No Reason for *Paradise Lost*

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Reason is murkily defined in *Paradise Lost*. While this lack of definition allows scholars to interpret the poem multiple ways, it also suggests that despite expecting other characters to be reasonable, those expectations themselves seem unreasonable. Godly "reasoning" is too confusing to have been applied properly by Adam and Eve.

Refusing to reason according to God's mandate is believed by several prominent scholars to be the cause of the fall. Northrop Frye, a particularly notorious one, argues that by choosing "appetite" over "reason," man fell. In his essay "Children of God and Nature," "an appetite... perverted into passion" (Frye, 463) is what defines the postlapsarian world. Recalling Milton's *Prolusions*, Frye notes that the "soul of man, as God originally created it" was a "hierarchy" of "three main levels: the reason, which is in control of the soul; the will, the agent carrying out the decrees of reason, and the appetite" (Frye, 458). But after the fall, "appetite moves into the top place in the human soul, and by doing so... ceases to be appetite and is transformed into passion" (Frye, 463). Unlike the "freedom" of the reason that had governed before, in postlapsarian society passion acts as a "tyrant of the mind" (Frye, 464). According to Frye, this passion manifests internally as greed and externally as lust. Thus a perverted appetite, manifest as passion, is shown to be the progenitor of the world's vices.

In the poem, much support can be found for Frye's argument. After consuming the forbidden fruit and engaging in carnal activity, Adam and Eve cry, and Milton writes: "For Understanding ruled not, and the Will/ Heard not her lore; both in subjection now/ To sensual Appetite, who from beneath/ Usurping over sovran Reason claimed/ Superiour sway" (IX.1127-1130). Here appetite is definitely shown to have replaced reason as ruler of the will. When Michael tells God of the trespass, he states similarly: "Their Maker's image... then/ Forsook

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them, when themselves they vilified/ To serve ungoverned Appetite" (XI.516) and "Disfiguring not God's likeness, but their own;/ Or if his likeness, by themselves defaced;/ While they pervert pure Nature's healthful rules/ To loathsome sickness; worthily, since they/ God's image did not reverence in themselves" (XI.525). Since these two statements ought to agree, it seems that we should conclude that God's image only holds when reason, not appetite, reigns supreme. God's likeness *is* reason. And by emulating reason, man epitomizes God's image and differentiates himself from beasts, as Raphael explains to Adam: "Love refines/ The thoughts, and heart enlarges; hath his seat/ In reason, and is judicious; is the scale/ By which to heavenly love thou mayest ascend,/ Not sunk in carnal pleasure; for which cause,/ Among the beasts no mate for thee was found" (VIII.589-594). To ascend to heavenly love, therefore, one must use primarily one's faculty of reason.

A problem arises, however, when we consider how man actually chooses "appetite" over "reason." The original crime of eating the forbidden fruit can definitely be seen as an apotheosis of appetite, which according to Frye, manifests externally as lust and internally as greed. Eve greedily perceives the fruit before consuming it: "Mean while the hour of noon drew on, and waked/ An eager appetite, raised by the smell/ So savoury of that fruit, which with desire,/ Inclinable now grown to touch or taste,/ Solicited her longing eye" (IX.740-743). Adam lustfully eats the fruit: "She gave him of that fair enticing fruit/ With liberal hand: he scrupled not to eat,/ Against his better knowledge; not deceived,/ But fondly overcome with female charm" (IX.996-999). These two incidences support Frye's idea that appetite triumphed over reason at the moment the fruit was consumed.

Despite these points in Frye's favor, however, the faculty that cemented the eating of the fruit was not in fact appetite, but ironically, an internal sense of reason. Even though the fruit

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solicits Eve's eye, Eve does not act on that soliticitation: "Yet first/ Pausing a while thus to herself she mused" (IX.743-744). Eve would not have "mused" if she had behaved according to appetite alone. The musing, in fact, recalls Eve's reasoning faculty. And at the crucial moment in which she picks the fruit, she says to herself "What hinders then/ To reach and feed at once both body and mind?" (IX.778-789). If she was feeding strictly her body, this would constitute greed, as in an overpowering appetite. Since she feeds her mind as well, however, she clearly thinks that eating the fruit will somehow increase her reasoning faculty. Initially, Eve actually even rejects Satan's suggestion to eat the fruit by saying, "our reason is our law" (IX.654). She only eats the fruit because "yet rung in her ear" "his persuasive words impregned/ With reason (to her seeming) and with truth" (IX. 737-738). So it is reason, at least "to her seeming," not appetite, that makes her eat the fruit. The same goes for Adam: although he is deceived by "female charm," he does not know that he is being deceived. Right before he eats the fruit, he makes a long speech to himself rationalizing his own behavior in much the same way Eve rationalized hers. Only in these incidences, the reasoning believed is not God's, but Satan's.

