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Milton Iconoclastes

During his wide-ranging career as both polemicist and poet, Milton proved himself adept at recasting his opponents’ ideologies by framing familiar practices in startling new light. Milton undertakes precisely this act of recasting in Eikonoklastes, the longest of his polemical works. The tract provides a sustained and devastating response to Eikon Basilike, The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in His Solitudes and Sufferings, which circulated immediately following the execution of Charles I in January 1649 and which generated widespread sympathy for his plight. Published as the official parliamentary response to the king’s tract in October of that same year, Eikonoklastes demolishes Eikon Basilike’s image of Charles as a martyred king—an image that emerges not only through the simple prayers and prose of the royalist tract, but even more strikingly in its frontispiece portrait of the kneeling monarch. In the image, Charles gazes toward the heavens as he raises a token crown of thorns—reminiscent of
the one worn by Christ at Gethsemane. According to Milton, the sole purpose of this frontispiece image, with its implicit parallel between Charles and Christ, is “to catch fools and silly gazers.”

In undertaking the monumental task of demolishing the Eikon Basilike’s literal and ideological icons, Milton establishes a precedent for his own polemics by positioning them within an extensive tradition of early Christian iconoclasm: “For which reason this answer also is intitl’d Iconoclastes, the famous Surname of many Greek Emperors, who, in thir zeal to the command of God, after a long tradition of Idolatry in the Church, took courage, and broke all superstitious Images to pieces” (YP 3:343). In response to Charles’s fictions and pretensions, Milton appropriately counters with an act of role-playing of his own. In the figurative act of appending “Iconoclastes” to his own name, Milton sets himself up as the last in a long line of image-breaking emperors, and creates a genealogical tradition for his own visual, political, and textual iconoclasms.

But if Milton crafts a genealogy for himself as the most recent of the Christian iconoclasts, he is equally invested in crafting one for the executed king as well. Milton Iconoclastes wants to demolish not only the singular and historically specific icon of Charles I, but also the larger tradition of monarchical tyranny that Milton argues the executed king represents. Pointing to the violence of the English civil war, Milton contextualizes what he views as Charles’s acts of tyranny by juxtaposing them against the historical persecution of early Christians. In his criticism of Charles’s military leadership, Milton writes “that there hath bin more Christian blood shed by the Commission, approbation, and connivance of King Charles, and his Father James in the latter end of their raigne, then in the Ten Roman Persecutions” (YP 3:439). With respect to “those many whippings, Pillories, and other corporal inflictions” that marked Charles’s reign in both war and peace, the monarch was comparable to that early persecutor of Christians, the “tyrant Nero,” who allegedly had a penchant for lighting the imperial premises by setting Christians ablaze (YP 3:439). If Charles’s tyranny rivaled that of the Romans, Milton also made sure to emphasize that the
monarch’s ineffectualness as a ruler had ancient precedents as well. David Loewenstein points to the abundance of historical analogies comparing Charles to ancient, biblical, and Near Eastern despots, all of which is conducive to what he sees as a vision of historical recurrence: “Charles, is, in a sense, just one more figure in a long and crowded history of oppression and tyranny.”3 Indeed, in his preface to Eikonoklastes, Milton compares the deceptions of Eikon Basilike to the posthumous recitation of Caesar’s will before the people, an act that, by detailing “what bounteous Legacies hee had bequeath’d them, wrought more in that Vulgar audience to the avenging of his death, then all the art he could ever use, to win their favor in his life-time” (YP 3:342). As the text’s reconstructed genealogy of tyranny makes clear, demolition is not Milton’s preferred mode of iconoclasm; rather than razing the image of the king, Milton elects instead the monumental task of recasting Charles’s image.

“Defacement leaves behind a face,” writes Joseph Koerner in his study on Reformation iconoclasm.4 This is certainly true in the case of Milton’s polemics. His defacing of the king in Eikonoklastes does not leave behind a featureless personage, but sears into the public imagination an image of Charles as the very face of devotional insincerity and political corruption. The figure of the English monarch then becomes the most recent instantiation in Milton’s constructed history of tyrannical rule. In Eikonoklastes, Milton sets out to shatter the image of the executed king. But in fact, he does something else entirely. After successfully breaking the fictions linking the image of the executed king to Christ, Milton Iconoclastes recasts the royalist figurehead as an icon for his own construct—the genealogy of political tyranny.

**Breaking Idols in Paradise Lost**

Nearly 20 years after constructing historical genealogies that recontextualized royalist ideology and his own acts of image-breaking, Milton showed himself no less invested in the project of establishing historical precedents and types for the contemporary figures
and movements that populated his own cultural moment. Milton’s response to the icon of Charles I resonates with his treatment of the problem of idolatry in *Paradise Lost*. While Milton’s genealogy of tyranny stretches backward toward antiquity, *Paradise Lost* opens and closes with genealogical catalogues of idolatrous acts that extend into the future. The fallen demons dispersed throughout the world pass on their names and personae to an astonishing array of false gods and deities, “known to men by various names / And various idols through the heathen world” (*PL* 1.374–75). At the close of the epic, Michael’s outline of human history provides a parallel genealogy of human folly and idol worship. As the arch-angel foretells the various sins and transgressions of humans yet unborn, Adam learns to his dismay that within a single generation of the deluge, Noah’s descendants will have resumed their idolatrous worship:

Oh! that men
(Canst thou believe?) should be so stupid grown
While yet the patriarch lived who ’scaped the flood
As to forsake the living God and fall
To worship their own work in wood and stone
For gods! 

