The Scattered Body of Truth:

Contradictions, Ambiguities, and Transgressions in the Narrative of *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract

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Scholars have expressed interest in ambiguous or discordant elements in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but little attention has been devoted to the presence of these elements at the narrative level. Moreover, the attention previously given has largely been directed at resolving any apparent transgressions and showing the epic to be a unified didactic whole. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the complexities of the narrative structure of *Paradise Lost*. I argue the transgressive narrative elements in the epic, which persistently resist understanding, are strategically employed and/or allowed in order to foster an acceptance of truth as inherently fragmented. I begin by outlining Milton's definition of truth as presented in *Areopagitica,* which is used as a framework to understand the narrative ambiguities and contradictions. These transgressive components are subsequently analyzed across three dimensions of narrative: plot, voice, and temporality. Drawing on concepts from unnatural narrative theory, these analyses evidence how the transgressive features in the epic's narrative often disrupt poetic stability, defy resolution, and deny readers a stable point of reference. Competing narratives of the same events, for example, present different and incompatible versions of the same event, and the reader does not know which, if any, is the accurate version. I conclude by considering the potential interpretive or reading strategies available to aid readers in maneuvering the narrative contradictions.

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Dedication

For Zeus and Sahar, whose company during the long nights of writing I will forever be trying to repay with treats.

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Introduction

While many critics have shown interest in ambiguous, subversive, or unorthodox elements in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), few have analyzed the contradictions in the text as unresolved and even fewer have investigated them in conjunction with the epic's narrative structure. Remarkably, the convergence of these two lines of inquiry remains largely unexplored. The present study aims to rectify this gap by establishing an intersection between certain narrative elements and transgressive or destabilizing features in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Specifically, I examine those narrative components that disrupt poetic stability, persistently defy resolution, and deny readers a stable point of reference. These disruptive elements include plot contradictions, temporalities that border on the impossible, and narrative voices shrouded in ambiguity. I propose that these transgressive features intentionally resist comprehension as a means to encourage readers to accept truth as fragmentary and disjointed, while still pursuing its assembly, a concept Milton articulates in *Areopagitica* (1644). In essence, the transgressive narrative elements, which persistently resist understanding, are strategically and intentionally employed and/or allowed in order to foster an acceptance of truth as inherently fragmented.

To better understand the workings of these transgressive narrative elements, this study incorporates theoretical concepts drawn from various strands of narrative theory, with a particular emphasis on the framework of unnatural narrative theory, which analyzes the aspects of fictional narratives that feature "strikingly impossible or antimimetic elements" (Alber et al. 1). Theorists working in this tradition are collectively interested in narratives whose impossibility "move beyond, extend, challenge, or defy our knowledge of the world" or of mimetic conventions of narrative, but have come up with different criteria for the unnatural (Alber et al. 2). Some theorists use the term to describe impossibilities at the level of narrative,

that is the chronological structure and presentation of events and other theorists define the unnatural as storyworld impossibilities, that is, impossibilities in the thematic content. While many elements of the storyworld in *Paradise Lost* seem to qualify (e.g., angels, demons, etc.), theorists like Jan Alber who use the term unnatural to indicate “physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events” would clarify that such elements in *Paradise Lost* are conventionalized by the context they appear in: a retelling of a biblical story (Alber et al. 6). Put differently, because of the storyworld they’re situated in, the physical impossibilities in the epic are not seen as impossibilities, let alone as strange or out of place.

Because this study is focused on elements at the level of narrative and acts of narration as transgressive, I’m more interested in concepts that are theorized by critics who locate unnaturalness at the level of narration rather than storyworld, such as Brian Richardson. For Richardson, “the fundamental criterion of unnatural narratives is their violation of the mimetic conventions that govern conversational natural narratives, nonfictional texts, and realistic works” (Alber et al. 5). Some examples that meet this criterion include the temporality of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which has a dual chronology and Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter” due to its contradictory events. Crucially, I do not propose that any narrative transgressions in *Paradise Lost* qualify as unnatural or meet this criterion; I only suggest that certain narrative oddities, by problematizing narrative stability and coherence or disrupting narrative expectations, render some of the concepts that have come out of this theoretical field, specifically related to unnaturalness at the level of narration, applicable to an analysis of how these narrative oddities in the epic function.

After exploring how the destabilizing narrative elements manifest in the text, I conclude the study by considering the potential interpretive strategies available to and commonly taken by

readers to aid in maneuvering the narrative contradictions. Employing a historically-sensitive narrative framework throughout, this study explores the complexities of the narrative structure of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The concept of an uncertain, rebellious, or methodically inconsistent Milton, and of the presence of such elements in his writings, has historically been suppressed as part of a broader and longstanding trend in Milton criticism to actively resolve the multifaceted complexities within the poem and promote its structural integrity. Whether it be paradoxical lines or conflicts between Milton's doctrines and representations, since *Paradise Lost*'s first publication, critics have largely been concerned with explaining away any uncertainties and affirming that the epic is a unified didactic work. In the 1674 poem "On Paradise Lost," published in the second edition of the epic, Andrew Marvell expresses concern about Milton's intentions: "the argument / Held me a while, misdoubting his intent" (II.6). Marvell worries that, seeking revenge for the loss of his eyesight, Milton "would ruin (for I saw him strong) / The sacred truth to fable and old song" (II.7-8). A few lines later Marvell reveals that as he continues to read the epic he becomes "less severe," seemingly assured his initial worries are baseless (II.11). Yet Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer argue in the co-written Introduction to *The New Milton Criticism* that, though Marvell's earlier doubts appear to be assayed, "the threat of Milton's strength lingers" throughout his poem (Herman and Sauer 4). Regardless of whether or not Marvell ultimately overcomes any uncertainty about *Paradise Lost,* his initial anxiety becomes characteristic of subsequent critics' reactions to the significant challenges the epic poses to both literary conventions and the establishment of a definitive interpretation.

The scholarly commitment to pronounce the coherence of *Paradise Lost* and eliminate any irregularities is notably exemplified through the critical debate between Zachary Pearce and

Richard Bentley during the 1730s. In 1732, already a highly regarded classical scholar, Bentley published *Milton's Paradise Lost: A New Edition*. Bentley objects to certain moments of doubt or contradiction in the epic as unconventional and takes it as his project to correct them. Bentley goes as far as to argue Milton could not have written such moments: "Some acquaintance of our Poet's, entrusted with his Copy, took strange Liberties with it, unknown to the blind Author" (qtd. in Herman and Sauer 6). Bentley's approach to any seemingly transgressive elements and to stabilizing the epic is to purge it of any passages that seem to contain doubt or contradiction which as Bentley argues, threaten to compromise its integrity.

Bentley's publication was met with opposition, most notably from Pearce in his *A Review of the Text of Milton's "Paradise Lost"* (1733). While Pearce is in agreement with Bentley that the epic should be free of contradictions and ambiguity, he does not, in contrast to Bentley, admit to the presence of inconsistencies in the poem. Rather Pearce argues that there are no contradictions that need to be explained away. Instead, "he always explains how the moments Bentley objects to as unconventional or contradictory, are if only 'properly' understood, perfectly traditional" (Herman and Sauer 6). Pearce assuages fears by affirming that any contradictions or problematic similes only *seem* to be so, and the poem is actually intact. Though they present different arguments for why Milton could not have evinced any kind of uncertainty or ambiguity, Bentley and Pearce agree on what *Paradise Lost* should be: wholly consistent and stable.

The debate between Bentley and Pearce is central not only because it signals the long-time compulsion to show *Paradise Lost* as free of contradictions (which were deemed errors or problems), but also because it identifies many oddities in Milton's epic. As William Empson first notices, Bentley provides a valuable guide "to the many problems in *Paradise Lost*" (qtd. in

Herman and Sauer 7). But it is Pearce's approach that becomes the model for how later defenders of Miltonic certainty deal with ambiguity in *Paradise Lost*. Christopher Ricks and Stanley Fish, for instance, are just two of many who take up Pearce's argument that the seeming anomalies lose their anomalous nature once they are "properly" understood.

The version of Milton and *Paradise Lost* presented by Romantic writers is the first notable divergence from previous critics. Less concerned about political heresies and in a world of religious uncertainty when poets increasingly privileged the creative self, the Romantics began to express interest in an unorthodox or inconsistent Milton that Marvell, Bentley, and others worried about. Or, as William Kolbrener summarizes, "Eighteenth-century critics sanitized Milton the man of his political and theological energies, taming his wildness, but the romantics lamented the lost legacy and attempted to revitalize it" (200). I would add that through this revitalization, the Romantics also interrupted a long history of finding unity in the poem.

The Romantic poets drew attention to passages of indeterminacy or open-endedness and embraced the notion of a rebellious Milton. A captivation with Milton's Satan character and an increased interest in the Satan books is a fundamental quality of the Romantics' reception of *Paradise Lost.* Some like William Blake even raised the possibility that Satan is the epic's hero. Others such as Shelley and Keats admired the greatness of the character and generally valued the epic's indeterminacy and potential for multiple meanings. The Romantics were able to appreciate the poetic achievements that can't be recognized in the conservative or orthodoxy models, such as the poetic power of Satan's character or the effect of paradoxical lines.

It was not until Empson's 1935 "Milton and Bentley" in *Some Versions of Pastoral* and his later *Milton's God* (1961) that the Romantic reading was seriously taken up again and rehabilitated. Writing at a time when the Romantic reading "ha[d] been held in contempt since

the last bold literary revolution, spearheaded by Mr. T. S. Eliot," Empson praises and revitalizes their "unorthodox" reading (Leonard 190). Empson argues that Satan is not a one-dimensional villain, but rather a complex and compelling figure who embodies both heroic and demonic qualities. Throughout his works, Empson maintains that Milton's poem is not an overt celebration of Christianity, but instead is a complex and ambivalent work that invites multiple interpretations. Empson takes the "unpopular" stance not only by charging Milton with religious and poetic unorthodoxy but also by focusing on rather than dismissing Miltonic ambiguity. Empson's writing on Milton gained much attention and generated the publication of many divergent responses. These came to a head in the ensuing "Milton controversy," an ideological rift which separated the "Christian" critics from the "non-Christian" and modernist critics and which saw God and Satan repeatedly contend for mastery.

Despite Empson's efforts, the unified, cohesive, and wholly orthodox views of the poem remained predominant throughout mid-twentieth-century Milton scholarship. The representative of this camp (even to this day) and Empson's biggest combatant was undoubtedly Stanley Fish. Throughout his career, Fish presents a Milton "without either contradiction or tension," a Milton "fixed on a single theological purpose: to achieve a union with deity" (Fish, *Surprised by Sin* 130). Fish makes clear in the "Introduction" to *How Milton Works* (2001) that "conflict, ambivalence, and open-endedness – the watchwords of a criticism that would make Milton into the Romantic liberal some of his readers want him to be – are not constitutive features of the poetry but products of a systematic misreading of it" (14). He goes further when he bluntly states that in Milton's epic, "there are no moral ambiguities, because there are no equally compelling values. There is only one value—the value of obedience" (*How Milton Works* 53). Fish is definite in his declaration that Milton's poetry is coherent, certain, total, and unified because any

uncertainties it might produce in the reader are to be subsumed in their faith in and obedience to God. While Fish recognizes the poem's difficulties, they're ultimately contained within a larger didactic work and pose no threats to the epic's stability. This outlook persisted as the dominant model, followed and enforced by many Miltonists.

