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Believing and Doubting as Hermeneutic Method: Reading and Teaching Paradise Lost

Cover Page Footnote

Sheridan Blau, Professor Emeritus of English and Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is now teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he heads the graduate program in English Education and the Teaching of English. He has published widely in the areas of seventeenth-century literature, composition theory, professional development for teachers, the politics of English teaching and learning, and the teaching of composition and literature. He is a former president of NCTE.

Believing and Doubting as Hermeneutic Method: Reading and Teaching *Paradise Lost*

Sheridan Blau

A Brief Critical History

From the time of its publication in 1660, Milton's *Paradise Lost* has posed for most of its readers a powerful experience of believing and doubting, either with respect to the doctrinal content of the epic or to its artistic integrity. Through the eighteenth century it seems to have been mostly an experience of believing, as it was for Samuel Johnson who revered the poem for its orthodox doctrine, while claiming (not surprisingly perhaps) that no reader ever wished it longer. Beginning with the Romantics—most notably Blake and Shelley—and continuing through much of the twentieth century, the poem more typically offered most of its readers—at least most of its scholarly and most famously literate readers—an experience of doubting, represented in the academic community by A. J. A. Waldock's extended analysis of what he identifies as the conflict between the doctrine and the drama of *Paradise Lost*.¹ Waldock's analysis may be said to offer a modern version of Shelley's claim that Milton was secretly or (in more modern terms) unconsciously on the devil's side, with the explicit Christian doctrine that the poem ostensibly asserts systematically subverted by a drama that shows more sympathy and political affiliation with Satan than with God and thereby implicitly refutes Milton's own explicit attempt to "justify God's ways to man." Aside from suggesting that Milton found Satan a better spokesperson than Adam for the "deepest expression of his own interests" (24), Waldock argues that Milton's poetic loyalties ultimately had to subvert the religious doctrine of his epic in order to meet the requirement of logical verisimilitude, which applies no less to the genre of the epic than it does to its successor genre of the novel. And there is no way logically and convincingly to dramatize disastrous choices and fatal actions on the part of our first parents, claims Waldock, except by constructing a pre-lapsarian universe that carries in it the seeds of its own inevitable destruction, thereby revealing the culpability of the creator of that universe.

Stanley Fish in *Surprised by Sin* reshaped the interpretive landscape of *Paradise Lost*, while challenging the prevailing canons of contemporary critical theory, by converting the "affective fallacy" of the New Criticism into a modern reader-

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¹For a notable exception see C.S. Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, which demonstrates Milton's theological and poetic integrity in the portrayal of Satan, but is otherwise surprisingly secular and literary rather than theological and moral in its focus on Milton's achievement in the poem.

oriented hermeneutic theory by which he offered a detailed account of a seventeenth-century reader's experience of both doubting and believing in the course of reading and interpreting the drama and doctrine of *Paradise Lost*.² According to Fish, Milton's rhetorical and dramatic strategy in *Paradise Lost* is to provide readers with a series of dramatic moments that can and often do tempt them into doubting the doctrines of faith that further reading of the poem eventually re-establishes. This process demonstrates to the readers who experience it the illogical or otherwise mistaken basis for their earlier doubting, thereby giving them an experiential education in their vulnerability to the same kind of doubt and faithlessness that Adam and Eve and most readers themselves will again succumb to in the climactic event of the poem. In this way, claims Fish, attentive readers of the poem will learn of their own responsibility for their virtual fall and therefore of Adam and Eve's responsibility for the primordial fall, and they will also learn with our first parents of the continuing need we all retain for the grace and mercy and forgiveness of an ultimately just and loving deity. In other words, the poem fosters a series of experiences of doubting in order to promote in its readers a more convincing final experience of believing. No critic or theorist since Fish has offered an account of the dramatic and rhetorical structure of Milton's poem that has such reach or explanatory power as Fish's own account, nor am I aware of any recent critic who has offered any newer reading that seriously undermines Fish's major interpretative claims.

