

Opening a Way into the 'Thick Shade' of *Paradise Lost* (M. Scott Stenson)

John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* contains a two-part, Neo-Platonic dialogue that reveals and conceals knowledge which aids with the poem's spiritual interpretation. The first half is about things high and the second half about things low. Despite the "narrative expediency" of its content, the dialogue becomes disorienting because of its double structure and meanings.

Crossman Many passages present "epistemological problems." **Crossman** The rhetorically complex dialogue, or angelic interlude, is found in the middle of the epic. **Lewalski**. Just before Raphael's descent to Earth Milton has the couple in unison sing under the spirit of frenzy an early morning hymn that foreshadows the mystical dialogue at the center of this study (5.153-208). The location and content of the memorable hymn suggests that it may be read as a general poetic introduction to the subsequent dialogue. **Lewalski** In the course of the creation hymn, itself anticipating the longer creation hymn in Book 7, we learn of the incommunicable character of God and of the dialogue's intended arch following the journey of the sun, as well as find a surprise—the intrusion of the author's voice:

Ye that in waters glide, and ye that walk
The earth, and stately tread, or lowly creep,
Witness if / be silent, morn or even,
To hill or valley, fountain, or fresh shade,
Made vocal by my song, and taught his praise. (202-04)

As the Miltonic narrator (the maker or creator of the poem) intrudes into the hymn, "Witness if / be silent," so does Milton apparently hope that God (the Creator of all) will visit with his divine voice or presence his readers while they read his poem.

In this study, I argue that Milton's central educational dialogue makes the most sense when read as a two part mystical text--beginning in fear and culminating in wisdom—prefiguring a divine encounter that ultimately is not in Milton's control as poet (3.302). In part one, I define mysticism and suggest that the dialogue can be divided into two parts corresponding to the famous proverb: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (9:10). Specific observations are made near the end of the paper connecting *Paradise Lost* with the parable of the kingdoms in Doctrine and Covenants 88:51-61. I assert that both deal indirectly with the doctrine of divine encounter. It should be noted before proceeding that Milton's choice to place his dialogue in the center of his epic has some important structural parallels in literature such as Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book 6) or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Chapters 11-14), one of which influences and one of which appropriates Milton.

The Neo-Platonic/Solomonic Foundation

For the purposes of this study examining Milton's mysticism, I use a definition for mysticism that allows for understanding the mystical encounter as textually grounded, a definition that emphasizes study or experience and charity or love. I also differentiate between the numinous (dramatic) and mystical (non-dramatic) experience inasmuch as Milton is both a sublime and/or numinous poet and a mystical one. **Lewis and Smart** Milton's mysticism, however, is of a quieter sort, or more conducive to his understanding of revelation. Mysticism for our purposes is "the process by which believers are fitted for some awareness of [a] hidden or mystical depth of God's presence" within an ambiguous text. **McIntosh** The definition allows for upward movement among stages (i.e. purgation, illumination, and union, for example), as in Raphael's formulation: "In contemplation of created things,/ By steps we may

ascend to God”; the upward movement assures the discovery of the divine presence within and through the reading experience (5.11-12). Milton does not employ these stages rigidly, but has placed in his poem passages that tend to prepare, test, and purify his readers, or at least ask them, to make choices that they might ascend to illumination and union with God by means of the epic (8.431).

In the spirit of this textually based definition, many of the early Christian thinkers and poets that Milton admired framed their ascending mystical systems on the word of God. Augustine, for example, in his formulation in his *On Christian Doctrine* uses several familiar places in scripture to describe his system. For him the mystical path to union with God first requires fear of God and a desire to follow His will. This fear keeps before our eyes “our mortality and . . . our death and will affix all our proud motions . . . to the wood of the cross” (38). The same path of the soul requires the cleansing of the eye and the love of God and Truth in order to find wisdom and beatific vision. Petrarch, a disciple of Augustine, similarly suggests in his *My Secret Book* that the path of the soul begins with fear and desire and moves upward towards wisdom. Both systems apparently rely on the ordered phrase of the writer of proverbs to achieve the beatific vision: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7, 9:10). But how does this reliance on the proverb relate to Milton and his epic’s central dialogue? Simply stated, I argue that Books 5 and 6 of the dialogue effectively teach Milton’s reader about fear, and Books 7 and 8 teach his reader about foolishness, wisdom, and love. Both halves of the dialogue engage and educate readers and prepare them for an eventual unspecified mystical encounter. References to fear and wisdom, the proverbs salient words, lie at the literal center of the poem and the center of the dialogue. Book 6 ends with the Archangel’s summative

exhortation to Adam: “Remember, and fear to transgress”; Book 7 begins with Milton’s invocation to the sister of Wisdom--Urania. The early Christians and Milton blended the proverb with the principles of Neo-Platonism, and that blend is at the base of understanding the dialogue and poem. In other words, reading the poem this way suggests that it is designed in such a way as to enable the reader to ascend to a divine encounter.

