

**Cringing before the Lord:
Milton's Satan, Samuel Johnson and the Anxiety of Worship**

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In between on Sunday afternoons we had to study the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* for an hour and then recite before we could walk the hills with him while he unwound between services. But he never asked us more than the first question in the catechism, "What is the chief end of man?" And we answered together so one of us could carry on if the other forgot, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." This always seemed to satisfy him, as indeed such a beautiful answer should have. —Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

It is too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist; that discovery is called the Fall of Man. —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience"

The two epigraphs offered here are intended to mark out, in an admittedly jagged way, a foundational debate within Judeo-Christian thought over the nature and purpose of existence. For Norman Maclean in his moving novella, *A River Runs Through It*, the answer to the question, "what is the chief end of man," is as simple as it is satisfying: we exist "to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." What is not so simple or satisfying for him is why his brother, Paul, so blessed by God—so filled with grace and beauty—in certain areas of his life is so utterly devoid of those in other areas. "Beaten to death by the butt end of a revolver," Paul Maclean remains forever a mystery to Norman, and in the end he can find no satisfying answers to his more persistent, and more troubling, questions: "what happened" to his beloved younger brother "and why?" Still, for Norman this is a mystery of the human heart, not a theological question. It is not a question that fundamentally challenges his faith in God's ultimate goodness (a faith powerfully rediscovered in the closing cadences of the novella) or forces him to confront the possibility that a life dedicated to the glorification of God may be problematic.

Emerson's much more cryptic assertion, by contrast, seems quite deliberate in its intention to trouble us. Emerson is not so much interested in answering the "why" of

existence, as though that question were part of some traditional catechism, the “What is the chief end of man?” question posed by Maclean’s Presbyterian-minister father to his two young sons. Rather, he is concerned with the bare fact of existence itself—“the discovery we have made *that* we exist”—even as it leaves mysterious his unstated premises: there can be a time in human life before such a discovery; we can somehow exist without knowing that we do.

Maclean is certainly interested in the actual content of the answer to his father’s question: the answer is primarily *informational*. At the same time, that information has ethical and emotional resonances. Maclean seems to believe that to recognize the true nature of our existence is to participate in it more fully, and that participatory knowledge is redemptive: we fulfill our “chief end” in part by acknowledging what it is. Like Maclean, Emerson is at least as interested in the process of coming to know (“the *discovery* we have made”) as he is in the content of that knowledge (“*that* we exist”). But unlike Maclean, Emerson views the process of coming to knowledge as tragic, simultaneous as it is with the “Fall of Man.” Of course, Maclean tells a tragic story as well: how a man falls off the path of grace and beauty. But Emerson poses something grander and more encompassing, a tragic condition inseparable from existence itself. If Emerson were to answer the question posed by Maclean’s father we might expect to be told that our “chief end” is to discover the irremediably fallen condition of existence itself. Whatever the “Fall of Man” is for Emerson, it is something that touches all of us just because we exist; or perhaps it touches all of us to the extent that we are willing and able to contemplate the fact of existence. To see existence as it is—to come to know “that we exist”—is, for Emerson, to alienate ourselves from our own false consciousness

and its satisfying illusion. And by the time we know not to seek to know, it is too late: we are already fallen.

This essay is intended as a meditation on the strange convergence of these conflicting modes of conceptualization in the character of Milton's Satan. While it is easy to imagine that Milton would have whole-heartedly endorsed Maclean's view (at least on some conscious level), his Satan is a powerful testament to the psychological insights offered in the Emerson passage: both that it is somehow possible not to know that we exist and that knowledge of the very conditions of existence carries tragic weight. For Satan, however, the tragic knowledge that will be inseparable from his fall is not a purely existential knowledge of the kind explored in Emerson's essay; rather, Satan's tragic knowledge is still defined within the parameters of the Judeo-Christian tradition in such a way that the "discovery" Milton represents as taking place within his character's consciousness is akin to the answer provided in Maclean's catechism: he *discovers* that his "chief end"—the very purpose of his existence—is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. It might seem odd to suggest that Satan *discovers* this "end" in the course of the narrative; one might ask how it is possible within the Miltonic cosmos to be ignorant of it. I want to argue, though, that, in the course of *Paradise Lost* (at least in its first five books), Satan does indeed discover this fact. And I want to argue as corollaries of this central claim first, that this discovery is profoundly shocking for Satan and second, that, read in Emersonian terms, Satan's discovery of his "end"—which is inseparable from his existence—is the true moment of his fall, and indeed constitutes the risk of falling for any reader who is sensitive to the implications of Satan's situation. Finally, as counter-intuitive as this claim might appear, I want to argue that,

properly contextualized within the full scope of Milton's representation, the emotional-psychological condition usually taken as the chief cause of Satan's fall—his pride—can be better understood as its chief effect. It is to a more detailed explication of these various claims that the remainder of this essay is directed.

I

say first what cause

Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,

Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off

From thir Creator, and transgress his Will

...

Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?¹

The narrator of Milton's *Paradise Lost* asks this question at the opening of Book 1. The full answer, extended over the poem as a whole, will be developed in substantially greater and subtler detail. But here, there is a single, simple answer to the question: the "infernal Serpent" (1.34), Satan. That answer, however, merely begs another question: if Satan is the cause of Adam and Eve's Fall, who, or what, caused his?

There is certainly no shortage of motivation in Milton's account of Satan's fall. If we judged simply from Book 1, and if we accepted Satan's own claims on the matter, we might say that his fall was motivated by a political decision: his courageous, if doomed, determination to stand against the tyranny of heaven:

To bow and sue for grace

With suppliant knee, and deifie his power,

Who from the terrour of this Arm so late

Doubted his Empire, that were low indeed,

That were ignominy and shame beneath

This downfall. (1.111-16)

As we know, of course, the poem will problematize the heroic, republican Satan in a number of ways. One of the most intriguing of these, if not the most obvious, comes in the only prelapsarian portrait we get of Satan, the unexpected image provided by Gabriel at the end of Book 4:

And thou sly hypocrite, who now wouldst seem

Patron of liberty, who more than thou

Once fawn'd, and cring'd, and servilely ador'd

Heav'ns awful Monarch? (4.957-60)

Brief as it is, Gabriel's account is certainly surprising, for it leads us to believe that, at some unspecified point in the past, Satan was not particularly bothered by God's tyranny. And even if, as we suspect, Satan is lying in Book 1 about his republican sentiments, we still need to ask what motivates his shift from cringing adorer of God to self-proclaimed rebel against a tyrant or, what seems more likely, to one who wants to replace God and become the grand tyrant himself.

