakness.

Finally, God’s gift of clothes accommodates fallen humans hermeneutically, because they are the first instance of explicit typology in *Order and Disorder*. Creation is full of metaphor (Canto 1 plays extensively on the various meanings of light and darkness), but only after the fall does biblical history begin to anticipate symbolically the Christ event. Indeed, when Adam and Eve exit Eden at the start of Canto 6, the typological significance of clothing is reinforced: “Comfort again new cheering sallies made / When types the promises did represent / And clothes were given for new encouragement” (6.10-12). The point here is that the clothes, as types, represent God’s promises. Taken on its own, however, the middle line also suggests that the mere fact of typology represents the promises as well. Indeed, when first describing God clothing Adam and Eve, the poem declares:

Their feeble souls rich promises upheld,  
And their deliverance was in types revealed.  
Even their bodies God himself did arm  
With clothes that kept them from the weather’s harm (5.287-90).

As at the start of Canto 6, these lines offer the sinners a threefold solace: physical protection from the weather, the promise of Christ’s ultimate deliverance, and the pedagogic accommodation of typology itself. To underscore the hermeneutic point, Hutchinson emphasizes the paradox that deliverance is *revealed* through clothes’ concealment. Types are a form of signification accommodated to fallen human nature,

since they imbue the world of history, still accessible after the fall, with hints of the divine.

This paradox itself reveals the contradictory, dual status of the type. On the one hand, the type emerges out of and critiques human fallenness. They were unnecessary when human cognitive faculties functioned naturally and perfectly, and thus their mysteriousness mystery constantly evidences the present inaccessibility of the unmediated, naked truth—that is, the Fall. On the other hand, types reveal the solution to the fall, and provide access to salvation. For Hutchinson, accommodation involves not only divine choices to tailor punishment to us, but a doubled literary and epistemic structure that entangles the twinned recognitions of our weakness and of God.

**“Sacred Spectacles”: Knowledge of God in *On the Principles and Order and Disorder***

In this section, I step back from specific divine accommodations. Given that human weakness provides a hermeneutic key to understanding God’s salvation, I argue that for Hutchinson, the paradoxical entanglement of divine perfection and human limitation means that we can approach God through our own weakness. In her theological treatise, she emphasizes the unique epistemic function of our weakness; *Order and Disorder* puts that theology into practice. The significance of accommodation thus expands for Hutchinson: not just a local, specific divine practice, it generates the continual paradox of human attempts to grasp the divine.

In her theological treatise, Hutchinson repeatedly insists on the interrelation of our knowledge of God’s perfection and our weakness: “the true wisdom and felicity of man consists in the knowledge of God as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, which we could not perfectly arrive to, but by the reflection of ourselves in our created, lapsed,

and restored estate”; the two things “requisite for us to study, God and ourselves” are, she writes in a parallel passage, “so interwoven in each other, that no man can truly have one without the other” (138).

The language of “reflection” describes a twofold move, which Hutchinson explains at the treatise’s beginning. In the first move, humans attain basic knowledge of God through consciousness of their own limitation:

A poore fleshly finite creature cannot ascend up to that inaccessible, incomprehensible light, wherein God dwells, to see or consider him as he is absolutely in himselfe; but by considering ourselves, as creatures produced in time, we are led to the knowledge of an eternall, uncreated Being before all time, who is the first cause, the last and noblest end of all beings, and this is God, whose nature is so farre transcending ours, that wee cannot know him as he is absolutely in himselfe, but by his operations manifested in ourselves, and all things elce which wee contemplate (2).

We initially know God only through God’s accommodated reflection in human beings.

But knowing God, we then come to know our own weakness:

As these lead us to such a knowledge of God as wee are capable of, so this knowledge of God as a cleare light (for he indeed is only light in whom there is no darknesse, and all things without his shining on them, and in them, are fowle polluted darknesse)—this light of God, I say, truly makes us know ourselves; in the contemplation of whose wisdom, goodnesse, righteousnesse, and holinesse, we see our folly, sin, iniquity, impurity; his power discovers our weaknesse, his fullnesse our emptinesse and vanity and nothingnesse, which wee neither discern nor believe, till wee come to see him. This sight made Job leave of his iustification and defence of his innocence, and to abhorre himselfe in dust and ashes; and all others in this light only truly discern themselves, when the false shaddowes of naturall pride, error, and presumption, which mist men’s mindes, and fill them full of vaine conceits of themselves, flie away from the glorious presence of God (3).

