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From Person to Individual: Milton and the Political Philosophy

Of Antitrinitarianism in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England

In the wake of a recent scholarly controversy surrounding the authorship of Milton's theological treatise, *De doctrina Christiana* (which has been reasserted as belonging to Milton), a critical consensus has begun to emerge, or re-emerge, that Milton was an antitrinitarian. Denying the equality and essential identity of the three persons of the trinity, Milton came to embrace many aspects of the ancient heresy of Arianism, Arianism being the fourth century theology of the Father and the Son universally acknowledged as the archetypal Christian heresy.¹ Arianism insisted on the Son's status as a creature – the Son was in no way to be thought of as co-equal or co-eternal with the Father – but, like Milton in *Paradise Lost*, Arians endowed Christ with a pre-existence, a life in Heaven before his incarnation as the Messiah. Holding that the Father generated, or “begot,” the Son in Heaven at a particular point in time before the creation of the universe, Arians argued that the Father alone was omnipotent, omniscient, and ubiquitous; that in creating the Son he shared or communicated none of his essential substance, or what theologians call his *hypostasis*, with him; and that the Father's will and consciousness were entirely distinct and separate from the Son's. Arians believed, according to the greatest of the anti-Arian confuters, the Church Father Athanasius, that “The Substances of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are separate in nature, and estranged and disconnected, and alien, and without participation of each other.”² This is the theology of the Father and Son as stated explicitly in Milton's *De doctrina Christiana* and implicitly in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, all works written within the last two decades of Milton's life.³

¹ The non-Miltonic authorship of the heretical theological treatise *De doctrina Christiana* has been most vigorously asserted by William B. Hunter, in his *Visitation Unimplor'd: Milton and the Authorship of De Doctrina Christiana* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998). Other important voices in the authorship controversy include Gordon Campbell, Thomas N. Corns, John K. Hale, David Holmes, and Fiona Tweedie, in their “The Provenance of De Doctrina Christiana,” *Milton Quarterly* 31 (1997): 67-121. The proper reassertion of Milton's authorship of the treatise has been accomplished by Barbara Lewalski, in “Forum: Milton's Christian Doctrine,” *Studies in English Literature* 32 (1992): 143-54; and John P. Rumrich, “The Provenance De doctrina Christiana: A View of the Present State of the Controversy,” in Mark R. Kelley, Michael Lieb, and John T. Shawcross, eds., *Milton and the Grounds of Contention* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 214-33. The most comprehensive statement on the fact of Milton's Arianism are Rumrich's, in “Milton's Arianism: Why It Matters,” in *Milton as Heresy*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 75-92, and that of Michael Bauman, in his book *Milton's Arianism* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1987). I have explored some implications of the Arianism of *Paradise Lost* in “Milton and the Heretical Priesthood of Christ,” in *Heresy in Early Modern England*, ed. David Loewenstein and John Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos*, I, 6; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, I, 586f. Quoted in John Clair, *A Note on Milton's Arianism*, p. 44.

³ Milton's heretical discussion of the Son of God in his posthumously published *De doctrina Christiana* is by far the most elaborate and sustained theological argument in the treatise. See Chapter 5 of Book 1 of the treatise, edited by Maurice Kelley and translated by John Carey, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-82), 6:203-80. Citations from the English translation of Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* will be taken from this edition, noted as *CPW*, and cited parenthetically by volume and page number in the text.

A brief consideration of early modern Reformation *trinitarianism*, the positive articulation of the existence of the trinity, might at this point be useful. At the bottom of all the official Reformation defenses of the existence of the trinity (all of which are heavily indebted to the Church Fathers) is the principle of necessity. It is a commonplace to say that, with respect to man, the Reformation deity assumed an extraordinary degree of freedom and power: the God of Calvin was alone free and capable of determining the path to salvation. But with respect to the inner workings of the godhead itself, the three persons of the Trinity, even for Calvin, enjoy nothing like freedom; they are inescapably bound to the relations and actions in a divine drama founded strictly on a principle of unswerving necessity. The Father and the Son are of course, for Trinitarians, co-eternal; but the Father nonetheless “generated” the Son, mysteriously outside of any temporal framework, in an act that was necessary and inevitable. This necessary and inevitable generation of the Son merely establishes the paradigm for all of the actions, or functions, of the Trinitarian godhead, none of which, it is endlessly repeated in the theological literature, could have occurred otherwise. Just as the father had no choice but to create the son, The Father has no choice but to demand judicial satisfaction for the crime of Adam’s fall, and the Son has no choice but to be sacrificed on the cross: a perfect and sufficient sacrifice, adequate to atoning for Adam’s crime because the Son is himself, of course, God. The Father in the Trinitarian scheme does not *accept* the sacrifice he had no choice but to demand: he can’t be afforded the liberty of accepting or doing anything of his own volition. The necessary action of Christ’s sacrifice in and of itself automatically, necessarily effects the atonement, the consequence of which is the necessary and inevitable salvation and damnation (in the Calvinist scheme) of the elect and the reprobate. The three persons of the trinity, with respect certainly to their role as actors in the divine drama of creation and redemption, endure a bondage of the will easily as constrictive as that suffered by the sinful man of Reformation Protestantism. And it was, I propose, the seeming implications *for man* of the iron determinism by which the persons of the Trinity were themselves gripped that as much as anything else impelled some of the most radical early modern dissenters to articulate or adopt a *critique* of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