We might pause for a moment to notice the rhetorical design of Gabriel's lines (and in a moment we will look at another instance of this peculiarity of Miltonic poetics, where Satan's motives for rebelling are again on display). Gabriel's lines are structured to achieve their chief effect—on the reader rather than on Satan—by surprising us. The lines here lead us to expect that Gabriel's description of the prelapsarian Satan will culminate in an explanation of just what Gabriel means by calling Satan a hypocrite.

More specifically, we expect that the accusation of hypocrisy—which involves Satan’s representing himself as “Patron of liberty”—will lead to Gabriel’s full portrait of Satan’s motive for rebellion: that it was actually motivated by his desire to rule the cosmos himself. The image of Satan the would-be sultan that opens Book 2 has already provided sufficient evidence of this possibility (and more will be provided in Books 5 and 6 in Raphael’s account of the rebellion).² Under the circumstances, we would not be all that surprised to discover that Satan had found it difficult to keep this desire hidden; that is, his ambition to reign in heaven might have been manifest in his prelapsarian conduct and perfectly obvious to such an astute angel as Gabriel. But if that is what the lines lead us to expect, they manage to create meaning by defying our expectation. For what we discover, instead, is that Satan is a hypocrite in rebelling against God because, at that unspecified point in the past, not only did he accept but he even, apparently, endorsed divine despotism.

A similar rhetorical surprise has come earlier in Book 4 in the soliloquy in which Satan self-consciously reflects on his various motives for rebelling against God. Here is part of that soliloquy:

Ah wherefore! he deserved no such return
 From me, whom he created what I was
 In that bright eminence, and with his good
 Upbraided none; nor was his service hard.
 What could be less then to afford him praise,
 The easiest recompence, and pay him thanks,
 How due! yet all his good prov’d ill in me,

And wrought but malice; lifted up so high
 I sdeind [disdained] subjection, and thought one step higher
 Would set me highest ... (4.42-51)

Before looking more carefully at the rhetorical play of this passage, we might simply ask why one who previously had so obsequiously fawned over, cringed before, and adored God *now* want to be placed above him (“set ... highest”). If Satan is motivated primarily by his own tyrannical ambitions, the lines in the soliloquy make sense—deposing God will make him Heaven’s new alpha wolf—but they would fail to explain Satan’s earlier relationship to God (at least as that relationship will later be described by Gabriel).

The first part of the soliloquy offers one possible solution to this conundrum, what we might call the Augustinian interpretation of the angelic fall: Satan’s rebellion is motivated primarily by envy against the Son:

Sometimes towards *Eden* which now in his view
 Lay pleasant, his grievd looks he fixes sad,
 Sometimes towards Heav’n and the full-blazing Sun,
 Which now sat high in his Meridian Towre:
 Then much revolving, thus in sighs began.

O thou that with surpassing Glory crownd,
 Look’st from thy sole Dominion like the God
 Of this new World; at whose sight all the Starrs
 Hide thir diminisht heads: to thee I call,
 But with no friendly voice, and add thy name
 O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams

That bring to my remembrance from what state

I fell, how glorious once above thy Spheare ... (4.27-39)

As something akin to sibling rivalry, Satan's envy is largely unconscious; hence, his cathexis is here transferred by a pun from the actual object of his feelings to a substitute: from Son to sun. The elevation of the Son to a position of special eminence in the heavenly court, what Milton clearly understands as the begetting of the divine son described in Psalm 2, is narrated by Raphael to Adam as the first event in his celestial chronicle:

Hear my decree, which unrevok't shall stand.

This day I have begot whom I declare

My onely Son, and on this holy Hill

Him have anointed, whom ye now behold

At my right hand; your Head I him appoint;

And my Self have sworn to him shall bow

All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord:

Under his great Vice-gerent Reign abide

United as one individual Soule

Forever happie ... (5.602-11)³

Satan, we are immediately told, though he "seemd well pleas'd" with this change in the structure of heavenly governance, was not pleased in fact. And his distaste for the new situation—the Son's "Vice-gerent Reign"—will prompt the first motions of rebellion (5.657-71). Read in the context of filial envy, the political motives of Satan's rebellion might appear as an after-thought. For in that context, the attempt to depose God makes

better sense as an act of vengeance: he wants to punish God for changing what was, to his mind, a perfectly adequate arrangement. Read along with Gabriel's account of Satan's earlier attitude toward God, then, the rebellion appears to have had a motive that was at once simpler and more complex: what Satan really wanted was to topple the Son from his preeminent position in the new divine hierarchy so that he might return to his fawning, cringing, and servile adoration in the role of the favorite child. And, indeed, the narrator confirms much of this diagnosis just a few lines later:

he of the first,
 If not the first Arch-Angel, great in Power,
 In favour and præeminence, yet fraught
 With envie against the Son of God, that day
 Honour'd by his great Father, and proclaim'd
Messiah King anointed, could not beare
 Through pride that sight, & thought himself impair'd ... (5.659-65)

If that is the case, of course, we are certainly within our rights to ask another question: if the Son were suddenly out of the picture, would Satan then be satisfied with returning to his former role as fawner-and-cringer-in-chief?

I think we would instinctively say no to this possibility in part because it is difficult for us to imagine that the Satan in Gabriel's portrait is the same being who so roused us in Book 1 as the "Patron of liberty." But I would also suggest that, in the Book 4 soliloquy, Milton is showing us that Satan could never return to his old relationship with God, a truth Milton unveils by offering yet another motive for Satan's rebellion, but one that offers an even deeper, more traumatic prompting for it.

We can tell that Milton wants to call attention to this other motive because of the special rhetorical play he provides in the soliloquy. For just as with the Gabriel passage I quoted earlier, a key section of Satan's soliloquy generates meaning by defying our expectation of how the statement will be completed. Note how the passage I previously quoted from the soliloquy (ending in the phrase "one step higher / Would set me highest") raises certain expectations in our minds. We are expecting that Satan will either lay bare his own tyrannical ambitions or acknowledge his jealousy towards the Son. But as we see in the lines that immediately follow he does neither:

... lifted up so high

I sdeind subjection, and thought one step higher

Would set me highest, *and in a moment quit*

The debt immense of endless gratitude,

So burthensome still paying, still to ow;

Forgetful what from him I still receivd,

And understood not that a grateful mind

By owing owes not, but still pays, at once

Indebted and dischargd; *what burden then?* (4.48-57; emphasis added)

At a minimum, to the extent Satan is here articulating a motive for rebellion, this motive is different from any we have previously seen, and it is not obviously consistent with what will come later in the poem. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that this motive is the most profound of all Satan's conscious or unconscious motives for rebelling against God. It is such a profound motive that it is difficult to be sure that Milton is himself fully aware of it and its implications. And it is certainly impossible to determine if, from

Milton's view, this motive is intended to supersede and absorb the other motives, displace them, or simply mark the fact that, psychologically speaking, the rebellion is overdetermined.