Some critics further locate the influence and dominance of this unifying model in the classroom. For instance, C.Q. Drummond, in *The Compass 2,* illustrates how educational institutions enforced the pattern of Miltonic certainty in the middle of the twentieth century:

> I knew something was odd about *Paradise Lost*…about the verse, and I knew something was very odd about the story the poem told. But whenever any of these oddnesses were raised in class, our professor told us in the first place how great the verse was and… how consistent and complete the narrative was (objections to the story were made by people called Satanists, and surely no one wanted to be a Satanist). (29-30)

Although it cannot be definitively asserted that Drummond's experience was the prevailing norm, the publications of that era provide evidence that it was, at the least, widespread. Moreover, the enforcement of Miltonic certainty by educational establishments and the predominance of the unified model Milton criticism cannot be solely ascribed to Fish, as Drummond's account elucidates how a continuous reinforcement of this paradigm led to its establishment as the prevailing standard. Indeed, the insistence on cohesion runs deep in Milton criticism. Balachandra Rajan identifies the commitment to coherence made by a plethora of scholars as a "unifying imperative." "*Paradise Lost* is read," she argues, "as overcoming or at least containing its problems, as being able to take command of itself even while agreeing to question and threaten itself" (50). Hence if it's understood as diverging from its intentions, it's because the "reader is incorrectly situated in literary history. Alternatively, he's surprised by sin" (Rajan 50).

The insistence on finding unity also extends to studies of the epic's narrative structure and features.

The emergence of narratology as an approach and literary field in the 1960s didn't immediately inspire any application of narrative theories or the methodologies that came out of them to the narrative of *Paradise Lost*; this may be reflective of the "limited impact theoretical developments have had in the field" of Milton criticism which resulted in a "methodological prudence in the scholarship" (Herman and Sauer 10).[1] Though showing no direct interest in narratology, it was around this time that some Miltonists began to more seriously investigate some of the epic's narrative features.

Reflective of the longstanding insistence on unity, the elements of *Paradise Lost*'s narrative structure that have repeatedly galvanized literary critics throughout the centuries have been those that unsettle or interfere with attempts to view the epic as wholly unified. For instance, the question of narrative authority instigated by the epic's multiple voices is revisited again and again at least partially because the multiple, sometimes incompatible, authoritative voices and genres in the text pose various difficulties to viewing the poem as a whole. Prominent examples include John M. Steadman in *Epic and Tragic Structure in Paradise Lost* (1976), which delves into the work's transformation of epic and tragic genres, while Barbara K. Lewalski's *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Form* (1985) analyzes the broad spectrum of literary genres Milton incorporates in the epic.

The epic's multi-vocality was of particular concern for late twentieth-century critics. Barbara Hardy and Fish, for instance, expressed apprehension about the relationship between the

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[1] For an example of how many Miltonists viewed narrative theory, Milton scholar John K. Hale criticized Gérard Genette, a key figure in theories of narrative, for "blur[ring] for [him] what Aristotle had clarified, and bury[ing] his points under neologistic technical terms." He further saw the theorizing of narrative elements as being liable to becoming "centrifugal, arid, or overcomplicated" (Hale 132).

narrator and the characters, raising questions of narrative and authority. Many critics, including Fish, responded by granting a privileged status given to the poet-narrator. Sauer explains how by "foregrounding the authority of the dominant narrative, critics developed a reading of the poem as a unified whole" (5). Fish's important book, *Surprised by Sin* (1967), most clearly illustrates the privileging of a narrative authority as he encourages readers to rely on the narrator as "an authority who is a natural ally against the difficulties of the poem" (Fish, *Surprised by Sin* 47). A. D. Ferry in *Milton Epic's Voice: the Narrator in Paradise Lost* (1963), published three years before *Surprised by Sin*, similarly gives authority to the narrator, stating that any apparent "contradictions must of course be explained if we are to be satisfied with our reading of the poem" and a "satisfying reading experience demands the presence of a univocal, ubiquitous narrator who successfully conveys an impression of deliberate control" (Fish qtd. in Herman and Sauer 9). Not unlike other Miltonists of the era, both Fish and Ferry present an argument that aims to demonstrate that the narrative of *Paradise Lost* is contained and ultimately unified.

The next wave of interest in the narrative features of *Paradise Lost* came about with the post-structuralist readings of the epics that appeared in the 80s. Though "post-structuralism did not gain many adherents among Miltonists," there are a few notable works which look at the narrative voice in *Paradise Lost* with a poststructuralist lens (Herman and Sauer 10). William Kerrigan develops a Freudian reading of the poem in his 1983 book *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost.* In his 1986 book *Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and English Renaissance Texts,* Jonathan Goldberg offers a poststructuralist interpretation of the intertextual relationship between the written text and the author's voice. Notably, each critic, in different ways, challenges "the strong claims to totalization in the poem made by Miltonists of the 1960s and 1970s, who seek to resolve tensions or difference in the text by creating a

univocal, ubiquitous poet-narrator" (Sauer 4). As part of this challenge, the post-structuralist readings provide alternative approaches to analyzing certain narrative features which focus less on their stabilization or unification.

Along similar lines, two distinguished studies from the late twentieth century that offer a sustained engagement with the narrator and/or narrative structure of *Paradise Lost* are Clare R. Kinney's *Strategies of Poetic Narrative: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Eliot* (1992) and Elizabeth Sauer's *Barbarous Dissonance and Images of Voice in Milton's Epics* (1996). In the latter, Sauer argues that the epic displays the multivocality that Milton advocated for as the foundation for a new, republican society. Sauer demonstrates how by introducing varied viewpoints and contrasting accounts of creation, Milton resists the hegemonic influence of a singular narrative voice, be it derived from the biblical Genesis or from the contemporary milieu of the author himself. Kinney's book is another pivotal addition to both Milton and narrative studies. In its analysis of five English narrative poems, the book is attentive to the complex interactions of poetic language with narrative structure. Kinney's chapter on Milton, focusing on the epic's unusual temporality and layering of beginnings, shows how *Paradise Lost* both expresses and subverts narrative progression.

After Kinney, most discussions of the epic's narrative have appeared in the service of some other conceptual interest. Samuel Fallon in "Milton's Strange God: Theology and Narrative Form in Paradise Lost*"* (2012), for instance, explores how narrative offers Milton a tool to tackle metaphysical challenges posed by God, and Diana Trevino Benet, in "The Fall of the Angels: Theology and Narrative*"* (2016), discusses how Milton's theology affects the narrative structure of *Paradise Lost*. Importantly, theology also informs my analysis of the epic's narrative as I utilize a theological-based framework to situate certain narrative transgressions.

But unlike Benet and Fallon, I do not see narrative as wholly in service to or reliant on theology. I recognize the significance of theology in shaping the narrative, yet I contend that the functions and effect of narrative extend beyond being mere conduits for theological exploration. Hence, in my analysis, the epic narrative transcends its theological underpinnings.

The new century, meanwhile, has seen redoubled incursions on the older, stabilized accounts of Milton. In *Destabilizing Milton*, Peter Herman acknowledges earlier critics such as Kerrigan and Goldberg for paying attention to contradictions but also insists that – more often than not – these critics fall into the old habit of trying to resolve the discrepancies. Herman argues that critics such as A.J.A Wadlock and Gordon Teskey only *attempt* to shed the dominant model. After dismissing these critics, Herman suggests that he will do what these previous critics fell short of: examine Milton's uncertainty without resolving or explaining it away. He emphasizes the "thematic importance of the inconsistencies within" the poem and proposes a poetics of "incertitude" or indeterminacy as the defining characteristic of Milton's epic" (Herman 11). Herman specifically uses "incertitude" instead of indeterminacy because he believes "that in the aftermath of the Revolution, the critical sensibility that Milton championed throughout his career led him to engage in a wholesale questioning of just about everything he argued for in his prose works, and *he does not come to a conclusion*" (21, italics in original). And it is out of this wholesale questioning that Milton structures his epic according to indeterminacy and varying opinions, to a "poetics of incertitude."

Though Herman plants the seed in *Destabilizing Milton* (2005), the first explicit attempt to define a "New Milton Criticism" in theory and in practice is found in *The New Milton Criticism* (2012), a collection of essays edited by Herman and Sauer. The volume draws together the various strands of research united by their embrace of indeterminacy and "incertitude." The

New Milton Criticism, as Herman and Sauer define it in their "Introduction", aims "to recast Miltonic uncertainty as a constituent element of [Milton] studies" (14). Ultimately, New Milton Criticism invites the interrogation of not only the privileged interpretations of Milton's works but also of the authority of the – often competing – narrative voices within.

Although detailed in his challenge to the conservative stream of Milton criticism, Herman is perhaps overly ambitious in declaring the "newness" of his proposed school. As previously mentioned, Miltonic contradiction, tension, and unconventionality have been of interest to scholar-critics throughout centuries. And while some were only interested insofar as it related to the more significant interest in poetic unity, others were interested because they realized narrative tensions create poetic power. So, the question remains: what makes New Milton Criticism new? Herman would say it's the commitment to leave contradictions or tensions unresolved. But this too is not wholly new. Most notable is Empson's *Milton's God* and the bounty of essays and books published from the 1980s onwards. While Herman does acknowledge these works – and even attributes the title "the New Milton Criticism" to the rise of publications interested in Miltonic contradictions – the acknowledgment is largely to dismiss these works or show how they fall short. Moreover, Herman only briefly examines how these critics consider Miltonic contradiction and largely skips over what they have to offer.

Evidently Herman fails to acknowledge that these critics established the ground on which New Milton Criticism was built. Perhaps his dismissal of contemporary investigations of contradictions is strategic; Herman is trying to show why these earlier works don't constitute the change in Milton studies that he's advocating and hence why a "new" school is needed. But Herman's critique of his fellow "anti-Miltonists" whose methods he builds directly upon, simply comes off as denying recognition of the groundwork laid for him.

Herman further claims that the rise of works exploring an “alternative” view shows that “the paradigms governing Milton studies are shifting (20). Such a shift, Herman states, is made evident by two things; first, the reevaluation of Empson’s previously “dismissed” and “ignored” works such as *Milton’s God;* second, some critics who “earlier accepted the ‘certain’ Milton have now partly changed their view” (21). I don’t deny either of these points (except the idea that Empson’s work was previously “ignored”), and the influx of publications exploring varying and alternative versions of Milton is undeniable. But there’s little evidence that the advocacy for a conservative Milton and unified poem fell away during the time of Herman’s writing and even now. Critics such as Feisal G. Mohamed and Corey McEleney, who “agree with Fish that Milton is a poet with totalizing intentions,” are just two of many others that show the traditional reading remained prominent, making it difficult to see how a totalizing “shift” occurred in Milton criticism (McEleney 132). In this way, the Milton war is, and seemingly always will be, ongoing and continuously shifting its focus.

It’s important to note that there are scholars interested in Miltonic ambiguity or contradiction that locate themselves outside of the New Milton Criticism school. For instance, *Milton’s Rival Hermeneutics*, a collection of essays edited by Richard J. DuRocher and Margaret Olofson Thickstun, acknowledges that “the heralds of incertitude have done well to highlight tensions and issues too often ignored in Milton criticism,” but ultimately find that “both [the heralds’] diagnosis and response to these issues have been too sweeping and dogmatic” (xvi.). Liam D. Haydon also critiques Herman's response, but for different reasons, noting how Herman actually resolves the contradictions: “The poem, for Herman, is finally stabilized by ‘equally powerful opposing forces, like massive tectonic plates pressing against each other’” in which “the poem’s very ambiguities [in Herman’s view] are bounded and controlled by a narrative

figure to produce a unified meaning from the system of self-conflicting metaphors" (Haydon 176). Despite Herman's assertion that the poem methodically establishes deliberately unresolved narrative oppositions, he fails to fully adhere to his own principles as he ultimately resolves the poem's contradictions and stabilizes its meaning.

Subsequently, Haydon articulates his own viewpoint, which confronts the claim that the ambiguities and contradictions are effectively resolved. Haydon posits that these contradictions are instead "the necessary effects of the poem's post-lapsarian production" (176) and hence can never be resolved. Haydon further proposes that the contradictions in the epic demonstrate the *limits* of the narrative voice itself, which cannot render the divine or diabolic without recourse to scripture or inadequate comparative, which is all that is available through fallen language" (176). Ultimately, for Haydon, the ambiguities and contradictions arise from the inherent difficulty of conveying biblical truths through imperfect language and, as such, undermine any possibility of internal coherence.

