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**Victoria Silver: Imperfect Sense: The Predicament of Milton's Irony** □□

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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Introduction*



### THE PREDICAMENT OF MILTON'S IRONY

Caught as we are between possibility and mortality, irony remains a quintessentially human expression that, without platitudes, conveys the perplexity of our condition. This is especially the case when irony is taken to the extremes of absurdity or extenuation, since these manage to ridicule that most fundamental of human dogmas, namely, our pretension to something grander and finer than mere animal existence. For even as irony expresses the rueful if distinctive impulse to reflection or consciousness of ourselves *as* creatures, our very attempts at that perspective tend to leave us lost in Swiftian loathing at the unangelic thing we find, in terror of what looks like our own bestial futility. Of course, absurdity has always inspired such revulsion at our creatural nature, designed as it is to deliver us from the rational delusion of human preeminence. Yet more tacitly or more insidiously, so do the endless placating, temporizing, casuistical rounds we make in the opposite direction, invoking 'mere humanity' to excuse our seemingly invariable failure to improve ourselves. I mean the unctuous irony of rationalization, when we devote all our ingenuity to the task of avoiding thoughtfulness, and whose point is how we debase and betray our peculiar intelligence in thus refusing responsibility for what we have made of human being.

But intelligence, however it is expressed, remains our obligation as creatures, and the one quality capable of rendering this existence meaningful, memorable, artistic in the ancient sense. And for the most part, we invoke irony both more kindly and scrupulously to assess just this intelligence, in the desire to better if not transcend human nature as we find it, and at the same time to acknowledge the finitude of the creature on which human vanity appears doomed to founder. That is why irony and drama show such an entire affinity for each other, because drama is the mode of representation most completely capturing not just the sense but the intimate sensation of this tension integral to human being—between our aspirations and our actualities. When Aristotle says that epic, like tragedy, is a *mimesis* or imitation of an action, he is distinguishing this dimensionality that attends any populated, diversified account of our experience: it is the genius of drama as an expressive mode to imagine and depict the human predicament much like we undergo it, projected as the perpetually latent mean-

ing that figurative persons must encounter and negotiate—forever latent because forever contingent upon the humanly inevident and incalculable train of motive and circumstance. For no matter how resolute or pointed, drama makes for an uneasy, restless literature just as irony does an uneasy, restless meaning.

These observations may seem entirely superfluous to *Paradise Lost*, which is not a drama, at least in the conventional sense, and whose idiom is explicitly cast as a justification, which we generally take to mean a positive assertion of truth—God’s ways being truth, as Milton reminds us. Understandably, then, critics both friendly and hostile to what his speaker relates about the loss of Eden and all our woe have supposed the poem to be anything but dramatic or ironical, incapable of surprise or self-criticism. With ever more sophistication and nuance, they have tended instead to read it as symbolic and propositional—a poetic tractate if you will; and it is this supposition which ensures that there isn’t much middle ground of opinion where Milton is concerned, with the readers of the poem either vindicating or condemning what it more or less figuratively asserts, and loving or hating its author accordingly. Without seeking to exonerate Milton of what he says there (although it will inevitably appear that way), I would like to show that *Paradise Lost* is both dramatic and ironical in some perhaps surprising and self-conscious ways. Yet I also want to suggest that this is why there are, broadly speaking, two Miltons to be found in Milton studies and why people tend to evolve such exclusive and opposed ideas of them. It is telling, I think, that we never get so exercised over what we presume to be Shakespeare’s notion of things (unless we are George Steiner or Wittgenstein). But then, Shakespeare’s meanings are dramatical and, as such, too oblique and manifold to give indelible offense. But Milton and his poem have been offending someone or other for more than three hundred years.

Needless to say, this project of arguing Milton’s irony is by no means incidental to yet one more reading of *Paradise Lost*, which I will give in a somewhat episodic fashion, the better to explain how the dramatic and ironical aspects of the poem are created not so much despite, but because we know the outcome of the story. For irony not only causes there to be two Miltons; it is the reason that there are two Gods in Milton’s poem—one tedious and repellent, the other unremittingly if only vicariously delightful, and both the source, or rather the occasion, of some extraordinary poetry. In relating the two—Milton with Milton’s God—I am of course enlisting William Empson, without whose book I could not proceed.<sup>1</sup> For as one admiring critic has described Empson’s place in Milton studies, his offense was “to take seriously and to force us to take seriously the idea that Milton truly thought that God’s ways needed justifying, that this was a hard, not an easy thing to do, and that a case could also be made for the other side.”<sup>2</sup> And Empson’s triumph, like his Milton’s, was “a triumph of the will, a work of extraordinarily perverse dedication”—“to try to keep us from thinking that Satan’s grandeur can be *easily* dismissed, or that God’s goodness can be *easily* cleared.”

I would like to take up our understanding of Milton where Empson left off—with the *uneasy* significance of *Paradise Lost* and that perdurable human need to justify God's ways—and will begin by stating the obvious: that we usually undertake to justify something only when we suffer an injustice, by which I mean an incoherence, a challenge or conflict in our experience of the world. For whether or not they go by that name, our religious commitments tend to respond not to our ease but to our difficulties with things, on those occasions when the ordinary would seem to behave not just extraordinarily but wrongly—defying reasonable expectation and eluding that mastery of our circumstances to which we presume. Crises like these make us fearful but also reflective, self-conscious, moving us to pursue the justification, the right conceiving or ordering of such experiences, precisely because we cannot as creatures tolerate the uneasiness left in their wake. So rather like Lord Macaulay's Francis Bacon, or Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, we make an enduring scandal of the discovery that the familiar remains unknown or perhaps unknowable at its core, because we dearly want to assume that human expectation and human understanding are one and the same, when they are not. Indeed, our human predicament is chronic, ineluctable surprise at the discrepancy between these dimensions of our experience, which we are obliged daily to witness as expectation outstrips understanding even in the smallest things. This aspect of being human is what irony enacts for us. And while there is something really wonderful and hopeful about the fact that we are always learning what we do not know, yet as thinking and time-bound creatures, we are unable to leave our existence to what feels like chance. So we worry it endlessly, which is why we are also religious.

Yet when we think about religion at all these days, we do not tend to regard it as an account of humanity's inveterate uneasiness in the world. We are most inclined to suppose that it is some sort of positive, exclusive representation of what we cannot see or prove, that is, the absolute nature of things as it affects us in this life—a metaphysical statement variously credible, variously mythic or symbolic, to which we adhere devoutly or thoughtlessly in some degree of "implicit faith." Seen in this narrow, prejudicial way, religion is indeed ideology, a perverse frame of thought by which we situate ourselves in the world to hopeful and ruinous effect, precisely because we refuse to distinguish our religious notions from the truth. For as the rationalist bias runs, truth is the sole prerogative of science and its emulators, which is one reason why Marx and Freud insist on calling their explanations of our predicament by that name, although they address the human subject no less evaluatively than religion or philosophy, and no more rigorously or systematically. But as anthropologists have kept reminding us in recent years, there isn't an *essential* difference between "civil" and "savage" modes of thought—between "science," "religion," and "magic" so-called. Their distinction is real, but it must be argued in other terms than axiomatic truth, and not in such a way as to bolster once again the delusion of one's superiority over the other.