Certainly, unless Gabriel's portrait of Satan is simply wrong, it is hard to figure out if the Satan who during the Book 4 soliloquy speaks of the burden of owing God can possibly have the same attitude toward God that the Satan depicted in Gabriel's scathing denunciation (towards the close of in Book 4) might have had. That is, if Satan felt about God *then* (at the point in the past alluded to by Gabriel) the way Satan feels about God *now* (in the soliloquy), then how is it conceivable that he could he have fawned over, cringed before, and servilely adored this God? This shift in attitude would only make sense if something had fundamentally changed in his relationship to God or to himself, something that would now make him understand just how "burdensome" it is to worship this God. Given what Satan is saying at the opening of Book 4, one would think that in his earlier manifestation (what is being recalled by Gabriel) he would have been more like Gabriel himself, who, in his exchange with Satan, appears rather put off by the very necessity of worship (a point to which I shall return later in the essay). How, then, should we understand this new motive for rebellion, this sudden recognition of, and reaction against, the "debt immense of endless gratitude," the burden of giving thanks to God? How and why are we being encouraged to view the worship of God as a burden for an angel or for a host of angels? In what sense does this particular motive displace, supersede, absorb, or conceptually compete with all the other motives for Satan's rebellion? And to whom can we turn for help in grasping the poem's shifting focus?

II

There may be many answers to this last question, but the one I want to give is, perhaps a bit surprisingly, Samuel Johnson. Harold Bloom once remarked that “a hidden element in [Johnson’s] ambivalence towards the Metaphysical poets” was a “great distrust of devotional verse.”⁴ But if this is true, we need to figure out precisely what he distrusted in it. And I think that “distrust” is too pale a word here. For, buried in his aesthetic attack, Johnson’s attitude is, as I will try to demonstrate, akin to Gabriel’s attitude toward Satan at the moment of his recollection of the latter’s servile adoration. So what exactly does Johnson say?

As part of a broader discussion of Abraham Cowley’s epic, *Davideis*, Johnson writes:

Sacred History has been always read with submissive reverence, and an imagination over-awed and controlled. We have been accustomed to acquiesce in the nakedness and simplicity of the authentick narrative, and to repose on its veracity with such humble confidence as suppresses curiosity. We go with the historian as he goes, and stop with him when he stops. All amplification is frivolous and vain; all addition to that which is already sufficient for the purposes of religion seems not only useless, but in some degree profane. Such events as were produced by the visible interposition of Divine Power are above the power of human genius to dignify.⁵

In his inimitable way, Bloom captures something of the rhetorical and moral complexity of Johnson’s position here in his comment that Johnson’s criticism is meant as Cowley’s

“punishment for daring to provoke a great critic into ‘submissive reverence.’”⁶ The provocation to a feeling of submissive reverence, it seems, is not to be tolerated, especially when the provoker is unworthy. But is Johnson responding only to Cowley’s aesthetic provocation or is something else bothering him?

Let me pose this question another way? Is Johnson concerned only about the attempt to render devotion poetical or is the real concern here devotion itself (or, perhaps more accurately, the public display of devotion)? Reading sacred history, for Johnson, should promote a certain relationship with, or at least a certain attitude towards, God: “submissive reverence, and an imagination overawed and controlled,” acquiescence, humility, “suppressed curiosity.” Above all, Johnson is suggesting that one engaged in what he elsewhere terms “contemplative piety” must come to a recognition of human limitation in the face of divine truth, even to the point of acknowledging that there is something profane in attempting to violate this limit. Indeed this acceptance of limit seems to be as important to Johnson as the “authenticity” of the divine narrative itself, an authenticity he simply takes for granted (we are simply “to repose on its veracity with ... humble confidence”). Cowley, however, transgresses this limit, and he does so precisely by attempting to amplify what cannot be amplified, to dignify by human effort what cannot be dignified beyond what it already is. In his devotional verse, in other words, he is not properly submissive or humble or acquiescent; his liberated curiosity about things divine is profane, whereas he should be recognizing that human inventiveness in matters of faith is “superfluous and vain.” And, for Johnson, since we cannot dignify God by our inventiveness, why bother trying?

Johnson's complex sense of just how useless devotional verse is comes out even more keenly in his discussion of the work of Edmund Waller. Precisely because we are not used to encountering such sentiments, I will quote Johnson's statement at some length:

Let no pious ear be offended if I advance, in opposition to many authorities, that poetical devotion cannot often please.... Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer. The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but, few as they are, they can be made no more; they can receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression. Poetry pleases by exhibiting an idea more grateful to the mind than things themselves afford. This effect proceeds from the display of those parts of nature which attract, and the concealment of those which repel the imagination: but religion must be shewn as it is; suppression and addition equally corrupt it; and such as it is, it is already known. From poetry the reader justly expects, and from good poetry always obtains, the enlargement of his comprehension and elevation of his fancy; but this is rarely to be hoped by Christians from metrical devotion. Whatever is great, desirable, or tremendous, is comprised in the name of the Supreme Being. Omnipotence cannot be exalted; Infinity cannot be amplified; Perfection cannot be improved.... Of sentiments purely religious, it will be found that the most

simple expression is the most sublime. Poetry loses its lustre and its power, because it is applied to the decoration of something more excellent than itself. All that pious verse can do is to help the memory, and delight the ear, and for these purposes it may be very useful; but it supplies nothing to the mind. The ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestic of ornament; to recommend them by tropes and figures, is to magnify by a concave mirror the sidereal hemisphere.⁷

Johnson's main contention here is that, when it comes to devotion and piety, there is really nothing for poetry to do: it merely exposes its own limits, shows what it is incapable of doing. Johnson seems to be arguing, in short, that devotional poetry merely embarrasses itself. Of course, as my first epigraph suggests, this kind of embarrassment, or creaturely humbling before the divine, is foundational in Jewish and Christian experience; hence, there is something strange about Johnson's assertions here when read in conjunction with his critique of *Davideis*. For in his discussion of Cowley's epic, Johnson represents the experience of faith in relation to "Sacred History" as humbling, even humiliating from an aesthetic point of view. We might ask, then, why the aesthetic failure of contemplative piety does not rhetorically mimic the very experience of faith Johnson seems to be espousing: faith *as* the experience of limit. By exposing its own limits in the face of divine truth—and thereby its subordination to a higher truth—devotional poetry could very well remind us of what we lack, that we reside within limits, that our imagination is, or at least should be, "overawed" in relation to the divine Word. As Johnson continues in the passage I previously quoted from the "Life of Cowley," "the miracle of Creation, however it may teem with images, is best described with little

diffusion of language: ‘He spake the word, and they were made.’” In other words, the necessary failure of devotional poetry *should* act as a powerful stimulus to the recognition of the very religious experience Johnson seeks to champion: “submissive reverence,” “passive helplessness,” “humble adoration.”