Knowing oneself, one comes to know God, but only by reflecting that knowledge back upon oneself can one fully know oneself (this sequence is exactly that elaborated by Calvin in the first chapters of the *Institutes*). The example, drawn from Job, is carefully chosen. After Satan has ruined Job’s fortunes, killed his children, and afflicted him physically, Job engages in a long argument with his pious friends, who insist his

sufferings must be deserved. The peculiarity of Hutchinson's account is that she seems to praise Job for the friends' position, a reading that the biblical book specifically forecloses. For although Eliphaz and the other friends may preach sound doctrine, God uniquely approves of Job ("ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath"). I would suggest that Hutchinson takes Job to be pious because only he founds his theology on the oscillation between his natural perspective and God's perfection ("I know that thou canst do every thing... therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not... I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes," Job 42:1-7). For Hutchinson, it is not the orthodox assertion of one's weakness that counts, but the active process of rejecting one's prideful presuppositions.

Hutchinson thus requires the self-reflective, dialectical articulation of human weakness and divine perfection. Indeed, on her account, knowledge of our weakness is intertwined not only with knowledge of God's perfection, but of Scripture as well. We need Scripture because of the limits of self-reflection:

The creation and our owne frames are like faire volumes to a dimme-sighted man, where the truths of God are written in legible characters; but wee cannot make any sence of them without the help of devine illumination, which sacred spectacles once put on makes us read the discoveries of God with holy wonder and delight, and therefore he hath added to his workes, his word given forth in the Scriptures of the New and Old Testament (4).

In an image clearly drawn from the *Institutes*, Hutchinson compares Scripture, an actual book, to a prosthetic device for reading one's self, a metaphorical book. The figural inversion underscores that Hutchinson's proposed phenomenological sequence in effect frames the reading of Scripture. As much as one's life becomes legible only through a Scriptural lens, so too Scripture must be studied in the framework of one's own

introspection. That is, only by contemplating the gap between human limitation and divine perfection can one understand Scripture's use and function. Further, the metaphor is inexact on another point: at first it seems the "dimme-sighted man" is in need of a book with especially large type ("faire volumes... written in legible characters"), but in fact Scripture provides not reading material but "sacred spectacles." The "discoveries of God" are not found in Scripture itself, but rather in the correct use of a circuit that connects the created self and world with God and God's word.

Hutchinson's understanding of the epistemic usefulness of human weakness appears not only in her theological treatise but also in *Order and Disorder*. In this section, I argue that Hutchinson understands her own, experience of marital submission (at once a curse and a blessing) as central to the Christian redemption her poem describes. Given the way in which typology accommodates human weakness with concrete symbols, and given the epistemological privileging of self-recognized depravity, Eve's curse (and the model of femininity predicated upon it) opens distinctive aspects of the biblical text. Because Eve is uniquely charged with and cursed with an internal struggle over insubordination and submission, female experience is paradigmatic to understanding human salvation, and thus the female narrator's voice has a unique theological role. Eve, and then Hutchinson, become types for the fallen will and its potential salvation.

First, the typological entwining of curse and promise detailed above in terms of God's clothing Adam and Eve also applies to Eve's curse. To be sure, Christian exegetes had long linked the curse of painful childbirth to the promise of birthing the messiah,<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> In *Order and Disorder*: "...mothers should maintain / Posterity, no frighted with the pain, / Which... hath a promise that thereby she shall / Recover all the hurt of her first fall" (4.221-6).

but Hutchinson additionally attaches redemptive promise to the curse of male domination. In Genesis 3:16, Eve is told, “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” Hutchinson glosses this desire as erotic attraction:

Alas! How sadly to this day we find  
Th’ effect of this dire curse on womankind;  
Eve sinned in fruit forbid, and God requires  
Her penance in the fruit of her desires.  
When first to men their inclinations move,  
How are they tortured with distracting love (5.127-132)!

