Milton's Satan and Virgil's Juno: The "Perverseness" of Disobedience in *Paradise Lost*

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In the "Virgilian" opening lines of *Paradise Lost* Milton establishes an allusive correspondence between Satan's "Envy and Revenge" (I, 35),¹ which caused the Fall of our Grand Parents, and envious Juno's wrathful persecution of Aeneas. Yet in Book IX Milton endows the Satan-Juno analogy with an ingenious twist when he has Satan speak to Eve about God's alleged motives for not allowing her and Adam to eat of the Tree: "Or is it envy, and can envy dwell/In heav'nly breasts?" (IX, 729-30) These lines echo the words with which in the opening of the *Aeneid* Virgil reproaches Juno for her treatment of Aeneas: "tantaene animis caelestibus irae?" ("Can such great wrath be in heavenly souls?" *Aen.* I, 11).² We already know from the "Virgilian" opening lines of *Paradise Lost* that the Devil's own motive for corrupting mankind is envy. His words are therefore a Satanic inversion of the Mantuan's question which rebukes Juno for trying to stand in the way of Rome's destiny: much like the envious Juno, Satan tries to stand in the way of God's plans for man.

Since the question in the First *Aeneid* is spoken by Virgil the poet, one might be inclined to ask: is in IX, 729-30 Milton the poet speaking? Yes, Milton is speaking, indirectly: he is placing the reader in a position where the latter can on his own arrive at the conclusion that God's command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge does *not* spring from envy. God cannot be envious because He is *heav'nly* in a sense in which Juno and the other Graeco-Roman deities are not, i.e., in the Christian sense. Milton is using Virgil's question, which the Mantuan has to answer with yes, for the purpose of contrasting the pagan deities, who are "heav'nly" only in the literal sense of living on Mt. Olympus, with the Christian God. More important, in an ingeniously esemplastic allusive transaction Milton uses the Mantuan's question to have Satan expose himself for what he is, and thus to explain why man fell.

Regardless of whether Virgil personally believed in Roman mythology, his question is an editorializing comment in that it implies that some of

the painful events in Rome's history, i.e., the Punic Wars that resulted from the Dido-Aeneas affair, occurred because Juno was more wrathful than befits a deity. Milton avoids Virgil's editorializing and lets history speak for itself, in lines which echo the Mantuan's own. Milton, poetically speaking, has Satan usurp the position of Virgil the poet who is trying to endow some of the darker events in Rome's history with religious sanction. With this allusive transaction, Milton has already covered a good distance in his attempt to "assert Eternal Providence" (I, 25). By having Satan himself ask the question about divine envy, i.e., the question Virgil had asked concerning Satan's analogue Juno, Milton not only justifies "the ways of God to men" but places the blame where it belongs. The point is not only that after Satan's and his followers' expulsion from heaven there no longer can be envy in "heav'nly breasts," but also that Satan inflicts his "Envy and Revenge" upon mankind *because he is no longer heavenly*. The fall from heaven has placed Satan even below the pagan deities: his position is now "infernal" (I, 34). Whereas in the plot of the *Aeneid* Juno finally relents, and whereas in Rome's history the consequences of Juno's envious actions will be terminated by the eventual defeat of Carthage and the goddess will be worshipped as a benign deity, Satan and his crew will be perpetual instigators of strife.

We have seen how Milton ingeniously adapts Virgil's famous question concerning Juno's wrath ("Can such great wrath be in heavenly souls?") to expose the malice of Juno's analogue Satan, who in Book IX asks the "Virgilian" question concerning the deity's motive. In Book III Milton had *already* made use of the Mantuan's question. God, after foretelling Adam's and Eve's Fall and their punishment, asks whether anyone in heaven would be willing to pay the price for the redemption of man:

Say Heav'nly Powers, where shall we find such love,
Which of ye will be mortal to redeem
Man's mortal crime, and just th' unjust to save,
Dwells in all Heaven charity so dear?

He ask'd, but all the Heav'nly Choir stood mute.

(III, 213-17, italics added)

While, as I have attempted to demonstrate, Virgil's question and Satan's distortion thereof are merely rhetorical, the "Virgilian" question which Milton puts into God's mouth generates epic suspense and concludes with the epic formula, "He ask'd." Line 217 recalls epic contests where the challenge is so prohibiting that at first no one dares to step forward (e.g. the boxing contest in *Aen.* V, 378). The function of the allusion is of course to portray Christ as an epic hero who accepts a challenge that is inevitably mortal — whereas an epic contest usually is not deadly.