Seventeenth-century metaphysical poets were, of course, particularly quick to recognize a general analogy between the poetic and the spiritual . This insight and the impulse to celebrate figurative expression as essential to the process of coming to know God are given perhaps their most direct statement in Donne’s famous “Expostulation 19” from his 1623 *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*:

My *God*, my *God*, thou art a *direct God*, may I not say, a *literall God*, a *God* that wouldest bee understood *literally*, and according to the *plaine sense* of all that thou saiest? But thou art also (*Lord* I intend it to thy glory, ...) ... a *figurative*, a *metaphoricall God* too: A *God* in whose words there is such a height of *figures*, such *voyages*, such *peregrinations* to fetch remote and precious *metaphors*, such *extentions*, such *spreadings*, such *Curtaines* of *Allegories*, such *third Heavens* of *Hyperboles*, so *harmonius eloquutions*, so *retired* and so *reserved expressions*, so *commanding perswasions*, so *perswading commandments*, such *sinewes* even in thy *milke*, and such *things* in thy *words*, as all *profane Authors*, seeme of the seed of the *Serpent*, that *creepes* ... This hath occasioned thine ancient *servants*, whose delight it was to write after thy *Copie*, to proceede the same way in their *expositions* of the *Scriptures*, and in their composing both of *publike liturgies*, and of *private prayers* to thee, to make their accesses to thee in such a kind of

language, as thou wast pleased to speake to them, in a *figurative*, in a *Metaphoricall language*.⁸

Following this logic, Donne and others seem to have viewed the writing of poetry as akin to the writing produced by God's "ancient servants (*"publike liturgies, and ... private prayers"*). They thus viewed the poetic-spiritual analogy as a rhetorical opportunity, something to be exploited rather than avoided, and an opportunity that might be effectively realized in the celebration of figurative expression itself as essential to the process of coming to know God. In this way, the writing of poetry could at once represent and enact devotion as a form of human expression. George Herbert's poetry, for example, about which Johnson is uncharacteristically reticent, often plays on the speaker's discovery that his struggles, desires, and ambitions as a poet run up against devotional intent. Herbert typically uses this scenario to make the writing of poetry an analogy for the experience of faith very generally. But perhaps more deeply, as we shall consider in detail in the case of Andrew Marvell, works such as Herbert's Jordan-poems also often mark a relationship between the recognition of human expressive limits and what we might call an edifying spiritual humiliation.

It is worth reminding ourselves in this context that Johnson's attack on Cowley's religious poetry comes in the same discussion in which he levels his famous, sweeping critique of metaphysical poetry. This critique, we recall, is focused especially on the metaphysicals' penchant for figural excess (precisely the sort of excess suggested by the previously quoted passage from Donne's *Devotions*); so Johnson famously remarks:

Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of

dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, [metaphysical poets] have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions ... Their attempts were always analytick; they broke every image into fragments.⁹

While acknowledging that Waller does not rightly belong to this group, we might briefly reconsider Bloom's observation that Johnson's "great distrust of devotional verse" was an essential, if perhaps unconscious, part of "ambivalence" towards the metaphysical poets. But which came first, the distrust or the ambivalence? What we should ponder, that is, is first, whether Johnson's distrust of devotional verse might have derived precisely from his ambivalence toward metaphysical poetry and second, whether that ambivalence, and the distrust it inspired, stemmed, in part at least, from his broader distaste for a poetry of rhetorical excess, a distaste for a poetic style that, in effect, called too much attention to its own figurative condition. (It is possible, of course, that Johnson's distrust of devotional verse led to his distaste for figural excess rather than the other way around.) Whichever came first, though, it is certainly possible to imagine how Johnson might have viewed the metaphysicals' paired poetic tendencies (figural excess and a habit of putting representational activity itself on display) as leading, in the context of devotional verse, to the production of poems that indecorously foregrounded the very act of devotion.

III

Marvell's "The Coronet" is probably the clearest example of just such a metaphysical-devotional poem:

When for the Thorns with which I long, too long,

With many a piercing wound,

My Saviours head have crown'd,

I seek with Garlands to redress that Wrong,

Through every Garden, every Mead,

I gather flow'rs (my fruits are only flow'rs)

Dismantling all the fragrant Towers

That once adorn'd my Shepherdesses head.

And now when I have summ'd up all my store,

Thinking (so I my self deceive)

So rich a Chaplet thence to weave

As never yet the King of Glory wore:

Alas I find the Serpent old

That, twining in his speckled breast,

About the flow'rs disguis'd does fold,

With wreaths of Fame and Interest.

Ah, foolish Man, that would'st debase with them,

And mortal Glory, Heavens Diadem!

But thou who only could'st the Serpent tame,

Either his slipp'ry knots at once untie,

Or disentangle all his winding Snare:

Or shatter too with him my curious frame:

And let these wither, so that he may die,

Though set with Skill and chosen out with Care.
 That they, while Thou on both their Spoils dost tread,
 May crown thy Feet, that could not crown thy Head.¹⁰

Marvell here calls special attention to the act of devotion by linking it at once to the writing of poetry in general and to a self-consciousness concerning the figurative conditions of writing in particular. The poem's explicit subject, moreover, is how the recognition of poetic failure in the face of divine majesty might function both as an analogy of and a means to a soteriological spiritual humility.

In very broad terms, Marvell's poem offers us a glimpse of the conditions of writing religious poetry, its form, origins, goals, and rhetorical problems. The speaker self-identifies as at once a sinner—one who, through the typological imagination so prevalent among seventeenth-English poets, reveals himself as mysteriously implicated in the crowning with thorns episode from the crucifixion account—and a poet.¹¹ In the first 12 lines, he reveals a dual devotional aim: to praise God and to “redress” the “wrong” of his continuing complicity in Jesus' suffering. And he tells us that he will accomplish both aims by drawing on his previous experience as a poet. His new poetry will thus be built out of the dismantled figures (flowers) of his love poetry, which he claims will now crown his “Saviours” rather than his “Shepherdesses head.” But even before this section is concluded, the speaker has introduced a discordant undertone that will both grow more audible as the poem continues and eventually threaten to undermine his claims on behalf of his new poetic vocation: “And now when I have summ'd up all my store, / Thinking (so I my self deceive)” (ll. 9-10). Calling attention to the poet's very writing as a form of self-deception, these lines move the meditation on poetry's redemptive possibilities in a

new direction even as they introduce a new theme: the problem of misdirected, even sinful, figuration.