(12.115–20)

The postdiluvian idol worshippers, of course, provide a direct historical precedent for the acts of idolatry—both religious and secular—that Milton witnessed in his own time. The angel concludes the vision of human history by announcing the unfortunate fact that few will discover true faith: “The rest, far greater part,” Michael reveals, “Will deem in outward rites and specious forms / Religion satisfied” (12.533–35).

For a polemist who two decades earlier had argued against the use of prescribed forms of prayer and had denounced Charles I for valuing the liturgy over human reason, the catalogue’s inclusion of the vast majority of those who worship only in “outward rites and specious forms” extends the epic’s concluding genealogy of human depravity all the way up to Milton’s present moment. Indeed, Milton holds strong opinions about how his fellow Christians
ought not to conduct themselves during their prayers. He dedicates an entire chapter of *Eikonoklastes* to arguing against the practice of using set forms of prayer, in which he criticizes the *Book of Common Prayer* and what he perceives as its underlying royalist ideology. For Milton, Anglican prescribed prayers are nothing other than thinly veiled acts of popery, and he argues that the *Book of Common Prayer* “was no other than the old Mass-Book don into English” (YP 3:504). Moreover, common forms of prayer—including those prescribed by the Anglican church—constrain both an individual’s prayerful sentiment and the Holy Spirit’s ability to inspire prayer, “imprison[ing] and confin[ing] by force, into a Pinfold sett of words, those two most unimprisonable things, our Prayers, [and] that Divine Spirit of utterance that moves them” (YP 3:505). Those who subscribe to set forms of prayer “put on a servile yoak of Liturgie” (YP 3:505), while a true Christian offers up prayer “without our premeditation” (YP 3:506).

In *Eikonoklastes*, Milton condemns Charles I for reappropriating the psalms of David in his own prayers throughout *Eikon Basilike*, an act that Milton sees as indicative of the king’s spiritual disingenuousness. Although Charles engages with the psalmic formalities, Milton claims that his external gestures of devotion belie his disingenuousness. What Milton found so alarming about Charles’s appropriation of scriptural hymns for his own political purposes was the fact that although the king preoccupied himself with the outward show of praise, his heart nevertheless remained aloof from worship. Responding to a chapter of *Eikon Basilike* that cautioned against the dangers of overzealous Reformist iconoclasm, Milton positions Charles’s use of the psalms as an act of literary and spiritual thievery: “He borrows Davids Psalms, as he charges the Assembly of Divines in his twentieth Discourse, *To have set forth old Catechisms, and confessions of faith new drest*. Had he borrow’d Davids heart, it had bin much the holier theft. For such kind of borrowing as this, if it be not better’d by the borrower, among good Authors is accounted *Plagiarie*” (YP 3:547). Charles is so incapable of mustering even a kernel of original sentiment that, throughout the *Eikon Basilike*, the king sings “to his soul vain
Psalms of exultation, as if the Parliament had assail’d his reason with the force of Arms” (YP 3:435).

Yet despite Milton’s vituperation against Charles I for his use of the psalms in his own attempts to pray, he nonetheless engages in a similar act of reappropriation in his efforts to poetically imagine Edenic prayer. Acts of repeated and rehearsed prayer abound in *Paradise Lost* and Milton unabashedly incorporates elements of both the psalms and the *Book of Common Prayer* into his own vision of Adam and Eve’s worship rites. In his article on Milton’s religious paradoxes, Daniel Shore makes the daring argument that Milton was not an iconoclast at all. According to Shore, Milton had no interest in enacting violence against religious images, but rather sought to leave us profoundly disenchanted with these icons, now hollowed out and utterly “void of spirit, value, and power” (24).6 Although Shore is right to note that Milton is not an iconoclast in any straightforward sense of that term, he overlooks the fact that Milton was deeply preoccupied with the task of preserving much more than the empty form of the icons he sought to recast. If Milton hollowed out inherited forms and images, his recasting of prescribed prayer in *Paradise Lost* indicates his refusal to leave them devoid of spiritual potential. In spite of his vigorous denouncement of Charles’s prescribed prayers, Milton gives implicit assent to the power of formal worship in choosing to include elements of liturgical praise in *Paradise Lost*. Milton’s conflicted portrayal of the power of common forms of prayer embodies the paradox of David Freedberg’s observation that acts of violence against an image suggest the iconoclast’s belief in the power of that image.7 Such is the case in Milton’s poetic attempts to recast liturgical praise in *Paradise Lost*. Milton’s reimagined Eden presents a platform for dismantling the forms of worship that he found so spiritually repugnant, while also animating their devotional power. What, precisely, is Milton doing when he imagines Adam and Eve participating in the very forms of worship and praise that he believed made his own contemporaries not only liable to receive substantial prison terms but more important (as in the case of Charles), guilty of spiritual thievery?8
Edenic Worship: Prayer before the Fall