Be that as it may, most humane sciences are religious in one undeniable respect, namely, that their concern lies with the obscure causes of our condition. For even when we dignify human being by making our own effects the grand object of inquiry, there is the lurking suggestion that our study aims to repair something gone awry with our world—something that still keeps us poised and uncertain here. In different respects, Empson's writings and Milton studies in general could be said to acknowledge this congenital need for reparation, each wanting to dispel their own discomfort at what they read, as well as any injustice this uneasiness may have promoted toward its ostensible cause. Mind you, I am not suggesting that the offense we take at what Milton or Empson argue in itself justifies or refutes what they say. I want only to ensure that the difficulty their ideas or language poses does not lead us to restrict our criticism to the authors alone. For it should also make us reflect on the sources of uneasiness in ourselves: that is, we should not only be scrutinizing what we suppose to be Milton's justice or Empson's truth, but in turn what exactly it is *we* expect these things to be and with what justification. Of course, such self-consciousness is irony's art; and in *Paradise Lost* it compels us to consider not simply what John Milton thinks is right and true, good and just (as though this were something perfectly feasible to know in itself), but equally to reflect upon what we ourselves assume them to be and how it is that we continue to be surprised by sin. Empson takes some pains to make this fact clear—that critics have always felt thrown back upon themselves by Milton's poem, for the simple reason that it has the temerity to represent God. And representing God, we feel, entails nothing short of asserting God's own truth (although, if we look again, Milton himself never quite proposes that for his poem). It is as if *Paradise Lost* were to say, without preface or apology: *this* is the nature of deity and the essential order of things, *this* the shape of history, *this* the nature of man and particularly womankind, *this* the extent of knowledge we should seek, *this* the type of polity to which we should conform. Because the poem is almost inordinately intellectual, looks as though it were defining universal order, and relies upon a primal religious myth to do its business, we respond to *Paradise Lost* not as we would to art or fiction or any such self-mitigating expression, but as though we were in the presence of a philosophical proposition—a truth claim.

In its tendency thus to confound our ideas and expectations, the poem a little resembles its great source in the Judaic scriptures, about which Erich Auerbach has remarked that they too seem to make an exclusive, "tyrannical" demand that we accept their world as objectively, irrevocably the case for us.<sup>3</sup> In other words, by the very nature of their subject, we are bound to read the scriptures as though they legislated our universal condition as human beings, not just their own meaning or the status of believers. And Auerbach describes our trepidation and reluctance in the face of such perceived coercion with a political metaphor Samuel Johnson would appreciate—someone who dreaded *Paradise Lost* as he would God Almighty; that is, Auerbach observes that the Judaic scriptures "seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels" to

the truth about ourselves.<sup>4</sup> We get something like this impression from Milton's poem—that there is a comparable stake in his justifying, that his truth allows us no choice but submission or offense because of what we assume him to be doing with it. In 1757, William Wilkie anatomized this offensiveness of *Paradise Lost* from a position to which we are perhaps less alive nowadays:

This art [of epic poetry] addresses itself chiefly to the imagination, a faculty which apprehends nothing in the way of character that is not human, and according to the analogy of that nature of which we ourselves are conscious. But it would be equally impious and absurd to represent the deity in this manner, and to contrive for him a particular character, and method of acting, agreeable to the prejudices of weak and ignorant mortals. In the early ages of the church, he thought fit to accommodate himself, by such a piece of condescension, to the notions and apprehensions of his creatures: but it would be indecent in any man to use the same freedom, and do that for God, which he only has a right to do for himself. The author of *Paradise Lost* has offended notoriously in this respect; and, though no encomiums are too great for him as a poet, he is justly chargeable with impiety, for presuming to represent the Divine Nature, and the mysteries of religion, according to the narrowness of human prejudice: his dialogues between the Father and the Son; his employing a Being of infinite wisdom in discussing the subtleties of school divinity; the sensual views which he gives of the happiness of heaven, admitting into it, as a part, not only real eating and drinking, but another kind of animal pleasure too by no means more refined: these, and such like circumstances, though perfectly poetical and agreeable to the genius of an art which adapts every thing to the human mode, are, at the same time, so inconsistent with truth, and the exalted ideas which we ought to entertain of divine things, that they must be highly offensive to all such as have just impressions of religion, and would not choose to see a system of doctrine revealed from Heaven, reduced to a state of conformity with heathen superstition.<sup>5</sup>

Wilkie's objections to the poem raise a problem more fundamental to its undertaking than the anthropomorphism of Milton's God, or the notorious materiality of Milton's heaven. For they concern the very place of imaginative art in his kind of religion, where almost any human expression of the scriptural deity cannot but transgress against its prohibition on graven images: that is, we are idolatrous not only in presuming to give a face to the hidden God of Isaiah, but also because we ineluctably make that face like our own, inasmuch as all human representation is drawn from human understanding. And poetry as the idiom most deliberately iconic not only misconceives but flagrantly violates this theological decorum. Implicitly, as Wilkie sees it, the only seemly language for divine things is theology's own—abstract, allusive, and honorific. Nor is he the only critic to think so, since readers from Alexander Pope to David Daiches have bemoaned Milton's tactlessness, his lack of grace or sublimity in represent-

ing this God. Indeed, if nothing else, Wilkie's distaste for *Paradise Lost* proves that, for a long time after Milton wrote, the world remained a religious if not a theopathic place, with a deeply reverent sense of how divinity and divine things should be depicted. Yet Milton himself was no folk poet, no religious primitive. So we ought to find it disconcerting that someone of his sophisticated piety would reduce God Almighty to a character in a poem, much less expect us to see deity in the peculiar figure of the Father, who would seem to succeed only in proving Dryden's suspicion that Milton must have been on the side of the devil. Then again, who but John Milton would ever have presumed to do such a thing, as Walter Raleigh remarks: " 'This man cuts us all out, and the Ancients too,' Dryden is reported to have said. But this man intended to do no less, and formally announced his intention. It is impossible to outface Milton, or to abash him with praise."<sup>6</sup>

Never mind that, like nature itself, Raleigh suggests Milton can do nothing in vain, even when he appears to be suborning the one true God to his version of truth. Such egotism only reinforces our impression that *Paradise Lost* intends to subject us, since unlike Wilkie but entirely like Milton himself, we are disinclined to separate his poetic from his theological decorum and are thus unable to extricate Milton's art from his religion. So we associate the great argument of Milton's poem with the speeches of Milton's God, yet are appalled at what ensues for us as readers when we do so, since Milton's God has the effect not only of making his truth unpalatable but also of rendering its justification injurious, intolerable. I need hardly mention that once Empson renewed this question of the poem's difficulty, Stanley Fish, Joseph Summers, Northrop Frye, and Arnold Stein more or less immediately took it up by examining the reflexive character Milton gives his images in *Paradise Lost*. But neither they nor Empson were the first to try to reconcile readerly disdain with consummate artistry in his case: Samuel Johnson's *Life of Milton* was there before them.