Following the ancient heresy of Arianism (though prudently avoiding any overt references to that outcast theology), early modern antitrinitarians systematically chipped away at the determinist edifice of the culture’s official theology of the Trinity. The Father and the Son, in most antitrinitarian schemes, are utterly free to act and respond to each other, and to us, as they see fit. A central appeal of antitrinitarianism, and certainly appealing to Milton, was the opportunity for the transfer of the freedom attributed to the persons of the godhead to the human individual. In attempting here to understand the function of Milton’s commitments to an Arian reading of the godhead, I will be assuming that one of the motives was the opportunity for the transfer of the freedom of the persons of the godhead to humanity. I am interested here in particular in investigating a way in which Milton’s version of Arianism functioned to supply the poet with a theological foundation for that new sense of the person we can identify as *individualism*. Any discussion of Milton and individualism, I know, must be accompanied by some important qualifications. “Individualism” itself, a word that does not enter the English language until the nineteenth century, is not of course one to which Milton had access. Nor – and

this is an even more important fact, and one to which I will return later in the essay – does Milton ever use the word “individual” as a noun referring to a person, and this despite the fact that the word’s modern, nominal use was in currency by the early 1640’s. But if we think of the concept of individualism as a faith in the essential ontological autonomy, the unique ethical integrity, and the equal moral worth of every human being, then a version, or a subset, of this shibboleth of modernity can be seen to have a presence in *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and the *De doctrina Christiana*, all works likely composed during the 1650’s and 1660’s. Further, I will argue, the particular form of individualism marking Milton’s later work can be found to have an anticipatory theorization in Arianism’s radical rethinking of the nature of the Christian God and of the ontological status of that God’s creatures, his first-begotten Son in particular.

In charting the role of Arianism in helping shape Milton’s relation to the phenomenon of individualism, my focus will rest on the representation of what I take to be the traumatic political designation undergone by two characters in *Paradise Lost*, Satan and Eve, characters whose affect of self-sufficiency and independence have surely led readers to assume, justifiably, their status as representations of modern *individuals*. I will, first, describe the two scenes in which Satan and Eve receive the revelation of their status as inferior creatures and of their obligation to acknowledge another, superior, being as their “head.” And I will then extract from those scenes a map of the dialectical process charted in Milton’s poem, by which those sinful but unavoidably Miltonic characters Satan and Eve appear to emerge as *individuals*. I will conclude with a reflection on a closely related dialectical process, a semantic process that I see at work in mid-seventeenth-century England, by which the modern noun “individual” is liberated from the earlier, pre-modern lexical field hitherto subjecting that word’s function to that of adjective.

The scenes of political designation to which I refer can be usefully categorized as scenes of “Exaltation,” the theological term naming the glorification, or the ceremonial “begetting,” or anointing, of Christ, which was the event (or, for some theologians, events) believed to find scriptural representation in Psalms 2:7, Philippians 2:9-10, and Hebrews 1:5-6.⁴ It is true that only one of the scenes from *Paradise Lost* that I will be discussing here, the scene in Book 5 featuring the promotion or “begetting” of the Son of God as witnessed by Satan, can with any theological precision be called an Exaltation; the scene in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Adam asserts his priority over Eve and commands her allegiance, is really an exaltation only by virtue of Milton’s carefully constructed analogy with the event in the life of the Son represented in Book 5. But Milton turns to the theology of Exaltation in sketching both of these scenes, and in fact in

⁴ The scriptural texts seen to document the event of the Exaltation include Psal. 2:7, “I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto mee, Thou art my sonne, this day haue I begotten thee”; Philip. 2:9-10, “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and giuen him a Name which is aboue euery name. That at the Name of Iesus euery knee should bow”; and Hebr. 1:5-6, “For vnto which of the Angels said he at any time, Thou art my sonne, this day haue I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Sonne. And again, when he bringeth in the first begotten into the world, hee saith, And let all Angels of God worship him.” Biblical quotations are taken from the 1611 King James version, *The Holy Bible*, A Reprint of the Edition of 1611 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003).

sketching numerous moments in *Paradise Lost*, as it can be seen throughout the poem to structure Milton's representation of the arbitrary divine authorization of one being over another.

Milton is certainly not alone in his attentiveness to the question of Exaltation; the struggle to interpret this event in the life (or afterlife) of Christ had long been a crucial and indeed inevitable component of any doctrinal determination of the nature of the Son of God. The concept of the Exaltation had long nettled orthodox Christianity, forcing theologians from the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers through the orthodox Reformation theologians to square their Trinitarian theology of the Son of God with the recalcitrant, seemingly antitrinitarian passages noted above. Lutherans and Calvinists and the early modern antitrinitarians known as Socinians, all at odds amongst themselves in defining and interpreting the Exaltation, found common ground in the conviction, supported fairly strongly by scripture, that the event of the Exaltation took place after the birth of Christ (either at his baptism, during his humiliation on the cross, or after his resurrection).⁵ The great heretic Arius, however, and after him Milton, placed the event of the Exaltation in the life of the pre-existent Christ, in the life of the Son before his incarnation as Jesus. Arius had suggested at some points the possibility that the Exaltation effected the promotion of the Son over the other angels (Arius had been accused, perhaps unjustly, of considering the Son to be a member of the same genus as the angels)⁶, and suggesting at other points that what the Father effected at the Exaltation was the adoption of the Son, his voluntary election of this particularly virtuous and excellent creature as the favored child.⁷ What Milton would have learned from the Arians was the fact that the biblical *topos* of the Exaltation, or ceremonial begetting, offered the most persuasive scriptural evidence for the distinctness of the Son's creaturely identity, and the fact that the Son – far from being the Father's equal – was sufficiently inferior that he could be meaningfully rewarded and honored by the Father for his exceptional virtue and obedience. In other words, the Arian doctrine that the Son was exalted by the Father, for merit more than birthright, bequeathed to Milton nothing less than the imaginative core of the heavenly drama in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton's epic goes to great lengths to amplify the Arian version of the Father's ceremonial acknowledgment of the Son's merit, placing one of those events of Exaltation – the institution of the Son's kingship, as represented in Book 5 – at the poem's nerve center. Here is Milton's representation of the Father's originary acknowledgment of the Son – a representation unprecedented in earlier theological or imaginative literature – as relayed by Raphael:

⁵ Marvin P. Hoogland examines the controversy among Lutherans, Calvinists, and other Reformed orthodoxies in *Calvin's Perspective on the Exaltation of Christ in Comparison with the Post-Reformation Doctrine of the Two States* (Kamper J. H. Kok, 1966).