The vehement antiliturgical sentiments of his prose tracts did not deter Milton from incorporating liturgical overtones into his poetic portrayal of prayer within the Edenic and epic spaces of *Paradise Lost*. Ever since Thomas Newton noted the liturgical and psalmic import of Adam and Eve’s morning hymn in book 5, scholars have observed the various formal genres to which the epic’s moments of spontaneous prayer nevertheless allude. The hymn, Cardinal Newton rightly observes, “is an imitation, or rather a sort of paraphrase of the 148th Psalm, and of what is a paraphrase upon that the Canticle placed after *Te Deum* in the Liturgy, ‘O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord.’”9 Both Psalm 148 and the canticle from the *Book of Common Prayer* serve as calls to worship, exhorting first the heavenly and angelic hosts to offer up praises to God before moving down the chain of creation, appealing in turn to the sun, moon, and stars and finally the small creatures that populate the earth itself. The voices of the many parts of creation—animate and inanimate, imposing and diminutive—coalesce in a chorus of praise, a universal chorus that is itself structurally united by the refrain calling each part of creation to contemplation and worship.

The refrain runs throughout the King James Version of the psalm—“Praise ye the Lord from the heavens: praise him in the heights. / Praise ye him all his angels: praise ye him all his hosts. / Praise ye him sun and moon: praise him all ye stars of light”10—as it does in the prayer book canticle: “O ye angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise ye him, and magnify him forever. / O ye heavens, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him forever…”11 Vestiges of both the refrain and the cosmic vision of the various parts of creation joining together in this chorus of praise are conserved in Milton’s own refashioning of the psalm and the canticle in Adam and Eve’s morning prayer. The hymn begins by exhorting those in heaven—“ye sons of light, / Angels” (5.160–61)—and the celestial bodies to join their voices in the hymn of praise, and moves down the cosmic chain as Adam and
Eve proceed to address even the smallest of living creatures: “Join voices all ye living souls, ye birds / That singing up to Heaven gate ascend” (5.197–98). The first morning prayer, as Milton imagines it, also retains something of a refrain that serves to structure the hymn’s blank verse, prompting all of creation to “sound His praise” (5.172), “resound / His praise” (5.178–79), “Vary...still new praise” (5.184), “still advance His praise” (5.191), “tune His praise” (5.196), “Bear...His praise” (5.199), and be “taught His praise” (5.204). Despite Milton’s insistence that Adam and Eve perform their morning rites “Unmeditated” (5.149), their orisons, “each morning duly paid” (5.145), nevertheless resonate profoundly with the display of outward show and liturgy to which Milton vehemently objected in his polemical tracts. In moments of what ought to be a deeply spontaneous outburst of praise, Milton presents us with an act of worship that startles us with its oddly rehearsed and reiterative nature.

Notwithstanding the indisputable liturgical and psalmic import of Adam and Eve’s prayers, no critic, to my knowledge, has considered the problems these forms of prayer pose when read alongside Milton’s iconoclastic and antiliturgical remarks. On the contrary, standard responses to the liturgical overtones of these Edenic prayers have avoided the paradox by pointing to the problems imposed by postlapsarian perception, arguing that our tendency to read set forms of prayer into these hymns indicates a failure of our own fallen perception. Our postlapsarian minds, such arguments contend, can neither situate these hymns within their original and unfallen contexts nor fully appreciate the perfect poetry of these spontaneous outbursts of praise. For example, Joseph Summers explains the hymn’s allusions to the various genres of worship as a means of approximating, for the benefit of postlapsarian readers, the perfection of unfallen human praise: “Various, here as always in the poem, has only the best connotations. No one ritual can suffice for the praise and thanksgiving due to God for the dazzling multiplicity of His perceived creation. More variety in sound is demanded than fallen man can conceive. Once again we are reminded that here we are dealing with yet perfect man, and once
again the perfection of praise is described.” Summers justifies the problematic presence of liturgical overtones in the hymn by pointing to the limitations of postlapsarian perception; Adam and Eve’s morning hymn is so supremely nuanced and variegated that fallen senses can never perfectly track the individual strains that come together in this most perfect moment of praise. This attempt at resolution is one to which Barbara Lewalski also subscribes, when she describes the hymn’s liturgical registers as an accommodation to the epic’s postlapsarian reader: “This complexity and comprehensiveness is at once a means of accommodation to us, suggesting the perfection of unfallen hymnody through a fusion of the most exalted hymnic forms we know, and also a testimony to the sublime artfulness of Adam and Eve’s poetic accomplishment.” Nevertheless, the explanation provided by Summers and Lewalski does not directly resolve the question as to why Milton assumed the risks—both theological and political—of incorporating into Adam and Eve’s prayers the very liturgical practices he argued were spiritually suspect and criminally punishable. We might be able to shed light upon the paradox of Milton’s views on worship using common forms of prayer when we consider the limitations not of our own decidedly postlapsarian senses, as Summers and Lewalski do, but also of those who inhabit Milton’s Edenic and epic spaces as well.

