“Ill fenc’d for Heav’n”: Boundary and Excess in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

[...] Heav'n op'nd wide
Her ever during Gates, Harmonious sound
On golden Hinges moving, to let forth
The King of Glorie in his powerful Word
And Spirit coming to create new Worlds.
On heav'ny ground they stood, and from the shore
They view'd the vast immeasurable Abyss
Outrageous as a Sea, dark, wasteful, wilde,
Up from the bottom turn'd by furious windes
And surging waves, as Mountains to assault
Heav'n's hight, and with the Center mix the Pole.
Silence, ye troubl'd waves, and thou Deep, peace,
Said then th' Omnific Word, your discord end:
Nor staid, but on the Wings of Cherubim
Uplifted, in Paternal Glorie rode
Farr into *Chaos*, and the World unborn;
For *Chaos* heard his voice: him all his Traine
Follow'd in bright procession to behold
Creation, and the wonders of his might.¹

As God and his angels perch above the edge of a vast abyss, readers of *Paradise Lost* can imagine only infinitude, only darkness. God imagines creation. That creation, which happens within the “vast immeasurable Abyss” as God speaks “into Chaos, and the World unborn,” is strikingly unbounded. The “wonders” of God’s “might” are enacted upon darkness, creating worlds within ambiguity. In this chaos, both Earth and Hell are formed. And as the gates of heaven open and the angels lean forward to watch the “King of Glorie” craft the Earth, they not only peer into chaos, but into the divine. For in chaos—the womb² of creation, where the maker

---


² Milton, *Paradise Lost* 2.911
uses “His dark materials to create more Worlds”—is God. In his prose work “On Christian Doctrine,” Milton finds that “the world was made out of some form of matter” and that “all things came from God.” Milton’s God is in all. Within *Paradise Lost*, all but God are created things, and are all created equally: Raphael, as he tells Adam and Eve about their creation, says that it is from God that “All things proceed, and up to him return, / If not deprav’d from good, created all / Such to perfection, one first matter all.” These created things, formed from chaos by the hands of God, are formed to wander. For even as God forms boundaries between his creations, those boundaries are transversed: Eden over-grows, Satan crosses into paradise, and Adam and Eve find themselves full of knowledge before they should have any. In these transgressions, *Paradise Lost* emphasizes the wantonness of God’s creation, suggesting that creation itself exceeds divine boundary.

Adam, Eve, Satan, the angels, Hell, and even Eden, are all made the same way from the same matter. As Flannagan points out, just as the soil of Eden is “tillable,” readers must remember that “Adam was also made out of mould or workable soil, and that God constructs according to a mold or preconceived shape.” Uriel, as he speaks to a disguised Satan, emphasizes God’s moulding of the Earth, telling Satan that he saw “when at his Word the formless Mass, / This worlds material mould, came to a heap.” God shapes Adam and Eve just

---

3 Milton, *Paradise Lost* 2.916


like he shapes Eden—out of formless mass. The creation of Hell is similarly emphasized. Flannagan notes that in “Milton’s theological system” Hell “came into existence specifically for the purpose of housing the fallen angels.”9 The moment that Hell comes into existence could not be more dramatic: driven out of Heaven by the son of God, the rebellious angels, led by Satan, fling themselves into “thir place of punishment, the Gulf / Of Tartarus, which ready opens wide / His fiery Chaos to receive thir fall.”10

As Satan breaks free of Hell and exits its gate, he looks out into the “hoarie deep, a dark / Illimitable Ocean without bound, / Without dimension, where length, breadth, & highth, / And time and place are lost.”11 The moment—five books and about a hundred and forty pages before God’s divine congregation looks on as He speaks into the vast abyss to create Earth—anticipates the later scene of God’s creation. Satan, also perched on the edge of the “deep,” recognizes this place as a place of creation, the “Womb of nature.”12 John Rumrich, in “Milton’s God and the Matter of Chaos,”13 makes much of this “womb,” arguing that Chaos in Paradise Lost is seen as fertile and thus connected to Eve. “Even if Milton had not called chaos a womb,” Rumrich argues, “its generative capacity would be apparent in the pattern that Satan follows during his violent encounter with chaos, an intensely recursive pattern that pervades his activity in Paradise Lost.”14

9 Milton, Paradise Lost page 509 footnote 22.
10 Milton, Paradise Lost 6.52-55
11 Milton, Paradise Lost 2.891-894
12 Milton, Paradise Lost 2.911
Though everything created by God initially comes from the same substance and the same vast abyss, it matters that God creates Hell separately from Earth. Boundaries are created by God to separate specific created things from chaos, but those boundaries, rules enacted upon creation by God, are consistently transversed. And chaos remains: even after both Hell and Earth have been molded by God, Satan can still peer into chaos as he travels between the two worlds. Thus Earth and Hell, created from the excess of chaos, are excessed by chaos as well. God creates from chaos, and creation itself is chaotic. When creation interacts with itself and other created things, boundaries are crossed. These boundaries, set up in opposition to excess, are therefore excessed themselves.