Student Readers and the Hermeneutics of Condescension and Respect

However, Fish's interpretative analysis (like virtually every application of modern critical theory) presumes an ideal reader—in this case a theologically knowledgeable seventeenth-century Protestant reader or a highly educated modern reader, like Fish himself, who is attuned to the culture and theology of a knowledgeable seventeenth-century Christian reader with Protestant dispositions and spiritual experience. That does not describe the students who typically enter my undergraduate Milton classes, nor do I think it profitable to try to pre-educate students in the culture and theology that are inscribed in the literary texts they will be studying, texts that are themselves the second best vehicles (after direct cultural experience) for acquiring cultural knowledge.³

Nevertheless, an approach to reading Milton that is consistent with Fish's groundbreaking critical insight (and to some degree his method) can apply with considerable literary efficacy and productive pedagogical (not to mention spiritual) effect to the reading experience of modern readers of *Paradise Lost* who are enjoined, as I enjoin my students (both religious and non-religious), to read and study the poem as an experiment in what I take to be an instantiation or variant form of Peter Elbow's practice and theory of methodological believing and doubting—a procedure for reading and interpreting the poem that is unlike either the

²Fish's theoretical approach (but not its application to *PL*) was anticipated to a large extent by Louise Rosenblatt thirty years earlier, though mainstream English professors, who seem to have cultivated an ignorance of research in English education, have generally ignored or discounted Rosenblatt's earlier contribution to dismantling the hegemony of the New Criticism.

³On the problem of teaching background knowledge to students, see Blau, *Literature*, Chapter 4.

believing of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers or the doubting of the Romantics and the twentieth-century debunkers of Milton's poem by virtue of its employment of believing and doubting both as heuristic and hermeneutic methods. That is to say, my students and I together deploy believing and doubting as methods of inquiry serving to advance our own understanding of a text from which we presume we have something to learn, and to advance our learning at the very least by clarifying our questions and our problems in understanding that text.

What I ask of my students, more specifically, is that they study the poem under a set of assumptions that represent our provisional belief in the profound wisdom of its author and the integrity and truth of his text—a belief that has been largely confirmed for me, I assure my students, in my own experience of teaching and learning the poem with generations of students fairly continuously over a period of some 40 years. Thus I ask my students to approach the poem under the assumption that it is poetically and humanly and universally true as the greatest works of literature are also true, that we have much to learn from its wisdom, that it will continue to reward study and re-reading with additional insight over a lifetime of readings, and that it is almost surely the case that the contradictions and inconsistencies we discover in the poem—which we will experience and may want to present as doubts—represent some failure on our part to understand a text whose dramatic logic and psychological insight is probably more nuanced and profound than we are at the moment prepared to appreciate. Thus the places where the poem seems weakest in its logic or where its drama seems either least believable or most at odds with its own doctrinal claims become the places that hold the greatest promise for teaching us what we do not yet understand. For this reason we will focus our class discussions and our writing largely on passages or scenes or conceptual or narrative problems in the text that puzzle and confound us (and there remain many for me too after 40 years of teaching the poem), and we will never accept as the solution to any problem in understanding the text the excuse that it represents one of the mysteries of Christian religious faith. We'll assume instead that, when Milton promises that his poem will justify the ways of God to man, he means what he appears to say: that the poem will make those ways accessible to human understanding, though he also says that he seeks an audience of readers who are “fit . . . though few” (7.31). Our task then is to render ourselves more fit.

These are important assumptions or premises to adopt in order to ensure that we read *Paradise Lost* with the same kind of demand for verisimilitude and logical coherence we readily apply to most other literary works (as Waldock did to the critical detriment of Milton's poem) because the characteristic tendency of modern student readers—again, religious and non-religious alike—is to dismiss what appear to be logical inconsistencies in Milton's poem as if they represented either “mere Christianity” or a narrative that is textually and dramatically coherent only for those readers whose own religious faith allows them to require of it neither verisimilitude nor narrative consistency. But to read the poem in such a manner is to employ what we might call a hermeneutic of condescension that presumes to find the poem humanly comprehensible and psychologically persuasive only to Christian readers who read it (as it is finally read, perhaps, by the ideal readers whose intellectual and spiritual experience Fish describes) from an ultimately uncritical religious perspective.