Early on in book 3, God watches Satan descending upon his newly created world. Addressing the Son, God the Father foretells the fall of humankind, but not without outlining a means by which his fallen creation might be able to regain their lost status before their creator. To the select few, God promises to impart the proper mode of prayer and repentance:

\[
\begin{align*}
(A) & \quad \text{I will clear their senses dark} \\
& \quad \text{What may suffice and soften stony hearts} \\
(B) & \quad \text{To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.} \\
(B) & \quad \text{To prayer, repentance, and obedience due,} \\
& \quad \text{Though but endeavored with sincere intent,} \\
(A) & \quad \text{Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eyes not shut.}
\end{align*}
\]

(3.188–93)
The chiastic structure of God’s description of proper repentance juxtaposes two acts of sensual awareness (which I have designated as “A” in the text above): first, God’s promise to “clear” human-kind’s “senses dark,” and second, the subsequent opening up of God’s ears and eyes to human prayer—provided that such prayers are properly performed. But even if we might bypass the description’s first pairing of these two kinds of sensory awakening, its second juxtaposition (B) immediately strikes us even upon a cursory perusal of the lines. God reveals that proper contrition should lead the penitent “To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.” And it is “To prayer, repentance, and obedience due” offered by the sincere penitent that God will willingly turn his attention. The nearly verbatim repetition of the two lines and their positioning one after another imbue God’s description of proper prayer with a strangely rehearsed and repeated quality, even as the content of the speech underscores the penitent’s “sincere intent.” Only those penitents who come to God exactly as prescribed—here grammatically and, by extension, theologically—will prompt God to forgiveness. In this vision of proper contrition, contra that of Eikonoklastes, it seems that the sincerity of the penitent need not preclude the practice of particular set forms of prayer.14 In the chiastic logic of God’s outline of the Fall, sensual awareness becomes intimately bound up with certain modes of prayer, suggesting that these kinds of prayer lend themselves not only toward a kind of devotional effectiveness but toward a perceptual effectiveness as well.

On one of the first evenings of their newly created life together, Adam and Eve’s performed prayers assume a deeply embodied quality; their prayers and praises both demand and foster heightened perceptual awareness. In book 4, Adam and Eve engage in a series of nocturnal rites that culminate in what is arguably the most sensational rite in Paradise Lost: sexual consummation. Under the open night sky, Adam and Eve offer up their orisons and prayers to God, remembering and reflecting upon the various parts of creation, both vast and minuscule, and thanking God for each of these blessings. Their prayers and evening rites now completed, Adam and Eve hasten to their bower for the night:
This said unanimous and other rites
Observing none but adoration pure
Which God likes best into their inmost bower
Handed they went and, eased the putting off
These troublesome disguises which we wear,
Straight side by side were laid. Nor turned I ween
Adam from his fair spouse nor Eve the rites
Mysterious of connubial love refused. \(4.736–43\)

Adam and Eve’s worshipful adoration of God—they “adored / The
god who made both sky, air, earth and heav’n” \(4.721–22\), spawns
another register of “adoration pure” between devoted soul mates.
The final rite that marks the evening’s close, that of the mysteries
of connubial love, becomes an extension of Adam and Eve’s unani-
mous praises of God. Indeed, there is something deeply sensual
about Adam and Eve’s nocturnal performance of worship, an act
that involves an opening up of the senses. This opening up of sen-
sual perception is, of course, the hallmark of the very kind of ideal
worship that God had earlier linked, in book 3, to the practice of
repeated prayer and praise.

But sexual intercourse is not the only act of worship that
involves the body in Milton’s paradise. Eating, almost as inflam-
matory an act for Milton’s contemporaries, likewise seems remi-
niscent (or perhaps anticipatory) of familiar postlapsarian forms of
repeated prayer. Yet Milton nevertheless manages to make Edenic
consumption a theologically and politically charged event. During
Raphael’s visit to Eden in book 5, Eve prepares a dinner feast for the
guest. All present—both human and angel—begin to partake of the
Edenic fruits and vegetables “with keen dispatch / Of real hunger
and concoctive heat / To transubstantiate” \(5.436–38\). To imagine
the daily ritual of eating as a mode of transubstantiation was, of
course, a comparison rife with theological and political connota-
tions for Milton’s seventeenth century audience. But here, Milton’s
decision to reimagine eating not only as an act of praise, but spe-
cifically as an act of transubstantiation, removed the act from the
rarified realm of the Communion liturgy in order to recontextual-
ize it as an everyday occurrence in the natural world. Both angelic
and human bodies require food alike to fuel their reason, which itself contains within it “every lower faculty / Of sense whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste, / Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate, / And corporeal to incorporeal turn” (5.410–13). Even the path toward achieving incorporeality, as described by Raphael, involves profoundly sensual and embodied processes. Eating, as a spiritual practice and a devotional address, constitutes one of the arenas in which Milton blurs the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Widening his definition of prayer to include repeated acts of eating and sexual intercourse in Eden, Milton recasts repeated acts of praise within the realm of the everyday.