By lines 13-18 Marvell has fully clarified this problem: “the Serpent old ... twining ... About the flow’rs disguis’d” (is it the serpent or the flowers that are disguised?) debases his poetic efforts and insults heaven by substituting forms of self-promotion—“Fame and Interest ... And mortal glory” (ll. 16, 18)—for true devotion. Ironically, then, the poet’s efforts to crown Jesus not with thorns but with poetic flowers—what is clearly intended as an act of contrition—only serve to perpetuate his fallen condition. And this is so because the poetic invention that aims to honor God perversely imagines itself as able to create something greater than God might Himself create, “a Chaplet ... As never yet the King of Glory wore.”

We are reminded here of Donne’s remark that, by comparison with God’s own figurative powers, “all *profane Authors* ... seeme of the seed of the *Serpent*, that *creepes*.” Of course, Marvell takes the remark further in warning that even authors with sacred intent (perhaps even those, who, like the “ancient *servants*[,] ... delight ... to write after [God’s] *Copie*”) might find their efforts already contaminated by the serpent’s presence. Indeed, how can a fallen human claim to redress a wrong done to God? How can that person, a mere poet after all, presume to create the conditions of his own unmerited grace? Marvell here seems to be anticipating Johnson’s attack on the indecorous presumption of devotional poets: like Cowley, Marvell’s speaker fails to understand that what is “produced by the visible interposition of divine power is above the power of human genius to dignify”; he had thus, foolishly, even sacrilegiously, attempted to exalt omnipotence, to amplify infinity, to improve perfection. But now, the

aesthetic failure of the speaker's "metrical devotion" exposes the limits of such devotion in the face of a higher spiritual truth. That failure thereby reminds us that our imaginations are indeed "overawed" in relation to the divine Word.

Marvell, then, might be said to be writing a devotional poem built on the very premise by which Johnson will later attack devotional poetry; or, to put it another way, Marvell's speaker-poet seems almost presciently aware of the objection Johnson will later make to precisely this kind of poetry even as the poem tries at once to show why Johnson is right and to use that truth to construct a meaningful metrical devotion anyway. Marvell's concern here is not just with the state of the speaker's soul, then, or with the problems of sin and salvation generally. Rather, he is more particularly concerned with the relation between devotion and its visible expression, which, in a poem means especially the figurative and metaphorical language that announces, describes, or meditates on devotional activities—confessing, worshipping, praying, lamenting, supplicating, giving thanks, imploring mercy, or anything else. What we might call a meta-poem, "The Coronet" is finally, and paradoxically, about the (near) impossibility of writing efficacious religious poetry even as, perversely, Marvell shows that he can make a devotional poem out of this very topic.

I say *near* impossibility because the poem's final eight lines attempt to redefine a true devotional vocation for poetry, one that can avoid the creeping serpent. The most obvious way Marvell's speaker attempts this recuperation is by reimagining the poem's very rhetorical structure. Switching at line 19 into direct address ("But *thou* who only could'st the Serpent tame"), the poem, in effect, becomes a prayer. And what that prayer requests more than anything else is that the very poem we are reading, and perhaps also

the artistic ambitions that prompted it in the first place, be destroyed: “shatter ... with [the serpent] my curious frame: / And let these [the flowers / the figures] wither, so that he may die” (ll. 22-23). The poet’s pride in his own artistry remains a problem almost to the very end: he cannot help but remind God / Jesus that his figures were “set with Skill and chosen out with care” (l. 24); the creeping serpent still has the “slipp’ry knots” of “Fame and Interest” tangled into the words of supplication. This recognition is necessarily at the heart of a poem that declares, where it cannot enact, a desire to deny its own status as art, a denial that comes, paradoxically, within the art itself. Certainly, the speaker is admitting that he desires to resign agency to God / Jesus, to whom the active verbs—“tame,” “untie,” “disintangle,” and “shatter”—are now assigned, and he even pleads that his poetic skill might “wither” so that the serpent in him might “die.” But he also must admit that he cannot both continue to write poetry and disclaim the human agency by which his poetry comes into existence. The poet wants to de-compose his work, but he will need help in doing so.

Although it is not clear if such help is forthcoming, the concluding couplet reaches a kind of compromise. The poet will continue to write poetry even as he acknowledges the failure of his original purpose: his poetic garlands will “not crown” his savior’s “Head.” Poetry will still be written, and the poet will still claim a devotional intent, but it will succeed only by admitting, indeed by putting on display, its own humiliation before his Lord, who will, he hopes, “tread” on his offerings as “Spoils” of conquest. What will be conquered (or what the poet prays will be conquered) are poetic ambition itself, human pride, his own claims of merit and recognition. Pursuing a goal that will later cause Johnson so much embarrassment, Marvell’s speaker aims here

precisely to expose his creaturely and poetic unworthiness as though to be rendered visible as a lowly servant were in fact the best, or perhaps even the only, way to demonstrate a proper devotion to God.

Marvell makes this display of his own humiliation more palatable by brilliantly linking together his poetic failure with the redemptive possibilities of service to God / Jesus. The middle section of the final couplet—"while Thou on both their Spoils dost tread, / May crown thy Feet"—draws together images from Genesis 3 and John 12 and 13, and perhaps from Luke 7, to reimagine a divine curse as an act of saving humility. While superficially akin to the work of the creeping serpent, moreover, such an act locates by analogy an appropriate role for poetry both in the glorification of God and in the work of salvation.

That middle section of lines 25-26 first updates God's curse on the serpent as issued in Genesis 3.15—"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel"—so that the woman's offspring, the Messiah, is proclaimed as having conquered (or perhaps about to conquer) the serpent rather than as engaged with the serpent in endless, evenly matched combat (material from Revelation 12 and 20, where the apocalyptic Jesus returns to defeat the "ancient serpent" [12.9], seems to be overriding the Genesis original). Marvell aligns the work of the poet with the defeated serpent as the savior's "Spoils." Failing in their designs to stand above him, the poet and the serpent cannot help but reveal their shared status as servants of a divine master.

What this master (the victorious Jesus) now "treads" upon thus becomes a special sign of his kingly status in that his "Spoils," paradoxically, will "crown" his "Feet." But

where the serpent might be thought of, futilely of course, as still resisting this situation, it is precisely what the poet is praying for. By crowing the savior's feet, where he could not crown his head, the poet escapes from the charge he leveled against himself at the outset: that he was complicit in a crowning with thorns that afflicted a perpetually suffering Jesus. Crowning Jesus' feet with ruined poetic figures rather than crowning his head with thorns, the poet's work seems more akin to the work of service prescribed in chapter 13 of John's Gospel, where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and then explains that his act of humility is meant to be an example, "that you also should do as I have done" (John 13.15). The verses that follow, in fact, read as if they could have been taken as the epigraph to Marvell's poem: "Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their masters, nor are the messengers greater than one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13.16-17). Jesus' humility here, as on the cross, does not negate his status as master (his Apostles are still his servants despite the fact that he has washed their feet). Indeed, we might be led to believe by John's account that an activity of servants, though itself modeled on Jesus' own example, should yet testify to their inferiority to him; it should remind them, and us, that we will never be greater than the master.

