BETWEEN WORLDS

The Rhetorical Universe of *Paradise Lost*

WILLIAM PALLISTER

Winner of the 2008 Modern Language Association Prize for Independent Scholars

'Pallister surpasses the work of his predecessors by carefully categorizing and detailing the various styles of the poem according to character, setting, and the degree of contingency in play ... Miltonists will value the thoroughness and command of detail Pallister brings to the study of Milton's rhetoric and style. This is a persuasive book about persuasion.'

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BETWEEN WORLDS:
THE RHETORICAL UNIVERSE OF PARADISE LOST

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* has long been celebrated for its epic subject matter and the poet's rhetorical fireworks. In *Between Worlds*, William Pallister analyses the rhetorical methods that Milton uses throughout the poem and examines the effects of the three distinct rhetorical registers observed in each of the poem's major settings: Heaven, Hell, and Paradise.

Providing insights into Milton's relationship with the history of rhetoric as well as rhetorical conventions and traditions, this rigorous study shows how rhetorical forms are used to highlight and enhance some of the poem's most important themes including free will, contingency, and probability. Pallister also provides an authoritative discussion of how the omniscience of God in *Paradise Lost* affects Milton's verse, and considers how God's speech applies to the concept of the perfect rhetorician.

An erudite and detailed study of both *Paradise Lost* and the history of rhetoric, *Between Worlds* is essential reading that will help to unravel many of the complexities of Milton's enduring masterpiece.

WILLIAM PALLISTER has a PhD from the University of London.

Acknowledgments

Sir Francis Bacon wrote that fortune is like the market, where many times, if you can stay a little, the price will fall. Without Lohren Green, who saw to it that I was able to stay long enough at a critical time, Fortune wouldn't have permitted me to finish this book. I also thank Ron Bond and Jill Kraye and gratefully acknowledge Shadi Bartsch for her wise counsel and cheerful support in the later stages of preparing the manuscript. Special thanks are due to John Baxter, whose remarks on Aristotle suggested one of the central themes of this project. My greatest debt is to my parents, and I dedicate this book to them.

Notes on the Text

Translations of classical works in this study are by other hands, with occasional slight changes to translations from Latin where the meaning of a technical term has been obscured or where I wish to highlight an alternative meaning. Neo-Latin translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own; the original Latin for these translations, with the exception of the epigraph to chapter 3 and quotations from Avitus in chapter 7, may be found in the endnotes. I have expanded Latin scribal abbreviations and removed accent marks. Milton's Latin prose is quoted from the English translations of the Yale *Complete Prose Works*, with occasional references to the Latin text from the Columbia *Works*. In quoting from English Renaissance texts, I have normalized spelling, changing *i*s to *j*s and *u*s to *v*s (and vice versa). *CWE* stands for *The Collected Works of Erasmus*; *PL* for *Paradise Lost*; *PR* for *Paradise Regained*; *ELLMA* for *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*. No other abbreviations are used.

Contents

BETWEEN WORLDS: THE RHETORICAL UNIVERSE OF *PARADISE LOST*

Introduction

In January of 49 BC Julius Caesar, enacting one of the most famous events in history, crosses the Rubicon, a violation of senatorial decree that precipitates the series of events leading to the battle of Pharsalus and the extinction of the Roman republic. Once on the river's south bank, Caesar as portrayed in Lucan's *Bellum Civile* delivers one of the poem's many apostrophes: 'Here I abandon peace and desecrated law; / Fortune, it is you I follow' (I. 225–6). Caesar rises in Fortune's favour as Pompey falls, pressing on to military victory and imperial power (Fortune eventually abandons him, as she does all her followers, five years later on one of the most famous dates in history, which Lucan did not live long enough to write about). Impersonal forces, not the gods or the wills of men, dispose Lucan's universe: either immovable Fate or random Chance seems to control earthly affairs (II. 9–13); Fortune wreaks havoc at Pharsalus while Fate rushes on (VII. 504–5); Fortune at length reduces Pompey, having formerly supported him (VIII. 21–3, 701–8). Here the future is trammelled by necessity, not shaped by the contingent play of alternative outcomes. Fortune, Fate, or Chance, or some combination thereof, denies free agency to human beings, cancels out autonomy and self-assertion, hinders the will of even the most driven and able of men to achieve their aims independently. Similar forces influence human affairs in Greek epic. Agamemnon and Achilles fall prey to Até, the state of mind leading to disaster, against which men are powerless. The modern judicial plea of temporary insanity – I didn't know what I was doing – contains a trace of this old idea. Judges sometimes believe it, just as Achilles believes Agamemnon's declaration that Até had impelled him to steal Briseis.