In the margin, Hutchinson cites Genesis 39:7, which discusses Potiphar’s wife and her love for Joseph. This connection, remarkably, imagines the feelings of a minor biblical female antagonist but also confirms that these inclinations are both erotic and illicit. But the poem insists that this torture is not confined to deviants like the overseer’s wife; rather, all women are in some sense enslaved by their passions:

What disappointments find they in the end;  
Constant uneasiness which attend  
The best condition of the wedded state,  
Giving all wives sense of the curse’s weight,  
Which makes them ease and liberty refuse,  
And with strong passion their own shackles choose.  
Now though they easier under wise rule prove  
And every burden is made light by love,  
Yet golden fetters, soft-lined yokes, still be  
Though gentler curbs, but curbs of liberty,  
As well as the harsh tyrant’s iron yoke (4.133-143).

Sexual desire (and also the desire for children—“Whate’er their husbands be, they covet fruit”) is part of Eve’s curse, since it facilitates female suppression. Hutchinson’s argument seems strikingly proto-feminist here. Its critique of erotic attraction’s role in

perpetuating the patriarchy, for instance, resembles arguments made today by Catharine MacKinnon.<sup>474</sup>

Yet Hutchinson also reads “thy desire shall be to thy husband” in a second, directly opposite sense as well: not as the curse but as the attendant command and promise. Hutchinson explains how each curse comes with a command and promise. Each of the precepts in the surrounding lines of Order and Disorder corresponds to explicit biblical language. The hatred of Satan discussed in 4.213-220 derives from Genesis 3:15, female childbirth in 4.221-6 from Genesis 3:16a, and male labor in 4.237-42 from Genesis 3:17. The most interesting passage discusses Eve:

Love too a precept made, where God requires  
We should perform our duties with desires;  
And promises t’incline our averse will,  
Whose satisfaction takes away the ill  
Of every toil and every suffering  
That can from unenforced submission spring (4.231-6).

These lines correspond to “thy desire shall be to thy husband” in Genesis 3:16.

Hutchinson’s description of female desire for men directly contradicts the one discussed in the previous paragraph: does love “takes away the ill / Of every toil and every suffering,” or does it in fact push women further into “curbs of liberty” comparable to “the harsh tyrant’s iron yoke”? (The other paired curse and precept passages do not similarly contradict each other, since in each, the promise *results* from the curse and precept, as, say, bread or the incarnation result from labor or procreation respectively. Only when God turns to Eve do curse, precept, and promise become identical: “t’incline our averse will.” Moreover, God here promises regeneration; unlike the other precept

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<sup>474</sup> See e.g. Catharine MacKinnon, “Desire and Power” in *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Law and Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 46-63.

passages, which discuss the particular commands in detail, here gender relations are treated not as a specific set of social duties and norms, but as a phenomenological, emotional experience. Both points accentuate the way in which Eve's curse reflects a psychological reorientation, a conversion of the will. Donne, of course, famously asked God to batter his heart and ravish him, and a long Christian tradition before him had gendered the soul female in relating to God. But Hutchinson goes farther, imagining the core Protestant experience of the divided will (the "we" of "We should perform our duties with desires" applies men and women alike) as *originating* in the conflicting desires of the submitting wife.

#### **"To thee he bends": Hutchinson's Universalization of Wifely Submission**

Indeed, the example of the submitting wife informs how Hutchinson reads biblical stories that take place entirely between men. The best example comes from outside the five-book unit of *Order and Disorder's* first edition, although it is closely tied to the Fall narrative: the story of Cain and Abel. Hutchinson's peculiar exegetical treatment of a key verse in the story draws on the Reformed commentary tradition, but she intensifies the tradition, by adding Christological overtones and by linking Abel's (and thus Christ's) submission back to Eve's.

Midway through Canto 6 of Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder*, as Cain is stewing with "envy and hate" at his brother, God "graciously did call / To the grieved wretch," attempting to assuage his anger:

...Why doth thy countenance fall?  
Why doth thy anger burn? Why art thou sad?  
If thou dost well, shall not regard be had  
To thy good deeds, to give them recompense?  
If thou dost ill, the guilt of thy offence  
As a tormentor at thy door shall wait



And ever shall perplex thy future state.  
What hast thy brother done to cause thy ire?  
*To thee he bends, to thee is his desire.*  
The favor he hath found doth not elate  
His thoughts against thee to an insolent height.  
Thee as his elder he doth reverence,  
And bears thy wrath with humble innocence (6.109-22, emphasis added).