The Fear of the Lord

Consistent with this Neo-Platonic/Solomonic foundation, Milton’s mystical dialogue begins with the first principle of the Augustinian/Petrarchan gospel: the fear the Lord is the beginning Although the word fear is used in many ways in the dialogue (the loyal angels are all said to be fearless or brave), Milton primarily uses it much as Paul did when he exhorted the Romans from Corinth, “thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear” (11:20). **Lewis** Paul’s usage of “stand” corresponds with earlier material in Milton’s epic (3.99-102), not to mention that Milton sees highmindedness (and intellectual overreaching) as an obstacle to the mystical encounter (3.199; 8.70-84). Three points are argued in this part of the study: 1) that Milton’s use of the imagery of shade and/or clouds and certain scriptural allusions in conjunction with the archangel Raphael’s theatrical descent suggest that the dialogue is semi-allegorical, and therefore, potentially mystical; consequently, readers fear that they might miss Milton’s drift; 2) that Raphael, strictly speaking, exceeds his divine commission, and in doing so, effectively provides readers a strange and copious textual metaphor (i.e. The War in Heaven) that only concludes with a form of divine encounter—the unanticipated appearance of the divine warrior in apocalyptic terms; and 3) that Abdiel, the angel who stands against the conspiratorial opposition in heaven (i.e. the disloyal angels), is the poetic embodiment of the

aforementioned proverb and therefore an exemplum to both Adam, Eve, and Milton's readers of the fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom. In short, the first half of the epic dialogue (Books 5 and 6) educates readers in fear and faithfulness and prepares them for what follows.

1: The Dialogue's Mystical Quality

In addition to its explicit Neo-Platonism and accommodation, the extensive imagery of shade and clouds, common to both Virgil's work, and Milton's use of certain ambiguous scriptures causes readers to see the central dialogue as semi-allegorical and potentially mystical. This reality causes readers to fear that they might miss Milton's idea. The way to wisdom is via the fear of God and textual uncertainty. The readers become conscience of their participation in the poem. The doubleness that marks the mystical quality of Milton's dialogue is suggested by the fact that Raphael descends to visit Adam and Eve in their "shady bower" (5.367) and then four books later re-ascends from the same "thick shade" (8.653). This last phrase directly alludes to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book 6 which recounts the Trojan hero's guided descent to the underworld to see the face of his father and to receive special knowledge about his seed. Adam and Eve and their angelic visitor retire from the strong rays of the sun to share a friendly meal and conference. The imagery of shade (and later cloud cover) throughout the dialogue (and poem) suggests that the text possesses hidden, shaded, or mystical meanings. Using this imagery so frequently, Milton encourages his reader to read spiritual or mystical meaning into the action of his text (8.653). This mystical quality of the text is made more obvious to the reader when one considers that Raphael twice explicitly acknowledges that he must accommodate his message to human understanding (5.563-576; 7.111- 118).

In addition to this concealing natural imagery talk of necessary accommodation, Milton represents Raphael's person in a scripturally allusive way to suggest that the dialogue is best read as a mystical or allegorical text. After receiving his commission, Raphael speedily descends to Earth to warn Adam of the approaching danger. Satan, now fallen from Heaven intends to tempt and destroy the prelapsarian couple. As Milton does with the Garden itself, he portrays the Heavenly Guest in a way so as to make his words appear faithful but layered with meanings. The Archangel's stunning appearance is a textual metaphor. He descends from heaven with "six wings . . . to shade / His lineaments divine" (5.277-78). The "gorgeous wings" suggest something layered about what is communicated by the tongue of the angel, a tongue that Milton uses to directly allude to Paul's famous passage on charity in 1 Corinthians 13. This allusion further cast doubt on Raphael's words. **Fish** Milton's character Raphael is based on the seraphim from Isaiah 6:2. **Flannigan** The chapter , invoked elsewhere in Milton's epic and his writings, describes in mystical terms Isaiah's cleansing and calling as a prophet whose prophetic truths would not be well understood or received by the many in his day of apostasy. Matthew later uses the same chapter from Isaiah to justify Jesus' use of parables to reveal and conceal spiritual truth from the unprepared. This ornamented angel and these particular scriptural allusions (Isaiah 6, 1 Corinthians 13, and Matthew 13) make it highly unlikely that Raphael's angelic words should be taken only at face value. All this together causes the reader to become self conscience and watchful. Readers become concerned if not fearful that they will overlook what Milton as poet has desired to lead them to find or experience. He has provided them an education in fear so that they might obtain wisdom through love in due time.