As it turns out, the rituals of praise and worship not only provide means for humans and angels to make each other sensorily and bodily present to one another; prayer in *Paradise Lost* also serves to bring God *himself* within the limited perceptual ranges of human and angelic minds. The almost prefatory-like observations that begin Adam and Eve’s morning prayer register a disconnect between the descriptors the pair uses in their address to God and the occasion itself, a moment of spontaneous worship that ought to draw Adam and Eve closer to God. They begin, as they did the night before, by litanizing the parts of God’s creation, before attempting a description of God himself:

\[
\text{Thyself how wondrous then,} \\
\text{Unspeakable, who sitt’st above these heavens} \\
\text{To us invisible or dimly seen} \\
\text{In these Thy lowest works!} \\
\text{[5.155–58]}
\]

Repeated acts of praise serve to make what would otherwise prove an “unspeakable” and “invisible” God sensorily present to the Edenic worshipers as they move through the various parts of creation in which God’s presence might nevertheless be “dimly seen.” These addresses to God in the vocative, despite the fact that the God to whom they are directed is removed from sensory access, nevertheless have the effect of *opening up* Adam and Eve’s senses, making it possible to overcome the distance posed by God’s unspeakable and invisible qualities. For Milton, the act of drawing God’s presence into the perceptive ken of the one who prays remained the objective
not only of human prayer, but also of those sung by angels. Indeed, the prefatory address to God that commences what might be conceived of as the world’s first act of praise is initiated by a chorus of angels who commemorate the newly created world:

Eternal King, Thee Author of all being,
Fountain of light, Thyself invisible
Amidst the glorious brightness where Thou sitt’st
Throned inaccessible.  (3.374–77)

The oddity of this description of God’s glory lies in the devotional force of these angelic prayers, which paradoxically bring his presence into relief only by drawing a cloud about his radiance: “Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear” (3.380). If neither angels nor human beings can perceive God directly, as they can each other through the daily rites of eating and sex, they can nevertheless do so obliquely, through his creation or even by means of the fringes of his cloak.

For both heavenly and Edenic inhabitants, Milton imagines that certain forms of prayer would have the effect of making God’s presence perceptible anew, with each instance of prayerful meditation. Adam and Eve undoubtedly performed repeated acts of praise in Eden, and indeed, as Lewalski observes, Milton surely expects us to understand the pair’s prayers and praise (both those that are immediately recognizable as such and those more quotidian acts of worship) as repeated features of life in paradise. But Milton so radically redefines the boundaries of what it means to engage with the rites of worship that, by the end of book 5, set forms of prayer as they are practiced in Eden seem to have little to do with the idolatrous and popish forms of worship that Milton denounces in the catalogues of human depravity that bookend the epic. Milton unhinges the very notion of the common prayer from its seventeenth century contexts and recasts the practice as one that orders the fundamental structure of Edenic experience. Much as Milton recasts the image of Charles I in *Eikonoklastes*, we might similarly read *Paradise Lost* as Milton’s twin effort at tearing down and reconceptualizing the practice of worship prescribed. Adam and Eve indeed partake in a protoliturgical form of public prayer,
but they do so without all of the formalities of orthodox Anglican worship. Milton gives us glimpses of familiar forms of praise, and yet he presents these moments within radically unfamiliar contexts. In redefining the boundaries of Edenic prayer, quotidian acts assume the solemnity of the liturgy while formal worship achieves the uninhibited qualities of spontaneous prayer. This tendency toward inversion—making prayer before the Fall look like postlapsarian worship—will likewise shape Milton’s depiction of Adam and Eve’s prayers after their expulsion from Eden.

**After the Fall: The First Common Prayer**

Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve’s prayers already incorporate many of the features of rehearsed forms of worship that Milton associated with disingenuous praise. But the reiterative nature of prayer in *Paradise Lost* is perhaps most fully realized after the Fall. Newly cognizant of their fallen state, Eve suggests to Adam the possibility of suicide as a means of terminating the cycle of sin and death that Adam has just predicted for the generations of their descendants:

Then, both ourselves and seed at once to free  
From what we fear for both, let us make short,  
Let us seek Death, or, he not found, supply  
With our own hands his office on ourselves.  

(10.999–1002)

Although it seems that Eve only corroborates the sentiments Adam has only just articulated prior to this moment (“Why comes not Death, / Said he, with one thrice-acceptable stroke / To end me?” [10.854–56]), Milton’s narrative intervention nevertheless attributes Adam’s levelheadedness amid his wife’s despair to his sturdier spiritual and rational faculties: “But Adam with such counsel nothing swayed / To better hopes his more attentive mind” [10.1010–11]. Seeking some “safer resolution” [10.1029], Adam proposes that they instead move God to pity through penitence and prayer. He proceeds to outline the observable qualities of contrition that he deems will prove most effective in eliciting God’s pity and forgiveness:
What better can we do than to the place  
Repairing where He judged us prostrate fall  
Before Him reverent and there confess  
Humbly our faults and pardon beg, with tears  
Watering the ground and with our sighs the air  
Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite in sign  
Of sorrow unfeigned and humiliation meek?  

Adam’s description of the features proper to effective prayer inspires in the couple an overwhelming impulse to pray. Adam and Eve at once fall prostrate, commencing their supplications in exactly the manner that he has just described:

They forthwith to the place  
Repairing where He judged them prostrate fell  
Before Him reverent and both confessed  
Humbly their faults and pardoned begged, with tears  
Watering the ground and with their sighs the air  
Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite in sign  
Of sorrow unfeigned and humiliation meek.

In extending their appeal for pity, Adam and Eve unwittingly undertake it upon themselves to perform the fallen world’s first common prayer. Their highly rehearsed and measured prayer indeed seems to hearken back to God’s prescient observation, early on in book 3 of the epic, that lapsed men and women will be able to regain their former favor with God through forms of prayer that are both premeditated and conscientiously performed.