Such interpretive condescension, allowing readers to “appreciate” the poem

in spite of its apparent failure to achieve artistically what it explicitly claims as its didactic aim or in spite of the limitations of its theological and moral vision, seems to me both disrespectful to the object of its attention and an act of intellectual pride insofar as it arrogates to the reader the position of one whose understanding is larger than the author's own (a position Wayne Booth in *The Company We Keep* memorably characterized as "overstanding a text" [115]), at the same time that it excuses the reader from the more provisional and generative doubting that questions his or her own possible failure to understand a poetic and intellectual structure that may be more coherent, harmonious, and illuminating than the reader at that moment can apprehend.⁴ A more respectful gesture of doubting and believing would acknowledge the reader's experience of incoherence or inconsistencies in the poem but treat that experience as a problem that might be located more in the reader than in the poem. It would, in other words, construe doubt as a state of confusion that calls upon the reader to re-read and reflect more deeply about a narrative and conceptual scheme that demands greater resources of attention, imagination, and reflection than a reader is likely to allocate in a reading until challenged by such doubts and confusions as the poem seems to engender.⁵

In treating doubt as an occasion not for skepticism but for problem-solving in order to resolve the doubting, I might be accused of denigrating the efficacy of the tradition of skeptical doubting to which Elbow himself has persisted in paying homage in his various explications of believing and doubting. Or I might be accused with equal justice of wanting to obliterate doubt entirely in its service to the more capacious exercise of believing. But what I hope I am really doing is urging student readers, first, to respect their doubts by acknowledging and articulating them at least for their heuristic value, and then to be sufficiently skeptical about their own doubting and sufficiently respectful of the stature of the poem they are studying to treat their doubts provisionally as an index of the degree to which they remain learners who may not yet have arrived at an entirely adequate understanding of the conceptual system they are obliged as students of Milton (and of mine) to try to understand. This is, in fact, largely in agreement with Elbow's observation that for those who practice what he refers to as a "more sophisticated methodological skepticism" (4), doubting is most productive as an instrument of learning when it serves as a tool for testing the truth claims of propositions, not in the interest of rejecting ideas, but of finding the basis for their rational belief.

Believing and Doubting in Practice: Addressing an Interpretive Problem

Let me now exemplify the exegetical and instructional method I have been describing in very general and abstract terms by pointing to a particular interpre-

⁴If this sounds embarrassingly like a reaffirmation of an old-fashioned principle of reading that we now associate with the much-maligned school of the old New Criticism, let us, as the patriot said, make the most of it. It seems to me possible and most productive, however, to resurrect the respectful critical stance of the New Critics without adopting the myopic aestheticism of their most orthodox and rigid practitioners whose critical discourse would exclude questions of value and representation as non-literary and therefore heretical or fallacious. See Blau "Transactions."

⁵See Blau, *Literature*, 21-22 and 46 for an account of the generative value of confusion.

tive problem in *Paradise Lost* that my students and I have found to be one of many generative openings for a richer and more illuminating understanding of Milton's poem through the respectful application of the hermeneutic process of methodological believing and doubting. The doubting in this case arises from the contradiction readers experience in the cruelty and tyranny of a Deity who punishes rebellious angels by condemning them to the unending torture of hell, yet claims that in their former state of obedience they were truly free. How free are angels to obey or not, however, if their choice of disobedience brings with it horrible punishment? How can they freely choose to obey their Lord, if they are threatened with death for choosing against the commandment of their ruler?

We can resolve this apparent contradiction, which is also a doubt about God's love and justice, either by asserting as some critics and many students do, that God's justice is sometimes beyond human comprehension or that obedience to God is absolutely required by virtue of God's role as the absolute good and absolute ruler, a resolution (either way) that evades the question by rendering it beyond the purview of reason and not subject to reasonable inquiry. This is the interpretive response I have described as a hermeneutic of condescension. Or we can assume, adopting a stance of belief or trust in the author and his vision, that our doubt represents some insufficiency in the current state of our understanding. I do not mean an insufficiency in our rational faculty of understanding or in our eventual capacity to understand, but in the degree to which we have already achieved sufficient illumination or insight to apprehend the reality of the truth represented by Milton's vision of the operation of deity and the role of angels and all other creatures in Milton's universe.