In fact, it is precisely the learning of this hard lesson that will, finally, separate the serpent from the servant. Marvell may be at once insisting on this critical difference and representing his own art as a kind of redemptive subservience by modeling his work less explicitly on Jesus' act as recounted in John 13 than on the account of Mary of Bethany's act provided in the previous chapter:

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12.1-3)¹²

Luke's version of this event is also worth noting. While Luke's anointer is, as in Mark's and Matthew's account, anonymous, she does, like John's Mary, anoint Jesus' feet rather than his head (which is how Mark and Matthew present it):

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisees' house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisees house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. (Luke 7.36-38)

In response to the Pharisee's silent observation that if Jesus were a real prophet he would have known that the woman was a sinner, Jesus rebukes him, saying: "You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love" (vv. 46-47). The episode concludes with Jesus' direct address to the woman: "And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'" (v. 50).

Marvell may be figuratively conflating the two accounts, John's and Luke's, and then linking this conflated version to build an image of his poem as a devotional act that possesses saving efficacy. As in Luke's account of the anointing, Marvell's speaker

insists on his own unworthiness (like the woman, he is a sinner). Moreover, Luke's unnamed woman, like Marvell's speaker, seems to be shown shifting from a planned anointing of Jesus' head (verse 46 in Luke suggests that the anointing of a guest's head would have been considered a proper sign of regard) to an actual anointing of his feet; the implication here is that the shift occurs because the woman is overcome with a sense of humility before the Lord, though her tears perhaps also represent a sense of shame for her past sins. Jesus refers to the woman's "love" (v. 47) and "faith" (v. 50), but overall the episode leaves the impression that Jesus forgives her because she is humble and contrite: anointing Jesus' feet is at once an act of penitence (she seems to be imploring his mercy) and an acknowledgement that she is unworthy of him. But if this image of a penitent sinner receiving forgiveness, and the promise of salvation, might have an obvious appeal to Marvell the pious Christian, Marvell the poet might have been more impressed by the remark in John that Mary's ointment was a "costly perfume" ("made of nard") that "filled [the house] with [its] fragrance" (v. 3). Marvell's poetic flowers ("set with Skill and chosen out with Care") are similarly costly, but they are to be tread upon by the savior. They thus, paradoxically, crown his feet. Marvell makes no explicit mention of their scent, but we might surmise that the crushed flowers of the poem, like Mary's ointment, give off a fragrance that fills the house. Such a fragrance honors the one anointed, insists on the perfumer's inferiority, and provides both beauty and a valuable lesson to all who can observe. Marvell's poem, then, does not simply represent humility as the virtue distinguishing the servant from the serpent. Rather, it puts the actual learning of humility on display as though such a public display—here couched in the poem's formal rhetorical structure—were a necessary first step in the process of salvation.

Returning now briefly to Johnson, I would like to suggest that he is made uncomfortable by the likes of Cowley and Waller, and by Marvell and Herbert and Donne in some of his guises, not so much because he finds their work embarrassing or unimaginative in aesthetic terms (though Marvell's "The Coronet" might be too metaphysically "witty" for his tastes). He is made uncomfortable because their poetic representation of contemplative piety is undignified in spiritual terms: it forces the reader to experience supplication, submissive reverence, humbled confidence, suppressed curiosity. Especially to the extent seventeenth-century devotional verse marks or even enacts its own necessary failure in the face of a transcendent God, it undermines human dignity because it necessarily exposes our limits before the creator and savior. (Marvell, of course, not only recognizes this fact but openly celebrates it.) For Johnson, however, by failing to do what poetry should do—enlarge comprehension and elevate fancy—devotional poetry makes our creaturely inferiority to God all too clear. In effect, devotional poetry rather indecorously reminds us of our unavoidable humiliation before God.

IV

Is this humiliation, then, what Satan is remembering, or perhaps struggling to forget, when he refers to what he owes God, the "debt immense of endless gratitude?" Such gratitude is best felt and not expressed, for, as Johnson uneasily observed, when expressed it exposes the dirty secret of worship. There is a great paradox here: to recognize divine worship for what it is makes it appear almost as a kind of idolatry. Read in these terms, Satan's republican sentiments in Book 1 might be understood more as an existential than as a political statement: he refuses to "To bow and sue for grace / With

suppliant knee, and deifie [God's] power" because such a surrender would represent an unacceptable "ignominy and shame," an admission of his own, inescapable creaturely inferiority to the creator. Futile as it is, Satan's rebellion is an act of denial: if he can reimagine God's supremacy as deriving not from his actual divinity but only from his superior weaponry (his power), then there is no necessary ontological gap between God and other beings. In thus refusing to bow down before another, Satan is refusing to turn God into an idol, an object of worship (his worship). Satan, in other words, refuses to practice that idolatry that is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition: he will not give thanks to God for his existence or implore God's mercy or perform any of those devotional acts that might serve to remind him that he is—we are—forever in God's debt. What Satan wants is some sense of self that is not already created by God; in other words, he wants to discover that he is not a slave to his very creatureliness. Satan therefore rebels because in a state of rebellion he can deny, even momentarily escape from, what he has been forced to see in himself: that he has fawned upon, cringed before, and servilely adored heaven's monarch, and that this is all he can possibly do. To accept divine worship as central to, indeed as inseparable from existence, is intolerable for Satan, and perhaps for Johnson as well, because it leaves no room for the discovery of anything of the self that is not always already owed to, or owned by, God.

Satan's argument with Abdiel in Book 5, of course, turns on precisely his desire to assert his ontological equality with God by refusing to acknowledge that he is even created by God:

That we were formd then saist thou? and the work

Of secondarie hands, by task transferd

From Father to his Son? strange point and new!
 Doctrin which we would know whence learnt: who saw
 When this creation was? rememberst thou
 Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?
 We know no time when we were not as now;
 Know none before us, self-begot, self-rai'd
 By our own quick'ning power. (5.853-61)

Clearly, to be “self-begot, self-rai'd” would be a negation of God’s monopoly on “quick'ning power,” a power he will assign in Book 7 to the Son for the creation of the world. As Abdiel tells the rebel angels, moreover, God has previously assigned this power to the Son for the purposes of creating the angelic host, a transfer of power Satan here mockingly refers to as “work / Of secondarie hands”:

Thy self thou great and glorious dost thou count,
 Or all Angelic Nature joind in one,
 Equal to him begotten Son, by whom
 As by his Word the mighty Father made
 All things, ev'n thee, and all the Spirits of Heav'n ... (5.833-37)

Part of what makes this entire exchange so curious is that we cannot accurately assess the status either of Abdiel’s knowledge or of Satan’s denial. We assume that Abdiel is telling the truth here—the angels are created beings and the Son created them¹³—but is it possible that the angels had never before learned this “doctrin?” What would it mean to say that Abdiel is actually teaching them something “strange and new?” Is it possible that he alone among the angels knows this? And is *he* learning it for the first time (and is

this, then, the first instance of prophecy in the cosmos)? It is difficult to imagine that Satan and his cohort had simply forgotten such an important fact. And while it is easy enough to imagine that Satan might want to lie in his attempt to refute Abdiel's claim, it would be hard to lie before the other angels since, we would surmise, they would know as much as Satan and Abdiel do about the facts of their own creation.