Haydon's analysis is fundamental not only because it makes clear how New Milton Criticism falls short but also because it is one of very few to truly consider the contradictions in the epic as irresolvable. While my own analysis of certain narrative contradictions as irresolvable aligns closely with Haydon, I diverge from his essay in a few ways relating to methodology and the location of the contradictions. First, my analysis places greater emphasis and is principally focused on how the contradictions play out in the epic's narrative structure and voice. Because his focus is primarily on diction, Haydon only briefly discusses how the contradictions manifest at the narrative level and spends little time locating them in the story; even less time is spent describing how this tension impacts narrative coherence. For instance, he discusses Michael and Raphael's difficulty in describing God's works, matters which are "ultimately explicable only by

reference to themselves," to Adam while being "themselves bound by the conditions of the incomprehensible or unutterable" (Haydon 179). Yet Haydon doesn't explicate how the story unfolds for Adam or readers in light of these difficulties, leaving the narrative impact of this valuable insight untouched.

Haydon and I further diverge in our treatment and usage of literary, specifically narrative, theory. Haydon's essay draws on deconstructionist thought; in line with his focus on the role of language, he briefly uses a Derridean lens to look at angelic and satanic language and discusses the role of signification. By contrast, I utilize narrative theory in my analysis. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the body of critical work that combats the longstanding disconnect between narratology and literary history. Indeed, since the inception of narratology, the works taken under its consideration have overwhelmingly been from the mid-20th century and onwards. While more recent decades have seen narratological analysis increasingly applied to a diverse range of texts and narratives throughout history, the critical works that do connect narrative theory to historical works lack a clear methodology as they "differ widely with respect to the methods they use and the perspective they assume towards the historical and/or diachronic agenda" (von Cotzen et al. 27).

The variations in methodology largely stem from a question of compatibility: can contemporary concepts of narratology, largely formed with reference to the modern novel, be applied to premodern texts? Narratological concepts are largely considered trans-historical, and their application to historical narratives often neglect the text's historical circumstances. It was not till the early and mid-2000s that "the possibility [has] been raised among narratologists of taking the historical dimension into account in narratological research" (Steinby and Mäkikalli 8). It is now commonly accepted that it's possible to take a context-sensitive approach to

narrative that still utilizes contemporary narratology. My analysis follows this, with the premise that narrative concepts (e.g., focalization) can be applied to premodern texts while still taking into account narrative form as historically and ideologically grounded. By using narratology in investigating the epic's contradictions and their defamiliarizing effect, I hope to actively engage with the project of historicizing narratology with a context-sensitive approach as well as encourage the appeal to literary theory in Milton studies.

Though I diverge by focusing more on narrative concepts and narrative theory, Haydon and I use similar frameworks to locate the contradictions. Haydon proposes the indeterminacies and contradictions in the epic's narrative are the necessary effect of the ineffectiveness of fallen language when tasked with expressing divinity while I propose that they are the effect of the fragmentary nature of truth and the temporary impossibility of its reassembly, which Milton articulates in *Areopagitica*. But these frameworks overlap in many ways. First, both fallen language and fragmentary truth are a result of the post-lapsarian state and hence are unavoidable conditions. However, while post-lapsarian or fallen language is enduringly irresolvable, the fragmentary nature of truth is only temporarily irresolvable until the Second Coming. Another key difference is that the fragmentary nature of truth and the search it necessitates is more than a passive condition because it requires active involvement (which will be discussed further shortly).

In both frameworks, the ambiguities and contradictions are the effects of these post-lasparian conditions which Milton must deal with in writing the epic. The fragmentary nature of truth as a framework to locate and read the irresolvable contradictions, however, differs slightly from the framework of fallen language in that it is not only a condition that impacts Milton's writing, but it is an idea that Milton actively engages with and puts forth. That is, Milton uses the

narrative contradictions as a way to present to readers ideas related to the nature of truth such as the encouragement to accept particular irresolvable – and fragmentary – matters as such and to pursue them anyways. Hence, in this framework the defamiliarizing effects produced by any narrative contradictions or ambiguities are not just effects of the necessary conditions behind Milton's task but purposeful maneuvers. My framework and hence analysis are grounded in Milton's formulation of the concept of truth as articulated in *Areopagitica*, as the definition put forth shows a Milton who accepts certain irresolvable contradictions and ambiguities.

The Scattered Body of Truth

Written as a response to the Long Parliament's bill calling for every publication to be approved and licensed by the government, *Areopagitica* (1644) has become a classic in the literature against censorship. Indeed, though Parliament ultimately ignored it and chose to uphold the Stationers' control over the book trade, *Areopagitica* remains an important tract on free speech and plays an important role in the history of toleration and liberalism. The text also remains at the forefront of Milton studies but for different reasons. As T.N. Corns summarizes, "since approximately the mid-twentieth century Milton's *Areopagitica* has seemed less like an iconic proclamation of core values of western liberalism and more like a series of problems to be explained away" (73). Milton's divided stance on a variety of topics fundamental to the treatise, such as book licensing and censorship, has proved problematic for scholars as evidenced by "interpretations of *Areopagitica*'s argument [which] differ widely if not wildly" (Schaeffer 84). Indeed, inconsistent or unclear moments within the text have understandably led to a divided critical field as modern scholarship remains perplexed on some points. Consequentially, "current scholarship offers contradictory explanations for what appears to be contradictory in the tract"

(Corns 74). *Areopagitica* along with, as I argue, *Paradise Lost*, insistently avoid a single clear meaning not simply by being ambiguous but also by being contradictory. Before I describe the scattered body image of truth in *Areopagitica*, it will be valuable to look at Milton's earlier attempts to make sense of or explain truth.

Milton experiments with several metaphors to describe truth throughout his career. In *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), Milton analogizes truth to childbirth, offering different but not unrelated imagery. He first objects to those who attempt to stop all innovation, "as if the womb of teeming Truth were to be closed up" (qtd. in Hequembourg 67). And shortly after, he notes that "many truths ... had their birth and beginning once from singular and private thoughts" (67). Milton senses a connection between childbirth and truth, as he finds the role of both mother and child apt to show how truth both generates and is also what is generated from, but he doesn't continue to use this analogy.

Another early image for truth and its propagation is economic exchange. Milton explains that God sends us into the world with "sums of knowledge and illumination ... to trade with" (qtd. in Hequembourg 68). But this imagery falls short. For one, there is nothing in the "free marketplace of ideas image that captures the pain of making difficult truths public, as the imagery of childbirth did" (Hequembourg 68). But more importantly, "the circulation of goods and currency among various individuals does not point to any larger image of truth in the making" (68). The third image appears throughout Milton's works: truth as combat. The image of intellectual warfare returns in many forms throughout his works and "serves Milton well because it expresses both the openness of encounter, as the economic image did and also the prospect of pain, as the imagery of childbirth did" (68). But this imagery, used often for both truth *and* knowledge, is expended in a variety of works and changes shape. The most productive

image instead seems to be the one Milton lands on in *Areopagitica*: the reassembly of the torn and scattered body of Truth.

Unlike previous imagery used, the torn body imagery emphasizes the positioning of the actual form of truth that existed in the past. “Truth indeed,” Milton begins, “came into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on.” Yet “when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers who . . . took the Virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scatter'd them to the four winds” (*Areopagitica,* 205). After falling prey to "deceivers," the virgin Truth’s body is torn apart and scattered across the earth. Yet Milton is not pessimistic, as the ramifications of the scattered body are oriented towards progress. Indeed, since the dismemberment and scattering, “the sad friends of Truth…imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangl'd body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them” (205). Though the league of laborers work to put it back together, the body has not been restored and “nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming” (205). Until Christ returns when he “shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortall feature of loveliness and perfection," the task remains unattainable (205). In short, the reassembly of truth is humanly impossible and unending.

Yet, even though the body cannot be reassembled by human effort alone and is impossible to know, Milton underscores the value of striving to uncover truth. And though encouraging the pursuit of something inherently elusive may appear paradoxical, the continual endeavor to piece together the fragmented aspects of truth can actually signify progress. As Gertz-Robinson explains, “the torn body of Truth institutes a search for knowledge, rather than the obliteration of it” (977). The pieces of truth's body disseminate, and though the work of

putting it back together is unending, Milton encourages critical inquiry by inciting readers to do so anyways, or perhaps because of. Hence, its irresolvability doesn't render it useless but makes it worthy of pursuit and re-membering.

Yet, whatever one does find in their pursuit, should be considered temporary: "and as each person is dealt only the measure of illumination God sees fit, we should probably hold all of our anatomies of truth as provisional" (Hequembourg 69). Milton encourages in readers a state of continual searching in which they remain skeptical of and willing to challenge whatever is found. That is, Milton encourages readers to search out for truth in active confrontation with – and thus toleration of – certain hostile religious and political positions. Moreover, until the Second Coming there can be no natural agreement about what the final shape of the body of truth is, about what counts as correct proportion. Hence truth is (temporarily) not universally resolvable and one person's truth can easily contradict another's. Much like the scenes in *Paradise Lost* that critics persistently debate, and the wide-ranging interpretations produced, there can be no agreement over what is meant, only individual reactions.

Milton allows irresolvable matters that provoke varied, divergent, and even contradictory responses or understandings. But Milton is not simply accepting, he further finds irresolvable contradictions productive as made evident by his encouragement to seek out these provisional truths still. Evidently, Milton understands the search for the truth as both an essential process and one inevitably unfinished.

Milton's formulation of truth parallels the narrative contradictions in *Paradise Lost* in multiple ways. The scattered parts are analogous to the contradictory moments. And the unending search for a sequence that can never be fully organized/understood is the irresolvability of the contradictions. And similar to how, despite the inability to reassemble the parts of truth,

the search is productive; the narrative contradictions in *Paradise Lost*, in spite of their irresolvability, promote critical inquiry. In this way *Paradise Lost* uses the contradictions to propose that "there is a way of thinking about truth which is not reassuring, which is more adventurous and risky" (Wittreich, "Sites" 104). Due to these evident parallels, I use the irresolvability of the fragmented and sometimes erroneous nature of truth as a framework to understand the irresolvability of the narrative contradictions in *Paradise Lost*.

Truth in *Areopagitica* not only parallels narrative oddities in *Paradise Lost*, but Milton uses the contradictions calculatedly – as a way of revealing aspects about the pursuit of truth to readers. Put differently, the fragmented and sometimes erroneous nature of narrative in *Paradise Lost* is intentionally allowed by Milton to provoke diverse and often equally compelling reactions. And the inability to decipher a "correct" reading or clear explanation for *some* of the narrative contradictions is meant to encourage readers to accept their human inability to understand or "fix" the contradictions, reflective of how they are to accept the temporary impossibility to reassemble truth and resolve it of its fragmentary state. The contradictions or inconsistencies I look at can be divided into three categories: plot, voice, and temporality.

Plot and Fabula

Because many of the contradictions related to or at the level of plot stem from contradictions inherent to the biblical stories Milton retells, an overview of how biblical contradictions were understood in Milton's cultural context is necessary before looking at the narrative contradictions at the level of plot and fabula. It was well-known by Milton's contemporaries that inconsistencies abounded in the Bible, including in the Genesis 1 and 2 accounts of Creation. The usual recourse in scriptural interpretation and in representing

challenging biblical scenes was for a long time – and for many of Milton's contemporaries – to try to provide explanations or to show that the Bible is "itself logical and only requires the slightest formal transformation to make its ideas clear" (Rutherford 67). But in the seventeenth century, there was also an unsettling of received interpretation. Around Milton's time, the Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation "was becoming profoundly and incurably restless, condemned perpetually to shuttle between dichotomies that it must raise but cannot solve'" (Wittreich, "Dissenter" 23). As Wittreich notes, many of Milton's "contemporary commentators' agenda [was] to challenge, not confirm, venerable interpretations of key biblical stories" ("Dissenter" 23). Hence, though not exactly commonplace or conventional, Milton was not alone in, as we'll see, representing the biblical contradictions in a way that goes beyond simply trying to solve them.