Within *Paradise Lost*, this excess is considered in terms of wantonness. “Wanton” is used 11 times within *Paradise Lost*, and Roy Flannagan notes that though “the adjective ‘wanton’ can be applied to natural overgrowth, it often has a sexual overtone.” Milton drifts between unfallen and fallen definitions of wanton, juxtaposing its multiple meanings within singular description. Though the “overgrowth” of Eden, described as “wanton” and “wilde,” seems “natural,” the reader is still reminded of a more sinister definition of wanton, one of “lasciviousness.” The wanton growth of Eden is implicated in this definition after Adam and Eve eat the fruit of knowledge in the garden, as they fall to wantonness and “Lust.” Here, Adam, Eve, and Eden are all connected by their wantonness. And the wantonness of man is further implicated when Michael shows Adam future humans who fall to “wantonness and

---


This wantonness, an extension of the wantonness that Adam and Eve themselves fall to, echoes throughout earlier descriptions of wanton growth within Eden. Thus even in the wanton growth of nature, there is always the lurking possibility of excess in lust or sin.

The reader’s first glimpses of Eden are of growth. As Satan peers into paradise in book four of *Paradise Lost*, he sees “blooming Ambrosial Fruit,” a “shaggie hill,” running “Nectar,” and water from a rising “Fountain,” meeting the “Flood” of other rivers. Eden is never static. From Milton’s first descriptions of it, it moves, blooming fruit and running nectar. As Eden’s foliage moves, it grows, and Milton makes clear that the growth of the foliage is caused by Eden’s fertility—its “Porous” ground. The trees that Satan sees, “of noblest kind for sight, smell, taste...” grow because God “caus’d” them to from “the fertil ground.” God, as Flanagan points out in his footnote, has “taken care to give Adam and Eve good tillable soil.” But even as we are introduced to the “tillable soil” given to Adam and Eve, itself pointing to God’s act of creation, Eden’s abundance suggests the possibility of over-growth. Adam and Eve’s purpose, “To prune” the “growing plants” and “tend” the “Flours” of Eden, suggests that Eden is, from its creation, in need of active containment. And Eden does eventually over-grow, causing Eve to decide to work separately from Adam in order to better tidy the over-spill of plants.


Adam, well may we labour still to dress
This Garden, still to tend Plant, Herb and Flour,
Our pleasant task enjoyn’d, but till more hands
Aid us, the work under our labour grows,
Luxurious by restraint; what we by day
Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind,
One night or two with wanton growth derides
Tending to wilde.  

Quickly, Adam and Eve’s gardening work outgrows them. While “the work under [their] labour grows” and until Adam and Eve are aided by “more hands,” Eden, as Eve points out, is too much for the pair to handle. As they garden “by day,” what they prune comes back within “One night or two.” Wanton Eden seems unruly and even overwhelming. Consistently, Adam and Eve’s work is “brought to little, though begun / Early.” Day after day, the “wanton” plants spring back, seemingly instantly, though Adam and Eve continuously prune and tidy. Eden, in its insistent growth, seems excessive, and that excess causes Eve to wander from Adam. As a solution to the over-growth of Eden, Eve suggests that she and Adam split up and “divide [their] labours.” After she leaves Adam to garden on her own, it becomes more apparent that her decision to split the work was the right one; walking in Eden, Eve is “Veild in a Cloud of Fragrance,” and “so thick the Roses brushing round / About her glowd” that she can only be “Half spi’d.” Clearly, if the roses that Eve is tasked to prune are so thick she cannot be fully

seen, splitting from Adam to do more work was the practical choice. Eve drops Adam’s hand out of necessity, spurred by the overgrowth of Eden itself.