⁶ Athanasius, excerpted in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), p. 121 argues that the Arians had learned from Valentinus that the Son was the same genus as the angels, and points, p. 122, to the enormity of the question of whether the Son is of the same substance as the angels.

⁷ Hoogland describes Calvin's opposition to any notion that "Christ merited His Exaltation," in *Calvin's Perspective on the Exaltation of Christ*, p. 149.

Hear all ye Angels, Progeny of Light,
Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,
Hear my Decree, which unrevok't shall stand.
This day I have begot whom I declare
My only Son, and on this holy Hill
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold
At my right hand; your Head I him appoint;
And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow
All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord:
Under his great Vice-gerent Reign abide
United as one individual Soul
For ever happy.⁸ (5.600-615)

This event of the Father's decree, which rests at the chronological beginning of Milton's story, is the action that sets in motion the plot of Satan's, and subsequently, man's Fall. That Milton's scene here, which is typically believed to be one of those few events represented in *Paradise Lost* for which Milton had no precedent, is an explicitly Arian fiction is made clear by a reading of the fourth century Athanasius, Arius's great confuter and the founder of the Church's orthodox position on the equality and co-essentiality of the Father and Son. The great Church Father knew that the representations of the Son's ceremonial Exaltation in scripture were all scenes from the life of the incarnate Christ (his baptism, for example); or, as in Hebrews, if it wasn't actually the Messiah *on earth* who was exalted, it was the resurrected Christ who received his Exaltation in Heaven after the Ascension. But the early Arians, whose Christology, like Milton's, required a belief in the Son's actual generation at a point in time well before the creation of the universe, consistently placed the scene of Exaltation in the life of the pre-existent Son, a fact that Athanasius rightly pointed out could not be supported by any of the scriptural references to Exaltation.⁹

⁸ All quotations from Milton's poetry, and all line citations noted parenthetically in my text, are taken from *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, ed. John T. Shawcross, revised ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

⁹ See Athanasius on Arius's reading of Phillipians 2:5-11: "These things were not said before, only when the Word became flesh, that it might become clear that 'he was humbled' and 'he will be exalted' are said about the human nature" (*Trinitarian Controversy*, p. 104).

Milton in *Paradise Lost* followed Arius, and not orthodoxy, in deliberately pre-dating the scenes of Exaltation to the life of the pre-existent Son, placing at the chronological beginning of his story of the fall this Arian scene of the Father's decree to promote the pre-existent Son to the seat at his right hand. But what Milton does with this antitrinitarian *topos*, and the way in which he bends the fiction of Exaltation to his own purposes, is owing to no one but himself. Critics have mused for a long time now on the meaning of the Father's decree of the Son's begetting: "This day I have begot whom I declare / My onely Son" (5.602-603).¹⁰ There is nothing like a critical consensus concerning the meaning of any of the Father's substantive words or phrases: "this day," "begot," "declare," and "only." Readers have rightly found themselves troubled by the temporal specificity of the Father's phrase "this day," since the actual generation of the Son would have had to take place before the creation of the angels. They are troubled by the verb "beget," with its suggestion either of a first-order creation or generation, on the one hand, or a second-order ceremonial naming or anointing acknowledgement, on the other. They are troubled by the indeterminate relation between the Father's past action of *begetting* and this present act of *declaring*, uncertain as to whether those two actions are simultaneous or successive, the relation between them a logical or a temporal one. They are troubled, as Satan too will be, by that fact that the Father, who is addressing the assembled angels who are elsewhere titled the "sons of God," is now referring to the newly anointed creature as his "onely Son." Generations of critics have attempted, and will continue to attempt, to justify the ways of Milton's God by supplying a more or less rational interpretive account of this mysterious announcement of the Son's kingship in the form of a declaration of an exaltative begetting.

One thing can be said for certain – and this is a point indebted to the partial defense of Satan mounted by William Empson in *Milton's God*¹¹ – and that is that the Father here goes out of his way to make it difficult to believe that, as we learn later, from Abdiel, the Son of God was originally begotten, or created, long before the creation of heaven itself, and that, furthermore, the Son of God was the instrument through which God created not only heaven but Satan and all the other angels. Difficult to believe, yes, but Milton's poem nonetheless puts some pressure on us to credit Abdiel's supposition that this scene of Exaltation is not the announcement of a recent or present begetting or creation, but merely a belated, or a long-belated, ceremonial acknowledgment of a creative act at once prior and superior to any subsequent creation. If Abdiel is to be believed on this point, then we are obliged to point out that the Father has taken some pains to blur that crucial distinction. In fact, it would have to be said that the Father has deliberately staged this scene in order to make this announcement of the long-completed event of the actual creation of his Son *seem like an act of adoption* in the present moment. And the Father has tried in this scene to pass his genuinely begotten son off as

¹⁰ Critical interpretations of this scene of Exaltation include: Edmund Creeth, "The 'Begetting' and the Exaltation of the Son," *Modern Language Notes* 76 (1961): 696-700; William B. Hunter, Jr., "Milton on the Exaltation of the Son: The War in Heaven in *Paradise Lost*," *ELH* 36 (1969): 215-31; Richard S. Ide, "On the Begetting of the Son in *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in English Literature* 24 (1984): 141-55; and, most useful, Maurice Kelley, *This Great Argument: A Study of Milton's De Doctrina Christiana as a Gloss upon Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 94-106.

¹¹ William Empson, *Milton's God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 36-42.

an adopted child not simply, as Empson would argue, to provoke Satan into rebelling, but because the filial bond can only achieve the intellectually pure, rational ideal Milton sets for it if the parent and child in question act *as if* their relation were one not of natural necessity, but of freely elected adoption. The Arian fiction of adoption functions as a crucial strategy for introducing choice and contingency into what could otherwise be construed as the determinative tie that connects a creator to a creature, or a superior to an inferior being.

