

Vergil's Nisus and the Language of Self-Sacrifice in *Paradise Lost*

LEAH WHITTINGTON

Princeton University

When the Son of God offers to die for mankind in book 3 of *Paradise Lost* (1667), readers who have been tempted to join the devil's party for the first two books of the poem confront an unsettling dramatic scene: the assembly in heaven is staged as a mirror image of the demonic council at Pandemonium. The listening host suddenly grows quiet, and a solitary hero figure emerges out of the silence to take on the burden of raising the collective fortune. Placed beside the Son's promise to atone for man's sin with his death, Satan's exploratory mission to earth comes into focus as a fallen reflection of self-sacrifice, a self-aggrandizing perversion of the poem's heroic ideal now articulated in the Son.

This moment of internal self-reference has often been identified as part of Milton's didactic strategy to confront the reader with proof of his own fallenness,¹ but it is less often recognized that the Son's speech to the angelic host makes use of an allusion that gives it a central place in the story of Milton's engagement with classical epic.² When the Son

1. See Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). Fish famously argues that the heroic portrayal of Satan is part of a larger narrative strategy by which Milton provokes the reader "with evidence of his corruption" and forces him "to refine his perceptions so that his understanding will be once more proportionable to truth" (xiii). Satan's perseverance and courage are never denied, but his virtue and goodness are, so the reader is led to reassess the nature of heroism and "to make finer and finer discriminations" as the poem unfolds (49). I would add that the process of discrimination does not proceed at a consistent pace but makes sudden leaps, as in the Son's speech of self-sacrifice in book 3.

2. Milton's relationship to the epic poems of antiquity continues to occupy an important place in studies of *Paradise Lost*. The standard book-length studies are Davis P. Harding, *The Club of Hercules: Studies in the Classical Background of "Paradise Lost"* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962); Francis C. Blessington, "*Paradise Lost*" and the Classical Epic (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); and Charles Martindale, *John Milton and the Transformation of Ancient Epic* (London: Croom Helm, 1986). Though not strictly focused on Milton's relationship to classical epic, Barbara Lewalski's "*Paradise Lost*" and the Rhetoric

supplicates God on man's behalf and offers to exchange his life for man's, he echoes the language of Vergil's Nisus, the Trojan youth who tries to save his friend Euryalus from the Rutulians in book 9 of the *Aeneid* by begging them to kill him instead:

Behold me then, me for him, life for life
 I offer, on me let thine anger fall;
 Account me man; I for his sake will leave
 Thy bosom, and this glory next to thee
 Freely put off, and for him lastly die
 Well pleased, on me let Death wreck all his rage;³

"me, me, adsum qui feci, in me conuertite ferrum,
 o Rutuli! mea fraus omnis, nihil iste nec ausus
 nec potuit; caelum hoc et conscia sidera testor;
 tantum infelicem nimium dilexit amicum."⁴

["Me—here I am, I did it! Turn your blades on me,
 Rutulians! The crime's all mine, he never dared,
 could never do it! I swear by the skies up there,

of *Literary Forms* (Princeton University Press, 1985) offers some of the most insightful observations on the subject, especially regarding Milton's use of classical genres. For Milton's idea of heroism considered in relation not only to classical poetry but also to the more contemporary works of Tasso and Spenser, see John M. Steadman, *Milton and the Renaissance Hero* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967). Among the shorter studies that focus on various aspects of Milton's reception of classical epic, see esp. Katherine Calloway, "Beyond Parody: Satan as Aeneas in *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Quarterly* 39 (2005): 82–92; K. W. Gransden, "Paradise Lost and the *Aeneid*," *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism* 17 (1967): 281–303; Martin Mueller, "Paradise Lost and the *Iliad*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 6 (1969): 292–316; Barbara Pavlock, "Milton's Criticism of Classical Epic in *Paradise Lost* 9," in *The Classical Heritage: Vergil*, ed. Craig Kallendorf (New York: Garland, 1993), 291–314; Michael C. J. Putnam, "The *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*: Ends and Conclusions," *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 8 (2006): 387–410; David Quint, "The Virgilian Coordinates of *Paradise Lost*," *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 52 (2004): 177–97; Janette Richardson, "Virgil and Milton Once Again," *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962): 321–31; Wolfgang E. H. Rudat, "Milton's Dido and Aeneas: The Fall in *Paradise Lost* and the Vergilian Tradition," *Classical and Modern Literature* 2 (1981): 33–46, and "Adam's and Eve's Oneness: *Paradise Lost* and Virgilian Allusion," *Milton Quarterly* 22 (1988): 120–26; Andre Verbart, "Milton on Vergil: Dido and Aeneas in *Paradise Lost*," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 78 (1997): 111–26. For a provocative contrary view that argues that Milton's debt to classical epic has been overstated, see William M. Porter, *Reading the Classics and "Paradise Lost"* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

3. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1998), 3.236–41, hereafter cited parenthetically as *PL*.

4. Vergil, *Aeneid*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 9.427–30, hereafter cited parenthetically as *Aen*.

the stars, they know it all! All he did was love
his unlucky friend too well!"⁵

The Son's allusion to Nisus's desperate repetition of "me, me" has appeared among the classical echoes listed in commentaries on *Paradise Lost* since the early eighteenth century, but interpretation has been slow to follow because the parallel seems so unlikely.⁶ Milton invites us to read the Son's voluntary self-sacrifice, the poem's central act of heroism, in conjunction with an episode of the *Aeneid* often described as a digression or epyllion.⁷ The story of Nisus and Euryalus does not appear to advance the cause of Aeneas and Rome and even puts pressure on the *Aeneid*'s governing ethical principles of *pietas* and the subordination of personal desire to the service of the community. But if Milton's allusion to the story of Nisus and Euryalus at this crucial moment in book 3 is surprising in itself, the issue is further complicated by the fact that the same Vergilian language resurfaces in two key passages of book 10, when Adam and Eve, struggling to make sense of life after the Fall, both invoke Nisus's repetition of "me, me" in their successive attempts to take on all the blame for the sin that now shrouds them in shame, resentment, and despair. Adam recalls the language first in a lyrical complaint delivered at the height of his dejection:

All my evasions vain
And reasonings, though through Mazes, lead me still
But to my own conviction: first and last
On me, me only, as the source and spring
Of all corruption, all the blame lights due;
So might the wrath.