Hutchinson follows Genesis 4:6-7 closely: “(6) And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? (7) If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.” But her usual dutiful reproduction of the passage renders all the stranger her choice to interpret the bending and desirous “he” of 4:7 as Abel. In fact, the “he” in Genesis must refer to “sin” (grammatically masculine in Biblical Hebrew) earlier in the verse, as nearly all traditional commentators read it.<sup>475</sup> Hutchinson’s reading is forced, since in Genesis, God does not mention Abel in this speech, and Hutchinson has to interpose a question about “thy brother” so that the antecedent is clear.

Hutchinson’s choice becomes at once more and less comprehensible when recognized as a distinctively Reformed reading of Genesis 4:7. Breaking with the medieval commentary tradition, the Geneva Bible, like Hutchinson, takes the antecedent of “his” to be Abel. Thus, it translates the end of 4:7 as “unto thee (shall be) his desire, and thou shalt rule over him” and adds the gloss, “The dignity of the first born is given to

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<sup>475</sup> See, for instance, Augustine, *City of God* 15.7 (Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol. 2: St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1887)). Schaff’s edition of Augustine hereafter cited in-text by text, book, and chapter. Accessed online through <http://oll.libertyfund.org/>. Similarly see Nicholas of Lyra, who comments, “id est tu poteris devincere peccatum, quia nullus peccat nisi volens” in the *Bibliorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria*, vol. 1 (Venice: Iuntas, 1603).

Cain over Abel,” construing God’s conclusion as offering Cain the carrot of primogeniture.<sup>476</sup> The Reformed commentator Henry Ainsworth similarly reads “his desire” as Abel’s, though he notes that the “*Thargum Jerusalemy*” understands it as “*the desire of it* (that is, of Syn) is *unto thee*, but *thou shalt rule over it*” (as indeed do Onkelos’s Aramaic translation and the medieval Jewish commentators).<sup>477</sup> Ainsworth and Geneva derive their readings from Calvin, who devotes a lengthy comment to explaining why, although “nearly all commentators refer this to sin, and think that, by this admonition, those depraved hosts are restrained which solicit and impel the mind of man,” they are mistaken.<sup>478</sup> As Calvin’s explanation of the majority opinion suggests, the traditional reading offends him because it suggests that Cain could succeed in restraining the depraved hosts of his fallen nature. Indeed, Erasmus had quoted this exact verse as Scriptural evidence of free will,<sup>479</sup> and while Calvin insists that even “if we grant” the traditional reading “that Cain was admonished of his duty in order that he might apply himself to the subjugation of sin, yet no inherent power of man is to be hence inferred,”

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<sup>476</sup> See Michael H. Brown, ed. *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1599 Edition with Undated Sternhold & Hopkins Psalms* (Missouri: L. L. Brown, 1991), on Genesis 4:7.

<sup>477</sup> Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations Upon the first book of Moses, called Genesis* (1616), on Genesis 4:7. See Onkelos as well as Rashi, Radak, and Ramban, all collected in *Torat Hayyim: Hamishah Humshei Torah* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1993), 69-70.

<sup>478</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* vol. 1, trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847-1850), available online through <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.html>, p. 138.

<sup>479</sup> Erasmus, *On the Freedom of the Will*, found in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 54.

certainly a major benefit of his implausible reading is the squashing of a troublesome source of theological error.<sup>480</sup>

Although Hutchinson's choice of antecedent places her in the Reformed tradition, she interprets God's invocation of Abel quite differently than do her forebears. The Geneva Bible reads the end of 4:7 as God's promise of the benefits Cain afforded by primogeniture (conditional on his good behavior), while Calvin takes it as "a reproof, by which God charges the impious man with ingratitude, because he held in contempt the honor of primogeniture" (138). Though the younger, Abel had worshipped God more diligently. What Calvin takes to be Cain's hypocritical offering ("he wished to appease God, as one discharging a debt, by external sacrifices, without the least intention of dedicating himself to God") is all the worse because Cain should have upheld the dignity of being firstborn (133). By contrast, Hutchinson reads God as emphasizing the baselessness of Cain's anger, since despite his spiritual election, Abel humbles himself before his elder brother ("The favor he hath found doth not elate / His thoughts against thee to an insolent height"). Partially, Hutchinson interprets God's words in this way because for her "guiltless Abel," who bears Cain's "wrath with humble innocence" is, as Jonathan Goldberg has suggested, a "figure of the sacrificed God": he peacefully submits