More than almost anyone before or since, Dr. Johnson has the uncanny ability to say, without flinching or digressing, whenever Milton's poem strays into the difficult—or what Johnson himself prefers to call the peculiar, the outrageous, or the implausible.<sup>7</sup> That is because Johnson as a critic possesses something like an innate decorum of ideas, a normative sense of how the good and just, the right and true, ought to appear to us. Yet he observes this instinctive classicism in a manner wholly unlike Addison, whose rage for Miltoniana made him the poet's posthumous impresario, not just his apologist. But if Dr. Johnson is devoid of the latter's suavity and self-consequence, not to mention his graciousness (in the sentimental picture of Addison honoring the poet's memory by relieving an indigent Milton daughter),<sup>8</sup> that is because John Milton genuinely disturbs him, with the result that the *Life* is acute, even febrile in its sensitivity to its subject and so endlessly if wrong-headedly perspicacious: "Bossu is of opinion that the poet's first work is to find a *moral*, which his fable is afterwards to illustrate and establish. This seems to have been the process only of Milton: the moral of other poems is incidental and consequent: in Mil-

ton's only it is essential and intrinsick. His purpose was the most useful and the most arduous; *to vindicate the ways of God to man*; to shew the reasonableness of religion, and the necessity of obedience to the Divine Law."<sup>9</sup> Johnson evidently departs from Empson in thinking that Milton's "essential and intrinsick" moral is made perfectly clear and obvious to us, an effect created by what he (and many critics after him) describes as a stringent, calculated, almost syllogistic economy of poetic meaning—not a jot or tittle of verse free from the task of justifying God's ways to us. And this should interest us, for Johnson finds *Paradise Lost* a thesis-ridden poem, which may partly explain his sense of its "arduousness," not simply for the poet but for the reader, neither of whom are permitted anything in the way of diversion from its great and painful argument. In *Paradise Lost*, he tells us, we get no gratuitous or at least unencumbered flights of imagination; we have withheld from us the delights of sheerly voluptuous verbalizing; and (anticipating Eliot) we are obliged to forego the pleasures of any passion which is not rational.<sup>10</sup>

What with such an implacable argument, and such a remote and repulsive subject as deity, divine law, and the precipitance of human corruption and death, it is hardly surprising that Johnson would be moved famously to remark that no one ever wished *Paradise Lost* longer than it is: "Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions."<sup>11</sup> Johnson apparently feels about the poem the way Adam and Eve do the Lord's curse: namely, as an indictment operating upon him like necessity. And in such excruciation he speaks for many subsequent readers, who see Milton in Milton's God not so much for what the Father says in condemning his creatures as for how he says it—ruthlessly, intractably, *inhumanely*. Implicitly, Johnson says that we are oppressed by the poem in a fashion not unlike the way Milton in his blindness notoriously oppressed his daughters; that is, we too are placed in involuntary servitude to an obsessive, domineering text which repels our sympathy, if not our entire understanding.

Such readerly durance is the effect Johnson analyzes when he says that the poem's argument is not circumstantially discovered but rather imposed ineluctably upon us, in a relentless amplification of human sinfulness. Seen this way, *Paradise Lost* is scarcely suitable reading for someone of Johnson's poignant and melancholy temper. Yet is Milton's argument really the bitter pill he feels thus obliged to prescribe to us, or does Johnson actually recoil at his own interpretation of the poem? The latter must be true to some extent or other—that despite Milton's supposedly Draconian mastery of his poem's meanings, the dreadfulness of the argument that Dr. Johnson bravely, stoically approves is at least partly the work of his own critical art. Yet I would contend that this sort of displaced, vicarious authorship of *Paradise Lost* by its readers occurs with such strange consistency as to render it a notable literary phenomenon, one worthy of attention and scrutiny. For how could it happen that an argument so patent and tendentious, so doctrinaire and exacting, is susceptible of the utterly un-Mil-

tonic meaning Johnson chooses to give it? Let us allow for the moment that Milton was unlikely to part company entirely with those religious and political opinions to which he devoted the most public portion of his writings through the 1670s, and which, as he considers them true, he associates with the revelation of his God. Let it also be allowed that he intends *Paradise Lost* to perform the work of right understanding or justification of its readers that Milton had declared from early on to be the office of poetry. Yet despite these probabilities, Johnson's version of Milton's life and text manages selectively to convert *Paradise Lost* into a pusillanimous palinode, a recantation for its author's career as an advocate of dissent, republicanism, and regicide. For by Johnson's own account, it was a career spent in the poet's flagrantly defying the more natural and decorous, and presumably kinder and gentler, order of human things which the divine institution of monarchy ordains for us—an outrage Milton perpetrated upon the state and his betters, among his peers, in his home and within his writings.

Moreover, as a high churchman and a royalist, it is Johnson's joke that the person thus coercing daughters and readers alike is a noisy but not a very notable libertarian who tyrannizes over almost everyone, with the sole exception being his copious indulgence of himself. Indeed, in the *Life*, the only real latitude shown to others is exercised not by Milton but by sundry royalists and Charles II especially, who at his restoration forbears to prosecute the poet equally for his manners and his crimes, even as that artful traducer of God and king tries to slink out of justice's reach. And when Johnson gets down to reading *Paradise Lost* itself, he predictably finds the same generosity expressed by that "Supreme King," the title Johnson prefers for Milton's God, who elects to restore an unworthy humanity in a fashion altogether reminiscent of the Stuart noblesse oblige just celebrated. Taken altogether, the *Life* succeeds admirably in showing us a *Paradise Lost* upholding that divine yet reasonable authority, that beneficent paternal power exercised by monarchs toward their subjects, which Milton had slandered in his tracts apparently to his ultimate regret, repenting thoroughly in his own life where his Satan would not. And no doubt because he is a great and subtle classicist, inexorably defining the universal canon of value, Johnson effectively bypasses the peculiar embarrassments of the dissenting poet in favor of God the transcendent king and rational epitome: that is to say, God in a kind of immaculate conception vicariously begets all decorum, truth, and beauty in Dr. Johnson's *Paradise Lost*—vicariously, because Johnson makes the "moral sentiments" of the poem original to the supernal author of Genesis, and so exempt from the taint of Milton's nonconformist views.<sup>12</sup>

It follows that whatever Johnson finds good about the poem, he finds good about English monarchy and the Anglican God, such that the poet becomes their virtual amanuensis. And what he condemns in the conduct of the poem is what he predictably abhors in Milton himself, which is that willful idiosyncrasy and self-indulgence, that want of proper deference to the authority of

nature and custom, and—although Johnson can almost bring himself to applaud its effects—that “uniform peculiarity of *Diction*, a mode and cast of expression which bears little resemblance to that of any former writer, and which is so far removed from common use, that an unlearned reader, when he first opens his book, finds himself surprised by a new language.”<sup>13</sup> For reasons not entirely distinct from the classical unity of aesthetic, moral, and political value, Johnson allocates to Milton all blame for his poem’s perversities and innovations, while praising Genesis for its sublimity and truth, from which (he concludes) piety alone prevented the poet’s deviating. It is Milton’s personal flaws which create *Paradise Lost*’s errors of expression, although these are not so grievous as to mar irretrievably the poem and its putative moral; only the man is beyond the pale (as Eliot concurs). But man and text are clearly a source of unease for Johnson, compelling him to reconcile the poem’s indubitable achievement with his aversion to its author. For when they are kept inseparable in the way Milton most probably intends (given all the autobiographical excursus linking his political to his poetic professions), then *Paradise Lost* constitutes a real threat and affront to Johnson’s ideas—precisely because he supposes Milton to be offering up God’s own truth. Of course, this enthusiastic presumption on Milton’s part would be nothing if the poem he wrote weren’t itself too considerable an object to be dismissed by someone of Johnson’s taste and intelligence. But as it stands, the sheer marvelousness of *Paradise Lost* requires him to engage in some vindicating of his own.