(PL 10.829–34)

5. Translations are from Vergil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 2006).

6. Thomas Newton's 1749 edition of the poem, for example, remarks in the note to 3.236: "The frequent and vehement repetition of *me* here is very like that in Virgil, Aen. IX. 427. *Me, me: adsum qui feci: in me / convertite ferrum.*" The reference is often handed down by nineteenth-century editors under Newton's name and appears most recently in Alastair Fowler's 1998 Longman edition of the poem.

7. In his commentary on *Aeneid* 9, Philip Hardie argues against critics who try to dissociate the Nisus and Euryalus episode from the larger thematic concerns of the poem by relegating it to the status of a digression; Hardie prefers to see the use of generic elements from the neoteric epyllion (passionate emotion, self-conscious artistry) as part of Vergil's practice of giving "unity both to individual scenes and episodes in his epic and to the larger structure of which they form part" (Philip Hardie, ed., *Aeneid IX*, by Vergil [Cambridge University Press, 1994], 24–25). For a useful discussion of the features of the neoteric epyllion that appear in the night raid, see C. W. Mendell, "The Influence of the Epyllion on the *Aeneid*," *Yale Classical Studies* 12 (1951): 216–19.

Shortly after Adam's lament, Eve returns to the same Vergilian vocabulary of self-sacrifice when she attempts to placate Adam's anger by insisting that the responsibility for the Fall should lie entirely with her:

On me exercise not
 Thy hatred for this misery befallen,
 On me already lost, me than thyself
 More miserable; both have sinned but thou
 Against God only, I against God and thee,
 And to the place of judgment will return,
 There with my cries importune Heaven, that all
 The sentence from thy head removed may light
 On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe,
 Me me only just object of his ire.

(PL 10.927–36)

This constellation of allusion, which spans the entire narrative arc of *Paradise Lost* and helps to establish a figural relationship between Nisus, the Son, Adam, and Eve, has received sporadic attention from readers of the poem interested in the relationship between *Paradise Lost* and the *Aeneid*. Barbara Lewalski includes the Son's echo of Nisus in her discussion of topoi borrowed from the genres of epic and romance, observing that Milton appears to have had a special interest in "deeds of bravery and self-sacrifice inspired by erotic love and noble friendship."⁸ Lewalski also takes note of Eve's echo of the Son's Vergilian language but does not pursue the implications of the parallel or situate Adam within the larger allusive pattern. Barbara Pavlock registers the verbal link between Eve and the Son, arguing that "Eve provides the impetus for regeneration" after the Fall, but she leaves the larger question of the relationship of Milton's characters to Nisus unexplored.⁹ Charles Martindale has gone so far as to question the interpretability of the allusion to Nisus in the Son's speech, claiming that it "should be seen as a close parallel rather than as an allusion, since thoughts of Nisus and Euryalus would distract the reader from the issue to no clear purpose."¹⁰ But the fact that Milton returns to Nisus again in the pivotal book 10 argues that the reader might do well to be distracted. Philip Hardie offers a more promising line of interpretation when he suggests that "in *Paradise Lost* the repetition of 'me' repeatedly provides a focus for that poem's the-

8. Lewalski, *Rhetoric of Literary Forms*, 116.

9. Pavlock, "Milton's Criticism of Classical Epic," 310, 219.

10. Martindale, *Milton and the Transformation*, 11.

matization of Christian sacrificial substitution and ties together Christ, Adam, and Satan in a plot of altruism and selfishness.”¹¹

In this study, I aim to develop this line of thought further by examining in greater detail the presence of Nisus and Euryalus as an under-story in the narrative structures through which Milton articulates his ideas of blame, pity, self-sacrifice, and Christian heroism. In each instance of allusion Milton appropriates and reshapes the highly ambiguous material of the Nisus and Euryalus episode to build a conception of the Christian hero that is both radically unique and also deeply indebted to Vergilian antecedents. As a result, the allusions to Nisus and Euryalus also shed new light on Milton’s interpretation of the *Aeneid*. Modern reception theory has stressed the reader’s role in constructing the meaning of allusion;¹² in Milton’s poetry, instances of creative imitation perform readings that offer the deepest insight into his understanding of the literary works of the past.¹³ The allusions to Nisus and Euryalus, therefore, are moments of active reading and interpretation in which Milton uses the narrative and aesthetic forms of his classical predecessor to define the place of duty, affection, and self-sacrifice in his Christian-biblical epic.

The story of Nisus and Euryalus as it appears in the *Aeneid* offers a particularly appealing set of materials for the reader interested in this cluster of themes and their literary manifestation. The account of the night raid through the Rutulian camp that leads to the tragic deaths of the two Trojan friends cannot easily be pressed into the service of the poem’s teleological plot but instead carries a surplus of meaning that is left unassimilated and unresolved. As Colin Burrow has observed, the episode “releases stray emotions—rebellious desires, non-imperial loves, unmarital compassions—which will not be absorbed into [the poem’s] main story.”¹⁴ Despite the disproportionate number of lines Vergil devotes to their enterprise and the narrator’s extraordinary emotional response to their deaths, Nisus and Euryalus in the end have no effect on the forward motion of the poem. Instead, they represent one of the marginal directions not chosen by the narrative, and the meaning of their story lies open, inviting the intervention of a reader like Milton to give it new shape and direction.

11. Philip Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53.

12. Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3. See also Stephen Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47–51.

13. For a recent example of reception study that attempts to reconstruct Milton’s reading of the *Aeneid* through allusion, see Craig Kallendorf, “Allusion as Reception: Virgil, Milton, and the Modern Reader,” in *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, ed. Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 67–79.