In *Paradise Lost,* contradictions at the level of plot often result from the serial repetition of a singular event. That is, when different descriptions of the same event are offered by various authorial voices. Some of these repetitions conciliate while others collide. For instance, as Peter Herman notices, the "accounts of Creation by Uriel and Raphael exhibit concord whereas those by Raphael in Book 7 and Adam in Book 8 are at odds" (53). The accounts of humankind's creation offered by Raphael and Adam, which I focus on in this section, offer readers two contrasting fictional possibilities that often parallel Genesis 1 and 2.

Raphael's account of humankind's creation on the sixth day of Creation is given while relating, at the request of Adam, how and why the world was created. In the next book, Adam chooses to relate to Raphael what he remembered since the moment of his own "birth" and consequentially provides another account of the same moment in the story of Creation. In several ways, the two accounts of humankind's creation offered "compete with one another" (Herman

52). Some minor discrepancies between Raphael's and Adam's accounts are to be expected given their respective stories are produced from different perspectives (more on this later). But some of the discrepancies, even if arising from differences in perspectives, interfere with readers' comprehension of the story of Creation and hence are not so minor.

Brian Richardson, in the chapter "Narrative Middles I: Plot, Probability, and Tellability" in *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century* (2019) explains how the serial repetition of a single story or event in narrative typically offers a fuller or extended view of the story being retold. But in some cases, the repetition of an event results in the story being "negated or altered" (Richardson 71). This is the case with the story of Creation as some of the discrepancies between Raphael and Adam's accounts pertain to or describe key moments necessary to understand the story and hence result in the two voices "present[ing] radically different versions/narratives" of humankind's creation and render their accounts incompatible (Herman 53-4). These types of discrepancies offer not a more nuanced understanding of humankind's creation but mismatched fragments that not only impede on one's ability to understand the event as it happened but further complicate the reader's sense of the underlying story (or fabula). To begin with, Adam and Raphael present divergent views of how God understands gender relations.

After recounting the events of the first five days of Creation, Raphael proceeds to narrate the events of the sixth day. Quoting the Father's words to the Son, he declares, "Let us make now Man in our image, Man / In our similitude, and let them rule / Over the Fish and Fowle of Sea and Aire" (VII.519-21). Raphael uses "Man" here to refer to both Adam and Eve: "let *them* rule." Raphael draws "on the equality of male and female implicit in the first creation narrative" as "both are given equal power over the earth's inhabitants" (Herman 52). Hence, Raphael gives weight to the equal power apportioned to both sexes in the first Genesis story. Adam presents a

different narrative of who is given dominion over the earth. Reciting God's speech, Adam states, "but all the Earth / To thee and to thy Race I give; as Lords / Possess it" (VIII.338-40). "Thy race" presumably is males since, at this point, God has not created Eve. Moreover, the definition of "lord" according to the OED is specifically only in reference to "a man (or boy) who has dominion," explicitly excluding women. Importantly, this quote and the idea that God gives dominion solely to men is not part of the Genesis stories but Milton's own creation because as Herman points out, "in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28 God gives Adam and Eve 'dominion' over the earth" and Genesis 2 doesn't specify authority" (52). Milton implanting this idea that dominion is specifically given exclusively to Adam and his male lineage into the Genesis-based accounts creates two contradictions. First, it negates Raphael's account of dominion. Crucially, this is not an alternative that can exist at the same time; rather, it is one or the other, making this aspect of the accounts incompatible. Second, it imagines an impossible situation, or more specifically, shows God imagining an impossible situation. By God stating, as told by Adam, that all the Earth is given to "thy Race", God imagines a "race" of male humans without any indication of how reproduction will take place. That God imagines and puts forth such an impossibility is yet another narrative contradiction, but one created by Milton.

Herman also highlights the inconsistencies found in Adam and Raphael's narratives concerning the intent and timing behind Eve's creation. While in his narrative "Raphael specifies that God creates Eve specifically (and arguably solely) for the propagation of the race," in Adam's version, Eve is created to suit his desire for an intellectual equal (Herman 52). Initially, Adam emphasizes companionship: "In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (VIII.364-6). And when God reminds Adam of the animals available to "find pastime with," (VIII.375) Adam makes clearer what he seeks: "Among

unequals what societie / Can sort… / Of fellowship I speak / Such as I seek, fit to participate / All rational delight" (VIII.383-91). Adam specifies that he seeks more of an intellectual equal than a mere companion or pastime. And though Adam does eventually mention "the continuation of the species (VIII.419-27), the issue is always subordinated in Adam's mind to his desire for someone or something that would be his intellectual equal" (Herman 52-3). As certain aspects of the event revealed in one account are qualified, doubted, or denied by the other, we're left then with a story of creation that leaves central elements, such as when and why God created Eve, unclear. These problems are further generative as Eve's later shown desire to assert herself as Adam's equal (re)enforces a type of status of uncertainty she has in the narrative and harkens back to these circumstances surrounding her creation.

Lastly, because Raphael narrates Eve's creation right after presenting Adam's, Herman contends that there's "little sense…that much time elapses between their respective origins" (52). And indeed, Eve's creation seems to immediately follow Adam's. By contrast, in Adam's account of Creation, between the moment he first awakens and the time he sees Eve, Adam is able to explore Eden, have a lengthy conversation with God, and name the animals. Further, enough time had to have elapsed for Adam to develop feelings of loneliness that he states instigate her creation. Hence Adam's account suggests that "an indeterminate yet fairly lengthy amount of time separates the two" (Herman 52). The kind of possible temporal sequencing offered by Adam's narrative leads to a story of Creation different than the one offered by Raphael. This is just one aspect of the incongruity of the two stories of humankind's creation that result in there being "no single unambiguous story to be extrapolated from the discourse; rather, there are two or more contradictory versions" (Richardson 109). While, as stated, the

divergences may be explained by the different perspectives, unlike any minor discrepancies, these pertain to moments fundamental in understanding the story as well as to its narratability.

Many of these contradictions in the epic are, as mentioned, inherited from the scriptural stories Milton depicts. The Bible, with its multiple authorial strands, inherently contains inconsistencies, including those within the Genesis story that Milton retells. These inherited contradictions are carried over into Milton's representation of the narrative events. Or as Wittreich observes, "the contradictions within Milton's poem...find their parallels in conflicts both within the scriptural texts and hermeneutic traditions on which they are based" ("Dissenter" 35-6). While it is true that many of the narrative contradictions in Milton's work stem from the biblical contradictions inherited, there exists a critical dissimilarity in how these contradictions are presented and narrated. Indeed, Wittreich asserts that "*Paradise Lost* is not just a re-packaging of Genesis" and this extends to how the epic represents the inherited biblical inconsistencies ("Dissenter" 23). The representation of the biblical contradictions is undoubtedly the blueprint of many of Milton's narrative contradictions, but not the driving force behind their irresolvability or defamiliarizing effects. Consequentially, it would be misguided to explain all the contradictions and other narrative inconsistencies in the epic as simply the representation of those found in its source material.

Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis present two distinct and separate accounts of the creation of the world and humanity, showcasing different perspectives and focusing on various aspects. Each account appears in the Bible as separate chapters, functioning as independent stand-alone narratives that conclude when the chapter ends. As a result, the disparate aspects and contradictions within the Genesis accounts of Creation only become apparent when one actively compares the two accounts. While Milton partially emulates this format by providing two

separate accounts of the Creation story, he also diverges from Genesis. Unlike the distinct chapter structure in Genesis, where the two accounts are presented as separate entities, Milton intricately weaves together and forms a connection between the accounts by employing conversational dialogue between Adam and Raphael. Though Adam and Raphael's conversation, in which both accounts are presented, spans multiple books (akin to chapters), the accounts remain connected through the sustained dialogue format employed.

Weaving them together in this way, Milton "narrativizes" the biblical contradictions and gaps, grounding them in the difference between heavenly narrators and human perspectives. Milton grounds the Genesis stories – and the discrepancies between them – in questions and variances in perspective at least partially in order to rationalize or make sense of them. Indeed, while in the Bible, the discrepant accounts are provided by the same 3rd person, in the epic the discrepant accounts are provided by two different points of view, making some of the discrepancies more explainable. In this way, Milton uses the narrative strategy of perspectival differences to reconcile some of the discrepant aspects of the biblical accounts.

By folding some of the biblical contradictions into variations in point of view, Milton places the biblical contradictions into the structure or framework of a narrative story. This refitting of the biblical contradiction into a fictional story narrative format means they have different consequences and effects as well as follow different conventions. That is the conventions of fictional/story narrative and in this specific case, conventions of how characters converse. It is some of these new consequences and conventions that allow Milton to rationalize some of the discrepancies (e.g. the story conventions of different points of view and what they allow explains some differences between Raphael and Adam's accounts), but other consequences and conventions of the narrative story format result in the biblical discrepancies interfering with

narrative stability/coherence and the productions of new narrative contradictions. In short, while Milton uses narrative point of view to reconcile some aspects of the biblical account, the consequences and conventions of this narrative framework sometimes interfere with narrative stability and produce other narrative contradictions.

For instance, some of the discrepancies in Raphael and Adam's accounts have narrative consequences related to plot and its stability. Even if explained by allowances of perspectival differences, the discrepancies, at the level of narrative, still present readers with two contrasting accounts of Creation. And these contrasting accounts give rise to narrative challenges regarding plot, primarily due to the ambiguity of which alternative story, presented by Raphael and Adam, holds authority or accurately depicts the true account of Creation.

Indeed, which account is authoritative is unclear. Because their accounts pit "divine revelation against human interpretation" (Wittreich, "Sites" 118), the immediate or obvious response may be to privilege divine revelation and angelic intellect over human faculty, which is notoriously prone to error. But the choice is not as clear when one realizes the accounts pit not only divine revelation against human interpretation but also second-hand information against eyewitness account. Indeed, Adam narrates his conversation with God as he experienced it and, as an unfallen human, there is no good reason to doubt his account of Creation as his experience of it.

By contrast, though Raphael narrates as if an eyewitness to Creation (providing direct quotes from the day, for instance) book 8 reveals that he was in fact not present: "I that Day was absent…/ Bound on a voyage uncouth…/ Farr on excursion toward the Gates of Hell" (VIII.229-31). His narrative is instead the result of "Grace Divine / Imbu'd" (VIII. 215-16). As Jonathan Richardson first notices, this admission makes clear that his account, of at least the sixth day of

Creation but maybe more, comes from “Hear-say, or Inspiration,” (Richardson and Son 293). Similar to Satan’s account of Creation, which comes from either “ancient Prophesie or report in Heaven,” the source of Raphael’s account is unclear (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 3). Though it seems more likely Raphael received the story from divine revelation (inspiration), some believe otherwise. Zachary Pearce for instance argues there is “no doubt he learned the story…from other Angels which were present” (237). While it seems that even hearsay, if coming from angels, should count as trustworthy and reliable, the text complicates matters by showing angels are not exempt from error or misperceptions. The most notable demonstration of such is Uriel’s encounters with Satan in disguise as a cherub. Though the “sharpest sighted Spirit of all in Heav’n” (III.691), Uriel fails to recognize and is fooled by Satan’s disguise. In light of the knowledge that angels are not immune to mistakes, it seems that hearsay is still hearsay. Moreover, while angelic hearsay would undoubtedly be accepted if compared to human hearsay, in this case the hearsay is put up against not only an eyewitness account but the eyewitness account of an unfallen human, who is presumably not prone to *as many* follies and errors as a fallen human. In either case, hearsay or inspiration, Raphael can only describe what he’s been told, and how much he was told and by whom remains ambiguous.

