The Symbolic Fallacy of Milton’s Homunculi

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While the toughest debates have always raged between contemporaries, inconsistencies between generations are too often overlooked as byproducts of historical truth, moral progress, or simply irrelevance. John Milton in his epic *Paradise Lost* and George Herbert in his religious poetry disagree on more than the proper genre for collecting the flow of spiritual sentiment: They are at odds over the status of humanity in its relationship to God. In his epic, Milton introduces the character of Satan to illustrate the futility of faithlessness and the doomed quest for betterment outside of God’s domain. Milton then counterbalances Satan’s character with Jesus, a parallel that illustrates the fruition of faithfulness and the internal peace that accompanies satisfaction with one’s position under God. Milton considers rebellion and loyalty towards God as holistic forces that can be personified and subsequently internalized by humanity to become pre-defined archetypes of good and bad conscience. By contrast, Herbert and his poetry begin the search for God in the wasteland between pure faithfulness and faithlessness. Herbert questions whether humanity’s capacity for worshipping God is better served through a confused search for an unknown being, or through an incautious resolution to revel in God’s creation. By removing Herbert’s existential doubt, Milton’s personification of the relationship between God and humanity as an attitude of disloyalty, Satan, or as an attitude of loyalty, Jesus, represent a conceptual regression from Herbert. Since Milton’s symbolic representation of good and evil as Jesus and Satan groups an ambiguous set of spiritual attitudes into two polarized extremes, his framework denies the possibility of a temporary coexistence between Satan and Jesus in the human mind, and thereby oversimplifies the core of Herbert’s artistic tension.

Milton and Herbert both portray deviation from God as the starting point for each of their respective perspectives on religious struggle. In Book 5 of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the initial deviation from God originates from Satan’s unjustified dissatisfaction with his position in heaven. Satan’s dissatisfaction expresses itself as “Deep malice thence conceiving”, where the choice of the adjective and the gerund associates divergence from God with organic development, holistic completeness, and exponential growth (Milton 2039). The spontaneous generation of evil in
Satan’s psyche shows that the origin of evil occurred independently of God through a corruption of God’s creation, and further implies that the creation of evil must be sheltered from God in “midnight [...] in secret”. Milton pursues this account of evil by recounting the propagation of Satan’s dissatisfaction in his subordinate Beelzebub and the other fallen angels, with the false belief that a coup against God is under preparation by Jesus “The great Messiah, and his new commands”. Already, Milton sets a tension between Satan’s jealousy of the superiority of Jesus and Satan’s need to accrue power by imitating Jesus (Stein 221). His homunculus Satan draws its source from desire for greater power, and its power from superficial similarity to the good.

However, Hebert’s *Denial* suggests that loss of faith in God’s providence is not derived from evil as a single force, but instead from the individual’s repeated experiences of suffering and abandonment. Herbert conveys the situational irony of God’s providence in the speaker’s apostrophe accusing God “that thou shouldst give dust a tongue/ To cry [...] then not hear it” (Denial 1714). Compared to Satan, Herbert’s speaker does not object to his humble position as dust, or to the exalted position of the good as giver. Herbert’s speaker does, however, lament that the individual’s desire for relief from suffering is direct proof of the gulf between God and the believer. At first, the speaker assumes that evil exists in the absence of God and resists his own desire to “[take] his way” by losing his devotion to God in physical pleasure. Over time, the speaker’s continued inability to find God’s protection from the change and pain of the world crystallizes in the realization that the greatest danger to an individual’s integrity under God is not the corrupt advice of Satan as homunculus, but the individual’s voluntary choice to forget God in the scramble to escape suffering (Geertz 107). Thus, Herbert’s speaker in *The Collar* expects “double pleasures” to help him lose his awareness of the difficult prerogatives of Christian life, which are captured in the desolate diction of God’s “blasted”, “sigh-blown”, and “petty” commandments (Collar 1720). Herbert’s speaker in *The Collar* castigates the good life of Christian morality as “no harvest but a thorn/ To let me blood”. The image of the thorn, as it appears in biblical passages like Matthew’s parable of the sower, typically describes the barrenness of an
immoral, worldly life (Halverson 34). By using the thorn to describe Christian ethics as well as moral error, Herbert finds his speaker living in the unguided overlap between the path to and away from God. Herbert emphasizes that the pursuit of any lifestyle, whether hedonistic or Christian, is a self-interested judgment predicated on the alleviation of suffering and the hazardous navigation of blurred moral boundaries. *The Collar* portrays the ultimate rebellion from God as the decision to “will abroad” and misuse free will to forget God’s prescriptions under the pressure of human suffering, not as a manipulative maneuver by Satan or a fall to temptation.