14. Colin Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.

The openness of the story is confirmed not only by the widely divergent interpretations of it in modern criticism but also by the many rewritings it has received in the works of other poets of epic and romance.¹⁵

In the *Aeneid*, Nisus and Euryalus are bound up in the poem's thematic concerns with heroism and self-sacrifice when they are first introduced in book 5 as contenders in the footrace at the games in honor of Anchises. As competitors in the race, they are participants in an elaborate offering in honor of the spirit of the deceased, in which a "ritual sacrifice of physical energy" is offered alongside the standard sacrificial forms of libation and animal slaughter.¹⁶ In this resonant setting, the two Trojan friends act out a drama of substitution that anticipates the tragic events of the night raid in book 9. Just as the race is about to end, Nisus slips in a puddle of blood left from the animal sacrifice and loses his lead. As he falls to the ground, he deliberately trips one of the other runners, allowing Euryalus to run ahead and claim the victory. Sprawling in the sacrificial blood (*sacro cruore*) (*Aen.* 5.333), Nisus takes on the symbolic status of a ritual victim whose "death" in the race secures the success of his friend.¹⁷ By tripping his opponent, he effects a substitution in which his own loss is exchanged for Euryalus's gain. In the light-hearted atmosphere of the games, Nisus's privately motivated self-sacri-

15. The Nisus and Euryalus story later becomes almost a topos in the epic tradition. After Lucan's wry allusion to Vergil's "Fortunati ambo" in his apostrophe to Julius Caesar (*Bellum civile* 9.980–86), the reception history of the episode in antiquity begins more explicitly with Statius, who reconfigures Vergil's Trojan friends in bk. 10 of the *Thebaid* as the Greek warriors Hopleus and Dymas. For Statius's treatment of the episode, see D. D. Markus, "Transfiguring Heroism: Nisus and Euryalus in Statius' *Thebaid*," *Vergilius* 43 (1997): 56–62; K. F. L. Pollman, "Statius' *Thebaid* and the Legacy of Vergil's *Aeneid*," *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001): 10–30; and Randall T. Ganiban, *Statius and Virgil* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131–36. In the medieval pro-imperial context of Dante's *Commedia*, Nisus and Euryalus appear alongside Turnus and Camilla as warriors who died to pave the way for the future glory of Rome (*Inferno* 1.107–8). Ariosto parodically recreates Nisus and Euryalus in *Orlando furioso*'s knights Cloridiano and Medoro. For discussion of Ariosto's imitation of the episode, see Burrow, *Epic Romance*, 62–67; Wiley Feinstein, "Ariosto's Parodic Re-writing of Vergil in the Episode of Cloridiano and Medoro," *South Atlantic Review* 55 (1990): 17–34; and Walter Moretti, "La storia di Cloridiano e Medoro: Un' esempio della umanizzazione ariotesca delle idealità eroiche e cavalleresche," *Convivium* 37 (1969): 543–51. Milton's English predecessor in biblical epic, Abraham Cowley, also incorporates references to Nisus and Euryalus in his characterization of David and Jonathan in the *Davideis* (1656). Stephen Guy-Bray focuses on Cowley's treatment of the homoeroticism of Vergil's pair (Guy-Bray, "Cowley's Latin Lovers: Nisus and Euryalus in the *Davideis*," *Classical and Modern Literature* 21 [2001]: 25–42).

16. See David Sansone, *Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 37, 63.

17. Hardie also notes that the words used to describe Nisus's fall ("pronus . . . concidit" [*Aen.* 5.332–33]) are elsewhere applied to the slaughter of a sacrificial animal (Hardie, *Epic Successors*, 42).

face is allowed to be successful: Aeneas amicably resolves the dispute that arises from Nisus's foul play by giving prizes to all the runners. Euryalus keeps his victory, Salius is awarded a separate prize, and Nisus, comically displaying his body splattered with bloody mud, wins a laugh from Aeneas and a consolatory shield.¹⁸

But in book 9, when the issues raised by the footrace—Nisus's private love for Euryalus and his attempt at sacrificial substitution—emerge again, the accent has shifted from playful farce to the high seriousness of tragedy. The story of their daring mission to sneak through the enemy camp at night in order to bring news of the Trojan plight to Aeneas in Pallanteum has proved to be one of the most controversial episodes in the second half of the *Aeneid*.¹⁹ Part of the reason the episode resists

18. On the idea of games in antiquity as a mirror for real combat and a training ground for war, see James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the "Iliad": The Tragedy of Hector* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 204–10.

19. The most balanced accounts of the story of Nisus and Euryalus can be found in Hardie's introduction to his commentary (*Aeneid IX*, 23–34) and in Nicholas Horsfall, *A Companion to the Study of Vergil* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 170–78. Both Hardie and Horsfall observe the tendency of modern interpretations to fall into opposing extremes, beginning with George E. Duckworth, whose view of the night raid as "a story of mistakes which lead to disaster" inaugurated a trend of negative criticism of the characters and the episode (Duckworth, "The Significance of Nisus and Euryalus for *Aeneid* 9–12," *American Journal of Philology* 88 [1967]: 134). Both Mario A. Di Cesare ("Aeneid 9: The Failure of Strategy," *Rivista di Studi Classici* 20 [1972]: 411–22) and G. J. Fitzgerald ("Nisus and Euryalus: A Paradigm of Futile Behavior and the Tragedy of Youth," in *Cicero and Virgil: Studies in Honour of Harold Hunt*, ed. John R. C. Martyn [Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1972], 114–37) condemn Nisus and Euryalus for their excessive violence and failure to complete their mission and join Kenneth Quinn (*Virgil's "Aeneid": A Critical Description* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968]) in viewing Vergil's celebratory apostrophe to the Trojan friends as blatantly ironic. P. G. Lennox counters with the more positive view that the motivations of the characters, especially of Nisus, are not tainted from the beginning; instead "until Volcens draws his sword on Euryalus Nisus tries both to save his friend and to leave open the possibility of completing the mission" (Lennox, "Virgil's Night-Episode Re-Examined [*Aeneid* 9.176–449]," *Hermes* 105 [1977]: 340). For Lennox, the episode gains tragic power and pathos because Nisus is forced to choose between the two duties of friendship and service to his countrymen. Barbara Pavlock highlights an irremediable gulf between friendship and duty and sees the friendship of Nisus and Euryalus as revealing "the unpredictable, irrational side of *amor* that can be destructive rather than creative" (Pavlock, "Epic and Tragedy in Vergil's Nisus and Euryalus Episode," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 115 [1985]: 219). Pavlock places particular emphasis on Vergil's mediation between Homer and Euripides but concludes her article with a sympathetic interpretation of the apostrophe that conflicts with the bulk of her argument: "Although they do not achieve their glorious expectations within their own society, the two flawed young men do receive the fame that only the poet can provide" (224). For Gordon Williams, the apostrophe is a straightforward celebration of the self-sacrificing love that the two Trojans shared (Williams, *Technique and Ideas in the "Aeneid"* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983]); John F. Makowski provides a powerful Platonic context to support this reading (Makowski, "Nisus and Euryalus: A Platonic Relationship," *Classi-*