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<sup>480</sup> See also St. Albinus, who is quoted in the *Glossa*: "tu quia es libeti arbitrii, non habet peccatum super te dominum sed tu super illud & in tua potestate est, sive compescere, sive comcupiscere illud." In the first half of 4:7 ("If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?"), Calvin similarly rejects the reading of the Hebrew Divines who "imagine a satisfaction, which derogates from free pardon," and thus "dissent widely from the meaning of Moses. . . I explain the saying as referring to sacrifices, namely, that God will accept them when rightly offered" (136). Cain, according to Calvin, has no choice; the point is merely that he has no grounds to complain, since had he been pure of heart, his sacrifice would have been accepted.

and is murdered guiltlessly, and his martyrdom begins God's work of resurrection: "holy seed still with advantage dies / That it in new and glorious form might rise" (6.429-30).<sup>481</sup>

The analogy between Abel and Christ dates back Augustine and was conventional in seventeenth-century England.<sup>482</sup> But in Hutchinson, the analogy has a surprising third term: Eve. Hutchinson most directly ties Abel to Christ by cutting Adam's naming of his wife "Eve" from the section of Canto 5 that corresponds to Genesis 3:20 ("because she was the mother of all living"), before the couple were expelled from the garden, and pasting it into the parts of her Canto 6 that corresponds to the middle of Genesis 4:1:

[God] made the woman man's first fruit conceive  
In hope of which her husband called her Eve;  
And by this name not only did imply  
Her curse, in his superiority,  
But the sweet mitigation of that doom,  
Promising life to enter through her womb (6.17-22)

Hutchinson links Eve's name to the Protevangelium: Eve is the mother of all living because her seed, Christ, will undo the death with which humankind has been cursed. "Eve" thus names not only the first woman's subjugation (which the curse in Gen 3:16 connects with childbearing) but also the paradox of her being the agent of redemption precisely through that subjugation.<sup>483</sup> Indeed, Hutchinson's Adam and Eve mistakenly take Cain to be "her seed," the redeemer promised in 3:15: "When Cain was born, exultingly she thought / She had into the world her champion brought" (6. 33-4).<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, "Lucy Hutchinson Writing Matter," *ELH* 73.1 (Spring, 2006), 275-301: 294.

<sup>482</sup> See Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 206-45.

<sup>483</sup> Ainsworth makes the same suggestion on Genesis 3:20.

<sup>484</sup> Thus also Geneva on Genesis 4:1, "That is, according to the Lord's promise, as some read... 'To the Lord' rejoicing for the son she had born, whom she would offer to the Lord as the first fruits of her birth." The reading of "to" is almost certainly a spurious

Abel's name thus refers not only to his bleak future (referring either to *hevel*, "vanity" or *avel*, "mourning") but also to Eve's "finding now his forward first hopes vain"—that is, realizing that Cain is not the messiah. Ironically, these hopes *are* presaged, though not fulfilled, in Abel, since he is a type of Christ.

Splicing the promise of redemption into the account of Cain and Abel's births does not merely render Abel's death Christological. She is also linking both Abel and Christ's humble innocence to Eve's submission. Remember that Hutchinson reads Genesis 4:7 as a reference to Abel ("To thee he bends, to thee is his desire"). That verse, strikingly, repeats exactly the idiom God uses to Eve in 3:16: "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." The echo was obscured for readers of the Vulgate, which renders תְּשׁוּקָה ("desire") differently ("potestate" in 3:16 and "appetitus" in 4:7), but Calvin does notice it, commenting on 4:7, "this form of speech is common among the Hebrews... thus Moses speaks of the woman" (Calvin, 139). On the non-Reformed reading of 4:7, in which the subject is "sin," the echo with 3:17 unpleasantly makes sin and Eve parallel, imagining a female Sin, who "lieth at the door" and desires Cain. Indeed, Hutchinson personifies Sin just this way in rendering the first half of 7: "Envy, that most pernicious hag of Hell / ...starts from the gloomy cell / ... and secretly into his