Are human actions committed freely? The Greek concept of human

destiny gradually became more self-deterministic, culminating in Heraclitus's maxim, 'Man's character is his daemon' – that is, man's character, over which he has some control, determines his personal destiny, not the external and often capricious powers at work in Lucan or Homer. Yet the Stoics later acknowledged the efficacy of those powers and urged resignation to their ineluctable currents: 'Everything is fitting for me, my Universe, which fits thy purpose,' writes Marcus Aurelius. Examples from all periods, arguing both sides, determinism and voluntarism, could be endlessly multiplied. But these arguments are better comprehended subjectively, by reflecting on your own approach to the perennial questions they attempt to answer. Consider the matter, as everyone has, whether you believe your station in life, your portion of happiness, your day-to-day actions, and the management of your affairs lie within your own power to direct and determine, or whether those things are influenced to any degree, even settled, by some inscrutable power, be it God, Fortune, or Fate. Is there a divinity (or other force) that shapes your ends, rough-hew them how you will? Or is it in yourself that you are thus or thus? The question of personal agency, including whether the future is necessary or contingent, is central to the concept of rhetoric and to the rhetorical reading of *Paradise Lost* that occupies this book.

Milton admired Lucan for his politics, not his theology; the divine machinery of epic that Lucan discarded and replaced with Fortune, Chance, and Fate is of course reintroduced in *Paradise Lost*. God presides once again over the epic scene, and His relationship to narrative events as they unfold differs distinctly from that of the pagan forces that control human life in *Bellum Civile*. Pagan determinism gives way to Christian voluntarism, free will being an essential condition of human existence within Milton's theodicy. The presence and attributes of God are the most critical determinants of future contingency in *Paradise Lost*; therefore, they also bear directly on the nature of rhetoric, which is conventionally bound up with the properties of contingent statements and events. It was a first principle of classical and Renaissance rhetoric that persuasive arguments were based on probability, with no claim to be absolutely true or correct at all times, and that the decisions that those statements prompted an audience to make could have been made differently – future contingency meant that another choice or course of action was almost always open for consideration. This freedom to weigh the relative merits of an argument and to act accordingly was the essence of rhetorical persuasion

as it was conceived from its earliest beginnings down to the seventeenth century.

In light of future contingency, which I judge to be the central rhetorical issue of *Paradise Lost*, I interpret Milton's epic as comprising three discrete rhetorics, one for each of heaven, hell, and the Garden of Eden. The division is called for because in Milton's epic cosmos, the expansion of the rhetorical arena to heaven and hell, especially the inclusion of God in the poem's *dramatis personae*, complicates the standard rhetorical model predicated on contingency and probability. Questions arise concerning the omniscience of Milton's God and the implications of a providentially disposed universe. Does God's foreknowledge of events mean that they must necessarily come to pass, regardless of what other characters say and do? To what extent does providence, whereby all things happen according to God's plan, restrict the contingent outcome of decisions and actions? A normative conception of rhetoric does not account for divine foreknowledge or the certain fulfilment of Christian providence, or for situations in which supernatural characters, from heaven and hell, visit earth and speak to its human inhabitants. These circumstances exert different effects on the rhetorics of heaven, hell, and Eden; the main result is that the degree of future contingency varies from one plane of reality to another, and so, therefore, does the nature of rhetoric, which depends so much on the existence of possibility and uncertainty in order to accommodate persuasion and be genuinely 'rhetorical.'