So he sets about saving the appearances of Milton’s poem in order that its stature lends legitimacy to neither the regicide nor its author’s theological opinions nor Cromwellian policy more generally, but instead proves the necessity of obedience against Milton himself, whose incorrigible dissent from the decorous and the true is used to separate the poem from the poet’s errors. And while Johnson thus diverts the ingenious artistry and vast intellectual apparatus of *Paradise Lost* into the service of a conforming God and king, in the same breath he damns Milton himself for a lifetime of practices “founded in an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence; in petulance impatient of controul, and pride disdainful of superiority.”<sup>14</sup> And with this lesson for the attentive reader: that John Milton in life offers a truer fable about human presumption than even *Paradise Lost*, as someone whom study never made pleasant or wise, whose justification of God’s ways recoils back upon himself, and whose fixed and unrelenting mind could not preserve him from self-contradiction, or what is worse, impudence.

I offer Samuel Johnson’s unease with the poem and his attempts to obviate his discomfort for a number of reasons, first if not foremost because his version of *Paradise Lost* flies utterly in the face of that self-justification to which we usually regard Milton as bound by the fact of the Stuart restoration in 1660. Read in this light, the poem can still be understood as a sort of roman à clef, but in a different sense than Dr. Johnson intends. As Alisdair MacIntyre has had occasion to put the case—and with as little sympathy as Johnson himself

could wish—this different vindication entails a Milton “who does not have to justify the ways of God to man in general, but has to reconcile the hidden fact that God rules with the manifest fact that Charles II rules and the saints do not.”<sup>15</sup> In thus ridiculing what he presumes to be Milton’s professed intimacy with eternal providence—that is, given the poet’s failures in the way of merely ordinary prediction—MacIntyre reasserts the anomaly which our own contradictory readings of *Paradise Lost* nicely expose. For how is it possible that a poem whose argument Johnson and others critics regard as so blatantly, unforgettingly manifest, could produce such conflicting accounts of its purpose and significance?

Notwithstanding the lengths to which critical invention can go, the answer, I think, is twofold. On the one hand, we are variously inclined to identify the poem’s predicament with its author’s disappointments—loss of Eden with the demise of Cromwell, Independency, and the promise of commonwealth—given Milton’s fondness for intruding his own circumstances on our notice whatever he might happen to be talking about at the time. (This is of course to overlook the fact that Milton’s epic argument appears to have been in the making for twenty years or more.) On the other hand, this mutual project of justification conducted by Milton and Milton’s God permits us to presume that *Paradise Lost* represents figurally what its author would have us take as the truth about particular personal and contemporary events. In other words, it tells us how we are supposed to view not only universal providence but also the specific history in which Milton took part. Encouraged by such motives as well as Milton’s frequent topicality of expression, we come to expect from the poem an allegory of Milton’s own position, even where as critics we may refrain from casting the allegory in those precise terms. But as literally an alternate or “other” sort of meaning from the usual sense we give words, allegory can neatly accommodate the apparent necessity of justifying Milton’s own loss and failure, as it can equally fulfill our expectation that *Paradise Lost* expounds a positive and universal truth about human relations with the divine. For it is perfectly possible to speak at once figurally and exactly about the world: such is logic’s own imperative, as well as the aesthetic fault which the last two hundred years of criticism have found with allegory as an expressive mode. But our readiness to detect such autobiography does not require that Milton himself adopt a transparently allegorical and supposedly inferior poetic: indeed, there is a pronounced and somewhat excessive resistance to reading more than a few sections of *Paradise Lost* in this way.

Instead, the allegory of the poet’s private justification is largely kept interpretive by his critics, a significance discreetly argued off Milton’s page, not on it, as though the poet had adopted a new and uncharacteristic reserve about the parallels between his own predicament and what he writes. And once dislodged or liberated from its evident sense by this allegorical potential, *Paradise Lost* can be made available to any number of exclusive and extreme constructions of Milton’s argument, which it has sustained over the years no less handsomely

than it does Johnson's version. Out of respect for the poem or at least its reputation, other readers than Johnson have felt compelled to edit, ignore, displace, and allegorize whatever comes between the meaning of *Paradise Lost* and their preferred understanding of it, especially if they too are made uncomfortable by what it seems to say, or what its critics claim for it. Taking Dr. Johnson as a precedent, this can result in critics addressing only as much of the poem as suits their own ideas of truth. (Johnson's refusal to follow Milton into heaven, while a decorous omission, has the interpretive advantage of leaving the supreme king and his dubious speeches unexamined and unchallenged.)<sup>16</sup> The "essential and intrinsic" moral of *Paradise Lost* can then freely project the widely diverging ideas and interests of its readers, with interpretation serving as a blind for the poem's real difficulties and Milton himself assuming the protean and frequently apologetic guise of Thomist, Cabbalist, aristocrat, Cartesian, sectarian, post-structuralist, Platonist, animist materialist, Ramist, Kantian, and so forth. The sheer variety and volubility of Milton's transformations again force us back upon his poem's peculiar distinction: namely, its perplexing amenability to the vagaries of interpretation, despite our presumption that it tells a positive, unequivocal truth.

But if allegory can effectively bowdlerize the sense of a text, the presumption of irony can just as easily deracinate it, since irony argues an ambivalence or instability of meaning with something like the same metamorphic effect as allegory, and very likely the same ulterior motive—our desire not to be made uneasy by the order of truth Milton is thought to assert in *Paradise Lost*. Thus the critic may undertake to reconcile or oppose the poem's ostensible argument by referring it to extrinsic forces superior to Milton's own intention and control, and for that matter, his readers'. I mean logical, psychological, historical, cultural, economic forces maneuvering subliminally or symbolically within the text to orchestrate its contradiction. Yet after Dr. Johnson's fashion, this is once more to divide the express argument of *Paradise Lost* from its "essential and intrinsic" moral, and thus to exonerate or damn Milton and whatever sense of the poem we find difficult or offensive. Given their promiscuous use, these two figural modes may seem to differ little from each other, in that they both discount the evident meaning of an expression to implicate another order entirely of significance and understanding.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, each trope depends upon some anomaly or incongruity attending that expression to alert us to its presence, and so resolve the seeming incoherence of meaning that initially signaled this new, unexpected sense. Yet if allegory expands the possible meanings of a text, irony tends to make us reflect upon the phenomenon of polysemia itself, not so much perplexing the significance to which we presume—the proper work of allegory—as the conditions contriving to foster any such presumption: where allegory complicates the sense of what we read, irony criticizes the very ways we are accustomed to make sense at all. As Kenneth Burke observes, such sophistications of meaning are frequently the product of highly conventional cultures, where every person can detect the slightest deviation in usage: then

equivocality is more apparent than real, a function of certitude, not its opposite.<sup>18</sup> Irony becomes witty antithesis—a superior conversance with what is taken for truth, which in turn promotes a certain freedom or fluency with received ideas, as well as a special dignity of understanding for the ironist not unlike that which the hierophantics of allegory can bestow. And Milton's critics often assume this dignity, as allegorists disclosing the occult meanings of *Paradise Lost*, or ironists sophisticating or confounding its apparent sense.