The evidence supplied in Milton's theological treatise, and in several other scenes of *Paradise Lost*, suggests that the most meaningful aspect of this scene of exaltative adoption rests in what strikes everybody – Satan of course included – as the sheer arbitrariness of the Father's decree. It is certainly the case that Milton goes as far as any antitrinitarian in isolating omnipotence and omniscience in the Father. But Milton presses the matter further by appropriating some key features of early modern Socinianism, and imagining a Father who punctuates Christian history with a series of arbitrary, temporally specific decrees. There was, for Milton, first, the generation of the Son, who was begotten, as Maurice Kelley rightly noted, "in consequence of a decree" made "within the limits of time," a first-order creation implied though never represented in *Paradise Lost*, and one that, in the *De Doctrina*, is seen to establish the crucial pattern of divine decrees, which share the singular feature of being unprompted and unnecessary. The Son, for Milton, is not tied to the Father, as the orthodox insisted, out of a natural necessity; he was created rather out of a perfectly voluntary act of the Father's arbitrary will. The generation of the Son was merely the first event to issue from the Father's arbitrary decree, but it would be followed, Milton tells us in the *De doctrina*, by the institution of the Son's Kingship (Book 5), the Son's priesthood (Book 3), and his resurrection from the dead, all events that follow subsequent decrees. To this list of the Father's decrees, we could also add one not directly involving the Son, the prohibition of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden.

Why Milton so consistently presses the heretical view that God's decree to create the Son, and in fact all of the decrees issued by God, are not necessary acts, but contingent, arbitrary, fundamentally unnecessary, acts, is not a question that Milton scholars have attempted to pursue. In fact, critics attempting to unfold the "politics" of Milton's poetry and theology may well be embarrassed by what seems to be the awkward conceptual tension between Milton's radical, indeed heretical, insistence, in the *De doctrina* and *Paradise Lost*, on the Father's arbitrary kingship in heaven and Milton's equally radical insistence on the subjection of any earthly polity to the decidedly nonarbitrary, rational standards of natural law. But what has never been fully appreciated is the fact that the radical contingency that underlies each of the actions of the Miltonic deity works, in fact, not to counterpoise or undermine, but actually to bolster, the work that both the theological treatise and the epic poem are performing in the service of a liberatory politics.

When writing as a political philosopher, Milton, as is well known, had no time for arbitrary sovereignty, or any kind of civil law that had its origin in an earthly sovereign's

positive, arbitrary decree. Milton would always turn to the realms of contract law, covenantal law, and the law of nature, when imagining the readiest ways to establish a true commonwealth. For Milton the political philosopher, only civil laws founded in the law of nature, which is inscribed on the hearts of men, could be seen as binding. Freedom in the civil realm, for Milton, was always freedom from arbitrary law decreed from the outside. And this civic freedom found its compass and stability in man's gentle subjection to a law of nature already dwelling within.

That was the political philosophy that marked the central theory of obligation in Milton's political writings. But when writing as a theologian, Milton could not permit himself to ascribe the ultimate governance of the universe to anything like a rationally accessible law of nature, and for precisely the reason that the law of nature *had* to be the governing principle of the state. A law of nature, as Milton had argued twenty years earlier in the controversial prose from the divorce pamphlets to the regicide tract, is naturally binding: one would have to counter one's own rational instincts to violate a natural law. Milton could in those works assert, quite radically, the fundamental priority of a law of nature, or any internal moral principle in line with natural law, over any of the positive, civic laws issued by church or state. But the Miltonic obligation to obey the internally inscribed natural law rather than the externally imposed positive civil law was still an *obligation*; the Miltonic subject in this line of political reasoning may have freed from the arbitrary powers of the state, but cannot, in any ultimate sense, describe himself as truly free, truly liberated from the bonds of obligation, since the divinely endowed predisposition to virtue can still meaningfully be construed as a constraint, however virtuous, on the will.¹²

It is the obligation, therefore, of Milton's theology to carve out a liberatory space that frees men not only from the powers of arbitrary magistracy, but from the obliging constraints of the law of nature as well. An arbitrary divine decree, to which one's adherence can be motivated by neither nature nor reason nor any internalized propensity toward goodness, is the only declaration that one can obey, or disobey, with perfect, unfettered freedom. This logical advantage of an arbitrary divine decree, precisely the type of declaration of power made by the Father at the Exaltation of the Son to status as King, receives its most expansive theorization in chapter 10 of the *Christian Doctrine*, where Milton brings a version of the Molinist doctrine of freedom to his account of the Father's arbitrary decree prohibiting the fruit from the tree of knowledge. The decree proscribing the fruit is, crucially, *not* the product of a natural or a moral law, discoverable by the inward power of human reason. Milton insists that the commandment had to be an arbitrary, positive, one, because man's obedience could not have been made evident if the prohibition of the fruit had been a simple consequence of the law of nature, or an innately discernable moral law: "For man was by nature good and holy, and was naturally

¹² This argument is indebted to the reading of the divorce tracts by Victoria Kahn, in *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 198-207. Kahn argues that what "Milton discovers in his own inward being – or what Milton's prose discovers – is not simply the autonomous subject but a subject who is at once voluntary and involuntary, for whom consent to contract is not always so readily distinguished from voluntary servitude to one's passions" (p. 207).

disposed to do right, so it was certainly not necessary to bind him by the requirements of any covenant to something which he would do of his own accord. And he would not have shown obedience at all by performing good works since he was in fact drawn to these by his own natural impulses, without being commanded.”¹³ Had man shown even the slightest *natural* inclination to obey the decree against the fruit, he could never have freely demonstrated his obedience to God.¹⁴ Therefore, Milton argues, the prohibition of the fruit had to be fundamentally meaningless, since only its perfect arbitrariness could properly create the conditions for the ultimate form of human liberty, which is a liberty of indifference.