By turning our attention to the interplay between repetition and memory in *Paradise Lost* we might be able to shed light on what exactly Milton is doing by imagining Adam and Eve’s first post-lapsarian prayer as a deeply rehearsed act of supplication. As he did with the genealogies of tyrants and idol worshippers, Milton also adeptly constructs a genealogy of memory for Eden’s original inhabitants. At the close of book 6, Raphael concludes his account of Satan’s fall from heaven by commanding Adam to remember, as if Adam too now has access to the memory of events that transpired before his creation: “Firm they might have stood / Yet fell. Remember, and fear to transgress!” [6.911–12]. The archangel
continues his account of those events that occur before human memory in book 7, which he outlines for Adam’s benefit:

how this world
Of Heav’n and Earth conspicuous first began,
When and whereof created, for what cause,
What within Eden or without was done
Before his memory.

Memory, for the earth’s first inhabitants, is constructed rather than naturally acquired over the course of a lifetime. But apart from the express purpose of constructing a genealogy of human memory that stretches backward in time to those events that happened even before Adam and Eve’s creation, Raphael’s retelling of the Creation story has another less obvious purpose as well. After relating those events before memory, Raphael continues with his account, reiterating even the circumstances surrounding Adam’s own creation, the subsequent creation of Eve, and God’s first conversations with the couple. The archangel’s verbatim reiteration of God’s commandment to refrain from eating the forbidden fruit — “In the day thou eat’st, thou diest: / Death is the penalty imposed. Beware!” (7.544–55) — in effect functions as a present reminder of the continued validity of the prohibition.

Raphael’s account of Creation is, of course, not the first Milton has presented to his readers. Before we receive Raphael’s full account, we have already gleaned the central events of the Creation story: first, through the perspective of the fallen Lucifer upon beholding the splendor of the world for the first time in book 4, and second, through the conversation between the couple overheard by Satan in which Eve recounts the memory of her own creation and initial encounter with Adam. Raphael’s account of the Creation story, then, serves as both extension and reiteration, filling in gaps in our knowledge and reminding us of the details of Creation we have already culled from earlier moments in the epic. But Milton’s own vision of the Creation story does not end with Raphael’s. Immediately after Raphael’s detailed retelling of Creation, Adam reiterates the events surrounding his own creation, despite the fact that the angel has just outlined these events in full. After detailing
his newly discovered sensory awareness and embodiedness, Adam then reiterates God’s admonition in a much fuller account than the one just supplied by Raphael:

This Paradise I give thee, count it thine  
To till and keep and of the fruit to eat.  
Of every tree that in the garden grows  
Eat freely with glad heart: fear here no dearth!  
But of the tree whose operation brings  
Knowledge of good and ill (which I have set  
The pledge of thy obedience and thy faith  
Amid the garden by the Tree of Life)  
Remember what I warn thee: shun to taste  
And shun the bitter consequence!    (8.319–28)

Adam’s repeated account of God’s prohibition clearly serves a function other than information dissemination, for Milton’s readers have only just received the full account of Creation from Raphael in book 7. On the contrary, Adam’s compulsion to retell the angel’s Creation account is an act that functions not unlike the epic’s vision of reiterated prayer. God’s command to commit his admonition to memory—“Remember what I warn thee”—is literally carried out in Adam’s verbatim reiteration of the prohibition itself; the simple act of retelling in Eden has in effect become an act of obedience and praise of God.

But why would Milton have been invested in imagining a particular kind of recollection or reiteration that doubles as a form of worship? If we return our attention to God’s justification for Creation, we perhaps also discern a theological precedent for this particular kind of remembrance that expresses itself precisely through repeated telling. After Satan’s fall, God expresses his intent to create “another world” that will supplement the damage left in the wake of Lucifer’s fall:

But lest his heart exalt him in the harm  
Already done to have dispeopled Heav’n  
(My damage fondly deemed) I can repair  
That detriment (if such it be to lose  
Self-lost) and in a moment will create  
Another world.  (7.150–55)
Here God’s act of creation—re-creation, in fact—is a response to Satan’s fallenness; indeed, it seems that the heavenly counterreaction to sin is to crowd it out through repeated acts of divine power. On this newly made world God will create “out of one man a race / Of men innumerable there to dwell” (7.155–56). God’s creative acts of repetition as well as Adam and Eve’s (future) procreative acts of repetition serve as testament to the fact that divine power ultimately cannot be lessened even by Satan’s attempts to “dispeople” the heavenly premises when he drags a portion of the heavenly host with him on his descent below. The logic of God’s decision to create anew suggests that each part of the created universe serves as testament to God’s undiminished glory. Indeed, God presents the creation of the new world as an extension of the rites of praise performed by all of heaven:

Heav’n yet populous retains
Number sufficient to possess her realms,
Though wide, and this high temple to frequént
With ministéries due and solemn rites.   (7.146–49)

While the number of remaining angels in heaven remains sufficient for the performance of worship rites, God argues that this, of course, is no reason why there should not also be additional voices that might join in upon the rites of praise from their dwelling places in this other world.