Milton and Herbert continue to differ in their conceptual attitudes and artistic representations of the problem of evil as Milton expands on the account that evil originates from spontaneous generation in a homunculus, and as Herbert expands on the account that evil is the individual’s appropriation of free will for the pursuit of self-directed goals over divine worship. While the speaker in Herbert’s poems resorts to faithlessness out of desperation at God’s intangibility, the speaker in Milton’s epic frames faithlessness as the beginning of desire. Herbert’s conception of evil places the need to doubt God in the fluid internal struggle between finding God through submission to human suffering, and finding God through outspoken resistance against providence. During an apostrophe to God in *The Collar*, the speaker challenges God to “Call in thy death’s-head” (Collar 1721). The skull takes on double meaning when it functions as a symbol for mortality to represent God’s retribution against the deviant believer, and when it functions as an allusion to afterlife rebirth as a fulfillment of God’s promised plan. The speaker also asserts “He that forbears/ To suit [...] / Deserves his load”, with ambiguity in the object of the suit suggesting that the skeptic will bear the responsibility of his life if he rejects God’s plan, just as the believer will suffer under God’s plan. For Herbert, these ambiguities and double meanings accurately capture the individual’s dilemma of the pain of faith versus the pain of non-faith, a dilemma arising from the freedom of choice. Meanwhile, Milton’s characterization of Satan presents an undivided will to evil (Forsyth 427-428). By concentrating the representation of evil in Satan, such as his short paradox about Satan’s intention “to sound/ Or taint integrity” during the corruption of
the angels, Milton structures opposition to God as an active and organized force liberated from the spiritual indecision of Herbert’s speakers (Milton 2040). Milton draws a clear analogy from Satan and his desires, to evil and the stimulants of evil; Satan’s attraction to “Ambitious words and jealousies” serves as both the ends and the means of his opposition to God. For Milton, Satan is unmistakably vicious and the real ambiguity of his character is simply a manipulative maneuver between true goodness and simulated goodness.

The greater the degree by which the writer transforms evil into a concrete representation, the less plausible becomes the possibility of a compromise position between God and the believer. For one, Herbert’s speakers defer to intervention by God after questioning God’s power, whether invoking aid to “tune my heartless breast” (Denial 1714), or transforming a diatribe into a prayer “[replying], My Lord” (Collar 1721). In this way, Herbert raises a distinction between the absolute position of committed faithlessness and the relative position of a desire for faithlessness. Herbert places humanity in the relative position of compromise. Milton, on the other hand, categorizes any association with Satan and his temptations as an absolute position of faithlessness, when he makes a parallel between Satan’s opposition to God and a declaration of war. For example, during Satan’s march from heaven, the martial symbolism of “The great hierarchical standard” and the firm diction of “all obeyed/ The wonted signal” asserts the determined unity of evil and the hostile confrontation of Satan against God, to annul any association between good and evil besides antagonism. As a result, Milton urges the individual to ostracize Satan and evil from the self as an openly declared enemy. With the inability of Milton’s representation of Satan to sympathize with Herbert’s struggle over free will in the problem of evil, Milton’s representation does not replicate the self-doubt and the delicate mixture of rebellion and obedience in Herbert’s religious poetry.