(or by the same token invites) interpretation is because it is based on a conflation of multiple sources from a variety of genres.²⁰ The primary models are Homeric: the account of the night raid is constructed from elements of book 10 of the *Iliad*, which describes the nocturnal activities of the Greeks and the Trojans after Hector has successfully pushed the Greek army back to their ships. Nisus and Euryalus's attack on the Rutulian camp mirrors the Doloneia episode in which Odysseus and Diomedes cross into enemy territory, slaughter the sleeping Thracians, and successfully steal the horses of their king Rhesus. The capture of Euryalus by the Rutulian captain Volcens reworks the story of the Trojan spy Dolon who is apprehended by the Greeks when he tries to infiltrate their ranks.

These Homeric sources presume an epic concept of heroism, in which the warrior's main objective is to earn fame and renown through his personal military exploits, as Odysseus and Diomedes win glory by capturing the horses of Rhesus. Vergil, however, chooses to narrate his version of the Homeric Doloneia through the filter of non-epic models, particularly Euripidean tragedy, thereby casting a skeptical light on the pursuit of spoils and slaughter. Throughout the description of the night raid, Vergil incorporates references to Euripides' *Rhesus*, a play that, according to Barbara Pavlock, represents Odysseus and Diomedes as "pawns of the gods in fulfillment of fate" and "totally undermines the positive heroic model in Homer's Doloneia."²¹

cal Journal 85 [1989]: 1–15). More recently, Sergio Casali takes a similar approach to my own, arguing that the episode itself is full of tensions and that the "division of the critical bibliography into two irreconcilably opposed camps is deliberately provided for, and determined by, the text" (Casali, "Nisus and Euryalus: Exploiting the Contradictions in Virgil's Doloneia," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 102 [2004]: 320). This view, also espoused by Hardie and Horsfall, presents the most satisfying account of the apparent conflict between the narrative of the night raid and the emotionally charged epitaph that Vergil grants to its heroes. A thorough, if slightly one-sided, review of the bibliography on the episode through 1993 can be found in Steven Farron, *Vergil's "Aeneid": A Poem of Grief and Love* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 155–64. I have also found useful Agathe Thornton, *The Living Universe: Gods and Men in Virgil's "Aeneid"* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); Charles Saylor, "Group vs. Individual in Vergil *Aeneid* 9," *Latomus* 49 (1990): 88–94; Erich Potz, "Fortunati ambo: Funktion und Bedeutung der Nisus/Euryalus-Episode in Vergil's 'Aeneis,'" *Hermes* 121 (1993): 325–34; and Luigi F. Pizzolato, "Fortunati ambo: Per Niso ed Eurialo," in *Studia classica Iohanni Tarditi oblata*, ed. L. Belloni, Guido Milanese, and Antonietta Porro, 2 vols. (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1995), 1:265–83.

20. See Hardie, *Aeneid IX*, 29–31; and Pavlock, "Epic and Tragedy."

21. Pavlock, "Epic and Tragedy," 209. The question of the authenticity of the *Rhesus* has been much disputed, and there is still no scholarly consensus about whether or not it should be included in the Euripidean corpus. For an argument in favor of Euripidean authorship, see William Ritchie, *The Authenticity of the "Rhesus" of Euripides* (Cambridge University Press, 1964).

In Euripides' version, the Homeric night raid is transformed into a bloody-minded slaughter. Vergil's use of Euripidean language creates a lens of skepticism about personal glory and material gain, raising doubts about the moral status of Nisus's and Euryalus's Homeric exploits.²² As Nisus carves a path with his sword through the sleeping Rutulians, Vergil compares him to a lion descending on a sheepfold, an image that Homer uses to describe Diomedes' rampage through the sleeping Thracians (*Iliad* 10.485–6). Manipulating the elements of the Homeric simile in a Euripidean direction, Vergil intensifies its violence and invites sympathy for Nisus's helpless victims by describing them as a gentle flock of sheep (*molle pecus*) (*Aen.* 9.341), while adding vivid details about the lion's bloody mouth (*fremit ore cruento*) (*Aen.* 9.341) and his crazed hunger (*vesana fames*) (*Aen.* 9.340).

The presence of the tragic filter means that the tension between epic and tragic visions of heroic action forms a part of the substructure of Vergil's narrative, resulting in a conflict in the way the episode handles the nature of heroism. To make matters even more complicated, Vergil also incorporates lyric elements into the fabric of the story, most notably in the simile comparing Euryalus in his death throes to a drooping flower, an echo of Catullus 11 that foregrounds the more private, personal side of the friends' relationship and accentuates the motivating power of love in their choices and actions.²³

The generic multiplicity of the episode goes a long way toward accounting for the pull of different interpretive directions, but perhaps even more problematic is the fact that Nisus and Euryalus's nocturnal mission bears an uncomfortable relationship to the *Aeneid's* heroic ideal of *pietas*. Initially, Nisus wants to gain glory by helping the Trojan community as a whole, aligning him with Aeneas's commitment to the communal over the personal. The plan to summon Aeneas back to the besieged Trojan camp suggests a distinctly civic-minded form of heroism that the Homeric Doloneia does not have: Odysseus and Diomedes are out for the glory of a successful sneak attack and the reward of possessing Rhesus's magnificent horses, while the honor Nisus and Euryalus seem to desire is that of bringing much-needed relief to their compatriots. In his speech to the Trojan assembly, Euryalus's eagerness to sacrifice his life for the glory of helping his comrades rings like nostalgia for the old mythical Rome that Vergil evokes elsewhere in the parade of Roman heroes in

22. See Hardie, *Aeneid IX*, notes to lines 241, 316–17, and 333.

23. The simile echoes Catullus 11.18–20: "Qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati / Ultimi flos, praeterente postquam / Tactus aratro est" (Like a flower on the meadow's edge, when it has been touched by the plough passing by) (Catullus, *Carmina*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968]). The translation is from *Catullus*, trans. Francis Warre Cornish, rev. G. P. Gould, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

book 6 and on Aeneas's shield in book 8. Certainly that is how the mission is interpreted by the older members of the Trojan assembly, who praise the pair for their spirit and assure themselves that the future of the Trojan people is safe in the hands of brave young men like Nisus and Euryalus.