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correction of a difficult text. See Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 43-7. But Pardes ultimately produces a feminist, Jewish variant on the traditional connection between the Protevangelium (she is specifically interested 3:16, not 3:15) and 4:1: "By taking pleasure in her creativity, [Eve] attempts to undo God's punishment in Genesis 3:16, to misread God's linking of female procreation with sorrow and with subjugation to man" (54). See also Luther, who even translates Genesis 4:1 as "I have gotten a man [who is] the Lord" *Luther's Works Volume 1: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 193 and 242.

sad breast creeps, / There all his thoughts in her black poison creeps” (6.93-7).<sup>485</sup> But crucially, Hutchinson’s reading of the verse’s second half compares Eve to Abel, rather than to Sin. Thus, what might have easily been read as a misogynist image of female sin becomes a pattern linking Eve’s submission to Adam, Abel’s humility before his brother, and Christ’s sacrifice.

### **Hutchinson as Biblical Narrator**

The particular redemptive promise of fallen female subjectivity helps explain one of the most surprising moments in *Order in Disorder*, in which Hutchinson surprisingly interrupts the narrative with her own story. In Canto 5, Adam consoles Eve that at least they have each other (“Let’s no in vain each other now upbraid / But rather strive to’afford each other aid... When fear chills thee, my hope shall make thee warm, / When I grow faint, thou shalt my courage arm,” 5.587-88, 591-92). The narrator here interjects her own perspective on Adam’s speech, essentially replacing Eve as the poem’s female speaker:

Ah! Can I this in Adam’s person say,  
While fruitless tears melt my poor life away?  
Of all the ills to mortals incident,  
None more pernicious is than discontent,  
That brat of unbelief and stubborn pride  
And sensual lust, with no joy satisfied,  
That doth ingratitude and murmur nurse,  
And is a sin which carries its own curse;  
This is the only smart of every ill.  
But can we without it sad tortures feel (5.599-608)?

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<sup>485</sup> As noted by Norbrook, Hutchinson is drawing on Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (New York: Longman, 1989), 617: 5.12.29-32.

The uncertain chronology of the poem's manuscript history leaves it tantalizingly unclear whether the passage precedes or post-dates John Hutchinson's death in May 1664.<sup>486</sup>

Quite possibly, Hutchinson is especially exercised by Adam's speech because she has lost her husband; as the widow of a political pariah in post-Reformation England, she had good reasons to be discontented. But whatever her losses and dissatisfactions, she mourns them in terms taken directly from the curse of marriage itself. In this personal passage, as in the description of Eve's curse above, we see the interrelation of discontent and lust, the inescapable dissatisfaction with one's position, and the psychological unity of curse and sin (and which would, conversely, unify precept and promise). But strikingly, Hutchinson is not complaining about her husband, nor exactly about his absence; she is complaining about God:

Nor is that will harsh or irrational,  
But sweet in that which we most bitter call,  
Who err in judging what is ill or good,  
Only by studying that will, understood.  
What we admire in a low Paradise,  
If they [our rebellious wills] our souls from heavenly thoughts entice,  
Here terminating our most strong desire,  
Which should to perfect permanence aspire,  
From being good to us they are so far,  
That they our fetters, yokes and poysons are,  
The obstacles of our felicity (5.617-27).

The longer passage presents in verse a standard Protestant argument about the divided, fallen will, which must die, "subdued... Into th' eternal will and wisdom." But in pivoting from Eve's conversation with Adam to Hutchinson's with God, Hutchinson is essentially projecting the abusive, overpowering role of the fallen husband onto God and imagining herself as God's beleaguered, dominated, and discontented wife. To Adam's

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<sup>486</sup> See Norbrook, lii-iv.

dreamily mutual view of marriage (“When both our spirits at a low ebb are / We both will join in mutual fervent prayer” 5.593-4), Hutchinson responds with the bleakly hierarchical realities of human marriage (note that her sins are all of rebellion: “discontent,” “pride,” “ingratitude,” and “murmur”) and the specific wifely struggles of the repressed partner.