Surely it was Milton’s conviction that perfect freedom in this ultimate sense can only play itself out on a field of perfect arbitrariness that drew him to the heresy of Arianism. Arius had stripped the founding social relation of the universe, that of the Father to the Son, of anything that smacked of nature, or necessity, or any fundamental or essential form of binding connectivity. Milton followed Arius in radically distinguishing the Father from the Son, with whom the Father has shared none of his unique essence, or hypostasis, and whom he created, and later exalted at distinct moments in time, entirely at his pleasure. All human beings after Adam and Eve are begotten, begotten, as Adam reminds us after the fall in Book 10, not by “election,” but by “Natural necessity” (10.764-65). Human offspring are the inevitable products of the determinative dynamics of desire and reproduction, one of whose consequences is the natural, instinctive obligation that children feel toward their parents. (It is as if the “Natural necessity” of sexual desire that conditioned the child’s conception is reproduced in the natural tie that binds him to the parent, and vice versa.) But the Heavenly Father’s absolutely voluntary, perhaps even whimsical, creation of the Son of God, offers that excellent creature perfect liberation from a binding *habitus* or any instinctive obligation to the Father, from the obliging constraint that Satan will characterize as the “debt immense of endless gratitude” (4.52). Freed from the genetic bind of shared essence and the ethical or political bind of inescapable obligation, the Son enjoys a relation to the Father that is essentially synthetic rather than natural. As Machiavelli and Hobbes would before him, in their radical reconceptualization of the link that connects a sovereign to the state, Milton takes a tie that had always and everywhere been seen as natural and necessary and decrees it artificial and contingent. It is fundamentally a *political*, rather than a filial, relation that the Son of God has with the Heavenly Father. And it is this fundamental, antitrinitarian independence from the Father that guarantees the uniqueness and freedom of the Son’s will, and which lays the foundation for the uniqueness and freedom – the individualism – of each of God’s creatures.

¹³ CPW 6:352.

¹⁴ In this respect, Milton sets himself in direct opposition to William Ames’s *Marrow of Theology*, to which he is otherwise indebted for the structure of this chapter (“Of the Special Government of Man before the Fall”) in *De doctrina Christiana*. For Ames, the prohibition of the fruit is a moral law perfectly in tune with the law of nature: “First, the law prescribed to men and angels has the same moral essence summed up in the Decalogue. Second, it is written in the heart in the form of disposition [*habitus*], where the first foundation of conscience called συντήρησις, *synteresis*, is located, Rom. 2:15,” in William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1968), p. 112.

In this respect the Father and the Son enjoy a relation not unlike that of another couple in Milton's poem, Adam and Eve. Long before he had written *Paradise Lost*, Milton had in the treatises he had written in favor of the right to divorce fundamentally reconfigured the tie that binds a husband and wife. There in the divorce pamphlets of the mid-1640's, and then later in *Paradise Lost* and *On Christian Doctrine*, Milton elaborated a bold and original argument for what we can think of as an antibinitarian understanding of the marital bond. God, in Milton's reading of the scriptural evidence, decreed that man should have a helpmeet, and this decree inaugurated an institution that had no basis in nature or reason or moral law, but was a product solely of God's arbitrary, inscrutable will.¹⁵ Why, Milton asks, would God have bothered to command marriage at all, if, as part of the law of nature, it were something that man would have come to on his own, by instinct? The synthetic, contingent relation that man and woman have to the arbitrary marriage decree serves as the basis in Milton for the synthetic, contingent relation that the wife has to the husband, whom she is asked to recognize as her superior. In the divorce pamphlets, as in many places in *Paradise Lost*, the inequality of husband and wife has no foundation in nature or ontology; it is an essentially political, or juridical, inequality that has been decreed by God after the creation of Adam and Eve. Like the Son of God, whose obedience to the Father is undertaken every moment with perfect, unfettered freedom, the wife, in Milton's extraordinarily counter-intuitive individualist universe, has no choice but to choose to yield to the spouse whose arbitrarily decreed superiority she chooses to recognize.

Marriage can work, for Milton, and genuine love is possible between a man and a woman, because there *is no shared essence* that inescapably obliges them to an indissoluble union. Milton would go out of his way in the divorce tracts and *Paradise Lost* to dismiss as nonbinding – and almost trivial – the scriptural idealization of consubstantial union featured in Genesis 2: “this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh . . .” and “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.” Suggestive of the “shared essence” that Milton, like Arius, refused to acknowledge as the connective tissue binding the Father to the Son, the biblical phrase “one flesh” functions for Milton as false evidence for the mistaken notions that the tie between husband and wife is a natural one, and that it is indissoluble. And it is for this reason that Milton goes out of his way, in both the treatise and the epic, to remind us that it is not God who speaks here, but Adam, and that the image of consubstantial conjugality has no sanction in divine authority.¹⁶ This Adamic fantasy, in fact, that two persons can constitute *one flesh* will only emerge in *Paradise Lost* in negative contexts, as when Sin, in an argument dependent on the specious Trinitarian doctrine of co-essentiality (2.864-66), appeals to the ontological bond that, she

¹⁵ For more on the implications of Milton's idea of the arbitrariness of the marriage command, and possibly even of the divine ordination of the inequality of the sexes, see my “Transported Touch: The Fruit of Marriage in *Paradise Lost*,” in *Milton and Gender*, ed. Catherine Gimelli Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 115-32.