Christ, however, is an epic hero with a difference, one that is motivated not by personal fame but by love. Milton, then, is not only replacing Juno's *wrath* with Christ's *charity*, but, when he describes how God's love manifests itself in His own Son, our poet is already in Book III answering the question that in Book IX Juno's analogue will ask concerning God's envy.

When in Books III and IX Milton echoes Virgil's "Can such great wrath. . .?" question, he is conducting allusive transactions not only with the Mantuan but also between his own adaptations of Virgil. Virgil, too, frequently repeats earlier lines, sometimes verbatim, sometimes in altered form; he usually does this for the sake of economy. When in Book IX Milton echoes the adaptation of the "Can such great wrath. . .?" question which he had made in Book III, he does so for thematic purposes. The two passages in Books III and IX palimpsestically inform each other, in an interaction where the earlier question already provides the salvation for the evil which will be caused by the later question. This salvation is possible only because the *ira* of the pagan gods, which through his allusion Milton has delegated to Satan, is replaced by God's *caritas*: the relation between Milton's two questions is made even more suggestive by the manner in which both questions adapt Virgil's line. It is an ingenious variation of his practice of directing questions to God or heaven that, in a passage imitating Virgil's query about heaven, Milton has God Himself ask a question about heaven.

I have by no means exhausted Milton's palimpsestic use of Virgil's question. While Book III invalidates the accusation made in Book IX, there is a passage in Book VI which would seem to support Satan's statements about what can dwell in "heav'nly breasts." Satan's crew has been all but defeated in the battle in heaven yet "to rebellious fight rallied thir Powers" (VI, 786), and Raphael comments on their obduracy:

In heav'nly Spirits could such perverseness dwell?
But to convince the proud what Signs avail,
Or Wonders move th' obdurate to relent? (VI, 788-90)

Line 788 echoes, of course, *Aen.* I, 11.³ Since Raphael knows that his question has to be answered with yes, it is like Virgil's rhetorical. But then he uses it, as Virgil had done, to express his surprise and indignation: the actions of Satan and his followers are perverse because they are occurring in "heav'nly Spirits." The perverseness of their proud disobedience is underscored by the Virgilian allusion: according to Virgil's question, Juno's behaviour is "perverse" in that it does not befit a heavenly soul.

However, also allusively operative is the contrast between Juno and Satan. Whereas, submitting to Fate and Fate's guarantor Jupiter, Juno

will eventually "relent," the rebelling angels will not. I noted earlier that Books I and IX present Satan as no longer heavenly. At this point in the plot, however, the rebelling angels are still "heav'nly Spirits" — and, as the allusion suggests, they would have so remained had they only done what Juno eventually did. At this point, for the rebelling angels forgiveness, reconciliation and — if the following analogy with the religious-cultural context of Virgil's Juno is permissible — reintegration would still have been possible. Instead they renew their fighting and, plunged into hell, the heavenly spirits become "infernal" ones. Therefore, when in Book IX Satan asks about envy dwelling in heavenly breasts, the reader will reply: envy can *not* live in heavenly breasts — because Satan has been driven from heaven. Especially in view of the horrible event that is about to take place on earth, the reader may try to take comfort in the fact that at least *heaven* has been purged of Satanic perverseness. Perhaps the reader will react to Satan's reminiscence of his former heavenly status with a touch of irony: Satan's "Virgilian" self-reminiscence is also a reminder of God's earlier provision for man's salvation.

However, God's "Virgilian" question serves not only as a foil for Satan's question in Book IX, but also as a counterpart to Raphael's question concerning the perverseness in heavenly spirits. In other words, Raphael's "Virgilian" question in Book VI palimpsestically interacts with the two passages in Books III and IX, and it serves as a thematic link between the two: man would not have received heaven's "charity so dear" had it not been for the perverseness in heavenly spirits. Had it not been for Satan's envy, a character trait which in Book IX Satan imputes to God, the *felix culpa* would never have occurred.

I noted earlier that Milton is deviating from his practice of directing questions to heaven or God when he puts the Mantuan's words into God's mouth; he commits a similar deviation when in Book IX he has Satan ask Virgil's question. With regard to the latter locus, I have argued that Milton wishes to avoid Virgil's editorializing and instead let history speak for itself. Our poet pursues the same purpose in his allusive transaction in Book III: God's "Dwells in all heaven charity so dear" is less a question than a request — perhaps a fiat of sorts? — in the form of an epic challenge that will eventually lead to the regaining of Paradise. On the other hand, since God's words imitate the lines spoken by Virgil the poet and thus allusively incorporate the latter's questioning posture, I submit that, as in Satan's question in Book IX, Milton the poet is speaking also. Or perhaps, more precisely, while Milton objectively reports history he is at the same time expressing his own joyous astonishment at heaven's "charity so dear." In a sense, then, Milton *is* directing a question to God and heaven, as he will do in Satan's words in Book IX. And he has God Himself give the answer, just as our poet does with Satan in Book IX where the question will actually be an answer.