#### DESCRIPTION AS SOLUTION

But it is also the case that irony and allegory can express the human difficulties of meaning without purporting to resolve them by contradiction or hermetica. Tragedy, for example, does this when it represents an action at once symbolic and self-reflexive, where mimesis gets its force not from the depiction of fatal events as such, but from how humanity conspires with the nature of things to make them so for us. The art of tragedy lies in rightly representing a problem, that is, how the train of contingency and misunderstanding can transform what is humanly right, just, and true into fate, catastrophe, suffering, evil. As Vernant and Vidal-Naquet observe:

The tragic consciousness of responsibility appears when the human and divine levels are sufficiently distinct for them to be opposed while still appearing to be inseparable. The tragic sense of responsibility emerges when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate while still not being regarded as sufficiently autonomous to be fully self-sufficient. The particular domain of tragedy lies in this border zone where human actions hinge on divine powers and where their true meaning, unsuspected by even those who initiated them and take responsibility for them, is only revealed when it becomes a part of an order that is beyond man and escapes him.<sup>19</sup>

Yet the very activity of this representation and its sympathetic impact on the audience argues against the tragic dilemma as our own necessity. These narratives are enacted not because they are humanly ineluctable but because they can be made to be, if we are not brought to a better understanding of what it means to be human—of the actual predicament in which we collectively find ourselves. The Delphic dictum “know yourself” does not enjoin us to individualism but to an acknowledgment of our common nature and, as Werner Jaeger observes, how we are circumscribed and confounded by our mortality.<sup>20</sup> He then comments that a delimited human being is a religious recognition even as human suffering is a religious problem, which is to say that the understanding commanded by the Delphic god and proffered us by tragedy delineates the extreme boundaries of rationality, where explanation and transcendence are brought not simply to an impasse but to an insuperable conflict. But an antagonistic god is not their only conclusion: our misconceived humanity is the other. For the hubris or outrageousness of the tragic protagonist offends not only

against a jealous deity, but against the human nature whose predicament it neglects as well. Tragic excess arises from this neglect, which Homer understands as “thoughtlessness,” “recklessness”—an obliviousness to the implications of one’s choices. Indeed, the person who acts out of hubris is no less mad than the one suffering from *ate*—insanity or delusion; in what they do, they both express the human paradox of pursuing the good and true only to create the most profound disorder.

Of course, just knowing the tragic myth makes possible a different fate for audience as against protagonist. It places us in an ironic relation to the choices we see enacted, kept by that single prohibitive knowledge from simply assimilating the spectacle—as we might very well do were the protagonist’s predicament ours. Yet through the power of myth and mimesis, it is almost made our own, since these at once conceptual and expressive arts engage us with the action in such a way as intimately to grasp the appeal—the seemingly indubitable rightness, justice, beauty—of those choices. Thus the tragic action simultaneously immerses us in and protects us from the misunderstanding in which we ourselves participate as human beings, and tragedy itself becomes a justification not entirely unlike the legal or logical variety. For it too proposes to restore the audience to truth—to a right understanding of our world. But where logic assumes that this justification has a single, definitive, and (formally) necessary sense, and where positive law lays claim to its evidence and conclusiveness, tragedy does not do away with our difficulties. Instead, it locates justification in the acknowledgment and understanding of conflict itself. No less than philosophy in Plato’s sense, tragedy is *psychagogia*, a leading of the soul by which actors and audience alike are justified, insofar as we can be brought by a certain order of representation to admit the human nature which, in all its irreducible complexity, both ennobles and condemns us. But the sense of this understanding is neither single, positive, necessary, or self-evident, since it consists in a circumstantial appreciation of the conflict we ourselves foment. This is to say nothing more than that tragic meaning is dialectical, as we all know: it does not belong to one or other of the positions—sceptical or rhapsodic—in which the action places us but in the relationship between the two, as a proper account of human being.

To that extent, right understanding in tragedy has an affinity with Wittgenstein’s much-maligned statement in the *Investigations* that philosophy “leaves everything as it is” (*PI* p.124).<sup>21</sup> Certainly, this is Martha Nussbaum’s point when she takes as an epigraph to her own discussion of tragedy the following comments from *Zettel*, which may serve to clarify this typical remark:<sup>22</sup> “the difficulty—I might say—is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only preliminary to it. . . . This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it. The difficulty here is to stop.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than seeking the solution in a fix or cause, Wittgenstein would have us find it in describing the dilemma itself: this

is “solution” understood as elucidation—resolving a problem into its constituents and their relations, the better to understand what the conflict entails, with the goal as full and circumstantial a representation as possible.<sup>24</sup> We make this description a solution when we use it to grasp where we actually stand—what is “natural” to this position, by which Wittgenstein tends to mean integral to our condition as human beings. He sees the practice of meaning as fundamental to humanity in just this way, but also peculiarly indicative of its character—an aspect of our existence exemplary of the whole. That is why, in the *Investigations*, he goes on to argue that “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either” (*PI* p.124).

But, as he says, the rub is that our peculiar misunderstanding of language keeps us from stopping there, because we persist in trying to regulate how words mean in a manner wholly incongruous with the ways they actually work. Indeed, the rationality we like to cultivate effectively blinds us to our own behavior, aggravating by its solutions the crisis of meaning it has already fomented in our usage—a compound confusion Wittgenstein calls being “entangled in our own rules” (*PI* p.125). And as Stanley Cavell has shown, the self-imposed contradiction that inevitably arises between our “natural” practice and our “rational” theory gives scepticism its fateful impetus and tragic outcome, where we are condemned to suffer the perpetual insufficiency not just of human meaning but of human being to our affected notions of truth. Wittgenstein would have it that we cannot escape this endlessly repetitive doom until we get “a clear view” of the situation promoting it, and he argues that philosophical representation ought to supply that view in describing the modalities of human meaning. For such a description properly done would show us in turn how our analysis is not simply inconsistent but incommensurate with our usage, thus exposing the self-disguised entanglements of our ideas:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words.—Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions.’ Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*.

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a ‘Weltanschauung’?)

A philosophical problem has the form: “I don’t know my way about.” (*PI* p.122–23)

Again, these “perspicuous representations” do not supply causes or foundations for our verbal habits, in keeping with one sense of justification as implementing a rigorous formal procedure or criteria for conceptual practice. Instead, “description” treats the variable activity of meaning as something precedent to our understanding—a congenital attribute of human being ultimately groundless,

seemingly arbitrary and abhorrent to scepticism on that precise account. For philosophical scepticism argues that our expressions cannot be meaningful until they are properly rationalized, which of course it performs by adducing a set of criteria oblivious and so antipathetic to the circumstances surrounding their use. And its insistence on fulfilling these criteria succeeds only in obfuscating, to the point of paralyzing, an otherwise effectual if necessarily imperfect human practice of making sense.