I am not talking about religious faith here, at least not about faith as distinct from reason, but about the richer and sharper operation of reason that we experience whenever our understanding becomes more comprehensive and more penetrating (like improved vision through a lens that allows us a broader and better focused field of vision so we can better apprehend a broader landscape and identify more accurately the objects within our scope) enabling us to better apprehend some concept or set of facts whose true meaning had previously eluded us. For example, many students think of knowledge as a condition of having answers to questions, and ignorance as a condition of having questions. Such students frequently seek to demonstrate their own intellectual achievements by doing whatever they can to evade their own questions as they display their answers. Yet there comes a point at which any student who develops into an enlightened adult or mature intellectual recognizes that questions or problems are (as John Dewey asserts) the route to critical thinking and to the kind of reflective thought that characteristically yields a more profound and wider understanding. Such a maturing student comes to see, in other words, that true knowledge is often better revealed and more surely advanced by questions than by answers, and that the person with the fewest questions and the most answers—especially insofar as those answers are held with certitude—is likely to be the least enlightened of all. This kind of advance in understanding, which the wisdom tradition usually calls an advance in wisdom or “enlightenment,” is both an example of what I mean when I speak of the movement from an insufficient understanding to insight and an explanation of why a hermeneutic of respect is more productive than a hermeneutic of condescension by virtue of the respectful and humble gesture, of the former that treats doubt as evidence not of failure in the text or in the vision of

the author, but as evidence of our own need for additional enlightenment, which our continued and focused attention to the text we are interrogating and to the problems we are encountering in comprehending it is likely to provide. If any faith is involved in making such a gesture, it is the reasonable faith we exemplify in trusting our own capacity for growth in understanding and in also trusting the wisdom of an author and text that are commended to us by what Michael Polanyi and legal theorists might have called the “fiduciary” authority granted to a tradition of canonicity and the testimony of trusted mentors, even though it must be acknowledged that literary history and some of the critical mentors who have shaped the narrative of that history have not always demonstrated their trustworthiness. Yet surely an attitude of believing is warranted in dialogue with a respected text as much as it is in dialogues with valued friends or colleagues who deserve our presumption of faith in their veracity and intelligence.⁶

What then do our humility and our doubting observations yield for us when we turn our doubts into questions and ask, in the spirit of believing, how we can make better sense of the paradox of obedience and freedom that has troubled my students and so many other modern readers of *Paradise Lost*? Sufficient attention to that question along with further reflection on the text itself may yield to the persistent reader—especially in dialogue with other readers—an advance in understanding based on what may seem the obvious but often overlooked fact that in Milton’s poem heaven and hell are spiritual places and the geography of *Paradise Lost* is a mental geography, where heaven is by definition a state of psychological bliss and God a source of endless love and grace. To turn away from love, to cut oneself off from the source of love is to cast oneself out of a state of bliss and down into an opposite state deprived of all love and any bliss. Such a state can only be experienced by beings with a human or human-like psyche as a state of mental misery and longing for what one has lost. Hence it is not God who casts the rebel angels into hell, but they themselves in rejecting heavenly bliss and the only source of true spiritual joy.

Nor is this merely a way of explaining the inner logic of a theological system that has no relevance to actual human experience in the modern world. Rather, what I have been describing as the free choice and just punishment of angels describes the truth of human psychological experience every day when human beings freely choose what is destructive to themselves and their own happiness. And what that characteristically entails in ordinary life as it does in Milton’s heaven (and in the Garden of Eden) is choosing against oneself, which is to say one’s nature, which in angels as in men is the rational soul, a soul that in Milton’s vision (as in most modern accounts of human mental health) includes the recognition of the emotions and feelings that belong by nature to human beings and cannot be discounted in any operation of reason that might be said to be rational.