Since "reason" was previously defined to only be a Godly virtue, it might be argued that any reasoning that is not God's own is not a valid form of reasoning. After all, Milton does state that the devils like to use "words clothed in reason's garb" (II.224). This example describes Belial, but can be applied to all the devils, all of whom make elegant speeches in hell in Book II. Milton even goes so far to say that some of the devils "apart sat on a hill retired,/ In thoughts more elvate, and reasoned high/ Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate" (II.557-560). Even though they "found no end, in wandering mazes lost" (II.561) and ultimately engage in "false philosophy" (II.562), the use of the word "reason" here implies that though that no matter how false the thoughts are, for these devils those thoughts still comprise a form of reasoning and

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seem reasonable. When musing to *himself* as he spies on Adam and Eve, Satan mutters that "Knowledge forbidden" (IV.515) is "Suspicous, reasonless (IV.516)." Here God's mandate itself is accused of being unreasonable by Satan. So to Satan and all the other devils, their own method of reasoning seems more valid than God's.

The question this evokes seems to be this: Which form of reasoning is actually valid? Milton would have us believe that clearly, God's reasoning is, because God's reason is reason itself, the rightful government of his own image. God's version of reason is reason, just because God is superior to all the beings he has created, including in reason. Therefore, if God says that something is reasonable, then it must be. But this idea of an absolute type of reasoning that beats an inferior type contradicts the definition of reason given in this speech from God: "What pleasure I from such obedience paid,/ When will and reason (reason also is choice)/ Useless and vain, of freedom both despoil'd,/ Made passive both, had serv'd necessity,/ Not me" (III.107-111) Here reason is a choice, as Milton expands upon in *Areopagitica*: "When God gave him reason God gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing" (354). If reason is the ability to choose, then this implies Frye's argument: that instead of choosing to follow God, man chose to follow Satan; instead of choosing reason as his king, man chooses appetite. But if freedom to choose (reason) is the choice itself (reason), it seems that for Adam and Eve to have remained in the Garden of Eden, their only choice would have been to constantly have the choice of eating the fruit but deciding not eat it. The minute they enact their freedom to choose, they no longer have a choice. Does this not imply then that freedom to choose is merely a construct and not real freedom? Because clearly, once one actually acts on the freedom by choosing, one can choose no more. Thus "reason," as a means and/or an end to freedom of choice, seems paradoxical, almost to the point of being entirely illogical. While one has the freedom to choose between choice A

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and choice B, choice A is always absolutely better. So why would anyone choose B, knowing that A is always right? This does not really seem to be a "choice."

Adam and Eve, however, somehow manage to choose B. But it is not because they are unreasonable; as we have seen, they "reasoned" their way to choice B. Milton hopes to show that by doing this, Satanic reasoning, which compelled them to choose B, clearly is inferior to Godly reasoning and common sense, which would have chosen choice A, every time. But are we really to agree with Milton here? Why does God put choice B up for choosing when God clearly knows that choice A will always be preferable? Milton suggests in *Areopagitica* that choice B exists solely to make choice A seem like a choice:

> If every action, which is good or evil in man... were to be under pittance and prescription and compulsion, what were virtue but a name...? ... We ourselves esteem not of that obedience, or love, or gift, which is of force: God therefore left him fre, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes; herein consisted his merit, herein the right of his reward, the praise of his abstinence. Wherefore did he create passions within us, pleasures round about us, but that these rightly tempered are the very ingredients of virtue?
>
> This justifies the high providence of God, who, though he command us temperance, justice, contenence, yet pours out before us, even to a profuseness, all desirable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety... It would be better done, to lear nthat the law must needs be frivolous, which goes to restrain things, uncertainly and yet equally working to good and to evil. And were I the chooser,a dram of well-doing should be referred before many times as much teh forcible hindrance of evil-doing.

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Although convincing, this treatise does not mollify the logical problems in *Paradise Lost* mainly because before eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve do not know what "evil" is, so they cannot with full consciousness and awareness "choose" it over "good." It is of course possible that Adam and Eve had the trappings of "evil" already inside