In fact, the motivation for the night raid is significantly more ambiguous. Nisus and Euryalus are spurred on not only by a sense of civic duty but also by an interest in the spoils from the slaughter of the Rutulians ("mox hic cum spoliis ingenti caede peracta / adfore cernetis") (*Aen.* 9.242–43). Once the mission is underway, the tension between these two motivations—one civic and Roman, the other individual and Homeric—becomes even more strained. Euryalus gets so carried away with his slaughter ("nimia caede atque cupidine ferri") (*Aen.* 9.354) that Nisus has to rein him in and remind him that they only have a brief period of time to carry out their mission. His desire for *spolia* links him to Camilla, who meets her death because she lusts after the armor of Arruns ("femineo praedae et spoliolum ardebat amore") (*Aen.* 11.782), and to Turnus, whose despoiling of the body of Pallas ultimately arouses Aeneas's merciless rage at the end of the poem.

As a result, when Euryalus is betrayed by the flash of the helmet that he despoiled from the corpse of Messapus, it is tempting to conclude that the episode is a story of misguided heroism. The two friends begin with a civic-minded impulse that associates them with Aeneas and Rome but are distracted from their mission by desire for slaughter and spoils; they are fatally linked through violence and greed to the poem's antagonists; they are embodiments of an archaic form of heroism that does not have a successful outlet in the poem. But Vergil deflects this interpretation and encourages a more complex reading by focalizing the final segment of the episode through the eyes of Nisus, so that the reader is asked to experience the confusion in the wood primarily from his perspective and to sympathize with his predicament.²⁴ This technique, which Brooks Otis has called Vergil's "subjective style,"²⁵ transfers to the reader Nisus's sense of helplessness and anxiety as he looks around frantically for his lost friend. When Euryalus appears in view, struggling against his captors, a series of rhetorical questions insists that we share Nisus's panic and fear as he desperately looks for a way to help:

quid faciat? qua vi iuvenum, quibus audeat armis
eripere? an sese medios moriturus in enses
inferat et pulchram properet per volnera mortem?

(*Aen.* 9.399–401)

24. For a broader discussion of focalization in the *Aeneid*, which also makes reference to this episode, see Don Fowler, "Deviant Focalization in Vergil's *Aeneid*," in his *Roman Constructions: Readings in Postmodern Latin* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 40–63.

25. Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 349n.

[What can Nisus do? How can he save his young friend—
 what force, weapons, what bold stroke?
 Pitch himself at the swords and die at once?
 Race through wounds to a swift and noble death?]

This internal debate defines the range of possibilities Nisus sees before him in the crisis. Euryalus has been captured, and, as Nisus sees it, the only alternatives are to try to rescue him by force or to die fighting. The obvious third alternative of going on without Euryalus does not figure into Nisus's imagination. Instead, the graphic descriptions of the wounds he inflicts on the Rutulian soldiers continue the focalization, following Nisus's eager eye as he relishes the destruction of his enemies. When in retaliation for the deaths of his men Volcens moves to kill Euryalus on the spot, Vergil has constructed the narrative to make Nisus's perspective so dominant that we must feel with him the necessity of intervention, even at the cost of his own life. As he cries out "me, me adsum, qui feci," we are led to hope that his supplication will be successfully received and that the self-sacrificing exchange will be accomplished. But it fails, and the intensely erotic description of Euryalus's death at the hands of Volcens intensifies the pathos of the climactic moment when Nisus, pierced with many wounds, throws himself on the lifeless body of his beloved. By narrating the final scene through the eyes of Nisus and describing the deaths of the two friends as a dramatic *liebestod*, the poet invites a sympathetic view of Nisus's anti-imperial and self-sacrificing love, even if it means the failure of the mission.

In the course of telling the story, therefore, Vergil elicits a polyphony of conflicting responses to the mission and deaths of the two friends. The conflict culminates in the poet's epitaph for the pair:

Fortunati ambo! si quid mea carmina possunt,
 nulla dies umquam memori vos eximet aevo,
 dum domus Aeneae Capitoli immobile saxum
 accolet imperiumque pater Romanus habebit.

(*Aen.* 9.446–49)

[How fortunate, both at once!
 If my songs have any power, the day will never dawn
 that wipes you from the memory of the ages, not while
 the house of Aeneas stands by the Capitol's rock unshaken,
 not while the Roman Father rules the world.]