God’s justification for creation—and re-creation—explains Milton’s inclusion of Adam’s seemingly redundant act of recollection. But like eating and sex, we have already seen that prayer and worship in *Paradise Lost* need not be restricted to the rarified sphere of formal worship. Prayer and praise in *Paradise Lost* might be as simple as an act of remembering or retelling. Perhaps this explains why the epic includes so many separate retellings of the Creation story, even when the information conveyed by each retelling has been recounted recently. When Adam repeats God’s prohibition verbatim, he is engaging in the very form of worship that God imagines inheres within the act of creation—and re-creation. The inherited story of humankind’s creation is recast and refashioned, and in doing so, it is relived.
Recasting Paradise

According to the definitions of prayer and praise implicitly put forth by Milton’s epic, the whole of *Paradise Lost*—which includes not just one but several retellings of the Creation account—might itself be read, as Samuel Johnson chose to read it, as akin to a kind of prayer, spurring its readers toward proper devotion. The epic’s portrayal of prayer, precisely because of its liturgical undertones, would have undoubtedly piqued those contemporaries of Milton who sympathized with his iconoclastic efforts. How would radical Puritans have responded to a work, written by a man who himself argued against extrascriptural aids to devotion, whose central premise was to “justify the ways of God to men” (1.26)? And how does Milton himself respond to the theological and poetic anxieties that he might have felt at writing an epic whose reformulation of Scripture might seem to veer dangerously close to sacrilege? The answers to these questions lie in the patterns of iconoclasm that shape both *Paradise Lost* and Milton’s career as a polemicist.

At the moment when God establishes his prohibition against consuming the forbidden fruit, we have seen that he offsets the heavy requirement by handing over to Adam and Eve paradise itself and its plethora of edible fruits: “This Paradise I give thee, count it thine / To till and keep and of the fruit to eat” (8.319–20). Adam and Eve’s act of disobedience will eventually overwrite both God’s prohibition and his paradisal gift to humankind. Like the covenant between God and human beings, ultimately destroyed by Adam and Eve’s violation of God’s prohibition, so too will paradise itself meet destruction because of human shortcoming. It seems, then, that the epic’s own narrative arc is self-destructing, so that by the close of *Paradise Lost* Milton’s own act of poetic construction—the image of paradise itself—undergoes a dissolution of sorts. Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden at the close of *Paradise Lost* is thus perhaps the epic’s final act of iconoclasm, undertaken by a poet who has spent the whole of his political career demolishing an array of icons, both secular and religious.

In book 11 of the epic, immediately after Adam and Eve conclude their first postlapsarian prayer, Adam beholds an approaching
angel and imagines that the heavenly visitor bears tidings about the new laws God has issued for them as inhabitants of Eden. Adam attempts to placate Eve by suggesting, wrongly, that God might allow the two of them to continue living in Eden, only under slightly altered circumstances: “Eve, now expect great tidings which perhaps / Of us will soon determine or impose / New laws to be observed” (11.226–28). And thus the pair meets bitter disappointment when Michael informs them of their imminent expulsion from the garden: “O! unexpected stroke worse than of death!” Adam laments. “Must I thus leave thee, Paradise?” (11.268–69). His question is only partly rhetorical, of course, and Milton Iconoclastes, always adept at pairing demolition with a parallel act of reformulation, is not prepared to relinquish the image of paradise altogether. For although Milton builds into the very structure of his monumental vision of paradise its own self-directed demolition, he manages to salvage the idea of paradise. No longer tethered to a geographic locale, paradise becomes a metaphorized description of one’s inward terrain.

Michael finally supplies the answer to Adam’s question at the close of book 12: “Then wilt thou not be loath / To leave this Paradise but shalt possess / A paradise within thee, happier far” (12.585–87). All his life Milton was profoundly preoccupied with the possibility of cultivating genuine devotion, so much so that he condemned those—monarchs, clergy, and laypeople alike—who seemed to him merely dissemblers in their religion and politics. Thus, it is unsurprising that Milton finds a way of reimagining the tragedy of human fallenness as an opportunity for furthering inwardness. For those who live after the Fall, Milton imagines the possibility of internalizing the various forms of Edenic prayers as part of a concerted attempt to reclaim our primordial losses and to approximate paradisal wholeness and joy. If paradise and Edenic prayer are dismantled at the close of Paradise Lost, they are equally recast anew in Milton’s suggestion of the life that awaits Adam and Eve as they leave the garden for the wide world before them.

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46. For example, William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, N.C., 2005), 31, 62–63, proposes that the religious may find in the mysteries of their own faiths a basis for self-questioning and tolerance, and Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 11, outlines how secularly minded citizens can help believers translate religious arguments into more universally accessible forms.


48. Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 5, 10.


50. Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 11–12.

51. Ibid., 10; italics mine.

52. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 185.


54. Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” 53; see also 37, 50–53. Asad (*Formations of the Secular*, 186) raises concerns about Taylor’s position that are similar to my own.

**Notes to Hokama, “Praying in Paradise”**

I am grateful to James Simpson for sharpening my argument about Milton’s religious paradoxes, and for his conversation and generosity when this project was still in its nascent stages. Conversations with Barbara Lewalski proved instrumental in shaping my thoughts about
postlapsarian prayer in *Paradise Lost*, and Joseph Koerner and Stephen Greenblatt read over an earlier version of this essay and extended insightful comments on its direction. Laura Lunger Knoppers and the anonymous reader at *Milton Studies* provided helpful suggestions about the historical framing of this essay once it was in manuscript form. Finally, I thank audiences in the English departments at Harvard University and Northeastern University for listening to and commenting on portions of my argument.


not strictly entail violence; the paradox of iconoclasm for Milton was that it involved simultaneous destruction and creation [3].