The title of this book recalls the flight of the angel Raphael, who, charged with warning man of the impending crisis, 'Sails between worlds and worlds' (V. 268) on his journey to Paradise, a journey that mirrors the course to be taken in the following pages. We too will travel, with a rhetorical eye, between the worlds of *Paradise Lost*, between heaven, hell, and the Garden of Eden, noticing how Raphael and his fellow travellers negotiate that same journey as users of rhetoric. This course will also shuttle us between the worlds of Greece, Rome, and Renaissance Europe, as well as the spheres of history (secular and Christian), moral philosophy, politics, theology, biblical hermeneutics and homiletic theory, poetics, and, finally, poetry and rhetoric, the book's two main subjects. Rhetoric is aptly suited for conducting such a tour; according to a long-standing objection, it has, so to speak, no fixed address. Taught by the itinerant sophists of ancient Greece, rhetoric is inherently portable, having neither a rational account of what it is (at least before Aristotle) nor an ontological grounding in what is true or

good. It deals with opinion, not knowledge, values expediency, not justice, strives for victory, not demonstration. By the time of rhetoric's revival, however, fully under way in the fifteenth century, these qualities were considered either positive virtues or, if defects, ones that could be reformed with a due leavening of ethics: an eloquent man must be a good man, ran the standard theory. Moreover, rhetoric had found a home in the Renaissance arts curriculum and regained its high stature in both education and public life. Its days of wandering were over.

By the time Milton returned to poetry in earnest after a long hiatus of writing polemical prose, the identity that had been defined for rhetoric since approximately Petrarch's time was changing in a number of ways. The undifferentiated body of knowledge that rhetoric (and grammar) had subsumed or bordered on during the Renaissance was becoming compartmentalized during the seventeenth century, divided into specialized subjects. Rhetoric remained influential, for by it all subjects were bodied forth in words. It was itself, however, caught between worlds. It continued to figure significantly in English political argumentation during the upheavals from the 1620s to the post-Restoration period, but its role as a discipline implicated in the discovery of knowledge changed with the advent of the New Science, and it attracted particular interest for its long-acknowledged powers of moving the emotions and influencing the will. For Milton, rhetoric retained in full measure the universal importance accorded it by Renaissance humanists, who established it as an ethical and political instrument as well as the cornerstone of the cultural and literary pursuits that formed the chief areas of humanistic interest. Milton has been called 'the last great exponent of humanism in its historical continuity,'[1] and insofar as his allegiance to rhetoric is concerned, the designation is an appropriate one. He learned it as a student, later would have taught it as a tutor, practised it expertly – contemporaries acknowledged the vigour of his Latin prose – and explored it thematically throughout his literary career.

Rhetoric, in the technical tradition,[2] is the art of speaking or writing in order to persuade a given audience, based on a model of composition that unifies all the material of an argument: *inventio* finds what is to be said; *dispositio* organizes it; *elocutio* determines the proper words with which to express the subject; lastly, in the case of a spoken oration, there is *memoria*, or memory, and *actio*, the tones and gestures of delivery. During the Middle Ages, a myopic concentration on *elocutio*, particularly the tropes and figures, had stripped rhetoric of its characteristic persuasive capability, which was not revived until the Renaissance.[3] As