¹⁶ According to *De doctrina Christiana*, “Marriage is, by definition, a union of the most intimate kind, but it is not indissoluble or indivisible [*ne indissolubilis aut individua*]. Some people argue that it is, on the grounds that in Matt. xix. 5 the words *those two will be one flesh* are added. But these words, rightly considered, do not mean that marriage is absolutely indissoluble, only that it should not be easily dissolved” (CPW 6.371).

claims, necessitates her obedience to Satan, or when Adam, after Eve has fallen, attempts spuriously to rationalize his own decision to join his wife in eating the enjoined fruit. Even Raphael's rhapsodic celebration of angelic sex ("total they mix") disparages the Adamic ideal of consubstantial marriage, reliant as Adam's false image of "one flesh" is on the "restrained conveyance" needed for "flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul." The higher, "total," embrace of spirits involves in fact no consubstantial or co-essential union, mixing together nothing more than the pure volition, or unrestrained desire, of embracing spirits (a "union of pure with pure / Desiring") (8.626-29).¹⁷ Without, I think, exception, the necessitarian's appeal to a "one flesh" argument is catastrophic in Milton. While Milton's antibinitarian view of marriage is first articulated well before he embarks on the theological project of dismantling the holy trinity, his radical individuation of husband and wife in *Paradise Lost* has been submitted to a carefully crafted series of analogies with his Arianism, which, as noted earlier, celebrated the essential separateness of the universe's founding relationship, that of the Father and the Son, who are in the words of Athanasius essentially "separate in nature, and estranged and disconnected, and alien, and without participation of each other."

The heavenly beings, for Milton, are individuals, who may have derived the material substance of their being from the Father, but who are at the moment of their creation, fundamentally alienated from that source of their being, and essentially unaffiliated among themselves. Their ties among themselves and to God are elective, and not genetic. Eve, too, for Milton, is an individual, and while her corporeal substance derives originally from her husband's – God forms her, after all, from Adam's extracted rib – she becomes at her creation fully individuated from her husband. That Milton is asking us to think of Eve's status as an individual with the same kind of philosophical rigor that we think of the Son's is evidenced by the fact that it is with regard to them both that Milton uses the adjective "individual," a word that appears only twice in *Paradise Lost*. The first instance we have already seen: the Father uses the word "individual," adjectivally, in its original etymological sense of *indivisible*. He exalts the Son above the other angels, and then exhorts the unexalted, unadopted angels to consider themselves "united" under the Son's reign "as one individual Soul, / Forever happie."

Abdiel, in defending the Father's proclamation in his subsequent theological scuffle with Satan, will offer one attempt to gloss this command that enjoins the angels to unite under the exalted Son: the Father, he tells Satan, was intending to "exalt / Our happy state, under one Head more near / United" (5.829-31). The angels, in Abdiel's generously irenic rehearsal of the injunction, are not necessarily entreated to unite *indivisibly* – a conjunction that even the pious Abdiel might find a logical impossibility – but rather simply to live "*more near / United*." But the Father himself had issued no such qualification, commanding with extraordinary force the angelic acceptance of a new political ideal of indivisible union under the appointed Son.

¹⁷ I have accepted here the brilliant reading of Raphael's description of angelic copulation by William Kerrigan, who in *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 213, takes the sense of the line quoted as "a union of pure desiring with pure desiring": "'Desiring,' that is, is not a verb, but an emotional act become a substantive, a piece of word-smithing that imitates the angelic unity of mind and thing."

The other appearance of the word *individual* in *Paradise Lost* is also adjectival, and occurs at Adam's first encounter with Eve, after her poolside reverie, and after she has initially seen Adam and, instinctively turned off, turns away. Eve reminds Adam what he said to her when at their first meeting he launched his courtship:

Return fair *Eve*,
Whom fli'st thou? Whom thou fli'st, of him thou art,
His flesh, his bone: to give thee being I lent
Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart
Substantial Life, to have thee by my side
Henceforth an individual solace dear;
Part of my Soul I seek thee, and thee claim
My other half. (4.480-87)

In each of these addresses – the Father's to the assembled angels, and Adam's to Eve – an injunction is issued: the angels are commanded to abide indivisibly under the Son, and, in a softer key, Eve is claimed as Adam's indivisible other half, whose return to his side will involve a yielding to his authority. But while Milton's theology of arbitrary divine decrees grants the *Father* the right to command obedience to an arbitrary injunction, neither Adam nor the Father has a right or an ability to command the logically impossible, the institution of an indissoluble union between two or more distinct beings. As generous and loving as some of Milton's readers have taken Adam's language to be, Adam's theory of marital union is not Milton's. Milton's metaphysics, everywhere insistent on the essential distinctness of numerically different beings, consistently denies the possibility of shared essence or substance, united soul or united flesh.¹⁸

In arguing for the necessity of Eve's indivisible allegiance as his inferior wife, the moral, fallible Adam has overstepped his bounds. But his excess in this regard is perhaps forgivable. His figure of the essential convergence of lovers has a long history in erotic theory, and his appeal to the misguided argument from "one flesh" bears at least partially the stamp of the Adam of Genesis 2:23, not to mention that of the generations of biblical scholars who found in the image of "one flesh" evidence for their belief that God has prohibited divorce. Milton's *Paradise Lost* has not confined either Adam or Eve to utterances the philosophical consequences of which are strictly or consistently adherent to the implicit laws of the Miltonic universe. The Father, however, cannot be so easily forgiven. A close reading of the poem, in fact, *might* find this to be the only moment in

¹⁸ See *Complete Prose Works* 6:216, 262. In *CPW* 6:264, Milton explains succinctly in his discussion of the impossible fiction of the Trinity, "more than one hypostasis cannot be fitted into one essence."

which the Father says something truly impermissible by the terms of Milton's own theology. It is perfectly within the Father's right to decree the obligation to obey the Son, and, as we have already seen, the Father is under no pressure to make that decree justifiable or explicable. But while the Father can command obedience for no reason at all, the poem has not given him scope to compel indivisible union; he cannot require indivisibility either as a type of political allegiance that does not admit of divorce or dissent, or as a type of spiritual unity that inescapably discrete souls – whether essences or substances – would be incapable of achieving even if they tried.