Yet in analytic scepticism's obdurate refusal to accept any order of meaning but the one it imagines, Wittgenstein recognizes a profound human preference and expectation of how things *should* mean, encouraged by a symptomatic misreading of language's own myths. For the sceptic assumes that language simply and directly states what is the case with words, never suspecting that an altogether different operation of meaning obtains not only in human usage but in human grammar—in the very way language organizes its elements and idioms. To probe this entirely captivating but obtuse expectation, which is not limited to philosophical scepticism alone, the *Investigations* orchestrates a virtual anthropology of our semantic beliefs, customs, and behaviors. Or as Wittgenstein himself puts it: "What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark *only because they are always before our eyes*" (*PI* p.415, my emphasis). So his "natural history" attends to just those familiar but unexamined circumstances of human meaning which rationalism blithely ignores, in order to gain the "clear" but equally "instrumental" view he recommends. For "What we call '*descriptions*' are instruments for particular uses": "Think," he says, "of a machine-drawing, a cross-section, an elevation with measurements, which an engineer has before him" (*PI* p.291).

Given the scope of the crisis scepticism more engenders than anticipates, jeopardizing not only the integrity but the viability of human meaning, Wittgenstein advises us first to secure this "instrumental description" of our usage before we try to proceed in any direction. Needless to say, the *Investigations* has already been engaged in representing it; for the descriptive kind of justification Wittgenstein advocates consists in such an "instrument," where right understanding refers not to any one formal protocol of meaning but to an account of the circumstances obtaining when we actually engage in that activity. Or to put the difference another way, this "description" in no way revises the vexed conditions of human meaning; it revises how we think about them. So while it may appear "preliminary" to the problem in the way Wittgenstein warns, that is because the description itself resolves the human issue, if not the human predicament of meaning which scepticism feels so acutely and so tellingly misconceives. And it does so by disclosing another coherence and viability to our practice than that expected, much less allowed by the rational paradigm scepticism assumes only to explode by its own analysis, chronically scandalized by the obstinate fact that language does not behave as it should. And the

anthropology of the *Investigations* is designed precisely to effect this revelation, being comprised of an open-ended series of reluctant discoveries and astonishing encounters in which we are invited to see the oddities and incommensurables of our familiar assumptions of meaning. More particularly, Wittgenstein's speaker enacts for us the rationalist mythology our culture invents and to which it now appears strangely enthralled, in the process elucidating the human actualities of signification which we enthusiastically suppress. Thus in the ordinary-made-fantastic landscape of "intermediate cases," we discover the unexpected novelty of slabs, beetles in boxes, boiling pots and the aroma of coffee; tribes that ascribe pain solely to inanimate things and pity dolls, that only think aloud, that function entirely without the idea of a human soul; lions that recognizably yet unintelligibly talk, parrots conversing when there is a God around; simple line drawings that behave altogether eccentrically. Each event pictures an aspect of our verbal practice or our misunderstanding of it, so as to enact Wittgenstein's account of meaning and its moral entailments—especially the cost in human terms of our fond ideas.

It follows that the configuration given these conceptual events implies a certain mentality or subjectivity ("the form of account we give, the way we look at things"), self-alienated from its own expressive nature, unable to find its way about yet convinced that the confusion lies not in its own assumptions and procedures but instead in the incorrigibility of human being. For the speaker addresses his "perspicuous representation" to the sceptic's immense and recalcitrant disappointment in the world, to both dispel the confusion and alleviate the suffering attending it. As Wittgenstein observes, "The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language" (*PI* p.111). This is not to suggest that the human predicament exemplified in language is essentially tragic in nature, but that it *can be experienced as a tragedy*—the consequence of approaching language in a particularly insistent way (the way language invites by its own self-portrait). Insofar as we persist in both denying and misprising how language practically works, so we will continue to find the world it creates a disturbing, even unconscionable, place.

So the "perspicuous representation" which the *Investigations* gives is a parabolic action involving speaker, sceptic, and reader, as well as a justification in tragedy's manner. For it also aims to dramatize the nature of our perplexities about meaning, and not to discount them—on the contrary, by profoundly imagining these confusions, to understand and express scepticism's indignant doubt. In his preface, Wittgenstein adopts (not altogether inadvertently) a Miltonic idiom to convey his dubious hopes for text and humanity together, and almost as an afterthought, his dislike of being misrepresented by any words other than his own: "It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another—but, of course, it is not likely" (*PI* vi). There is thus some relation

between the occasion moving him to publish the *Investigations* in 1946 and what the text itself contains, which is not an answer or solution to those circumstances but an account of them. As he says, "I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own" (*PI* vi). In this justification, we do not end in the firm possession of truth as if it were a positive and portable property; we are offered instead a picture of language that might eventually conduce to truth, that is, if we can unlearn our conceptual *habitus* and live without the appealing idea of meaning's lapidary precision and luminous simplicity.

The *Investigations* treats this philosophical conflict as a mimesis—indeed, the representation of a conceptual passage that Wittgenstein himself has made, but that he ascribes recursively to the speaker and his sceptical interlocutor, much as Milton does both with that anomalous epic voice and the Satan of *Paradise Lost*. Again I return to the point Cavell makes decisive in his own work, with both Wittgenstein and tragedy: it is these tacit protagonists who perform "long and involved journeyings" from opposed yet sympathetic positions; they who project and traverse the ideational "landscapes" comprised of the text's remarks; they who face each place's unexpected yet reorienting inhabitants (*PI* v). And in the manner of every protagonist, the vicissitudes of their travels—"over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction"—and their responses to what they find implicate not only the peculiar purpose of their journeying, but also the larger human predicament for which this exploration stands. As in parable, the process is therapeutic as against conclusive; surprise is the only eventuality that the text provides, for there is no end. Instead, we are simply left with the predicament the *Investigations* ingeniously engages, in the hope that the twists and turns of reading will allow us to understand it anew. I must add that Wittgenstein does not expect his allegory of thwarted assumptions and disconcerting revelations punctually to reconcile us to his version of human affairs; for the sceptic's tragedy clearly distinguishes between listening and understanding—again, like scriptural parable. On the contrary, the *Investigations* does not attempt formally to vindicate the human conditions of meaning; but it describes their difficulty in such a way that we may be enabled to say, with Wittgenstein's speaker, if not his sceptic, "Now I can go on."

Even as this expression captures the vantage of our first parents as they slowly, elegiacally descend from Eden into the open world, so I will argue that Milton provides just such an instrumental description—a justification by parable—of human meanings in *Paradise Lost*: indeed, such a description inheres in all his writings. And I make this argument not only, like Wittgenstein, to link the contradictions holding sway in the field to the way we read Milton's words. I do it because the idea of meaning and the idea of deity have always been mutual and mutually entangled, especially for scripturalists like Milton himself and the Protestant reformers, Luther and Calvin. There is something precisely perspicuous for Milton in Wittgenstein's own debt to Luther, both conceptually and in his resonant term "grammar," which is owing in no little part to the latter's

1535 lectures on Galatians.<sup>25</sup> There Luther talks about theology entailing a new and special kind of grammar; and Wittgenstein himself famously observes in the *Investigations* that “Essence is expressed by grammar,” for “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)” (*PI* p.371, 373). Of course, the point that grammar expresses “essence” is an ironical one, since Wittgenstein holds that we are incapable of knowing anything *essentially*. Indeed, “essence” is what Thomas Hobbes would call “an idol of the brain,” a figure or expression out of which we conjure an entity. He ascribes this conceptual confusion originally to the idolatrous gentiles, who “did vulgarly conceive the Imagery of the brain, for things really subsistent without them, and not dependent on the fancy; and out of them framed their opinions of *Daemons*, Good and Evil; which because they seemed to subsist really, they called *Substances*; and because they could not feel them with their hands, *Incorporeall*.”<sup>26</sup> Afterwards, he continues, this “pagan” pathology of meaning infected the Jews in their Diaspora and, with the rise of Aristotelianism, was communicated through the distortions of scriptural commentary to the credulous modern world. Hobbes can accordingly attribute the civil and intellectual crimes of scholastic philosophy (both Catholic and Protestant) to the same hapless abuse of words that confounded the ancients: the abundant propagation of mental figments which are given a demonic because objective existence. So, at the very end of *Leviathan*, he consigns the lot to “The Kingdome of Darknesse,” a conceptual miasma of course nominally inhabited by phantasms, idols, images, figures—in Hobbes’s canon, things that are not.