The conclusion of *Order and Disorder* offers Hutchinson’s particularly female experience of marriage as a paradigm for all humans, who at once desire to be reconciled with God and constantly encounter their own stubborn, fallen, and rebellious wills. Having intruded upon Adam and Eve’s dialogue, Hutchinson answers her own question (“But can we without it sad tortures feel?”) in the affirmative, insisting that the soul can experience this-worldly setbacks without faulting God. She thus internalizes Adam and Eve’s postlapsarian argument over how to respond to loss as an intra-psychic conversation. Her response draws upon the doubled, typological structure of accommodation, in which curses are really promises, by now familiar: “The evils, so miscalled, that we endure / Are wholesome medicines tending to our cure / Only disease to these aversion breeds” (5.633-5). She also exploits an implicit analogy, commonplace in the period, between earthly marriage and the soul’s relationship to God.<sup>487</sup> Thus, approaching the conclusion of the canto (and thus the published edition), she writes:

As there’s but one most substantial good,  
And God himself is that beatitude:  
So we can suffer but one real ill  
Divorce from him by our repugnant will,  
Which when to just submission it returns  
The reunited soul no longer mourns (5.686-92).

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<sup>487</sup> For more on mystical marriage, and particularly how early modern women exploited the metaphor, see Longfellow, esp. 1-18, as well as Ann Astell, *The Song of Song in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).



Separation from God is imagined here as divorce. The vitality of this metaphor is proven by the poem's last line ("Return, return, my soul, to thy true rest"), which construes Song of Songs 7:1 ("Return, return, O Shulammitte") as a post-divorce rapprochement. Rather than justifying God to man, *Order and Disorder* finally attempts to reconcile Him to woman.

This reconciliation makes Hutchinson a uniquely good narrator, because as a (widowed) wife, she is distinctive and yet exemplary in her curse, perversity, and promise. Her conception of marriage is rigidly normative and unquestionably sexist. Yet my argument has been that we can appreciate the significance of Hutchinson's self-ascribed sinfulness only by placing it in a broader theological context. In that context, God's Scripture has been carefully calibrated to our lowliness, which in turn becomes crucial to understanding it.

Once reconciled with God, Hutchinson writes at the end of Canto 5, "in the crystal mirror of God's grace / All things appear with a new lovely face" (5.693-4). The metaphor of the clouded and the cleared mirror echoes God's creation of light in Canto 2. "Victorious morning," she writes there, "Those melancholy thoughts which night creates / And feeds in mortal bosoms, dissipates; / In its own nature subtle, swift, and pure, / Which no polluted mirror can endure" (2.339-42). Both cantos' ends track Hutchinson's personal redemption (from Lucretian darkness and, perhaps, from the loss of her husband). Since the recovery of the last fifteen cantos, critics of *Order and Disorder* have focused upon them; less weighted down with theological orthodoxy, they are noticeably sexier. This attention, and indeed Norbrook's 2001 edition (which prints Canto 6 directly after Canto 5 and thus undoes the first edition's five-canto structure), largely effaces the

personal, autobiographical resolution offered by Canto 5's conclusion, as well as the passage's close echoes of the end of Canto 2. But insofar as this chapter argues that Hutchinson entangles her autobiography with her narration of Genesis, the earlier, five-book edition has an independent structure: it corresponds not merely to Genesis's three chapters, but to Hutchinson's own, personal redemption of her internal darkness.

Critics have long been bothered by the famous passage in the *Memoirs* in which Hutchinson says her husband, "soon made her more equal to him than he found her, for she was a very faithful mirror, reflecting truly, though but dimly, his own glories upon him."<sup>488</sup> As Longfellow writes, "such language of copies and originals, mirrors and reflections has caused difficulties for feminist critics."<sup>489</sup> The mirrors in *Order and Disorder* complicate those difficulties, because they complicate the metaphor. That is, the mirror metaphor I traced through Calvin and Hutchinson's theological writing does not imagine a real object and a shadowy reflection. Rather it imagines continual pivoting between multiple, dialectically related mirrors in pursuit of an elusive God. Hutchinson both looks into the "mirror of God's grace" and is herself a "polluted mirror." Hutchinson's mirrors are devices of self-correction, not mimesis; they are, as I suggested above, best thought of not as realistic representations but as funhouse mirrors. To mirror God, and *especially* to mirror God imperfectly and perversely, is not to adopt a purely passive reception of God's holy light, but to involve oneself in a dynamic, ongoing process of examining the self and God's word and reinterpreting each in the light of the other.

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<sup>488</sup> *Memoirs*, 51.

<sup>489</sup> Longfellow, 180.