Vergil's apostrophe has been as controversial as the rest of the episode: why are Nisus and Euryalus *fortunati*? Kenneth Quinn argues that the epitaph "strikes an almost openly ironical note" by linking their mem-

ory to dubious longevity of Rome, and G. J. Fitzgerald adds, "I doubt that Vergil's judgment is '*fortunati*.'"²⁶ Gordon Williams, however, takes the more optimistic position that "they are lucky because, loving one another, they died together. . . . Euryalus did not die alone and abandoned; Nisus was lucky because he did not abandon his lover."²⁷ Don Fowler offers this judicious summary of the critical dilemma, correctly perceiving that responses to Vergil's interjection are shaped more often than not by a preformed view of the poem as a whole: "If the *domus Aeneae* is as unmovable as the Capitoline rock, then the narrator-as-reader at this point can know what the Nisus and Euryalus episode means and their fame is secure. If there is any doubt, then interpretation cannot be fixed, here or at the end of the *Aeneid*."²⁸

As Fowler's insight suggests, the critical impasse surrounding Nisus's self-sacrifice and Vergil's response to it speaks to the excess of meaning bursting from the seams of the episode. Vergil's apostrophe carries an ambiguity that makes it impossible for Nisus and Euryalus to be brought into line with either a pro- or anti-Augustan view of the poem. The story ends, open and unresolved, and the absence of any final resolution is made even more apparent by the fact that the last time two friends appear in the poem, we see their heads paraded before the Trojan camp on spikes, a subtle corrective to an overly sanguine interpretation of the epitaph.²⁹

In light of this self-consciously ambiguous story, how are we to understand the Son's allusion to Nisus in *Paradise Lost*? How does Milton interpret the episode by having the Son evoke Vergil's tragic pair? Barbara Lewalski, one of the few critics who have attempted to assess the significance of the allusion, argues that the Son's evocation of Nisus's "me, me" serves to call attention to the literary and theological distance between the futile effort of the Trojan soldier to save his friend and the efficacy of the Son's sacrifice to save the whole human race. "Unlike Nisus," she argues, "the Son had no share whatever in the guilt for which he offers to die"; furthermore, "by not saving a tribe or a country but an entire creation, [the Son] utterly transforms the concept of epic action."³⁰ Lewalski insightfully identifies the corrective function of the allusion: the Son's echo of Nisus exposes the inadequacy of Vergil's classical moral vision in comparison with Milton's Christian one. Vergil

26. Quinn, *Virgil's "Aeneid"*, 206–7; Fitzgerald, "A Paradigm of Futile Behavior," 117.

27. Williams, *Technique and Ideas*, 205–7.

28. See Don Fowler, "Epic in the Middle of the Wood: *Mise En Abyme* in the Nisus and Euryalus Episode," in *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*, ed. Alison Sharrock and Helen Morales (Oxford University Press, 2000), 104.

29. The pitiful lament of Euryalus's mother (*Aen.* 9.481–97) provides a similar corrective.

30. Lewalski, *Rhetoric of Literary Forms*, 116–17.

fails to grasp the redemptive possibilities of self-sacrifice, so Milton returns to the site of the "error" and "corrects" his predecessor's failure by showing how the self-sacrifice of a blameless victim succeeds in delivering not just one life from death but all mankind from sin. The repetition of "me" in the Son's speech becomes a triumphant reminder of the distance between Nisus's tragic attempt at substitution and the redemptive power of the Crucifixion.

In establishing the moral superiority of the Son's sacrifice, Milton might even be imagined as effecting the recuperation of a rhetorical figure. Vergil uses the anaphora "me, me" to register Nisus's panic and desperation, but for the Son, the same device functions in quite the opposite way, celebrating the certainty of his success. The Son's speech imitates the trope but reverses its pathos, ensuring that the pain of loss will no longer have the same finality: "Death his death's wound shall then receive" (*PL* 3.252).

In addition to having a strong precedent in the Christian reception of the *Aeneid*, the corrective or, as Thomas Greene terms it, "heuristic" interpretation of Milton's allusion to Nisus is consistent with the metaphors of strife and rivalry that Renaissance theorists, reflecting on the practice of imitation, used to describe the relationship between an author and his model.³¹ By leaving traces of the original in his imitation, an author was imagined as establishing a rivalry with an anterior source, inviting the reader to act as a judge in a competition for literary pre-eminence. Milton frequently embraced this form of *aemulatio*, often precisely marking the moral superiority of Christian poetry to its pagan models. The most notorious example in *Paradise Lost* is the story of Mulciber's fall, in which Milton takes care to correct the inaccuracy of pagan fables, concluding "thus they relate / Erring; for he with this rebellious rout / Fell long before" (*PL* 1.746–48).

It is important, however, not to read these allusions too antagonistically. The Son's echo of Nisus inevitably calls up the distance between Vergil's classical story and Milton's Christian one, but the link between Nisus and the Son also grants to Vergil's poem a moral authority that cannot be fully explained in terms of correction or rivalry. Of all the possible prefigurations of Christ that Milton could have seen in classical or biblical literature, he chose to take Nisus as the model for the Son's self-sacrifice, and this fact in and of itself is a powerful statement of his confidence in Vergil's ethical exemplarity. The sense of continuity and even camaraderie with Vergil that emerges from the Son's allusion to

31. See esp. Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 38–50; and G. W. Pigman III, "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 33 (1980): 1–32.

Nisus becomes all the more warranted if we reverse the direction of the allusion—as Milton himself invites by setting his poem at the beginning of history—and imagine Nisus as an echo of the Son. Milton's assertion of the primacy of his biblical epic in relation to classical heroic poetry has its own tendentiousness, of course; all the epic poems of antiquity become belated from the historical vantage point of *Paradise Lost*.³² But reversing the direction of the allusion is also an invitation to see Nisus as an imitator of the Son. To imagine Nisus as an *imitator Christi* casts a completely different light on his attempt at self-sacrifice. From the perspective of the Son, looking forward through history, Nisus's repetition of "me, me" is not a sign of moral failure but rather a link to the vocabulary of the originary self-sacrifice. Milton reads back into the Nisus and Euryalus episode a sense of their participation in the Christian ethical vision of selfless love and compassion. On this reading, Milton becomes a more sympathetic reader of the *Aeneid*. Rather than simply correcting the mistakes of his pagan model, he sees a typological relationship between the classical past and the Christian present. The reader is left with a sense that Milton appreciated the Nisus and Euryalus episode because of how close it comes to capturing the essence of Christian love.