8. During its five-year tenure as a parliamentary advisory committee between 1643 and 1649, the Westminster Assembly issued several documents suggesting a restructuring of the Church of England, one of which, The Directory of the Publick Worship of God, was approved by Parliament in 1645 as a replacement for the church’s standard Book of Common Prayer. Milton supported the Assembly’s rejection of the prayer book in favor of the Directory as well as the proposed year-long prison term for third-time offenders who practiced a form of worship not prescribed by the Directory. Despite its proscription during the Interregnum, a number of churches continued to use the Book of Common Prayer during services. Although the criminal statutes against using the prayer book were rarely enforced, one imagines that these statutes nevertheless profoundly affected those who chose to pray using the proscribed liturgical forms. Like the rarely enforced sodomy laws in regions of the contemporary United States, the very possibility of criminal punishment holds ramifications for one’s state of mind whenever we engage in private acts in private places—both in the prayer closet and in the bedroom. For a historical overview of the Westminster Assembly’s proceedings, see Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography (Malden, Mass., 2002), 161–62; and Regina M. Schwartz, Remembering and Repeating: On Milton’s Theology and Poetics (1988; repr., Chicago, 1993), 75.


14. Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago, 2001), 4, argues that certain early modern Anglican thinkers did not make distinctions between inward sincerity and outward show of devotion. Targoff maintains that this melding of inward and outward explains why the Anglican church did not view private devotion as incompatible with the public liturgy: “the religious establishment could simultaneously seem uninterested in private belief and yet demonstrate repeatedly its desire to subsume private devotion within the public liturgy of the church.” On the contrary, Targoff argues that mainstream Anglican thought postulated that outward display of devotion was conducive to cultivating genuine sincerity on the part of the one who prayed. Milton, of course, was hardly typical in his Protestantism, and he makes his disdain for common forms of prayer manifestly clear in his polemical tracts—for the very reason that he believed that there was a distinction between inward and outward (see my opening discussion of Milton’s response to Charles’s reappropriation of the psalms). There nevertheless remains something to be said for Milton’s willingness—whoever conscious or not—to incorporate elements of prescribed prayer into his vision of Edenic (and thus ostensibly devotionally sincere) worship.

15. The commemorative effect of prayer in *Paradise Lost* is detailed most thoroughly by Regina M. Schwartz, who argues that Adam and Eve’s morning hymn serves “as a final cleansing of the poisoned atmosphere” created by Eve’s foreboding dream the evening before. The hymn then returns Eden to a state of equilibrium, dispelling the malicious intent Satan has insinuated into Eve’s ear and returning the couple to the remembrance of their obligations to God. Schwartz’s argument about the morning hymn’s function echoes Summers’s earlier observation that the hymn’s placement immediately after Eve’s
insidious dream charts the oscillation in Eden between temptation and reconciliation as if Adam and Eve’s prayers, even as they are still blameless, somehow serve to foreshadow good Christian practice after the Fall. While neither Summers nor Schwartz attempts to suggest the perceptual potentialities of repeated prayer as I have tried to do here, the idea that prayer serves as a continual safeguard against the twin threats of forgetfulness and sinfulness certainly resonates with my argument that perceptual awareness and proximity to God requires repeated, and not isolated, acts of prayer and meditation. See Summers, The Muse’s Method, 73–74; and Schwartz, Remembering and Repeating, 72.

16. Lewalski, Rhetoric of Literary Forms, 205.

17. In his Lives of the English Poets, Samuel Johnson criticizes the genres of both devotional and sacred poetry for their aesthetic shortcomings and their potential sacrilegious import. Nevertheless, he imagines that Milton manages to conserve the devotional purposes of these inferior forms of religious poetry within Paradise Lost without slavishly binding the epic to their formal requirements: “Whoever considers the few radical positions which the Scriptures afforded him will wonder by what energetic operations he expanded them to such extent and ramified them to so much variety, restrained as he was by religious reverence from licentiousness of fiction.” See vol. 1 of Johnson’s Lives of the English Poets, 3 vols., ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1905), 182–83. For a discussion of Milton’s parallel acts of prayer and poesis in Paradise Lost, see Stephen Fix, “Johnson and the ‘Duty’ of Reading Paradise Lost,” ELH 52, no. 3 (1985): 649–71, esp. 656–59.

Notes to Kerr and Hale, “The Origins and Development of Milton’s Theology”

1. We quote De doctrina Christiana from John K. Hale and J. Donald Cullington, eds., The Oxford Complete Works of John Milton, vol. 8 (Oxford, 2012); hereafter cited as OM when referencing the Oxford apparatus. References to the text of De doctrina are by page number of the manuscript [MS], housed in the National Archives, London, formerly the Public Record Office, where it is SP 9/61. Wollebius’s Compendium theologiae Christianae first appeared at Basel in 1626, with a second, “correctior,” edition appearing there in 1634. The subsequent English printings, beginning with the first in 1642, derive from this second edition. No external evidence indicates which edition Milton used, and the apparent lack of significant variants prevents our making any inferences. We quote, therefore, from the