handed down from both Latin and Greek classical sources, rhetoric claimed eminence during the Renaissance partly from its central position in the curriculum of European humanists, the *studia humanitatis*, which comprised the linguistic arts of grammar, rhetoric, and poetry, as well as history and moral philosophy and later other areas of philosophy and the various sciences.[4] The cultural and educational priorities of humanism ensured that rhetoric was substantially a literary enterprise, concerned with the language of expressing ideas at least as much as the ideas themselves. This engagement with form meant that lettered men of the time were preoccupied with the ideal of eloquence, defined by the sixteenth-century French educator Peter Ramus (echoing the Roman rhetorician Quintilian) as 'the power of expressing oneself well' (*vis est bene dicendi*).[5] Eloquence was more than fluency in style, however much, as we shall see, style held a key place in humanist rhetoric. It was, in its true pursuit, a harmonious union between wisdom and style, with an emphasis on persuasion that often stressed the efficacy of moving the emotions. The art of rhetoric, replete with precepts to guide literary composition at all stages, constituted the methodological infrastructure of eloquence. It is this status as the technical machinery of eloquence in all its forms, from letters to historical and philosophical treatises, that allowed rhetoric to play a major role in the development of Renaissance culture. Of all the disciplines to which rhetoric imparted form and a consciousness of expressive intention, none was more closely connected with it, virtually since the inception of both arts, than poetry.

'Poetry has a history; ideas-in-poetry (which are not the same as ideas) have a history too; and the historian's task is a delicate and creative one.'[6] Frank Kermode raises a provocative question: why are 'ideas-in-poetry' not the same as ideas? Stanley Fish has recently explained this distinction by way of criticizing the historicist trend in Milton studies. Ideas-in-poetry (he does not use Kermode's term) need to be discussed in relation to the poetic form that expresses them, always in consideration of what the poem is intended to do. He judges this consideration to be absent from some of the best contemporary Milton scholarship, which often wrenches ideas out of their local context '-in-poetry' – the context that gives them meaning and significance – and discusses them in isolation simply as 'ideas,' forgetting or ignoring that Milton the poet pressed those ideas into service as part of a specific poetic (not political or historical) agenda. In order to perform the historian's task effectively, 'you have to attend to the specificity of the discourse that has solicited your attention, and that means attending to its

history, not to history in general (there is no such thing) but to the history of a form'; consequently, the history 'appropriate to the description and evaluation of literary works ... is the history of literary forms.' With form as a touchstone for critical inquiry, it is evident that 'historical and political matters matter chiefly as the material of an aesthetic achievement. Describing and evaluating that achievement, which while it is often inconceivable apart from historical and political concerns cannot be identified with them, is the proper business of literary criticism.'[7]

One of rhetoric's virtues as a method of critical inquiry is that it *is* the material of an aesthetic achievement. Its very nature is form, and as such it keeps critical attention tightly focused there. Rhetoric's inherent association with form makes it the ultimate idea-in-poetry; it has always been valued as an instrument of both composition and criticism, a means both of making a text, as the material of an aesthetic achievement, and of seeing how a text was made, describing and evaluating it in terms of its form. In studying rhetoric, the critic examines the formal constituents of the literary artefact – the bricks and mortar of which the cathedral is made, to borrow from C.S. Lewis's famous opening sentence, which Fish cites in his injunction to a realigned critical approach. Lewis is similarly concerned with the history of literary forms. Having stated that 'every poem can be considered in two ways – as what the poet has to say, and as a *thing* which he *makes*,' he directs himself to the second consideration.[8] This book will proceed along similar lines, turning to rhetoric for the insights it provides into the making of a poem written at a particular time, for a particular audience, under a particular set of laws and conventions. Poetry has a history. Its conventions are of material interest, as Quentin Skinner reminds us: 'We need to focus not merely on the particular text in which we are interested but on the prevailing conventions governing the treatment of the issues or themes with which the text is concerned.'[9] Rhetoric is one of a number of prevailing conventions, formal and otherwise, that governs Milton's treatment of themes in *Paradise Lost* (what the poet has to say) and also the process of composing the poem (the thing which he makes). As an essay on the history of literary forms, the present study will consider *Paradise Lost* in both ways, but it will stress the application of rhetoric to evaluating the poem's formal elements, especially those that individuate the discourses of heaven, hell, and Paradise.

A history of literary forms presupposes a historical context in which we may interpret form. Establishing that context puts us in touch with the rhetorical tradition behind *Paradise Lost*, acquaints us with the mate-