To be sure, the Father can be seen to be speaking merely poetically here, asking the lesser angels to consider themselves under the aegis of a *figurative* indivisibility: his image of union is couched in the simile, “*as one individual Soul.*” This embedding of the commandment to indivisibility in a simile is of course the technical loophole that the poet has generously provided the Father, as the scrupulous Milton would never have permitted his Arian father to make a direct case for the actual indivisibility of numerically distinct in any nonfigurative sense. But the Father's undeniably strong suggestion of essential indivisibility, surfacing at the poem's most awesome and consequential display of arbitrary political power, is no less irresponsible or disastrous for having been presented in a simile. It is an image that, despite the Father's claim, can on no terms be thought of as “happy.”

These decrees of indivisible allegiance uttered by the Father and Adam do not, as we know, pan out. And a likely reason for the failure of these decrees to gain the assent of their respective audiences is that they are, from the start, *doomed* to fail. Essences, beings, souls are not shared or shareable for the Arian Milton, a law of nature that Satan and Eve appear more than capable of intuiting. Eve will, in her still innocent request that they divide their labors and work alone, push to separate herself from Adam, despite his argument for their indivisibility. Satan, too, of course, balks at the opportunity he is afforded for indissoluble union with the other angels under the exalted Son. And in this respect, Satan and Eve can be seen merely to trace the philosophical path forged by Milton himself, who had in the months leading up to the execution of Charles I pressed the case of radical political resistance in the face of the demands of indivisible allegiance made by the Royalist defenders of the Stuart monarchy. In fact, in the greatest of Milton's regicide treatises, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), Milton had characterized the origin of kingship as an exaltation, as kings were simply persons who were, justly (at least initially), “exalted to the dignitie above thir Brethren.” Some examples of kingship, Milton argued in the regicide tract, are just, but no just kingship can be accompanied by a misguided faith in the king's ontological superiority over his subjects, or in his subjects' obligation to incorporate themselves in a state of subjection. Above all, Milton insisted in 1649, what must never be imagined of kings is that the “people . . . [were] created all for him, he not for them, and *they all in one body inferior to him single*” (my italics). Milton's political philosophical construction of the misguided absolutist ideal of the incorporation of subjects under a king, as if “all [abided] in one body inferior to him single,” surely anticipates the wrong-headed directives in *Paradise Lost* to live “Under his . . . Reign . . . United as one individual Soul,” or to submit to a life

at a superior's side "Henceforth an individual solace dear." It would appear, judging by the eventual acts of resistance that Satan and Eve will perform in consequence of those directives, that the responses of the two characters to those commands of indivisibility hew closely to that of Milton in 1649, who argued that any affirmation of a model of indivisible union in a state of political subjection "were a kinde of treason against the dignitie of mankind." For Milton the political philosopher, nothing would be more natural or rational than an instinctive disobedience to a command of indivisible union. And while it can always be objected that a political philosophy suited to the fallen world is inapplicable to the purer politics of association in a prelapsarian heaven or Eden, Milton's arguments in both the *De doctrina Christiana* and *Paradise Lost* suggest that his theologically libertarian ideal of an exclusively voluntary association among freely willing, numerically distinct, persons, has no less a hold on heaven or a paradise before the fall than on the messy state of affairs in mid-century revolutionary England.

All of this is to say that the fall of Satan and the fall of Eve, despite Milton's obsessively and noisily articulated pronouncements otherwise, were not truly avoidable, the ations of resistance performed by those characters not ones undertaken with perfect freedom. This is *not* to say, however, that we cannot imagine a fall that, in the terms of Milton's own theology, *was* avoidable. Arbitrary decrees, such as the prohibition of the fruit, are, as we know, in and of themselves allowable in Milton's universe; and as I have already argued, an *arbitrary* divine decree such as the prohibition of the fruit affords one a singular opportunity for a more radically liberated exercise of free will a decree in line with the intuitable laws of nature, founded in reason and always already inscribed on the heart. We should certainly then be able to imagine a Satan and Eve happy to obey, to remain in a state of freely willed allegiance to an arbitrary decree, to acknowledge the Son's kingship or to stick close to the so-called superior husband and refrain from eating the fruit. But, I submit, it is impossible to imagine Satan and Eve remaining unfallen so long as the arbitrary divine injunctions they are issued are presented and structured in the manner that they are. Satan and Eve could in no way have chosen freely to observe the injunctions of allegiance, as long as those arbitrary, divinely sanctioned decrees are embellished with – or contaminated by – a condition of indivisibility that violates not only the natural law of human and angelic dignity but the rigorous logic of the poem's universe as well. If it is true that, as theologians have declared for centuries, that God cannot will an impossibility, the same can surely be said with even more confidence of an angel like Satan or a human like Eve: they could not have freely willed their adherence to a decree of indivisibility which is by definition *impossible* to obey.

The doctrine of indivisibility, whether applied to the heavenly polity of Father and Son, the Edenic polity of Adam and Eve, or the English polity of 1649, was, as Milton knew, an absolutist one, founded, like the doctrine of the Trinity, on an elaborate philosophy of necessity. And in invoking the doctrine of indivisibility, so violently at odds with the antitrinitarian, libertarian commitments of the rest of the poem, the Father and Adam can be seen to have precipitated, perhaps even necessitated, the respective falls of Satan and Eve. The magnitude of the conceptual consequences of these unanswerable decrees cannot be overstated. The assertion of individualism, in its etymological root sense of interpersonal indivisibility, can be seen in *Paradise Lost* to necessitate the

generation – the begetting – of individualism in its modern sense. Perhaps it is this technically unrepresented event, the ceremonial begetting of modern individualism, that is the most important of the Exaltations featured in *Paradise Lost*.