To further complicate matters, both Raphael and Adam use God’s reported speech as sources in their inconsistent accounts. Considering that the idea of a contradictory or fallible God would have been inconceivable during Milton's time, this raises the question: “Who is the reliable translator of God’s word?” (Wittreich, “Sites” 120). But, as shown, this answer is not as straightforward as it may seem. By leaving no clear authoritative account, Milton “reverses the customary privileging of Genesis 2 over 1” which has “the effect of opening up rather than closing down interpretive possibilities” (Wittreich, “Sites” 120).

Because the question of the authoritative account remains unclear, the discrepancies are left unsettled and readers confront contradictory accounts. Indeed, the contrasting perspectives, held in tension, are not straightforwardly resolved, and these transgressive elements prompt the reader to allow the contradictory plots to exist simultaneously. Yet to do so is to leave vital questions pertaining to the primary narrative of the Fall, such as who received dominion from God and who instigated Eve's creation, unanswered. Hence, to do so is to accept that "there is no solid set of facts we might assemble together into a fabula; [that] we are left with only the ambiguous discourse of the text" (Richardson 56). The unresolved discrepancies in Adam and Raphael's accounts interfere with a singular story of Creation, leaving us instead with fragmentary portions. This moment in the plot of Creation that Raphael and Adam describe variously, is pivotal for the larger fabula of the epic; it forms the basis of Adam and Eve's future decisions. Hence the unsettled contradictory plots can pose a serious threat to narrative coherence and stability.

Another consequence of the narrative story/sustained dialogue format is that the discrepancies are in closer proximity and more interconnected than those in the Bible (where they are neatly separated by chapters). Consequentially the contradictions between the two accounts become more entangled and prominent. Wittreich points out that Raphael and Adam's narratives represent what Mieke Bal refers to as a "fracturing interpretation" that is, "an interpretation that will bring out into the open the contradictions within a text attributable to a…plurality of voices or focalizations" ("Sites" 121). And indeed, due to the minimal distance between Adam and Raphael's accounts of creation, the scriptural inconsistencies between the two - that result from the Bible's multiple authoritative strands - are brought out in the open, and further left unresolved. Another difficulty is that Milton doesn't wholly separate the two Genesis

accounts neatly between Adam and Raphael. Though Adam's account generally follows Genesis 2 and Raphael's more often accords with Genesis 1, the angelic and human account do not cleanly parallel the Genesis chapters. Raphael's account, as Herman notices, "uneasily combines elements from the two Creation stories" in Genesis 1-2:3 and Genesis 2:3-3:24 as well as "the brief recap in Genesis 5: 1-2" (53). This amalgamation complicates the interpretation of Adam and Raphael's account as parallel to Genesis 1 and 2.

Milton most likely knew that narrativizing to rationalize the biblical contradictions would work in many ways but that it would also pose problems to narrative stability/coherence and create new narrative difficulties. After all, the epic stories he studied since a kid at St. Paul's School and later at Christ's College, Cambridge, made him widely familiar with the narrative tradition including the multi-layered narratives of Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser. As a result, Milton was almost certainly aware of the possible impact of things like contradictory plots or ambiguous features. I propose that Milton never intended for all contradictions to be ironed out by narrativizing; some contradictions would remain and others be created. It seems that, by attempting to rationalize some of the biblical contradictions, Milton is doing something akin to attempting to assemble the fragmentary pieces of truth. Just as truth cannot be fully reassembled, narrative inconsistencies and contradictions will inevitably remain. In line with encouraging readers to accept the fragmentary nature of truth, these unresolved contradictions that remain and are created are used to encourage an acceptance of their nature and that of truth.

Though I wish to focus more on the effects of the contradictions rather than why they exist, it's worth briefly considering the ambiguities as the result of Milton's own search for truth. In *Why Milton Matters* Wittreich argues that Milton tests the divine analogy, or whether things on earth correspond with the way are in heaven by "running scientific debates between

discrepant accounts of creation” in books 7 and 8 (53). Though I don’t wholly agree with this argument, I believe in its basis: Milton is conducting a type of experiment. That is, I believe it’s important to remember Milton did not have it all sorted out and may have even been highly conflicted, especially writing during a period of great turmoil and transformation marked by religious conflicts and political upheaval which likely opened up new uncertainties with regard to Milton’s conception of issues such as free will, individual responsibility, marriage and gender. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton addresses these issues on multiple occasions. For instance, one can see how he tries to negotiate his sympathies for republicanism and his criticisms of the English monarchy with the Christian notion of obedience to God's will and the hierarchy of divine authority. Yet he never seems to adopt a consistent and definitive standpoint. Instead, Milton's epic abounds with complexities and uncertainties, suggesting that the tensions and contradictions may simply reflect his own introspective inquiries and personal hesitations along with his own search for truth. And Milton, knowing the search was endless, had little reason to resolve all the ambiguities that may have resulted from it. At the least, this shows Milton’s willingness to engage in wars of truth and to champion personal and individual freedom.

Contradictions at the level of plot and narrative negation are further present in the elevation of the son and the descriptions of Satan’s fall from heaven. The narrator first tells us that Satan’s “Pride / Had cast him out from Heav’n” (I.36-7) But less than ten lines after we are told that it was God who “Hurl’d headlong flaming from th’Etheral Skie” (I.44). And later the image is revised yet again as Raphael tells us that “headlong themselves they threw / Down from the verge of Heav’n” (VI.864-5). “The Argument” to book 6 reinforces the initial idea that Satan was cast out by his own accord by describing how the defeated angels “leap down with horrour and confusion into the place of punishment prepar'd for them” (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 132). “The

Argument" to book 1, on the other hand, reinforces the idea that Satan was thrown out by God, asserting that "Satan…was by the command of God driven out of heaven" (3). These clashing narratives evidence the interpretive variety Milton offers readers, often with no clear answer.

Narrative Voices and Characters

Narrative contradictions in *Paradise Lost* also exist in aspects of the narrator and characters. The narrator's presence is more complicated than it may at first seem. At its basis, the omniscient third-person narrator of *Paradise Lost* is heterodiegetic, or external to the story. Though the narrator uses "I," such as in the invocations in books 1 and 7, and describes his actions, such as himself as in metaphoric flight, this is a rhetorical device frequently employed in epics rather than a shift to a sustained first-person narrative. The majority of the poem is still narrated in the third person, with the narrator providing an omniscient account of the events.

Though this narrator is frequently associated with Milton, in narratological terms, it would be erroneous to say Milton the author *is* the narrator. Narratologists lay out six different actors in and of the text which Gordon Campbell summarizes: real author -» implied author -» narrator -» narratee-» implied reader -» real reader (Campbell 275). Existing between the author and the narrator is the implied author; the idea of which, as Campbell simplifies "seems to be that we as readers construct an author by inference from the text" (275). This implied entity is neither the narrator nor the literal real author of the work and is never heard from. The implied author could be thought of as the Milton we frequently associated with the narrator; it's not the real author Milton, but one readers construct. Though the language feels, as Campbell describes, like "indulging in a bit of linguistic and intellectual terrorism," these distinctions are imperative

to keep the entities separate considering how easily these voices seem to blend together easily (278).

Often a character is in the narrative focus, of principal interest to the narrator at a given time, and "followed" by the narration. The narrator employs a particular character as a conduit, enabling the story to be conveyed through their consciousness, thus transmitting the character's perception and cognition to the reader. Gerard Genette uses the term *focalization* to refer to the perspective through which events are perceived and filtered. As he defines it, focalization is "who sees." In *Paradise Lost*, the narrator employs various focalizations including Satan, Adam, and Eve at different points. Importantly, characters' perceptions or focalizations can be misleading and inaccurate, even self-serving. The impact of this is most evident in book 4 when readers observe Adam and Eve in their prelapsarian state for the first time, but crucially "through the eyes of Satan" (Campbell 280). That means the description readers receive is not just any description of Adam and Eve but specifically one originating from Satan's view. To complicate matters, as Campbell notices, at the same moment that readers see Eve and Adam for the first time through Satan's perspective, the narrator's voice enters (280). In this first sighting, the description begins, "In naked majesty seemed lords of all, / And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine / The image of their glorious maker shone" (IV. 290-2). Campbell draws attention to how the use of "seemed" in lines 290 and 291 informs us that Satan is the character-focalizer while "glorious" in the very next line indicates "another orientation, that of the external focalizer, the 'Miltonic narrator'" (280). The effect of conflating "these orientations into a single 'point of view' is to pummel opposing perspectives into a false consistency" (280). In the epic, the narrator subtly switches between various focalizers and hence obscures whose lens events are viewed from at certain moments. In these moments, readers are often unaware of whose

perceptions, emotions, and thoughts inflect the narrative we receive. This is just one of the ways Milton uses focalization to defamiliarize the biblical text in ways that must have surprised and even shocked his first readers (including, at least potentially, Marvell).

On the opposite end of the communication channel is the narratee -» implied reader -» real reader. The narratee, to whom the narrative is addressed, will be different characters at different moments. For instance, Raphael is the narratee at the beginning of book 5 as God is speaking to and instructing him. But the most crucial narratee is Adam. First throughout books 5-8, "Adam serves as narratee, or listener…to the narrative of which is spoken by the angel Raphael" (Campbell 276). Then in books 11-12, Adam resumes the position as the reader and narratee of the narrative of human history. Adam listens attentively to the archangel Michael who, by contrast to Raphael's account of largely past events, imparts knowledge of the consequences of humanity's fall and the future struggles that will define their existence. As is the case with his discourse with Raphael, Adam's role as a reader goes beyond mere passive observation. He engages with the narrative by questioning and seeking clarification on various aspects of human history. His inquiries reflect his desire to not only reconcile the events he witnesses with his own experiences and beliefs but also, as a now fallen human, to comprehend the complexities of the world and seek matters previously hidden.

Storytelling plays a vital function in *Paradise Lost* in part because of how many events are revealed through characters' discourse. The direct citations or spoken dialogues of the archangels carry particular authority as a substantial portion of the plot is revealed through them. Indeed, rather than being described by the omniscient narrator or shown as actions, many major events of the plot are narrated by Raphael and Michael in conversation with Adam. As mentioned, throughout books 5-8 Raphael, sent by God to provide guidance and instruction to

Adam, relates key information and moments leading up to the fall (including the war in heaven, the elevation of the Son, and the entire story of Creation) to both Adam and readers of the epic. Though from Adam's point of view, Raphael's narrative is largely enjoyable and he even asks questions partially as a "means of augmenting the pleasure of the present moment of converse with an angel," for both him and readers, the narrative is "absolutely essential in terms of epic economy" (Kinney 133). Specifically, for readers, understanding Raphael's account is imperative for narrative coherence as it "brings us up to date with all that has transpired since the 'now' of Book I.54" (Kinney 133). Hence Raphael the character-narrator bears much responsibility for the story's coherence and success.

The magnitude of what he conveys intensifies the urgency of the "restraints and limitations" imposed upon his narrative (Wittreich, "Sites" 130). Specifically, Raphael's narrative is subject to the principle of accommodation, meaning Raphael must navigate how to relay and essentially translate divine information into human language. Raphael serves as a mediator connecting God and Adam by presenting Adam with a story tailored to accommodate his and the audience's limitations. Raphael is sharply aware of his difficulties in adapting the story of Creation: "to recount Almightie work / What words or tongue of Seraph can suffice, / Or heart of man suffice to understand?" (VII. 112-114). Raphael states two difficulties involved in narrating: language and comprehension. The latter, Adam's capability to understand (can "heart of man suffice to understand"), is unsurprisingly crucial for Raphael given he was sent to Eden with the purpose of teaching Adam about his obedience and providing the information necessary to resist temptation.