Vergil's role as a stepping-stone for Milton's definition of Christian heroism becomes even more complex in the echoes of Nisus that appear in book 10, where the setting shifts from the assembly of angels in heaven to the more troubled scene on earth. By having Adam and Eve echo Nisus's cry to the Rutulians, now also filtered through the Son's heroic *devotio* in book 3, Milton allows them to participate in the poem's language of self-sacrifice and at the same time suggestively illuminates some of the difficulties involved in living the ethical ideal of *imitatio Christi* in the context of earthly marriage. Milton's terrifying revelation, already adumbrated in Satan's heroic posturing in book 2, is that self-sacrifice incorrectly understood can also be Satanic. While the Son's unique ontological status enables him to volunteer to die as one for all, in the mutual union of marriage such heroic isolation becomes highly problematic. Under the influence of pride and despair, even self-sacrifice is twisted into a negative reflection of itself, as Adam and Eve reveal in book 10. Only Eve's penitence and Adam's pitying response to her grief can restore the possibility of a different kind of *imitatio Christi* in marriage, beginning the process of reconciliation that enables the two to face their postlapsarian life hand in hand together.

32. This is already a favorite tactic of the ancient epic poets, as Martha A. Malamud and Donald T. McGuire Jr. argue in "Flavian Variant: Myth. Valerius' *Argonautica*," in *Roman Epic*, ed. A. J. Boyle (London: Routledge, 1993), 192–217. For Milton's claim to epic primacy and the problem of belatedness, see Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford University Press, 1975).

The tragedy of the Fall reaches its lowest point in Adam's despairing lyrical lament in book 10, as he lies "in a troubled sea of passion tossed" (*PL* 10.718), bitterly mourning the change that has taken place in his formerly happy life. Adam's solitary complaint has often been compared to Satan's soliloquy on Mount Niphates (soliloquy is a Satanic genre in *Paradise Lost*), with the distinction that while Satan emerges from his monologue with new defiance, resolving to make evil his good, Adam sinks deeper and deeper into despair. Milton has already given us a glimpse of Adam's postlapsarian psychological state earlier in book 10 when the Son comes down from Heaven to judge the fallen pair. Whereas Eve humbly admits her fault in one simple contrite sentence, Adam responds with an oration of self-exculpation that tries to shift the blame from himself to Eve.

In the lament that begins "O miserable of happy" (*PL* 10.720–844), Adam continues in this self-righteous vein, caught in a confused web of resentment, despondency, and self-loathing. He acknowledges the justice of his own punishment, but the conviction that all posterity will be cursed along with him prompts a profusion of recriminations against God: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man, did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me, or here place / In this delicious garden?" (*PL* 10.743–46). The process of verbalizing these blasphemous thoughts forces Adam to admit that to blame God is a "proud excuse" (*PL* 10.765), and he momentarily corrects himself, resolving to accept the punishment that justly follows from his transgression. But the haunting thought that he alone is responsible for the misery that will be inflicted on all subsequent generations backs him into a corner of Satanic self-obsession. Overstating the bleakness of the situation and hyperbolically exaggerating his agency in larger cosmic events, Adam vainly wishes that he could bear all the blame himself and spare his descendants the effects of God's curse. In his "fond wish" (*PL* 10.834) to be made solely responsible for the Fall, he echoes the Son's allusion to Nisus:

all my evasions vain
 And reasonings, though through Mazes, lead me still
 But to my own conviction: first and last
 On me, me only, as the source and spring
 Of all corruption, all the blame lights due;
 So might the wrath.

(*PL* 10.829–34)

The marked repetition of "me, me" connects Adam with the Son's speech of self-sacrifice, and John B. Broadbent argues that the verbal link

functions as the first sign of Adam's regeneration;³³ by taking the blame on himself as the "source and spring / Of all corruption," Adam seems to exhibit the "conviction of sin" that Milton identifies in *De doctrina Christiana* as the first of five steps that lead to spiritual restoration.³⁴ But while Adam's use of the Vergilian language forges a typological relationship between him and the Son, the rest of his speech suggests that at this moment he is actually an antitype of the Son's self-sacrifice. In his self-pity and despair, Adam's gesture of self-blame takes on a quality of Satanic egotism, as he adopts a stance of isolation and separates himself from Eve, his "other self" (*PL* 10.128). Rather than extricating him from his egocentrism, Adam's wish to take on all the blame and punishment for the Fall leads him to conclude mistakenly that his situation is as hopeless as Satan's, to whom he believes himself alike in "both crime and doom" (*PL* 10.841). His heartfelt conviction of guilt, manifested so poignantly in his desire to prevent the suffering of his innocent descendants, ironically plunges him deeper into the "abyss of fears / And horrors" (*PL* 10.842–43), blunting his ability to hope for grace or reconciliation. In Adam's fallen imitation of the Son, Milton reinfects the meaning of the Nisus and Euryalus episode, suggesting that Nisus's self-sacrificial language, indeed the idea of self-sacrifice itself, can lead to the moral glamour of standing alone.

Adam is guilty, but he is not guilty alone, nor is his guilt irredeemable. By claiming total responsibility for the Fall and asking to be the sole recipient of God's anger, Adam shuts Eve out of his experience and destroys the mutuality that Milton identifies as a cornerstone of their marriage. In fact, Adam's self-isolation looks like Satan's heroic posture of self-sufficiency; shortly thereafter we find him denying the very possibility that one person can bear the burden of blame for all:

Fond wish! couldst thou support
That burden heavier than the Earth to bear,
Than all the world much Heavier, though divided
With that bad Woman?

(*PL* 10.834–36)

Adam's "fond wish" distances him from the confidence, security, and faith of the Son's offer of self-sacrifice. The desire to take on all the blame only

33. John B. Broadbent, *Some Graver Subject: An Essay on "Paradise Lost"* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960). Broadbent sees the Son's speech as "the spring of self-sacrifice which Adam and Eve draw on after the fall to recover sanity and love" (151).

34. John Milton, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.19, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 6:466–70.

intensifies his despair rather than effecting a reconciliation with God or Eve. That no humility or contrition is expressed by his echo of Nisus becomes painfully evident in Adam's bitter reply when Eve attempts to console him: "Out of my sight, thou Serpent, that name best / Befits thee with him leagued, thyself as false / And hateful" (*PL* 10.867–69).