them: Eve is self-absorbed the minute she wakes, "[pining] with vain desire" (IV.466) her own face. Adam is lascivious from the very beginning when he says of Eve that "Authority and Reason on her wait" (VIII.554). To an extent Raphael sets Adam straight by warning him of "carnal pleasure" (VIII.593) and Adam sets Eve straight by warning her how because of her "many lesser faculties" (V.101), "Fancy wakes/ to imitate [Reason]" (V.110). But prior to eating the fruit, both of them, though knowing nominally that evil is not good, know not what evil actually is. When Adam decides to eat the fruit, both in his thoughts and in his words to Eve he does not even mention "evil" at all. Evil simply does not participate in his decision to eat. In fact, Adam rues Eve, referring to her in his thoughts as "Holy, divine, good, amiable... sweet!" (IX.899) Only Eve, who has already eaten the fruit, mentions "evil," by referring to her act as a "guilt" and a "crime" (IX.971) and using a synonym of evil, "pernicious" (IX.981). On the other hand, Adam sees only a "cursèd fraud" (IX.904) and a "strict forbiddance" (IX.904). We can see as such that Adam is aware only of a logical trickery and a violation of God's mandate, but not of the moral import of the act. Adam, at this point having no knowledge truly of good or evil, is not yet a "moral" being. So even if Satanic reasoning is not "real" reasoning and only a cover for an "evil" or at least undesirable appetite consisting of greed or lust, Adam would have no way of knowing that, because Adam is not able to experience either characteristic.

It appears that this lack of moral being may still import the loss of reason in this scene because Adam's greatest mistake could be that he thinks he has no freedom to choose when he does. By saying, "How can I live without thee" (IX.909) Adam seems to have already lost his reason since evidently, he can live without Eve (in fact, because of her, he died). But still, Adam is not aware of his choice in this situation. While one can say that Adam allows himself to be unaware by succumbing to Eve's "female charm," the fact that Adam does not know that it is

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"female charm" is worrisome because it implies that God did not do a good job of explaining where love ends and female charm begins. While Adam could well be falling for how physically attractive Eve is, Adam is unaware that he is doing so, attributing his fealty to her to his "heart" (IX.913) and his "love" (IX.909). Of course, he also cites the "link of nature" and "flesh of flesh,/ Bone of my bone" (IX.913-914). But is this so different from what Raphael tells him of the love among angels? Raphael says: "Us happy and without love no happiness./ Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy'st/ ... we enjoy/ In eminence and obstacle find none/ Of membrane, joint or limb, exclusive bars./ Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace,/ Total they mix, union of pure with pure/ Desiring, nor restrained conveyance need/ As flesh to mix with flesh or soul with soul" (VIII.621-629). Adam could easily have reasoned that his love was enough for him to remain with Eve, for an angel himself has told Adam that "without love" there is "no happiness." And the threat of death, a physical threat, becomes only an "obstacle" to his "union of pure and pure." Only in retrospect does it seem that Adam is listening to his appetite, not his reason.

Even if Adam is wrong about this "union of pure and pure" because he conflates lust with love, God never actually equips Adam to conceive of anything, other than what is physical and immediate, as spiritual. Though Adam chides Eve for listening to her "fancy" in a dream, Adam himself knows God only as a physical presence in a dream: "When sudenly stood at my head a dream/ Whose inward apparition gently moved/ My fancy to believe I yet had being/ And lived. One came, methought of shape divine" (VIII.292-295). This "shape divine" "by the Hand... took" (VIII.300) Adam, who later falls "at His feet" (VIII.315). And of course, God is a Voice. The physicality of God as a "Presence Divine" (VIII.313) reinforces the *physicality* of what is divine. The interplay between Adam's and Eve's hands is almost foreshadowed by God taking Adam's hand. In contrast, when Adam inquires of Raphael the motions of the celestial spheres,

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which are out of his physical reach, Raphael states, “From man or angel the Great Architect/ Did wisely to conceal and not divulge/ His secrets to be scanned by them who ought/ Rather admire” (VIII.72-75), thus shutting him down. Given Adam’s limited capacity to envision, it is no surprise that, like the reader, he may be confused about what reason is and what it means to choose it. Eve is in an even worse position because she is “invisibly thus led” (IV.476) by God, and seems nothing of him but a “Voice” (IV.468). Satan, on the other hand, appeals to all her senses by appearing to her in a dream, then by directly speaking to her as a Serpent. God never grants Eve his physical “Presence Divine,” while Satan does.

Ironically, because of these lacks in both Adam and Eve’s reasoning capacity, the Tree of Knowledge does actually solve the problem. Only after knowing evil can one know good, in its entirety. So the fall may be fortunate, and it may have made Adam and Eve real people. But the Fall is not reasonable. Man did not choose appetite over reason when he fell. He did not recognize at the time he ate that he reasoned incorrectly. He did not know what it even meant to “reason.” Because of these factors, I would not hold man accountable for his own fall. Rather, I hold God accountable for not letting man have the three drops of ambrosia before it was too late, for not granting a dream in which evil was truly felt, in which appetite truly reigned, before evil and appetite, unbeknownst to either Eve and Adam, presented themselves as reasonable choices. And they chose, quite reasonably.

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