However one regards Hobbes’s version of the causes of the British civil war, the role he gives this idolatrous propensity in *Leviathan* anticipates Wittgenstein’s comparable concern that we are forever wanting to treat abstract terms as though they signified substantives of the same order as bodies in space.<sup>27</sup> From different positions, both Hobbes and Wittgenstein argue that we habitually misconceive this species of word, and in a way detrimental to more than verbal sense. Indeed, for Hobbes, our perverse usage goes a long way toward explaining how the Presbyterians could claim England honorifically for the scriptural God, though really for themselves. In religion, Luther would say this delusive objectifying arises from the suppressed fact that “God” and “truth” or “meaning” (for him, the theological kind) are *res non apparentes*, things that do not appear as such, after Hebrews 11:1: “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”<sup>28</sup> And the difficulty peculiar to *res non apparentes* is that their invidence surreptitiously signifies more than mere invisibility: it implicates a kind of existence ineffably distinct from those things which mediate this incommensurable life to us. For if such an alien dimension to the world can only be known and understood according to its mediations, at that same time those mediations cannot signify as they seem to do since they are invariably antipathetic to their subject. Indeed, religious language in Luther confounds us like language more largely does in the *Investigations*: we assume an easy correspondence, an evident continuity of kind between an expression’s familiar and religious usages, where Luther argues there is none.

Religious *invisibilia*, he insists, must be understood in an unaccustomed fashion if they are to make any sustained sense, a circumstance we only discover when—in our world, in the scriptural text, or in the relations we argue between them—we experience deity’s self-revelation as incongruous, conflicted, contradictory, unjust.

For Luther himself, such an event was fomented by a phrase of Paul’s—“the righteousness of God”—which he had been taught to understand as the righteousness by which deity punishes the wicked: “For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’ ” (Romans 1:17). Despite Luther’s passionate religious commitment, these words engendered in him only an equally violent despair since he had no felt conviction that, with all his pious labors, he was adequate to this God’s acceptance. What with the intensifying sensations of his own spiritual futility, Paul’s words had the perverse effect of making him hate the blind and brutal God to whom, it would seem, he had all but unaccountably devoted himself:

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.<sup>29</sup>

Simply put, Luther’s anger and despair arise from his inability to tolerate the received meaning of the phrase “righteousness of God.” For he cannot reconcile with his own experience, his own sense of what is right, the sort of justice deity imposes on humanity in this understanding of Paul’s words. Indeed, he finds the “truth” scripture would seem to propound humanly unintelligible, since the phrase so construed works not to assuage but to exacerbate our suffering as “miserable sinners.” Implicitly, this is the consequence of pursuing a certain clarity or precision for deity’s self-expressions: that is, the scholastic exegetes of scripture handle its language as though each word *meant* in a void, without any regard either for the context of statement or for their reading’s human viability—an approach wholly at odds with the stated intent of the gospel, as Luther complains. Thus a conflict arises between the sense obviously assigned Paul’s phrase and the morality, the justice of that meaning, where the actual effect of the verse countermands its supposed claims: in short, the existential incoherence of Romans precipitates in Luther a crisis of faith. And just as that crisis has both grammatical and psychological symptoms, where a given reading is productive only of the most extreme mental anguish (anguish so extreme and overwhelming that it becomes a formal element of Luther’s theology), so does its solution:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.<sup>30</sup>

The appalling incongruity of sense with experience moves Luther to attend to more than the phrase alone, namely, to the actual circumstances of its use, “the context of the words.” And this interpretive maneuver results in a “perspicuous representation,” a description which is also a solution in Wittgenstein’s manner.

When Luther no longer approaches Paul’s words as though their meaning were severally distinguished like the picture of bodies in space—single, discrete, and absolute—the verse has entirely another look for him. It no longer argues an unbearable antagonism between God and humanity, but an affinity achieved in the very act of reading scripture, whose newly intelligible meaning operates circumstantially, contingently, and so surprisingly. For once pervaded by this peculiarly invidious order of divine revelation, the ordinary assumes “a totally other face,” which is to say that the Pauline expression gains the human viability it had catastrophically lacked. And this sensation of moving from the conflicted to the meaningful feels salvific to Luther, as if he “had entered paradise itself through open gates.” The shift in his religious position is vast and almost beyond words, yet it is an interpretive creation, simultaneous with the sudden onset of the text’s coherence and his own relief. For the received reading of Paul’s phrase, in its semantic equation of words to things, ignores a critical contingency in the text—“He who through faith is righteous shall live”—and the force of this contingency thoroughly reorders the sense of Romans, in keeping with a certain grammatical usage, the Hebrew genitive:

Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.<sup>31</sup>

So rather than proposing impossibly to match human to divine value, to trade human actions for God’s as though these were commensurate, even fungible, scripture relates through our speech and history the groundless, redemptive

movement of the divine toward humanity in a second creation, making us what we are not. Scriptural expressions thus come to signify in a new and extraordinary way a significance which Luther himself undergoes like theophany—the strange yet illuminating force of divine intent in human experience. For by their very incoherence with the usual sense we assume for ourselves and our world, these expressions implicate a meaning at once inevident and inordinate, whose reference is not the nature of God *per se* but the quality of God's attitude toward us. That reference Luther elsewhere distinguishes as "the will of His good pleasure" in a sense deliberately paradoxical to scholastic usage, as signifying deity's gratuitous, salvific intent in the Christ—"the one and only view of the Divinity that is available and possible in this life" (*LW* 2:49). In effect, these expressions provide an account of the relation between creature and creator, pictured as a profound distinction in the order of scriptural meaning itself. This is what Luther means by his being "born again": the shift in meaning is felt to be the virtual sensation of faith itself, and thus a palpable revolution—a conversion, that is—in our standing before God.