These differences become accented as each writer expands his scope, from the problem of evil to the problem of good. Since Milton explains evil by the idealized reaction of Satan to God’s providence, he builds a tenable conflict between good and evil by positing a similarly idealized reaction of support for God’s universal structure. In the passage of Paradise Lost immediately
following the march of Satan from heaven, Milton personifies his conception of human goodness by idealizing Jesus’ motives in support of God. One facet of this personification is the father and son relationship between God and Jesus, where Jesus is “heir of all my might” as perfect human goodness (Milton 2040). The ideal believer for Milton, Jesus never doubts that the intention to goodness will ever lack for proper means and is confident that the agent of God’s benevolence will always have sufficient evidence of God’s oversight. Another facet is the appropriation of attributes from Zeus and Jove in Greco-roman mythology to Jesus as a personified divine (Lewalski 130). Jesus’ possession of the classical symbol “clear/ Lightning divine” creates an identity between clarity as the special benefit of loyalty to God’s plan and lightning as the agentic power of the human who seeks to follow God.

At the third facet, Jesus has shed away the complexity of self-doubt to the extent that his motives, personifying Milton’s idea of human goodness, are contextualized by war. When Jesus juxtaposes God as one who “thy foes/ Justly hast in derision”, with Satan as steeped in “vain designs and tumults vain”, his unqualified confidence in God’s power frames God as above conflict and becomes even more striking in comparison to the fortunes of war. While his confidence in the victory of God reinforces Milton’s view that the faithful have no reason for self-doubt, Jesus’ allusion to Psalm 2 suggests that the struggle for human goodness is never serious enough to challenge God’s sovereignty and is simply resolved when the individual turns to Jesus over Satan. Furthermore, Jesus’ admission that Satan’s opposition to God is “Matter to me of glory” conveys that the opportunity to reject evil is necessary to the expression of human virtue. The war of heaven and hell becomes a sort of play-show struggle illuminating idealized goodness over idealized evil.

Conversely, Herbert’s view of human goodness is punctured by uncertainty from the limited insight of individuals into God’s plan, and transience from the volatility of free will. Unlike Jesus, the speaker of Herbert’s poem The Flower considers self-doubt as central to his project of affirming God. Only the evidence of God in the form of divine chastisement, and the speaker’s
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desire for rebellion as a form of self-doubt, keep the speaker alive to God. For example, the speaker celebrates God’s ability to bring “down to hell/ And up to heaven in an hour” (Flower 1722). Evil and suffering are no longer tests for virtue as they are in Milton: Herbert makes human error the engine of the growth cycle towards God. For Herbert, human goodness becomes uncomfortably mixed with evil origins, until the virtuous man “On whom thy tempests fell all night” finally “cannot be/ That I am he”. In every story of human virtue, Herbert conveys that the beginning is a state of suffering ignorance. For Herbert, the struggle for divine beauty from that state encapsulates all of human beauty. Just as error is the seed of goodness in Herbert’s poetry, self-doubt is the seed of self-recognition as the drive for human development towards divine good (Burden 449).

As Milton highlights Jesus’ confidence against the unstable backdrop of war, Herbert highlights his speaker’s ephemerality against the stable backdrop of literary achievement as an allegory for humanity’s quest for God. The paradox “After so many deaths I live and write” communicates that loyalty to a particular way of life is subordinate to the individual’s constant reformulation of its own purpose (Flower 1722). Human goodness always demands that one “once more smell the dew and rain./ And relish versing”, where olfactory imagery of the subtle scent of water offers Herbert’s poetry as a written meditation on baptism and Christian life. The conclusion of written meditation is first “To make us see we are but flowers” in the sense that the eternity of art allows the individual to grasp the eternity of God, and then to realize “Who would be more,/ Swelling through store,/ Forfeit their Paradise” in the sense that aesthetic experience is but a shadow of God’s unbounded greatness and can be ruined by worshipping beauty over divinity. Herbert believes that an individual should not be set and satisfied in its way of life because, even in art, the conceptual purity of Jesus and Satan is unattainable until the afterlife, a crucial distinction from Milton who believes that an individual should already embody the loyalty of Jesus as the better of idealized goodness and idealized evil (Miller-Blaise n.p.).
Herbert’s poem *Church Monuments* also elucidates the point that aesthetic experience in literary achievement is secondary to divine experience. The poem consists of six sentences, with a tonal shift at the end of the third phrase, from the speaker’s relief at the prospect of death to the speaker’s self-exhortation to pursue ethical Christian life. In the first part of the poem, Herbert puns on literature and life when his speaker describes the cemetery as the place “To spell his elements and find his birth/ Written in dusty heraldry and lines” (Church 1712). Herbert’s speaker presents ironic skepticism about the sufficiency of earthly life for human aspiration. In the second part of the poem, Herbert’s speaker despises the eternity of art, referred to as “all our time, which also shall/ Be crumbled into dust”, as a resting place for human aspiration. The eternity promised by sexual reproduction collapses before the eternity promised by art, which in turn collapses before the eternity promised by God.