(I am unable to consider points 2 and 3 due to time.)

The Way to Wisdom

In the second half of the mystical dialogue, Milton moves his readers from fear to wisdom. Moreover, Raphael transitions from his “message high” to one that is “narrower bound / Within the visible Diurnal Sphere” (7.21-22). Instead of describing the War in Heaven, the angel describes for Adam and Eve the Creation of the Earth. Again readers are conspicuously invited to take heed because what Raphael intends to impart to Adam and the reader in response to Adam’s epic questions “Cannot without process of speech be told” (7.178). In other words, Milton focuses his readers again on not only what is told but how it is told. By this point, it is evident, that the dialogue is an education that prepares readers for a mystical encounter that itself cannot be part of the education. Raphael is sent to prepare the way for the coming of one greater than himself. He acts as an Elias. In Book 7, Milton’s readers receive an extended account of creation accompanied by lessons in wisdom, omniscience, omnipresence, and love. As is true of the account of the War in Heaven in Books 5 and 6, the creation account eventually leads Milton’s readers to wisdom and union with the divine presence or God (7.155-161). In this part of the study four points are made: 1) that the account of the creation of Earth is suspect in many places and should be read as a textual metaphor (As the Son is the author of Creation so Milton is the author of his poem; the extended creation hymn in Book 7 emphasizes birth, upward movement, and the act of opening); moreover, it describes the generation of the sun in Isaianic and messianic terms (Book 6 of the Aeneid also emphasizes the power of the protagonist to see his seed); 2) that the second half of the dialogue emphasizes unity and love, and therefore, it also qualifies as a mystical text; 3) that overreaching (or highmindedness) and passion (or sexual love) are potential obstacles to union

with God; and 4) that Eve's visiting her Garden (she leaves the shaded bower just when Adam "Enter . . . on studies thoughts abstruse") at the beginning of Book 8 is yet another, albeit shorter, textual metaphor for *Paradise Lost* that has a parallel in LDS scripture. In short, Books 7 and 8 continue the second part of the education that moves the reader from fear to wisdom or from fear to divine encounter. For the purposes of this presentation, I focus on the metaphor involving Eve as gardener (8.40-47) that follows Milton's account of creation inasmuch as it corresponds to an important modern revelation.

(I am unable to consider points 1-3 at this time due to time.)

4: Eve's Visit to Her Garden as Textual Metaphor

As Book 8 begins, Raphael's enchanting voice lingers in Adam's ear. He says that the "thirst [he] had of knowledge" has been "largely allayed" (8.7-8) by the suspect account of creation. **Fish** However, the reader remains wary, watchful, and full of questions. If the dialogue has taught readers anything, it has taught them to read self-consciously and to avoid neglecting the text, or overreaching for meaning as they through love bring together all that they might "search and know" (7.125). Near the beginning of Book 8, a book that ends with further lessons on loving rightly, Adam shares with Raphael that "Something yet of doubt remains" (8.13). Curiously, his doubt is much the same as Eve's earlier concern about the stars: "wherefore all night long shine these?" (4.657). Adam wonders about the economy of God in designing the universe in a way so that the greater orbs must minister to the lesser earth.