But as Raphael makes clear, the difficulty of accommodating is based not only on the mechanisms of human understanding but also on the limitations of language. By wondering

“what words or tongue of Seraph can suffice” to recount the story of Creation, Raphael makes apparent to Adam and readers the limitations of language, even when instilled by angels, and further emphasizes the limitations imposed on angelic narrators, who can only describe what they partially comprehend from their own restricted perspectives. To further complicate matters, Raphael’s limited perspective is, as mentioned, not based on any actual visual sight or experience but on “hearsay or inspiration.” The need to accommodate human facets and his limited perspective as a narrator are some of the obstacles Raphael must maneuver in relating the history of Creation to Adam. In consideration of these difficulties he faces, it’s unclear if Raphael can be relied upon to convey to Adam strictly what he is allowed to know and divulge nothing more. It is further unclear if Raphael is able to relate the information in a way Adam will comprehend and not misconstrue.

In wondering how to go about his task Raphael questions: “for who though with the tongue / Of Angels, can relate, or to what things / Lik'n on Earth conspicuous, that may lift / Human imagination to such highth / Of Godlike Power” (VI. 297-301). Even with “the tongue of Angels,” Raphael’s task seems insurmountable as it involves narrating the inexpressible or containing the unimaginable into not only a coherent but a restricted narrative. These difficulties Raphael faces are reminiscent of the obstacles Haydon describes Milton navigating in writing the epic. That is, just as Milton faces the daunting task of attempting divine representation in post-lapsarian language, Raphael must attempt to narrate the overwhelming history of humanity within the constraints of human language and cognition.

The angel’s chosen method of accommodating the limitations of human cognition and language is to use the "process of speech" to tell of inaccessible matters in such a manner "as earthly notion can receave” (VII. 178-9). Though language is part of the problem, it also offers a

solution, as Raphael relates his story through comparison. The method is essentially to tell the story of creation as an extended metaphor. Raphael states explicitly: “What surmounts the reach / Of human sense, I shall delineate so, / By lik'ning spiritual to corporeal forms, / As may express them best” (V.571-4). And in his conclusion, he reiterates “Thus measuring things in Heav'n by things on Earth / At thy request ... to thee I have reveal’d” (VI. 893-5). Language as both the problem and solution once again parallels Haydon’s argument, which describes how the limitations of fallen language are what create the difficulties of writing the epic. One difference, however, is that while using fallen language is the sole option for Milton, Raphael has a second tactic to accomplish his task.

Another facet of Raphael’s method of accommodation entails Adam's acceptance of the notion that he may not achieve complete comprehension. After completing his narration of the war in heaven, Raphael makes clear that he’s revealed as much as he could and “What might have else to human Race bin hid” (VI. 896). Raphael informs Adam he’s withheld information but also assures him that the partial knowledge Adam has is sufficient. After narrating the six days of Creation, Raphael makes clear to Adam again that certain knowledge should not be of concern of him: “Heav'n is for thee too high / To know what passes there” (VIII.172-3). Rather than aiming for this knowledge, Raphael reiterates remaining content with partial knowledge: “be lowlie wise / Think onely what concernes thee and thy being; / Dream not of other Worlds, what Creatures there” (VIII.173-5). Even if faced with feelings of incompleteness or a state of incomprehension, Raphael urges Adam to embrace the limited knowledge imparted to him.

Raphael’s encouragement to accept limited knowledge also parallels Milton, but not in the context of fallen language and writing the epic previously discussed, but rather in terms of narrative contradictions and their impact within the epic. Similar to Raphael, Milton encourages

readers to accept the limitations of what's offered in the narrative. This is achieved by permitting the presence of contradictions and ambiguities that sometimes interfere with narrative completeness and leave readers with an incomplete picture. For instance, due to the disparate accounts of the stories of Creation, in readers' final understanding of the event, it remains unclear to whom God gave authority, how long after Adam Eve was created, etc. I argue the narrative contradictions that disturb readers' ability to gain a wholly unified and cohered fabula are intentionally allowed by Milton and put forth to actively encourage the acceptance of certain partial or fragmentary understandings and concepts; specifically, of the fragmentary nature of truth. By encouraging an acceptance of the temporary incompleteness of truth Milton highlights the necessity of being aware of the limitations that exist until the Second Coming. While Milton takes a similar stance to Raphael in advising an acceptance of limitations, he does not explicitly advise acceptance without further inquiry as Raphael does. Milton only encourages acceptance of the fragmentary nature of truth and doesn't actively discourage the pursuit of one's own truth. But the parallel endures: Like the reading of the history of humanity, the pursuit and representation of truth is no easy feat. And both processes necessitate an acceptance and tolerance of partial understandings. Milton allows and uses the irresolvable contradictions to encourage such an acceptance.

Here Haydon's argument ceases to line up with both Raphael's narrative and my argument. The irresolvable contradictions for Haydon are strictly the inherent and inadvertent by-products of "human language when faced with the task of expressing divinity" and hence are without a specific pedagogic purpose; they are not intended to convey a message or impart some idea to readers (Haydon 174). Put differently, for Haydon, the contradictions are a general feature of human language, and while Milton allows them, he doesn't intentionally use them or

aim for any pedagogic purpose. And if they reveal something, it's incidental. By contrast, I argue Milton understands how the contradictions work and intentionally allows them as a means to prompt readers to accept the fragmentary nature of truth which could in turn enable a more constructive search for one's provisional truth.

Temporality

The third category of irresolvable contradictions is located in features of the narrative temporality. But before discussing how temporality operates in *Paradise Lost*, some basic but imperative classifications must be made. First is the distinction between what Richardson terms the (1A) story/fabula which is "the chronological sequence of events that can be derived from the text" and the (1B) text/syuhzet, or "the sequence in which [the events] are presented to the audience" (Richardson 100). Because fiction rarely begins with the very first event in the story that it presents, 1A and 1B are most commonly different, as is the case with *Paradise Lost*. For example, the first event presented to readers is the fall of Satan and his league of rebel angels, but the catalyst for the rebellion (the elevation of the Son), which of course occurs before the rebel angels' fall, is not presented until book 5. The chronological sequence of events that can be derived from the text (1A) which as we'll see shortly, is in itself complex enough, is complicated by the order in which they're presented in the text (1B).

The following graph shows the discrepancy by listing the chronological sequence of events (1A) alongside the sequence in which the events are presented to readers (1B):

Table 1. Chronology in Fabula and in Syuhzet

1A: Story/Fabula	**1B: Text/Syuhzet**
First exaltation of Son, God declares Son messiah and pronounces him head of the angelic hierarchies (Book 5)	Book 1: Fallen angels lie vanquished in Hell for nine days
Rebellion of Satan and his legions in response to exaltation (Book 5)	Book 1-2: Fallen angels awaken in Hell where they regroup, build Pandemonium, and hold council to debate their next course of actions
War breaks out in heaven between rebel and obedient angels; the Messiah enters the battle and triumphs over rebel angels; their expulsion from heaven (Book 5-6)	Book 2: Satan, departing for Paradise, begins his voyage; meets his offspring Sin and Death and escapes hell through gulf of Chaos then lands on Sun where he converses with Uriel
Book 1: Fallen angels lie vanquished in Hell for nine days	Book 3: Father foresees the fall and pronounces his future judgement; Son volunteers' self to redeem mankind
Using Son as his instrument, God creates the universe in six days, culminating with the creation of man on the sixth day (Book 7-8)	Book 3-4: Satan enters the Garden; his first attempt to tempt Eve while she sleeps; found by angels and expelled from Eden
(*Presumably around the same time*), Fallen angels awaken in Hell where they regroup, build Pandemonium, and hold council to debate their next course of actions (Book 1-2)	Book 5-8: God sends Raphael to advise man about his obedience and provide them with the necessary information to resist temptation; beginning of Raphael's discourse with Adam
Satan, departing for Paradise begins his voyage; meets his offspring Sin and Death and escapes hell through gulf of Chaos then lands on Sun where he converses with Uriel (Book 2)	Book 5 [Raphael's discourse]: First exaltation of Son, God declares Son messiah and pronounces him head of the angelic hierarchies
Father foresees the fall and pronounces his future judgement; Son volunteers' self to redeem mankind (Book 3)	Book 5 [Raphael's discourse]: Rebellion of Satan and his legions in response to exaltation
Satan enters the Garden; his first attempt to tempt Eve while she sleeps; found by angels and expelled from Eden (Book 3-4)	Book 5-6 [Raphael's discourse]: War breaks out in heaven between rebel and obedient angels; the Messiah enters the battle and triumphs over rebel angels; their expulsion from heaven
God sends Raphael to advise man about his obedience and provide them with the necessary information to resist temptation; beginning of Raphael's discourse with Adam (Book 5-8)	Book 7-8 [Raphael's discourse]: Using Son as his instrument, God creates the universe in six days, culminating with the creation of man on the sixth day [end of Raphael's discourse]

1A: Story/Fabula	**1B: Text/Syuhzet**
Satan re-enters the Garden and, disguised as a serpent, tempts Eve. Eve then tempts Adam who decides to fall with her	Book 9: Satan re-enters the Garden and, disguised as a serpent, tempts Eve. Eve then tempts Adam who decides to fall with her
The Son comes down to pass judgement; Sin and Death enter the world; Satan returns to hell triumphant; Adam and Eve lament	Book 10: The Son comes down to pass judgement; Sin and Death enter the world; Satan returns to hell triumphant; Adam and Eve lament
God sends Michael to show Adam and Eve a vision of the future world	Book 11: God sends Michael to show Adam and Eve a vision of the future world
Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden	Book 12: Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden

The temporality of plot is very often against the strict chronology of story, but the manner in which they interrelate, as well as each aspect taken separately, often have destabilizing effects. Focusing on the level of story/fabula (1A), it is not too surprising that the functions of time in the story presented occasionally disrupt narrative coherence considering the presence of unusual temporal landscapes. Indeed, the different (and sometimes seemingly transgressive) ways in which time operates in the pre-fallen space, in which the majority of events occur, as well as in the non-human/heavenly space, in which most scenes with God and the war in heaven take place, contribute to the narrative complexity and destabilizing effects.

As would be expected, the varying temporal dynamics in *Paradise Lost* have raised significant problems for critics and readers alike. Readers have specifically expressed concern about the exact days that have passed and, since Thomas Newton complained in 1749 that "it is not easy to state and define the time exactly since our author himself seems not to have been very exact in this particular," have worked to piece together a time scheme for the epic (qtd. in Welch 1). Scholars have provided various answers, from an eleven day-chronology to a thirty-one-day to a thirty-three day and more. The multitude of answers offered speaks clearly to the obscurity

of the timeline presented in the text itself. Or as Anthony Welch argues, "each of the chronologies quietly struggles with its intractable materials, moments of lapse and confusion that cannot be explained away" (1). Indeed, attempts to establish a stable and coherent chronology are unsettled by Milton's use of flashbacks, foreshadowing, and other disruptions in chronological order.

While my point is not to expand or probe the problems of time in various sequences but rather to make clear that these irresolvable issues with times exist with no clear answer (as seen by the variations in those provided by critics), I will summarize some of the temporal problems commonly discussed in order to make the severity of the problems clear. One of the more well-studied temporal disturbances occurs during Satan's flight from Pandemonium, passing through Hell, to Eden. First, the narrative refers to a place that does not yet exist. As Judith Herz points out, during Satan's trip through the Gates of Hell the narrative "refers to a geography…of Hell that will only come to be once that journey out of Hell is accomplished and Hell becomes the place (but in the present narrative, as in the reader's experience [due to the non-linear text], it already is" (93). Second is the problem of when, how, and even if Satan leaves. James Dougal Fleming in his reading notes that, "his [Satan's] leaving is never recounted" and "in point of fact he never leaves (Fleming 1023). After the council in Pandemonium ends, "the ranged powers / Disband" and "entertain / The irksome hours, till this great Chief return" (2.513-27). Yet as Fleming points out, "the great chief has not left…he is suddenly and unaccountably gone" (1023). The "entire anomalous section of book 2, Hell occurs between "midst" and "meanwhile"- words which signal betweenness - and in lieu of a continuous narrative account of Satan's movement toward the world" (Fleming 1023). But, of course, for the story/fabula to work, Satan must leave. Herz points out how the use of "meanwhile" here displaces time by suggesting that

"there is always an alternative time then there is an alternative story" (94). This is just one instance of how the use of "meanwhile" often disturbs and troubles the narrative structure that contains it.