At this point, Milton’s image of Satan as the evil homunculus has translated to Herbert’s need to rebel against God’s provision of human suffering, and Milton’s image of Jesus as the good homunculus has translated to Herbert’s need to grow towards God through constant questioning of the self. This translation moves between Milton’s vision of faith as a soldier’s loyalty during war and Herbert’s vision of faith as the transition of literary seeking into divine eternity. But the translation is imperfect. Milton commits a symbolic fallacy, through his representation of good and evil as Jesus and Satan, when his depiction of the interactions between original man, Jesus, and Satan does not reflect the actual position of humanity, goodness, and evil. Here, Herbert stands as a near-contemporary reference for the spiritual quandaries faced by Milton’s society and its preceding generation.

Examining the symbolic fallacy, Milton depicts Satan and Jesus as homunculi by giving both an advisory role for original man’s proper relationship to God, to conclude that the reason for humanity to be good in the present time is because Jesus’ intervention for original man triumphs over Satan’s intervention for original man. As Satan enters Eden in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton reiterates the spontaneity of evil, “Fierce hate he recollects”, and its absolute faithlessness,
“all pleasure to destroy/ Save what is in destroying” (Milton 2101). These qualities of spontaneity and determination serve as the tenor of Milton’s extended metaphors, employing the serpent, classical mythology, and Petrarchan love as equivalent vehicles for the nature of evil (Lewalski 111). Thus, Milton first calls attention to Satan as a vehicle for evil by making the serpent the vehicle for Satan, where each is in some sense an “inmate bad” for a more fundamental version of evil (Milton 2102). Since the vehicle within a vehicle is highly unstable and contrived, Milton refers Ovid’s “Illyria changed” and Virgil’s “height of Rome” to find literary support for the doubled vehicle, where animals carry gods and gods carry love. At the same time, he criticizes polytheism and anthropomorphism of the divine as immoral on Christian terms. In a similar vein, Satan’s address to Eve puts the serpent in the background and instead uses Petrarchan literary conventions as a double vehicle for Satan and evil. Satan’s “gaze/ insatiate” and “ravishment” by the beauty of Eve embodies evil as unfriendly, unnaturally intense love.

While Milton does approach Herbert’s complexity by depicting the morphosis of evil throughout various extended metaphors, he always presents deviation from God’s providence as an abstraction to be loaded onto a vehicle rather than unpacking it into the heart of humanity. In this context, Satan’s direct advice to Eve in his “proem” turns his capacity as the bad homunculus into another vehicle for evil (Milton 2103). Even as Milton recounts that Satan “Into her heart too easy entrance won”, the linkage of evil to a vehicle impedes a clear formulation of evil as it functions in human phenomenology (2107). As Satan “back to the thicket slunk”, evil carried by the vehicle of the bad homunculus is ultimately external to humanity (2108).