Hence Satan, whose eminence in heaven had placed him at the top of the hierarchy of angels casts himself out of heaven and into a pit of endless misery through his obsessive envy and anger, his “sense of injured merit” (1.98) for

⁶I am thinking here of Grice’s cooperative principle and its “maxims of quality,” whereby it is conventional in conversation that participants trust that their interlocutors are telling the truth, not saying what they know to be false, and not making claims for which they lack evidence. I am also thinking of Mary Rose O’Reilly’s immensely useful observation (implying an ethical obligation to believe the texts of trusted authors) that the morphological root of “believe” is the same as the root of “belove.”

having to pay obeisance to the being identified by the Deity as one who by merit would be the son of God and man and the active expression of the will of God in heaven and on earth. Yet the hell of endless burning and misery that Satan experiences is clearly a mental or spiritual location that Satan creates and carries within himself as the free agent of his own damnation, not as the victim of God's ire—not any more than we could say that God, not ourselves, is responsible (in the ordinary sense of that term) for the fact that when we decide to jump from the roof of a tall building and fall to the ground, suffering great injury or death, our suffering derives from the will of God, though, of course, it does in the special sense that God is the author of nature, and Milton's poem asserts quite explicitly that "God and nature bid the same" (6.176).

Nor is Satan's pride—expressed in his anger and envy and psychological burning—the derivative of his being deprived by any external force of any honor or hierarchical place that he may be said to have merited. Indeed, it may be true that Satan aspires to rule in heaven—rule over the Father Himself—but, ironically, Satan doesn't actually want to be either the Father or the Son. The Father's principal characteristic in Milton's narrative is to serve as an active source of love, one who loves so selflessly that He creates beings with a freedom that resembles His own and grants them the possibility of opposing His own will. Similarly, the Son's principal characteristic is to love the Father's created beings and to love them so selflessly that he chooses to become a lower being (man) himself in order to raise fallen mankind to a higher state of union with the Father. But selfless love—which is the principal characteristic of the Father and Son—is not a characteristic that Satan wishes to emulate in any way. Satan rather asserts that he hates the love God granted to him, which made him so high and exalted in heaven that he could fall through envy of one higher, so that love and hate are to him equally hateful (4.69-70). Thus, in wanting to take the step that would put him equal to the highest, Satan has no true desire to be God or the Son, whose attributes he neither aspires to possess nor honors in their operation. Rather his ambition and burning desire is not to be Satan, not to be the one who is by nature what he is—all but greater than the source (in the Creator or in Nature itself) of his own being. His pain, then, is the pain of his hatred of the created being he is, which is to say, hatred of the self given to him by the very source of his being. What he rejects, in other words, is his own nature, the nature of the universe, the laws of nature, and in doing so condemns himself to endless misery by endlessly rebelling against himself. Hence God as an active agent is not responsible for Satan's punishment and misery; Satan is the author of his own hell, and what has often been called his sin of self-love (e.g., Fish, *Milton* 307) is actually the sin of self-hate.

I do not wish to present this reading of the punishment of the fallen angels as the only possible reading of *Paradise Lost* or even as the best or most authoritative reading, though it is the most comprehensive and intellectually satisfying reading I can produce and find warranted by the text at this moment. Nor have I answered all the questions that thoughtful readers might ask about the conceptual problems I have sought to solve or at least clarify. I am not able at this moment, for example, to offer what I would regard as an equally compelling explanation of how God's love and justice are expressed in the punishment of all of the unnamed angels who fell with Satan as his followers, though I suspect that further attention to the rebellion of Abdiel against Satan will reveal something

about the responsibility of Satan's followers for their punishment as well. Nor am I comfortable with having produced a reading in this essay that may appear to have been constructed all at once and as the independent product of my own personal practice of believing and doubting. It derived instead from questions and doubts expressed by my students and from years of classroom dialogue about these questions with my students (though my attempt to write it for this essay also constituted on my part a continuation of and an additional contribution to that dialogue—a dialogue that through my writing and thinking I engaged in with myself, with the voices of my absent students, with the text, and with some of its most distinguished explicators). My classroom contribution, aside from what I contributed to the dialogue, was in my insistence that we play the believing game as the surest route to enlarging our understanding, and in my refusal to allow our doubts either to be embraced as evidence of some failure in the poet or poem or to be resolved through the patronizing reference to the mystery of a faith that is less than reasonable. In that insistence I do not think I am expressing my own religious faith or attempting to bear witness to the truth of any particular religious faith. Rather what I hope I am exemplifying is a provisional faith in the wisdom of Milton, in the enduring truth and beauty of his great epic, and in the efficacy of methodological believing and doubting as an instrument for the advancement of learning. □

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