Another pressing temporal subversion occurs during Raphael's discourse with Adam in book 5. After describing angelic digestion, Raphael narrates a potential future: "Time may come when men / With Angels may participate, and find / No inconvenient Diet" (V.493-4). Raphael continues, describing a timeline where human bodies "improv'd by tract of time" may "winged ascend" into heaven, / Etheral" as the angels (V.498-9). But this future described is only conditionally possible: "If ye be found obedient, and retain / Unalterably form his love" (V.501-2). Raphael makes clear to Adam the potential for a different course of events if he and Eve are not found obedient. As Herz notices, before that future described can occur, "there is the time of the present, hinged on an 'if' intimating quite other possibilities" (Herz 92). Raphael follows by telling Adam and Eve, "Meanwhile enjoy / Your fill what happiness this happie state / Can comprehend, incapable of more" (II.503-5). If "meanwhile" is understood as "for the time being" Raphael here seems to explicitly reveal to Adam that his time in Eden is temporary. Herz goes a step further than this to argue that "Raphael's "if" and "meanwhile" "foreclose[es]" such expectations [of the future envisioned], *suggesting the point where obedience will fail*" (92, emphasis added). In this way, Raphael strongly hints at future negative possibilities, seeming to even divulge future occurrences. Raphael's use of "if" and "meanwhile," as Herz suggests, has serious consequences for not only his but the overall narrative. Indeed, the space opened and then collapsed between "if" and "meanwhile" not only "entirely realign[s] the Edenic situation for Adam and Eve" but it further has the potential to interfere with free will, a possibility I shortly discuss (Herz 92).

Another reason time is notoriously allusive in *Paradise Lost* is partially due to its multiple temporalities. The multiple temporalities have been looked at extensively by different critics who have identified them in different ways. For example, there are the multiple temporalities associated with the various ways characters experience time. Herz analyses how in the epic time moves differently for almost all characters. Indeed, "for Adam and Eve time is almost at a standstill…time is stasis… [Adam and Eve's] meanwhile is always now…an eternal present before time" (Herz 88, 90). But when God enters the poem, "he identifies a now that carries with it the meanwhile of all human time from a present that is not yet in time to the end of time…now as it moves in time is in an entirely separate time zone and tense from the one Adam and Eve are at that moment inhabiting" (Herz 88-9). Sin further is subject to time in yet another way. Herz is one of many scholars that have pointed out, "there is no time for the events [Sin] narrates to have occurred" (93). Consequentially, "Sin's meanwhile is never present; it is always at once before and after" (94). The unique temporality Sin occupies is just one of many.

Raphael's linking divine time with human time, the coexisting yet divergent plethora of temporalities, and other seemingly impossible temporal features may at first seem to be explained by what is possible in a Christian seventeenth-century context and the biblical storyworld they are represented in. That is, by the role and function of religion. In von Contzen's essay "Unnatural Narratology and Premodern Narratives: Historicizing a Form," which highlights what prior applications of unnatural narrative theory fail to address when examining premodern narratives, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing religious frameworks when analyzing narrative oddities or transgressions in texts from certain periods. von Contzen argues that "for premodern texts written in periods "deeply imbued with religion, [many] seemingly unnatural," or transgressive, "elements (the suspense of time in heaven, for instance), belong to

the ideological framework of religion (e. g. medieval Christianity). They may strike us as odd from a modern perspective, but for their time and literary genres, they are the default case; there is no need to naturalize" (11). While this is true for premodern scriptural-based works in general and for some aspects of Milton's work, there are certain temporal features whose contradictory or destabilizing nature are not wholly attributable to or explained away by the Christian context it exists in or the storyworld it depicts.

First, not all of the ostensibly impossible or contradictory scenarios or elements presented in *Paradise Lost* are "motivated and justified by the ideological overlay of the Christian framework" (von Conzten 12). And second, even some of the temporal oddities in the epic that are conventionalized by the Christian framework remain transgressive or allusive because rather than being conditions or abilities existent in the background, some of these elements impede on possibility and coherence. Hence, even with the consideration of what's possible in a biblical storyworld and according to seventeenth-century Christianity, certain disturbances in features of temporality remain.

In discussing how premodern narratives can be conceived of as unnatural in light of the role and function of religion, von Cotzen proposes that one method of conceptualizing transgressive maneuvers or "the unnatural in religious contexts would be the question of what is possible or impossible. If we take the laws of physics as the benchmark, the question will be answered quite differently from the assumption of a god's intervention in this world" (11). Though I do not argue for *Paradise Lost* as an unnatural narrative nor employ this criterion throughout my analysis, it is interesting to consider in the case of Raphael's use of "if" and "meanwhile" as the narrative brings not only contradictory but incompatible elements dangerously close. As Herz points out, Raphael's "meanwhile" subtly alludes to the occurrence

of the fall and hence provides Adam with some level of insight into future events or at least strongly suggests their unfolding. I argue this moment *plays on the border* between possible and impossible because of the grave repercussions that would arise if Adam were to fully comprehend the implications embedded in Raphael's use of "if" and "meanwhile,”

Specifically, Adam’s comprehension of what Raphael suggests could interfere with his exercise of free will, as an awareness of the transient nature of his current situation, may influence and even dictate his future choices. If Adam were to understand his time in Eden is inevitably temporary or to assume the negative future Raphael hints at is inevitable, he might be more inclined to succumb to sin, rather than make a conscientious effort to remain steadfast. In essence, his decisions may be driven by the awareness of an unavoidable future rather than through the exercise of free will, a fundamental concept within Christianity during that era, and one equally vital for Milton. Because an Adam pre-informed about his and Eve’s fall is undoubtedly impossible within the Christian framework of the period and the storyworld presented, Raphael’s narrative seems to *tread on the border* between possible and impossible.

The multiple temporalities of various characters are transgressive in a different way than Raphael’s linking of timelines. Like many narrative contradictions related to plot, the narrativizing (and hence refitting) of biblical temporalities has consequences for narrative stability and coherence. Indeed, the ability of the multi-temporalities to exist all at once is normal in a biblical framework, but they do not fit as neatly into the framework of a coherent narrative story. When thrust together into a singular narrative the multiple and divergent temporalities struggle to comfortably coexist and become defamiliarizing. While Milton’s first readers, were very familiar with biblical narrative and might have allowed some aspects of biblical temporality for non-biblical narrative, the concern here is less how accepted the fitting of biblical temporality

into non-biblical narratives was, and more so how doing so impacts narrative coherence and readability. Milton highlights this impact on narrative by bringing readers as close as possible to the multi-temporalities. Indeed, readers are exposed to these multiplicities of the characters' different conceptions of time up close because of the use of focalization which filters everything (including time) through the relative perspective of individual consciousness acting within the unfolding story. Milton thus instigates narrative discomfort by displaying clearly to readers the presence of various temporalities and the different ways time moves in them.

Beginnings and how they function also prove to be complicated in *Paradise Lost*. Beginnings are an unexpectedly elusive and complex topic, "on the one hand, they always seem predetermined but on the other, they also appear to mark a distinct break from that which precedes them" (Richardson 40). And as with temporality, narrative beginnings refer to both the beginning of the story and the beginning of the text. Richardson, to clarify the multifaceted nature of narrative beginnings proposes we identify three distinct kinds of beginnings: "one in the narrative text (syuzhet), one in the story as reconstructed form the text (fabula), and one in the prefatory and framing material provided by the author proper that circumscribes the narrative proper" (43).

The question of where the fabula (1A) begins is typically a difficult one to precisely determine, in contrast with the syuzhet. Richardson considers several possibilities such as the chronologically first narrative scene, narrative incident, or inferable event. But ultimately Richardson concludes that "if we are to determine the beginning of a story, which seems a basic narratological objective, we need to critically sift through the various possibilities – whether dramatized, narrated by a character, or otherwise alluded to – until we arrive at the first substantial event of the story or, stated more precisely, the earliest event that significantly

impacts later events in the story" (48). For *Paradise Lost* the beginning of the story then is the begetting of the Son in book 5 as all of the action of Milton's epic ultimately derives from the moment God anoints the Son and announces to the angels they must henceforth obey him, a moment that is of course only related to us through a retrospective conversation.

Though the elevation of the Son is the beginning of the fabula of *Paradise Lost*, several beginnings are recounted within the story: the beginning of the war in heaven, the beginning of human creation, the beginning of post-lasparian life, etc. Hence, beginnings crop up throughout the ensuing narrative. And because many of these beginnings are narrated more than once, readers are sometimes presented with multiple beginnings that are remarkably difficult to disentangle from one another. The presence of beginnings is not without effects. Because beginnings, as stated, "mark a distinct break from that which precedes them," when a beginning appears mid-text, the overall story is unsettled (Richardson 40). This effect makes the "massive shifts of temporal and narrative focus [that] occur within a relatively short space" all the more destabilizing (Kinney 126).

Where the syuzhet begins is typically less complicated to answer. Richardson notes how in "nearly all cases there is no ambiguity concerning the beginning of the syuzhet: in written narratives, it is the first page of the narrative proper" (43). Following this model, the beginning of the syuzhet in *Paradise Lost* seems to be the famous opening-lines in which the narrator describes the epic's subject matter: "Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree" (I.1-2). In the first five lines the narrator addresses readers, his fellow fallen humans: "All our woe…restore us" (I.2-5) before turning to the "heavenly Muse" in the sixth line (I.6). Though *Paradise Lost* contains the beginning of several stories, none of these is found at the beginning of the syuzhet/text itself. Rather, the description of the poem's endeavour and

the invocation in the opening lines are components of the text's framing material, which Richardson categorizes as the third type of beginning in a narrative. To be clear, the opening lines do not mark the beginning of the prefatory material, which includes "The Argument" and other preceding material all the way to the title. But by extending the framing material into the beginning of the syuzhet or the "narrative proper" the text postpones the initiation of the story. It's not until around line 55 that the story begins and even this first "event" described (Satan waking up in Hell after being thrown from heaven) is not one of the several beginnings recounted.

Further complicating the placement of beginnings, the syuzhet/text famously ends with a beginning. Indeed, during Adam and Eve's teary departure from Eden, the final lines in book 12 offer a new start: "The World was all before them, where to choose / Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide: / They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow, / Through Eden took thir solitarie way" (XII.646-9). It's not hard to see how, as Kinney points out, "it is possible, indeed, to suggest that *Paradise Lost* never ceases to begin" (125). Both in the story and in the text, beginnings are arranged in unanticipated ways. In *Paradise Lost* the narrative continuously builds and unbuilds itself as time seems to exist in multiplicity, showing yet again how "exacerbating the reader's uncertainty about where her sympathies should lie, and where the ethical center can be found, is a narrative structure that never allows for a resting place that is always meanwhile" (Herz 91). Like the features of plot and voice, temporality is another aspect of the narrative that prevents readers from finding comfort in stability or coherence.