Milton’s imprisonment in the world of abstraction continues from Satan to Jesus, even when the advisory role is positive. In Book 11 of *Paradise Lost*, Jesus negotiates the redemption of humanity by offering himself as a sacrifice in exchange for humanity’s return to heaven. Jesus’ speech operates on three rhetorical levels, at once addressing God, Adam, and Milton’s audience. The moment Jesus points out “contrition in [Adam’s] heart” and “all [Adam’s] works” in the presence of Adam as an argument for God to redeem humanity at death, Jesus binds humanity to
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good works and good faith as preconditions for redemption (Milton 2141). Furthermore, these preconditions of redemption become normative prescriptions for Milton’s audience, casting Jesus in the role of good homunculus from original man to contemporary man. Jesus concludes his address to God by reinforcing his capacity as the intermediate link between humanity and God, with the result that Adam is “Made one with me as I with thee am one” (2142). While Milton believes that his formulation of Jesus’ advice as preconditions for the redemption of humanity has elevated the good homunculus over the bad homunculus as a model for human behavior, the critical reader remains uncomfortably conscious of Milton’s inability to free good and evil from their homunculi vehicles.

Reexamining the symbolic fallacy, a consideration of Herbert suggests that Milton’s myth of the homunculi was already obsolete at the time of invention (Vendler 22). In the poem Affliction, Herbert suggests that humanity will have to accept the ambiguity of faith and faithlessness as necessary to God’s vision of life. The poem follows a speaker as he ages from youth to maturity, as “with my years sorrow did twist and grow” (Affliction 1710). Herbert sets up equivalence between the degree of suffering encountered by the individual and the increasing need for metaphysical comfort. As suffering outstrips divine explanation, the speaker explodes with indecision and frustration at God’s “not making/ Thine own gift good, yet me from my ways taking” (1711). Once again, the poem’s affliction seems to be the tendency to fault God’s allocation of suffering to humanity. Yet by the end of the poem, the speaker’s self-doubt is not a turning away from God, as it would be under Milton’s equation of confidence with loyalty, but a tortuous search for greater conviction through the paradoxical demand “Let me not love thee, if I love thee not”. Milton’s homunculi, giving good and bad advice to humanity, come across as unconscionably blunt compared to Herbert’s appreciation of self-doubt as a pious condition. In the poem Prayer, Herbert likewise implies that continued yearning for God through the chasm of ambiguity resuscitates the relationship between God and the believer. The poem is an English sonnet with three quatrains listing biblical allusions and Christian imagery, and a final couplet
summarizing the function of prayer. Among the allusions is the dual reference to the fall of Satan and the dispersal of the tower of Babylon as “Engine against th’ Almighty, sinner’s tower”, framing rebellion against God as part of the individual’s search for God (Prayer 1711). Far from listing pious acts or providing doctrine, Herbert simply concludes that prayer affords the individual an intimate closeness to God such that the individual finds “something understood”.

In sum, Milton gives an account of evil as spontaneous generation from corrupted creation and of good as confident affirmation of God; Herbert gives an account of evil as misjudgments about human suffering and of good as spiritual growth through self-doubt. Each writer’s artistic vision champions an idiosyncratic conception of the metaphysical world, where Milton’s vision observes a continuing battle between good and evil, and Herbert’s vision observes the diminution of reproductive and artistic eternities in the face of divine eternity. Herbert’s vision is superior to Milton’s vision because Herbert’s account of good and evil allows his speakers to engage in a direct struggle of faith with their inner soul, while Milton’s account of good and evil is always limited to externalized vehicles epitomized by Satan the bad homunculus and Jesus the good homunculus. This interpretation condemns much more than Milton and his masterpiece. It doubts the artistic validity of Dionysius’ theory of *imitatio* as an improvement on Aristotle’s theory of *mimesis*. While Milton splits his efforts between *imitatio* of the classical epic tradition and *mimesis* of contemporary spiritual struggles, Herbert pursues *mimesis* of his own spiritual doubts without the slightest consideration of publication and how his poetry might hold up to literary critics who judge by the standards of yesterday. Even with Milton’s literary skill, *imitatio* acts as a surrogate for artistic originality and a backdoor for obsolete metaphysical formulations, covering his voice before he has even begun to speak. What then is the proper technique? The perfect picture requires perfect exposure—let light burn beauty in the poor poet’s pride!
Bibliography

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