Bushman The repetition of the question of economy (or a variation of it) suggests that it is important and aids in interpreting the poem. Just as Adam asks his second epic question (8.15-38), Milton's readers learn that Eve, in something of a metaphor for the whole poem, quietly

and unexpectedly rises “from where she sat retired in sight” to visit her garden to cheer her plants and flowers as they grow. The quiet, ordinary, yet surprising event is a metaphor for God’s intention to visit in a similar way Milton’s readers as they read his poem. The epic is a literary testament. Milton has labored with God as a poet to create the textual environment wherein God might visit His readers if and when He should wish to do so. He apparently will do so in an unanticipated moment of His own choosing. The evidence of the poem suggests that Milton has used the occasion of writing the poem to prepare his reader to find God and His grace in the darkness of its most shady and allegorical passages. Though it is largely out of Milton’s control, he apparently hopes that God will visit the reader with his Holy Spirit and ultimately His divine presence even as the main characters in the story fall into sin, discord, and darkness. The fit reader is he or she who is able to find redemption, union, and God’s presence at the moment of the fall of Eve. This way is open to those who fear or reverence the Lord and His word; they are they who become the seed of Christ. In summary, the wisdom of the poem is not Platonic or Solomonic, but ultimately messianic and Christocentric. It declares His generation by choosing its readers (Isaiah 53:8). This is the Idea that seems to be at the center of the semi-allegorical poem when read as a mystical text.

The LDS Parallel

The sensuous prelapsarian metaphor substituting Eve for God (and Raphael) and Eve’s particular portion of the Garden of Eden for God’s universe has a striking unintended parallel in an important LDS revelation that may also be profitably read as an example of Mormon mysticism. Understanding that the revelation called “olive leaf” has a mystical character enhances our understanding of a meaningful doctrine. In Doctrine and Covenants 88, God

extends a “great and last promise” to his disciples. This is the doctrine of receiving the Second Comforter, a doctrine that is not well understood, especially as described in this revelation, inasmuch as Christ has already begun through Nature to manifest himself to us by degrees. In the revelation, God illustrates on a cosmic level the doctrine by using a parable involving kingdoms. The parable is prefaced by a question: “Unto what shall I liken these kingdoms [the stars], that ye may understand [the promise]” (46)? Just as Milton’s God in *Paradise Lost* creates and then visits all of his creations and creatures, so Joseph’s God visits all of his “kingdoms” and their “inhabitants” in their times and seasons (61). To see “any or the least of these [kingdoms]” is to have seen “God moving in his majesty and power” (47). The light of the orbs prepares us for the light of his face. This sentiment reminds one of Milton’s poem and of the morning hymn with which this study began. For Milton, even the human face radiated the divine (3.54). In the morning hymn, we overhear Adam and Eve pray that creation is evidence of the “Unspeakable” Creator (5.156), a Creator “To us invisible, or dimly seen” in His “lowest works” (157-58). After sharing the parable of the kingdoms the Lord says, “I leave these sayings with you to ponder in your hearts with this commandment that you shall call upon me while I am near” (62). However, God then claims that he is in effect invisible to us for now and like John the Baptist claims to be “the voice of one crying in the wilderness. In the wilderness, because you cannot see him—my voice because my voice is Spirit” (66). According to the scripture, therefore, God is both unseen and near at hand. Many of these same motifs can be found in Milton’s mystical text. One example is Milton’s frequent image of the “night-warbling bird” (a symbol of the divine presence) singing from somewhere unseen his beautiful song (3.38-40; 5.40).

Finally, what makes this important and complex LDS revelation interesting is that just as in Milton's poem where greater things (God and his ministry) are likened to lesser things (Eve and the tending of her garden), so too does the revelation compare small things to that which is great—the elders who have been and will yet be among “countries and kingdoms” (79) are indirectly compared to God ministering among his cosmic kingdoms (70-72). Just as the apostles in the book of Acts were to “tarry” in Jerusalem, the missionaries, according to the revelation, are to “Tarry” in Kirtland and to prepare to be sent forth again into the vineyard (70). The promise is made that the work of these “first laborers in this last kingdom” (70) will be “hasten[ed] . . . in its time” by the raising up of other hands (72-73). God explains in the same revelation to these elders who have returned home that He will “take care of [their] flocks” while they are not with them (72). Meanwhile, the flocks that have been already visited by them in the East are to have time to “ponder the warning in their hearts” and to obey the light that has been dispensed to them already. That light if used well will prepare them to receive the greater light in a future day. The revelation speaks a great deal about light and darkness and the stages by which one can come to “comprehend even God” (49). The key is “sanctifying ourselves” and having a “mind . . . single to God” (67-68). The doctrine of the Second Comforter as described in Section 88 resembles at many points Milton's mystical theology embodied in the image of Eve visiting each morning the plants of her garden. Just as Milton out of the darkness of his poem attempts to lead his reader up to God, so also does LDS theology teach that “the pure in heart shall see God,” but as Milton apparently understood, it will be “in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (68).