The modern substantive noun *individual*, pointing to the self-possessing, autonomous, undivided person, finds one of its earliest entrances in the English lexicon in 1646, in the political pamphlet *An Arrow Against All Tyrants*, by Milton's contemporary, the Leveller Richard Overton. (Most seventeenth-century scholars are familiar with this passage, as C. B. Macpherson attends to Overton's pamphlet in some detail in his landmark *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*.¹⁹) It is in that short pamphlet that Overton introduces this new noun, "individual," with a proto-Lockean concept of self-ownership. This is a sentence from the opening pages: "every Individuall in nature is given an individuall property by nature, not to be invaded or usurped by any." The human being can in a sentence like this be referred to as an *individual*, because he is in possession of an individual right (*right* being, as Macpherson reminds us, one of the early modern meanings of *property*), a right that can on no account be imagined as divisible or alienable from his natural being. An individual, in other words, is for Overton one from whom nothing essential can be divided or severed. In the bold metaphor that is Overton's inventive use of the adjective individual as a noun, he extends the principle of indivisibility from a *relation* among things or persons – this one must be *individual* from that one – to a characterization of a single entity – this thing stands undivided, individual, on its own. Overton's inventive semantic move, in this and other sentences, is one befitting a Leveller: it is a *lexical* arrow against all tyrants, seizing the right to self-ownership from the sovereign and transferring it to the sovereign's subject.²⁰

Milton, to be sure, has not introduced to the verse of *Paradise Lost* Overton's neologistic "individual" as a noun referring to a person. But its literal absence from the text should in no way suggest that the meaning and the implications of this new substantive noun *individual* and of the principle of individualism in general are missing in *Paradise Lost*. And nowhere is the modern logic of individualism more palpably felt as the missing corrective to the untenable authoritarianism of Milton's hierarchical universe than in those instances in which the independent beings Satan and Eve are being commanded, *decreed*, to consign themselves to the implication of the *original* meaning of individualism. It is in those uncomfortable moments in which the poem forces its characters to consent to an indissoluble union *with* (in the case of Eve) or *under* (in the

¹⁹ C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975).

²⁰ One way to reconstruct the defamiliarizing semantic force of the mid century nominalization of early of the adjective "individual" would be to imagine our own designation of a person as an "indivisible." And the motive for referring to a person an "indivisible," or, in the seventeenth century, an "individual," would be the need to emphasize with that awkward neologism the fact that we are speaking of a being from whom nothing essential or fundamental can be divided or severed. In *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 37-38, I proposed the importance of Overton's (and Milton's) monistic mortalism – their belief in the indivisibility of the body and soul – as the motivation for the nominal use of the adjective "individual." The thesis forwarded here, which examines the word's emergence from the Trinitarian controversies, places the conceptual origins of the "individual" as person a decade or two earlier.

case of Satan) a superior being that a principle of independence and self-sufficient nonunitability forces itself, without any formal semantic designation, into being.

Satan and Eve, I suggest, both embrace, though in different ways, the unarticulated modern theory of individualism. Knowing themselves to be first and foremost the creatures of the Arian Milton, they naturally bristle at any hint of a rhetoric of shared essence, shared flesh, shared soul. Commanded to perform the impossible – to become a part of someone else, to live as if organically and inescapably embedded in something or someone larger and better than themselves – they have no choice but to resist, to fall, to assert their individualism in the modern sense, a sense which is by definition antitrinitarian, antibinitarian, anti-any principle suggestive of the metaphysical collapse of inescapably discrete entities. Insisting on a principle of indivisibility that the poem's theology and metaphysics cannot support, the narrative frame of the poem creates the logical conditions under which we are obliged to articulate for ourselves the modern logic of individualism as the necessary and inevitable answer to an intellectual dilemma.

From the perspective of the sweep of the poem's narrative, Satan and Eve can and have been criticized for their embrace of the heresy of individualism, however we choose to restrict the meaning of that term (Satan's version of individualism, as we have seen, looks a little more like Milton's hierarchic individualism, and Eve's looks a little more like Overton's). As individuals, Satan and Eve reject God's decrees of indissoluble union, and they assert their own rights over and against the greater right of the Father to demand assent. Surely the legions of pious critics are right who have over the last century pointed out the innumerable ways in which Milton demonizes Satan and Eve, asking us to hold them accountable for our unhappy fallen condition. It seems almost undeniable that the poem pushes us to question any allegiance we might pledge to those heretics, regardless of the often compelling characterizations of Satan, and even of Eve, as heroic figures. But there is at the same time a sense in which the poem's official theology – Miltonic Arianism – invites us authoritatively to *identify* with at least an aspect of Satan's and Eve's apostasy. Milton's sophisticated antitrinitarianism *is* a heresy of individualism – the Son, no less than Satan, is necessarily individuated from the Father regardless of his original ontological indebtedness to the Father. Eve is inescapably individuated from Adam, regardless of her ontological indebtedness to *him*, regardless of Adam's guilt-inducing reminders of her ontological indebtedness to him (“flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone”). And so while the thrust of the story pushes us to pass judgment on Satan and Eve as heretics – as two who tragically refuse to accept the easy terms of a straightforward decree – there is another aspect of Milton's poem, no less authoritative, that invites us to applaud these heretics. Their superiors have attempted to seduce them into accepting the possibility of co-essentiality, of share personhood. And their instinctive and justifiable rejection of that temptation can be seen to exalt them to the highest possible status of creature. Sinners, yes, they also merit our adoption of them as truly Arian – and thus as truly Miltonic – children of modernity.

I will conclude with a brief comment on William Blake's famous statement on *Paradise Lost*: Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it. There is an important

way in which Blake, in that sublime utterance about Milton's poem, gets it exactly right, and exactly wrong. He was right to suggest, for many of the reasons I have enumerated, that Milton was the devil's party: Milton joins Satan, as we have seen, in deeming unacceptable the absolutist political demand of indivisible, indissoluble union. But Blake of course was also wrong. Milton's critique of the politics and theology of indivisibilism is an explicit and carefully elaborated component of the schemes of both *Paradise Lost* and the *De doctrina Christiana*. And so Milton, certainly in this one important respect (and no doubt in others as well), was of the devil's party, and he knew it.