Yet this excess is not limited to plant growth: Adam and Eve, too, over-grow. Though clear boundaries for Adam and Eve are laid by God in *Paradise Lost*—they must not eat of the tree of knowledge, and their lives are confined to Earth—the pair, in their wandering and seemingly insistent knowledge, transgress those boundaries. In response to Eve’s relation of a dream, Adam confesses that he fears “evil sprung.” He catches himself, continuing, “Yet evil whence?” For what can Adam and Eve know of evil before they have eaten from the tree of knowledge? Yet knowledge seems to slip through the cracks of *Paradise Lost* even as it is forbidden by God. As Adam recalls God’s rule, reminding Eve that God only requires them “not to taste that onely Tree / Of knowledge,” he mentions death—only to ask “what ere Death is.” And Eve’s understanding of death seems to slip through her conversation with Satan: “How dies the Serpent?” Eve asks, noting that “hee hath eat’n and lives, / And knows, and speaks, and reasons, and discerns, / Irrational till then.” Such a distinction between living and dead points to knowledge that Eve shouldn’t have. Adam and Eve’s knowledge is wanton itself, springing from them as the leaves and flowers spring insistently from Eden’s floor.

The two, in fact, are wanton from their first steps in Eden. Eve recalls that when she awakes in paradise:

With unexperienc’t thought, and laid me downe
On the green bank, to look into the cleer
Smooth Lake, that to me seemd another Skie.
As I bent down to look, just opposite,
A Shape within the watry gleam appeird
Bending to look on me, I started back,
It started back, but pleas’d I soon returnd,
Pleas’d it returnd as soon with answering looks
Of sympathie and love...36

In her essay “Narrating Originality in Paradise Lost,”37 Maura Josephine Smyth writes that Eve turns away from her reflection in the lake not because of “the law of nature, but [because of] the Voice’s warning: ‘Had not’ the Voice intervened, Eve would still be lying contentedly beside the lake.”38 Smyth argues that Eve could not continue lying by the lake indefinitely because of the “law” of nature; that Eve thinks she could is ridiculous. But the entirety of Eve’s interaction with her own reflection seems in excess of the knowledge she is granted from God, not abiding by any “law” of nature, and more importantly, not abiding by God’s expectations. That Eve goes to her reflection is something that the creator can’t anticipate; nor can God expect Eve to use the lake as anything other than a lake. Rather than used for reflections, the water in Eden is certainly meant to be drunk; its proper purpose becomes apparent when, before Eve relates her birth story, she and Adam drink from “the brimming stream.”39 Smyth further suggests that because “the Voice” which speaks to Eve “must ‘warn’ Eve away from her image,” that “suggests that her satisfaction

38 Smyth, “Narrating Originality in Paradise Lost”, 144.
with it is potentially corrupting and inconsistent with God’s desires for her.”

It is true that Eve’s “satisfaction” with her image is inconsistent with the role created by God for her. But so too inconsistent is her discovery of the lake at all. In her movement towards the lake, Eve interacts with the paradise around her in an unexpected way, discovering through wandering. Eve’s vision in the lake brings new realizations and relationships into Eden—God teaches Eve to be with Adam, and Eve develops self-recognition.

Adam, like Eve, runs upon awakening. When he finds himself alive, Adam springs upward to land on his feet. Then, Adam “Limb by Limb / Survey’d, and sometimes went, and sometimes ran.” Adam runs and moves through Eden because of Eden; as he wakes up, he sees the sun, sky, streams, woods, and plains—in order to better understand these aspects of the landscape around him, he explores them. And like Eve’s interactions with the lake and the serpent, Adam’s exploration has a permanent impact on Eden: as he moves, he finds that he can name the things he sees. Though Adam’s naming of the Garden is presumably expected and encouraged by God, the movement itself suggests a kind of freedom from divine expectation. That Adam is freely able to explore Eden problematizes Eden itself: as Eve’s responses to her reflection and Satan suggest, God is unable to predict all of his creation’s responses to each other.

The overgrowth of Adam, Eve, and Eden stems from their creation itself. All created by God, they are subject to God’s laws and boundaries: from the chaos of matter, God separates Earth from Hell, Eden from the rest of Earth, and the tree of knowledge from the plentiful

40 Smyth, “Narrating Originality in Paradise Lost”, 141.

41 Milton, Paradise Lost, 8.258-260.

42 Milton, Paradise Lost, 8.267-268.

43 Milton, Paradise Lost, 8.255-265.
groves. But those boundaries don’t seem to stop creations from transgressions—how could they? Satan remarks that Eden is “Ill fenc’t for Heav’n to keep out such a foe / As now is enterd.”44 But if Eden is paradise, how can it be bounded? Can a bounded paradise truly be paradise? This fence underlies all creation in Paradise Lost. For all is bound by God’s law. But matter itself, made from chaos, is created in excess to God. Though this excess is contained by boundary, God’s creations consistently transverse those boundaries. Created by God, but created in excess, all, it seems, are wanton, and all are meant to wander.

---

44 Milton, Paradise Lost, 4.372-373.