But if this is not prophecy and if Satan is not simply lying, could this be a moment of collective denial among all the rebel angels for whom the begetting of the Son—his elevation to a privileged, monarchical status within the heavenly hierarchy—has unleashed a memory they cannot admit into consciousness? And would such a denial be a way of staving off the moment of the *Emersonian* fall? This fall would be constituted by the discovery they have made that they exist, which, in Milton's cosmos, would entail an acknowledgement that they exist precisely because they have been created and hence possess no "quick'ning power" in themselves. In this context, we might reconsider the passage from Book 1 I quoted earlier:

To bow and sue for grace
 With suppliant knee, and deifie his power,
 Who from the terrour of this Arm so late
 Doubted his Empire, that were low indeed,
 That were ignominy and shame beneath
 This downfall.

Viewed from the perspective of Gabriel's comment at the end of Book 4, Satan's vehemence in Book 1 seems a kind of psychological defense, a way of forgetting how that "ignominy and shame" have *already* been his. That shame is, of course, the very condition of being

created. Satan and the rebels angels owe and, unless Abdiel's account is prophecy, deep down they know they owe the very fact of their existence to another. They may be immortal—indeed, they have had immortality bestowed upon them—but they are not eternal. They are dependent and inferior; in short they are “secondarie” beings. As much of a fantasy as Satan's position might be, he and the other rebel angels need to assert their own “quick'ning power” in order to cope with the trauma of origins.

This point is powerfully reinforced by what Gabriel's comment about Satan tells us about Gabriel himself. How did *he*, a still unfallen angel, experience heaven before the fall of the rebel host or even before the begetting of the Son? Gabriel's disgust with Satan's prelapsarian conduct is as surprising a feature of the Book 4 exchange as that very conduct he describes. For Gabriel's comments suggest that, even before Satan's fall, all was not well among the heavenly host. Gabriel, after all, seems to have been disgusted by Satan's obsequiousness before God—that is, he is remembering his earlier disgust with the situation of worship in heaven—even though obsequiousness before God is all there can be for a created being. Gabriel's charge seems to contain a note of jealousy (his own sibling rivalry), as if he recalls Satan out-hustling him on the worship scene. At the very least, he is rebuking Satan for violating some assumed decorum of devotion. More implicitly, though, and perhaps even unconsciously, Gabriel's disgust might also be directed toward God: his snapshot of the prelapsarian, pre-begetting Satan suggests in God a vain, all-too-willing recipient of his creatures' fawning and cringing and adoration. Gabriel seems to be remembering, in a pained way, that God is the creator of the situation in which even the greatest angels must servilely compete for his attentions. Gabriel's disgust therefore masks

a self-disgust, I think, a kind of humiliation that is by definition the subject-position of the creature-worshipper before the creator-God.

Why, then, doesn't Satan recognize this humiliation earlier, when Gabriel does? It may be, simply, that Gabriel is more astute than Satan, or it may be that the past moment alluded to in Gabriel's speech is the moment of Gabriel's own temptation (a test he passes, though not without some strain). God tests the obedience of all his creatures—angels and humans alike—but not necessarily in the same way. The poem tries to make us feel just what is at stake in such tests, of course: God tempts his creatures not just to make trial of their obedience but also to make us feel what freedom means in the poem. The establishing of the conditions under which real disobedience is possible—something that truly tempts a break from God—is the only means by which God's creatures can experience, and verify, their freedom and the only way Milton can exonerate God from the charge that he willed the falls both of the angels and of humankind. And creaturely freedom is the condition of moral excellence by which one might merit some higher status in God's cosmos.¹⁴ The downside of this view is that the only way to prove we can actually disobey (that we are *free* to disobey) is to disobey, a paradox that unhappily raises the spectre of William Empson's claim that the theology of Milton's poem cannot escape the charge that the fall is fated if not directly willed by God.

The easiest way for God to test obedience is to command something, perhaps something important (bow down to the Son), perhaps something insignificant (don't eat the fruit of a particular tree). I am inclined to read Gabriel's situation before the begetting of the Son—his witnessing of the fawning, cringing Satan—as his test, though it is not at all clear that, by that point in the story's chronology, he has been commanded to obey anything in

particular. But in Satan's case, the test clearly comes in the scenario narrated by Raphael in Book 5: God's command to bow down before the Son as though he were God himself:

your Head I him appoint;

And my Self have sworn to him shall bow

All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord:

...

him who disobeyes

Mee disobeyes, breaks union, and that day

Cast out from God and blessed vision falls

Into utter darkness.

One might conclude that Satan and the rebel host fall because they refuse to bow down to another creature even if God commands it; they refuse to become idolators. That conclusion, however, would miss the key point of the scene, for two reasons: first, because it cannot explain Satan's jealousy toward the Son as recounted in his Book 4 soliloquy; second, because it cannot fully explain the statements in the Book 4 soliloquy in which Satan expresses the unbearable burden he feels concerning the debt he owes to God for existence itself (a burden that, as we have noted, will lead in Book 5 to his denial before Abdiel that the angels were created). The connection between this burden and the begetting (exaltation) of the Son is not immediately obvious, though. So perhaps we need to reframe the question I previously posed: why doesn't Satan recognize his humiliation before God earlier, when Gabriel does? Now we might ask why it takes the begetting of the Son to prompt Satan to recognize this humiliation, a humiliation that will lead to his rebellion against God. We must ask this question because it seems as though

the situation he is rebelling against after the begetting of the Son had predated that begetting. And indeed, from what Gabriel tells us we must assume that Satan was perfectly happy with this arrangement prior to the Son's begetting. What we are asking, in short, is what exactly changes with the Son's begetting that might prompt Satan to rebel when he had not previously contemplated this course of action.

There are two possible ways to answer this question. The first, something we've noted previously, is that Satan is suffering from a form of sibling rivalry. He doesn't mind ceding authority to the Father-god as long as that Father-god showers most of the attention on him. He rebels because he is jealous:

he of the first,

If not the first Arch-Angel, great in Power,

In favour and præeminence, yet fraught

With envie against the Son of God, that day

Honour'd by his great Father, and proclaim'd

Messiah King anointed, could not beare

Through pride that sight, & thought himself impair'd.