Reading Strategies

Having established that some narrative contradictions are ingrained in various features of the text's construction, the question remains of how readers should make sense of or interpret them. How readers respond to or handle these contradictions is just as important as their existence. First, let's consider how the narrator and text direct us. From the first lines, the narrator tells readers what to expect from the text. The narrative is written, readers are told, to "justifie the ways of God to men" (I.26). It's difficult, if not impossible, to justify actions without at least partially understanding them. So, if we believe the narrator and expect a narrative that will justify the ways of God, then we are expecting a narrative that will provide reasons or an explanation for said ways. Moving forward then, readers will anticipate seeing not only a coherent structure of events, but also some coherent moral pattern in line with the "ways of God."

Reader response criticism tells us that "when we read, we create expectations of what will follow, and these expectations are modified throughout the text" (Gammelgaard 205). These expectations partially derive from what the narrative is telling us and how it is set up. That is, the narrative elements at play in any given moment of reading set up expectations for the plot and what's to come. And by instilling expectations of a narrative that justifies the ways of God to men, the narrative gives reason to believe that there will be a coherent moral framework underlying the events portrayed. As readers going forward, then, our natural expectation is that the text will offer us insights, explanations, and potentially even resolutions to any contradictions we encounter. Therefore, when we encounter narrative oddities, our initial response or reflex is to seek coherence and explanations.

Yet in *Paradise Lost* attempts to establish narrative coherence or to make the characters' actions fit into any coherent moral pattern are often subverted. The narrative resists sense-making via coherence by allowing room for narrative gaps and open-endedness. Narrative gaps are created and embedded in multiple features, a few of which were discussed, such as the multiple narrations depicting a single event that complicates efforts to establish a singular understanding of the event through the "respectively fragmentary, sometimes hazy and… incomplete" nature of the characters' accounts (Wittreich, "Sites" 111). Milton further writes these multiple and non-linear narratives in such a way "that he leave[s] out not only large segments of each of them but also temporal, spatial, and generic markers which would allow us to separate them into distinct stories" (Wittreich, "Sites" 109). In this way, Milton offers options and ambiguities that sometimes require readers to make interpretive choices. And in the process, the search for coherence frequently breaks down.

The narrative further resists sense-making or coherence by leaving certain matters open-ended. Rather than blatantly preferring one view over another, *Paradise Lost* often establishes a closer alliance between competing forces or hermeneutics, such as secular and sacred or scientific and biblical, than is expected. As Wittreich argues, "rival hermeneutics clash like armies in the night" as "competing interpretations are aspects of the intellectual debate at the core of Milton's epics, of their multivocality, multiperspectivism, and counterpointing" ("Sites" 102). This is evidenced by the presentation of the rival Ptolemaic and Copernican systems which show that Milton allows old and new philosophies to coexist and mingle. In Raphael's account, "Copernicus ultimately represents an advance upon Ptolemy" ("Sites" 108). Yet the implicit critique of the Ptolemaic system Raphael offers "declares itself to be on the side of readings at once open-ended and richly indeterminate…[and] values interpretations not for their conclusive

answers but for their openness to constant reading and reviewing" (Karen Edwards qtd. in Wittreich, "Sites"106). The handling of the Copernican and Ptolemaic systems, which present "science and religion…[as] mutually supportive and illuminating, but in unexpected ways" is just one example of Milton's ability to present opposing views with equal status (Wittreich, "Sites" 106). This aptitude for giving equal weight to conflicting perspectives is perhaps most strikingly demonstrated by Milton's ability to prompt critics who read the same text to hold firmly contrasting views on who the hero is. Ultimately, the narrative of *Paradise Lost* does indeed resist conclusive sense-making, though not in any direct way. Rather, the narrative prompts us to use certain reading strategies that inevitably fall short. By constantly denying a stable point of reference, Milton urges readers to avoid accepting "an improved interpretation…for the final truth" in favour of "unfolding revelation" ("Sites" 103,108). Hence the text encourages (even tempts) readers to find a coherent structure of events, but only in order to reorganize readers' assumptions.

Paradise Lost leaves the task of resolving its contradictions to the readers, allowing them to determine for themselves how to approach these conflicting elements. Faced with questions of how to work with the narrative oddities and what sense, if any, to make of them, readers must decide on an interpretive or reading strategy. Henrik Slov Nielsen discusses reading strategies in relation to unnatural narratives: "a reader, if encountering a text that resists sense-making or meaning-making, is faced with the problem of finding reading strategies that would 'fit' the given text and help uncover its meaning" (Nielsen 71). Put differently, when faced with unnatural narratives or elements readers must determine how best to interpret them and how to change their expectations for the text in light of them. Although as stated *Paradise Lost* is not nearly extreme enough to be unnatural, to the extent that the epic contains narrative

contradictions and ambiguities that are not easily (if at all) resolvable, interfere with narrative stability, and require readers to make similar interpretive choices when they're encountered, the reading strategies developed for engaging with unnatural narratives can be applicable to *Paradise Lost*.

Once aware of the contradictions (for instance, of the discrepancies between Adam and Raphael's accounts or of the multiple often incompatible temporalities) readers must make interpretive choices. One could respond to the narrative oddities like Bentley and Pearce who, each in their own way, insist on coherence. Or one could be like Haydon who sees them as irresolvable and heed Raphael's warning. There are countless other possible interpretive responses, but many of them seem to loosely abide by one of two approaches often taken with unnatural narratives: the cognitive approach and the non-naturalizing approach. Unnatural narrative theorists who advance the question of "how [we can] approach and/or make sense of" unnatural narratives often argue for one of these two approaches (Alber et al. 5).

The cognitive approach, put forth by Jan Alber, uses "ideas from cognitive narratology [to] help illuminate the considerable, sometimes unsettling interpretive difficulties posed by unnatural elements" (Alber et al. 7). This approach functions on the premise that we are always bound by our cognitive architecture, and hence unnatural elements "can only be approached on the basis of cognitive frames and scripts" (7). Alber, therefore, proposes a number of reading strategies, such as "allegorical, script-blending, or frame-enriching techniques of interpretation" that are designed to help readers explain or make sense of the unnatural (Iversen 96). This approach, as articulated by Alber, proposes that the reader's job is twofold. The first task of the reader of the unnatural is to "demonstrate how the unnatural urges us to create new cognitive frames that transcend our real-world knowledge" (Alber et al. 8). And the second job of readers'

according to Alber, is to "address the question of what the unnatural says about us and our being in the world" (8). The readers' job, ultimately, is to "translate the odd and strange matters of the unnatural narratives into statements about the way humans experience the world" (Iversen 95). This path, which ultimately aims at making "strange narratives more readable," seems to be in line with attempting to resolve or stabilize narrative contradictions in the epic (96). That is, this approach, applied to narrative transgressions in *Paradise Lost*, would attempt to make sense of or resolve them to make them "more readable."

In contrast to the cognitive approach, which aims to make unnatural elements more readable, is the non-naturalizing approach put forth by H. Porter Abbott, Henrik Slov Nielsen, and Stefan Iversen. Against efforts to make sense of unnatural elements, "nonnaturalizing readings leave open the possibility that unnatural narratives contain or produce effects and emotions that are not easily (if at all) explainable or resolvable with reference to everyday phenomena" or with reference to the rules of the presented storyworld (Iversen 95-6). Porter Abbott speaking specifically of unreadable minds, takes this approach as he argues they "work best when we allow ourselves to rest in that peculiar combination of anxiety and wonder that is aroused when an unreadable mind is accepted as unreadable" (qtd. in Alber et al. 8). Instead of restricting interpretation to what would be possible or plausible, unnaturalizing readings entails an interpretation which does not converge with present-day understandings of how minds actually work and hence do not limit "the narrative possibilities to what is mnemonically possible or plausible in real-world narration" (Nielsen 69). To apply an unnaturalizing approach to the case of *Paradise Lost* would mean a reader would encounter some narrative gap or other oddity and not search for an explanation. For instance, one would read Raphael and Adam's Creation stories and accept that we're denied a stable point of reference.

Arguably the way in which Milton challenges readers to avoid normal interpretative procedures and resist absolute certainty and instead encourages to read “his own biblical poems experimentally and to interpret [it] provisionally” could be understood as a prompt to accept the unreadable as unreadable (Wittreich, “Sites” 107). Perhaps readers should remain with the instability of the multi-temporalities and plot contradictions present in the text. This approach, because it encourages the acceptance of the unresolved as unresolved, aligns with my argument that certain narrative contradictions in the epic serve the purpose of revealing truth as partial. As stated, Milton, while encouraging the pursuit of truth, also means to remind readers of the incompleteness of their understanding in the present state, and that any accepted or discovered truth - or interpretation - remains provisional and temporary. Considering this, it seems the contradictions are most effective at unveiling and promoting acceptance of fragmentary truth when left unresolved, and when readers embrace the defamiliarizing sensation evoked by these fragments. That is, when readers “rest in that peculiar combination of anxiety and wonder” produced. Another facet of this approach is that it allows the contradictions in *Paradise Lost* to “be seen not as problems to be solved but as deliberate intensifications of the poetic experience. Thus, the inability of readers to iron out the contradictions should be seen not as evidence of our ignorance of Milton's confusion but of the poem's power to reach the deepest level of our awareness” (Hyman 5).

Although, as stated, I am inclined to view the non-naturalizing approach as more aligned with my own approach to the narrative contradictions, I do not assert that it is the "correct" or "proper" strategy for dealing with these contradictions and their irresolvable elements. In my perspective, while Milton undoubtedly intends to convey certain lessons, the narrative also accommodates and welcomes divergent interpretations that can be equally supported by textual

evidence, reflecting how the process of interpretation and truth is continual. I include this section to demonstrate the various reading strategies, including those that do not perceive contradictions as issues to be resolved or dismissed, that can be employed in interpreting the epic because the narrative allows for and embraces contrasting possibilities. There is no singular "right way" to interpret the transgressions within the epic.

I further believe that the mere existence of divergent camps reveals something significant about the poem. I'm in agreement with William Kolbrener who insightfully suggests that "the manifold, contradictory, and often equally compelling versions of *Paradise Lost* testify to a poem often arguing through paradox [and] resisting any single set of readings" (Kolbrener 208). I would add that the poem often argues not only through paradox but also through the narrative contradictions that defy understanding. Moreover, the irresolvable nature of these narrative contradictions (as well as Milton's narrative techniques) contributes to the poem's resistance to being confined to a singular interpretation, thereby allowing divergent camps to coexist and even find support in the same passages.

By relegating these contradictions to one particular camp, their impact is limited or restrained, in spite of their inclination to resist such limitations. But, as Kolbrener suggests, "perhaps the battle between Milton's warring angels of critical camps," or between the cognitive and non-naturalizing reading strategies, "need not end with the Milton of orthodox certainty or radical heresy finally triumphing. To accede to one of these versions of Milton…is to be 'misled' by one definitive and final conception of the poem" (207). Ultimately, "that *Paradise Lost* allows for so many contextualizations…may not relegate him to 'incertitude,' but show, as Freud did of Michelangelo's Moses, that *Paradise Lost* surpasses the multiple and sometimes divergent interpretive perspectives that it elicits" (208).

Conclusion

Though I have offered some commentary on the contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities within the narrative elements of *Paradise Lost*, a comprehensive exploration of these elements has not yet been presented. While I do not purport to achieve such a feat, by highlighting certain narrative contradictions and elucidating Milton's utilization of their irresolvability to promote the acceptance of truth as partial and fragmentary, I aspire to have demonstrated how narrative elements contribute to the epic's resistance to a singular and definitive understanding or interpretation of the poem as well as the significance of Milton's deliberate employment of narrative techniques and maneuvers, which, given their complexity, warrant further scholarly inquiry.

The current state of historical narrative theory, which facilitates the application of narrative theory and contemporary narrative concepts to premodern texts while considering their culturally specific contexts, presents a ripe opportunity for conducting additional investigations. The narrative of *Paradise Lost*, with its intricacies and its ability to simultaneously conform to and disrupt conventional notions of story and plot, as well as its subversive engagement with the Genesis tradition, appears to have long awaited a thorough analysis within this framework.

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