In Raphael's question too Milton, while he lets history speak for itself, is directing a question to heaven. The question is governed by a feeling of abhorrence: how can such perverseness dwell in heavenly spirits? While in its metaphysical dimension Raphael's question by far transcends the Mantuan's, it is more closely "Virgilian" than is God's query. Whereas in God's words Milton alludes to the selfish wrath of a pagan deity for the sake of contrast, i.e., in order to underscore the charity of the Christian heaven, he is here alluding to Juno in order to incorporate Virgil's abhorrence at the actions of a heavenly spirit. Since the Junoesque Satan cannot match God, he vents his hatred on man. This is exactly what Juno does as she is unable to avert Fate, and it seems quite appropriate that Milton mentions her by name in the prelude to the Fall:

Sad task, yet argument
Not less but more Heroic than the wrath
Of stern Achilles on his Foe pursu'd
Thrice Fugitive about Troy Wall; or rage
Of Turnus for Lavinia disespous'd,
Or Neptune's ire or Juno's, that so long
Perplex'd the Greek and Cytherea's Son. (IX, 13-19)

As Davis P. Harding has pointed out, Milton on several occasions allusively associates Turnus, Aeneas' direct opponent in Italy, with Satan.⁴ In addition to the fact that "Turnus is the specific means Virgil adopts to criticize the standards of Achilles,"⁵ there are numerous resemblances between Achilles and Satan. Harding notes that "like Satan, Achilles defies a central authority. . . Both are motivated by revenge. . . , proud . . . , self-centered. Above all else, both passionately seek to win glory for themselves."⁶ Neptune too, the Homeric model for Virgil's wrathful Juno, is in his destructiveness motivated by self-centered revenge, and as such "Satanic" in the sense in which Juno is. As Harding observes,

Milton follows the Virgilian pattern as scrupulously as his subject matter will allow. He invests Satan with a might far greater than that of Achilles. . . So endowed, Satan begins his assault on mankind. With the Fall, he wins a temporary victory, but the Fall is merely a prelude to the more crucial conflict that follows. This conflict. . . does not take place on the battlefield . . . but is fought out in the arena of Adam's moral being. It is there, at the end of the Tenth Book, that Satan is finally and permanently repulsed when Adam humbles himself before God and with contrite heart submits to His will.⁷

One would have to add that Satan's power is also far greater than that of the two deities mentioned in the invocation that serves as prelude to the Fall. Neptune and Juno are occasionally outwitted by opposing deities (Athene, Hermes/Mercury, and Venus) and actually possess the

frustrating knowledge that Odysseus and Aeneas will eventually reach their destinations. In contrast, Satan has only one direct opponent: man. Still innocent, Adam does not possess Odysseus' cunning, and when he fails to heed Raphael's warning he shows that he lacks the firmness which Aeneas exhibits when he follows Mercury's admonition, in a scene that Milton imitates in the angel's appearance to Adam.⁸ For this reason, Adam's battle is indeed "more Heroic" than the epic events alluded to in IX, 13-19. It is more heroic also because the epic adversary has become internalized in a psychomachia, in a psychomachia where Adam has to struggle with Milton's adaptation of the Virgilian Juno, not on the ocean, not on the battlefield, but in his own will.⁹ It is therefore only by submitting to God that Adam can finally exorcise the heavenly-turned-infernal spirit that had taken hold of him. And in submitting to God's will, Adam is indeed "more Heroic" than the Aeneas of Virgil's epic. While Aeneas has no power over the ill-willed deity, he actually does not need such power since his course is fated anyway, i.e., Aeneas and Juno cannot in the last analysis interfere with each other's goals. Aeneas, then, does not really have to do anything on his own in order for Juno's interference to be ineffective. In contrast, after the Fall Adam is in Satan's power, but through a heroic act of his own in order for Juno's interference to be ineffective. In contrast, obedience that is represented by Juno's analogue.

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Notes

- 1 Citations are from *Paradise Lost*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1962).
- 2 Citations are from *P. Vergili opera*, ed. F. A. Hirtzel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).
- 3 Hughes, 159n.
- 4 *The Club of Hercules: Studies in the Classical Background of Paradise Lost* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), p. 50.
- 5 Harding, p. 46.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 P. 51.
- 8 Cf. Francis C. Blessington, "Maia's Son and Raphael Once More," *Milton Quarterly*, 8 (1974), 108-13.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 109.