If Adam's repetition of "me, me" represents a fallen perversion of the Son's speech and a darker reading of Nisus's attempt at self-sacrifice, Eve's contrite response to Adam's outburst represents a final comment on the Vergilian sacrificial patterns that have so shaped Milton's construction of Christian heroism. Eve's penitent reply to Adam's angry accusation is a crucial turning point in Milton's narrative of the postlapsarian phase of the poem. With her genuine contrition and humble supplication, she recalls Adam back to himself and restores the dialogue fragmented by the isolating effects of sin. As Lewalski remarks, Eve's psalm of penitence "begins her redemptive role as type of the Second Eve whose Seed is the Messiah."³⁵ And while Eve's speech also marks a shift in genre from Adam's tragic lyricism to a biblical lyric model in the psalms of repentance, the climax of her entreaty for forgiveness is a return to the now-familiar language of Nisus and the Son:

On me exercise not
Thy hatred for this misery befall'n,
On me already lost, me than thyself
More miserable; both have sinn'd, but thou
Against God only, I against God and thee,
And to the place of judgment will return,
There with my cries importune Heaven, that all
The sentence from thy head remov'd may light
On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe,
Me me only just object of his ire.

(*PL* 10.926–36)

Of the three imitations of Nisus's speech, Eve's is the closest to Vergil in both syntax and situation. The repeated "me," though strictly in apposition with "me" in the previous line, seems to hang independently from the grammar of the sentence like an accusative of exclamation, and the object of her love is suffering before her eyes, as she humbly offers to substitute her grief for his. The scene is no longer a moment of solitary isolation, as in Adam's despairing lament. Unlike Adam, Eve does not appear to doubt the efficacy of her sacrifice; the fact that she plans to return to "the place of judgment" (*PL* 10.931) to offer her confession of guilt shows that she is confident in being heard by God. Nor

35. Lewalski, *Rhetoric of Literary Forms*, 250.

does she question, as Adam does, her own ability to bear the burden of punishment for them both.

Instead, Eve's gesture of self-sacrifice initiates a conversation in which the seeds of dialogue, sown by her penitence, begin to germinate. In Eve's speech Milton allows the lyric sphere of private love and personal intimacy, which titillates throughout the Nisus and Euryalus episode but is cancelled by their deaths, to come to the fore. Eve's appropriation of Nisus's words in the context of initiating a marital discussion pulls out the erotic element of Vergil's story so acutely described by John Makowski in terms of the relationship between the Platonic *erastes* and *eromenos*.³⁶ Milton's poem, in contrast to Vergil's, grants this love the power to succeed. There is no Volcens figure to prevent the sacrifice and no imperial mission to betray.

Instead, there is only Adam who, profoundly affected by his wife's sincere repentance, responds with sympathy and "commiseration" (*PL* 10.940). By recapitulating Adam's own reasoning and providing a mirror of his thoughts, Eve's speech allows Adam to see the faulty logic in the idea of taking on all the blame.³⁷ Her repetition of Nisus's "me, me" now seems to him "too desirous" (*PL* 10.947) and thus strangely akin to her decision to eat the fruit: in both cases, she longs to reach beyond the proper boundaries of human nature. Jolted out of his despair by her words, Adam gently chides her and, by extension, himself for engaging in the Satanic heroics of trying to take on all the responsibility of the Fall, dramatizing in his reply (*PL* 10.947–65) a rhetorical shift from the isolationist language of "I" and "thou" to the unifying "we" with which book 10 concludes.

Admonishing her for attempting to take too much on herself, he begins by relying heavily on second person address: "Unwary, and too desirous, as before, / So now of what thou know'st not, who desir'st / The punishment all on thyself; alas, / Bear thine own first" (*PL* 10.947–50). He then shifts the focus of blame to himself and insists, returning again briefly to Nisus's "me" language, that if one of them were able to bear all the punishment alone, he would offer himself as a sacrifice, "That on my head all might be visited / Thy frailty and infirmer Sex forgiv'n / To me committed and by me expos'd" (*PL* 10.955–57). But Adam soon abandons this rhetoric of individual self-sacrifice and puts the issue of culpability aside, urging in the first person plural "let us no more contend" (*PL*

36. See Makowski, "Nisus and Euryalus." Milton's engagement with the homoerotic nature of the love narrated by Vergil is minimal, while for Abraham Cowley it was an issue of central concern. See Guy-Bray, "Cowley's Latin Lovers."

37. For the importance of psychological mirroring in the reconciliation scene, see Jun Harada, "The Mechanism of Human Reconciliation in *Paradise Lost*," *Philological Quarterly* 50 (1971): 543–52.

10.958) but instead think “how we may light’n / Each other’s burden” (*PL* 10.960–61). By the end of Adam’s response, the first couple have moved into new emotional and rhetorical terrain in which the language of heroic self-sacrifice has been replaced with the language of charity and unity in suffering.

This shift from a heroic posture of self-sufficiency to mutual compassion and love offers the poem’s final reading of the story of Nisus and Euryalus. In Adam’s pity for Eve, Milton activates the sympathy of Vergil’s apostrophe to the two Trojan lovers but displaces Vergil’s passionate outburst on their behalf onto Adam, transferring the sympathetic response of the external poet to an internal character who has the power to act in the narrative of the poem. In Vergil’s story the pity that could have saved Euryalus if placed in the hands of Volcens is deflected onto the poet, whose expression of sympathy is heartfelt but powerless to change the tragic course of events. Milton brings together the disparate pieces of Vergil’s narrative and unites the two most powerful emotional moments—Nisus’s offer of self-sacrifice and the poet’s apostrophe—into one intimate scene between the two characters who will become history’s new heroes as they venture out of Eden. In recombining elements that were separated in the *Aeneid*, Milton constructs a Vergil who is not so much a rival as a peer and friend. The recurrence of Nisus as a key figure shows that the new definition of Christian heroism comes to be articulated not in opposition to the ancient tradition but precisely through it, even if Milton will ultimately offer something new. And finally, Eve’s echo of Nisus, followed by Adam’s transformation of that echo into the language of mutuality, invites the reader to reflect on the idea that in the earthly context of marriage, self-sacrifice by itself is not enough. It requires the pity and sympathy that Nisus and Euryalus tragically receive only after their deaths, but that Adam and Eve offer each other as they prepare to face the world after paradise has been lost.