Even his way of rebelling, imitating the power and status accorded the Son, might be understood simply as another way of getting his Father's attention.

Given the profound contradiction, however, between the beginning and the end of Book 4—the contradiction between Satan's earlier fawning and cringing and the "debt immense of endless gratitude" he now claims to feel—it is equally plausible to imagine that God's command that the angels must bend their knees before the Son and "confess him Lord" forces into Satan's consciousness a deeply disturbing recognition of what was

(is?) always already true. That is, with the Son's begetting, Satan now comes to see his pre-begetting behavior toward God as Gabriel must have seen it: *as* servile adoration. We cannot entirely eliminate other possibilities: it may be that Satan is jealous of the favored status as the "onely Son"; it may be that Satan wants the other angels to bend their knees to him; it may be that he simply refuses to bow down before a fellow creature¹⁵; it may be that he suddenly gets politics and rejects heaven's hierarchical design. But if we take seriously Gabriel's prelapsarian perspective, we must be willing to admit that the primary motivation for Satan's fall—its first and deepest cause—is shame. Satan's embarrassment about the very nature of his existence not only produces self-loathing but also leads to actions best understood as psychological defenses against what he doesn't want to remember. And his pride, manifested in a variety of way throughout the poem, is the chief effect of this embarrassment. In short, a kind of existential humiliation is the fall itself, and pride is Satan's chief means of coping with it, a way of forgetting what he once was: a servile adorer, a fawner and cringer before "Heav'n's awful Monarch." The begetting of the Son is the condition of possibility for Satan's discovery that he exists, a discovery of what it means to exist in God's cosmos, where the "chief end" of any creature is to "glorify God ... forever."

Johnson's distaste for metrical devotion is, I would like to argue, not so different really from Satan's self-loathing; it marks the disgust he feels for what that poetry exposes about his own status before the creator and redeemer, about the very nature and meaning of worship. When Johnson claims that the language of devotion should "suppress curiosity," the curiosity that is being suppressed, I suggest, is precisely the secret that Gabriel reveals about Satan's prelapsarian conduct. For Johnson and for

Milton's Satan (if perhaps not for Milton himself), the revelation of this secret is the religious equivalent of the viewing of the primal scene—a recognition of the structure of creation in which we must live perpetually as supplicants of the Creator. Like Satan's rebellion, devotional poetry seeks to carry out an impossible task; for such poetry that task is "to magnify by a concave mirror the sidereal hemisphere." But the real problem for Johnson may be that lurking within the necessary failure of this profane task is a Satanic memory that wants to stay hidden.

NOTES

¹ *Paradise Lost*, 1.28-33. Here as elsewhere, quotations from *Paradise Lost* are taken from the *Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flanagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) with citations given to book and lines numbers. Subsequent citations will be given in the text.

² High on a Throne of Royal State, which far
Outshon the wealth of *Ormus* and of *Ind*,
Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
Shows on her Kings *Barbaric* Pearl and Gold,
Satan exalted sat ... (2.1-5)

³ Cf. Psalm 2:

Why do the heathen rage,
And the people imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers of the earth take counsel together,
Against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying
Let us break their bands asunder,
And cast away their cords from us.
He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh:
The Lord shall have them in derision.
...
Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill in Zion.
I will declare the decree:
The Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son;
This day have I begotten thee.
Ask of me, and I shall give thee
The heathen for thine inheritance,
And the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.
Thou shalt break them with an rod of iron
...
Be wise now ... be instructed ...
Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, ...
When his wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed are they that put their trust in him.

In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton observes that “in scripture, there are two senses in which the Father is said to have begotten the Son: one literal, with reference to production; the other metaphorical, with reference to exaltation.” Psalm 2 and St. Paul’s exegeses of it (Acts 13.32-33, Colossians 1.18, etc.) are Milton’s major proof-texts here; he observes, finally, that “from the second Psalm it will also be seen that God begot the Son in the sense of making him a king” (*Riverside Milton*, 1168-69).

⁴ Bloom, Introduction to *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 4-5.

⁵ *Lives of the Poets* ("Cowley"), 2 vols., ed. Arthur Waugh (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1.40.

⁶ *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets*, 5.

⁷ *Lives of the Poets* ("Waller,"), 1.202-04.

⁸ *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 99-100.

⁹ *Lives of the Poet* ("Cowley"), 1.14-15. For elaboration of Johnson's critique of the metaphysical poets, see Andrew Barnaby, "Affecting the Metaphysics: Marvell's 'Definition of Love' and the Seventeenth-Century Trial of Experience, *Genre* 28 (1995): 483-512.

¹⁰ *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, rev. Pierre Legouis and E. E. Duncan-Jones, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 1.14-15.

¹¹ For a broad discussion of the seventeenth-century poetic-typological imagination, see Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); for a more specific examination of Marvell's poetry in this context, see Annabel Patterson, "'Bermudas' and 'The Coronet': Marvell's Protestant Poetics," *ELH* 44 (1977): 478-99.

¹² For some unexplained reason, John's Gospel insists on getting this detail right; even before the actual anointing episode we are told in no uncertain terms that it was Mary who performed this act: "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill" (John 11.1-2). It may be that John's Gospel is trying to rectify the insulting anonymity of the accounts of this episode as given in the Synoptics: Mark 14: 3-9, Matthew 26: 6-13; Luke 7: 36-50. It is also worth noting that while Luke and John have the woman (Mary?) anoint Jesus' feet, in Mark and Matthew the woman anoints Jesus' head. Unlike Luke's, though, John's account links the episode to the Last Supper ("Six days before the Passover ... they gave a dinner ..."), and, of course, the description of Jesus' ritual bathing of his disciples' feet is unique to John.

¹³ Milton, of course, following many scriptural passages, makes exactly this point in Book 1, chapters 5 and 7 of *De Doctrina Christiana*. He remarks in chapter 5 ("Of the Son of God"), for example: "it is certain that the Son existed in the beginning, under the title of the Word or Logos, that he was the first of created things, and that through him all other things, both in heaven and earth, were afterwards made" (*Riverside Milton*, 1168). Cf. Colossians 1. 16-17.

¹⁴ So Milton imagines the reward of faithful obedience:

till by degrees of merit rais'd
They open to themselves at length the way
Up hither, under long obedience tri'd,
And Earth be chang'd to Heav'n, & Heav'n to Earth,
One Kingdom, Joy and Union without end. (7.157-61)

¹⁵ However hard he tries in *De Doctrina Christiana* to accord the Son special status, even Milton concedes that the Son is a creature of God: "he was the first of created things" (*Riverside Milton*, 1168).