Moreover, in the moment the text of scripture is reconfigured, no longer terrible but sweetly reassuring to Luther, so deity itself assumes another aspect—this time as a loving God, not a hateful one. Luther's struggle with the sense of Romans, then, does not end in the seeming impasse between religious profession and human experience; for its difficulty and its authority mutually require him to seek a description resolving this incoherence—a justification. And while we might cynically assume the expedience of such justifying—that it will result in an incomplete or opportunistic reading—the opposite actually occurs. Luther's revised understanding takes more rather than less of the text into account, including the fact of its difficulty; nor is the Hebrew genitive a mere device but a real grammatical possibility foreclosed by the restrictive order of meaning on which its interpreters had previously insisted. The point fundamental to this hermeneutical episode is Luther's assumption, in the face of such soul-destroying difficulty, that God's words must be meaningful, must be true. He shares this assumption with Wittgenstein, whose sense of language as a natural and so practical, functional aspect of human being ensures his comparable reluctance either to rest in the contradiction raised by scepticism or to accept its merely arbitrary solution. For both of them, the trial of incoherence is not to be proved against language itself but against its interpreters, who are inclined to refuse any order of meaning that conflicts with their own conceptual customs, no matter the human suffering that ensues. Since human egoism automatically assigns primacy to its notions alone, we must be chastened by contradiction if we are to relinquish them.

But where the problem of meaning lies with us, the marvelous thing about its solution in Luther's account is that we are not led by this difficulty into sophistications like the epicycles of the planets—as Raphael says, building and unbuilding in order to save not so much the appearances as our preferred relation to them. Once the change in our position has taken place, we see this

revision as simple in itself. It is because we are infatuated with a single idea of truth that any revolution in our assumptions feels like an arduous and fearful conflict, a challenge to our very being; that is, we want to believe in a certain immediacy, elegance, precision, and self-evidence to our perceptions of the world, because these dignify our position in it. Their quality tacitly reflects the tenor of human understanding and human being, which is why we often fail to notice that what appear to be superb explanations cannot account for the mundane facts of our experience. By exposing the discrepancy between our practice of knowledge and our representations of it, scepticism of course handily dispatches that fond idea of truth. Yet the sceptic frequently persists in the assumption that right understanding must nonetheless have the same qualities thus denied to knowledge “as we have it,” in Francis Bacon’s wry phrase. Indeed, the sceptical critique itself solicits just these appearances, and for the very same reason—that they commend its analysis and our megalomania. So Luther’s historic break isn’t with scripture or the God of that text, but with a certain interpretive egoism and conceptual infatuation which dismiss, as an abuse of meaning, whatever does not fit its preferred model. And in banishing any other possibility of significance, it banishes all the world and deity itself from human understanding.

By contrast, the different model of *res non apparentes*, in which God, truth, mind, faith, significance, and such *invisibilia* resist our expectations of meaning, requires us to rethink where we stand relative to these things as well as the way we suppose religious experience to signify. We cannot find ourselves reflected in the world in the same way as before, because understanding is no longer held captive to our own inflated demands for significance. Humanity is still the maker of meaning, if only because we must be responsible to our predicament; but that predicament implicates another relationship altogether to this practice, where our ideas are not the end but merely the beginning of understanding. That is why when Luther reads Romans effectually, meaningfully, according to what he later calls scripture’s “theological grammar,” he is given no transcendent version of human nature, no invisible entity, and no sublimed world. Rather, Romans reveals an unexpected coherence and value in the most familiar things—in the very words we speak. And this occurs because difficulty can lead us to abandon our fixed and ingrained ideas of the way the world or the text, deity or truth, should appear to us. For once thrown back upon our failed assumptions of meaning—as Luther was, as Wittgenstein recommends we should be in such cases—we are obliged by our condition to return again and again to the conflict until, all of a sudden, it acquires another aspect as inclusive of understanding as our previous notions were prohibitive. In apprehending the force of the Hebrew genitive, Luther’s sense of “being born again and entering paradise” enacts Wittgenstein’s observation that we feel as though we have discovered a new object, a new place, a new physical phenomenon. But what we have experienced is simply the “new sensation” of another grammar—a new way of speaking or looking at our world and ourselves (*PI* # 400).

In his preface to the 1545 edition of the Latin works, which recounts this crisis, Luther may be said to justify his theology by the parable of his life: we are given a mimesis of a kind, describing the now historic turn or revision in his ideas and actions peculiarly contributing to, if not solely inciting, the events of the Reformation and the establishment of Protestant doctrine. As Lutheran scholarship itself acknowledges, his justifying is retrospective and artistic inasmuch as he intends this circumstantial account of his personal and public predicament to be instrumental for himself and his reader: in effect, it is a way of making sense of the social upheaval in which he and his writings participate. For his variously strident and perplexed responses to these scandalous events surely imply that Luther knows no complacency about the European wars of religion, which last well into the next century. Rather, he feels obliged to account for the fact that the gospel rightly understood does not relieve but seemingly precipitates a conflict of such global dimensions—political, religious, economic, intellectual. In part, the solution at which he arrives is expressed in that paradoxical righteousness, where humanity is justified by no physical or material action but a conceptual and interpretive one—the living practice of *sola fides*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*—which we feel in every aspect of our being, as Luther says about himself.

Yet we cannot see this justification as such, any more than Luther finds the conventional meaning of Paul's words spiritually facile or coherent: on the contrary, the statement from Romans appears incongruous, offensive to him in his malaise—a *horridum decretum*, to adopt Calvin's ironic epithet. But the existential conflict this meaning promotes moves Luther to pursue what he then profoundly experiences as the letter's proper sense and the alleviation of his suffering. It is necessary to recognize that, in the crucible of his own anguish, he remains conspicuously faithful to the text, adamantly refusing to abandon it or God but insisting on their mutual justification. And this "importuning" of the text, this insistence on its meaningfulness, conduces to the very coherence of which he despaired both in Paul's words and in his own life. That is why, in Luther, neither justification before God nor the paradoxicality of its Pauline description implicates a mystical or transcendental being. Instead, as in tragedy, as in Wittgenstein's philosophy, religious contradiction throws us back upon ourselves in such a way that we are impelled to discover not the wonders of the invisible world, but a revised meaning for the ordinary one which at some point or other we have experienced as intolerably conflicted. So although contradiction is accessory to this new meaning, it does not serve Luther as the basis for some metaphysic or counter-aesthetic. Human conflict and suffering cannot be a value or a good in themselves; nor is their painful reality to be effaced by any religious apprehension of them. That would be grossly immoral. But as its invariable effects, these misfortunes mark the occasions of our chronic misprision of the one true God, whom we want to construe as a palpable entity or transcendent analogue when he exists for us only as an alien and discomfiting sort of meaning that keeps obtruding on our unexamined lives. Since deity's

hiddenness represents for Luther the limits of human understanding, we cannot expect to educe a knowledge of God directly from his expressions; we can seek to understand them only within the limits of this constraint. And the constraint places deity in the category of *res non apparentes*, things which do not appear as such, along with all religious things including the sense of scripture. So Luther insists that even in the incarnate son of God, we do not have an *analogia entis* to the divine, much less deity per se, but rather the right understanding of God expressed parabolically in the peculiar story of a human life—Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ.

Such an impassable boundary placed on religious knowledge does not allow us to say, *This is God*, or *This is godlike*; it enables us only to say, *This is how we must go about understanding God's intent*. For Luther, our knowledge does not take the form of an axiomatic doctrine of the divine nature, but a circumstantial account of our forever-vexed relations with the absolute—in the scriptural text, in history, in our present lives—whose difficulty works to revise how we take God's revelation: that is, we are brought by contradiction to acknowledge that it does not describe an order of being, one which remains beyond even our attempt at conception. Rather, what these expressions do is to introduce a new dimension and complexity of meaning into our existence; and Luther's theology of justification—"the righteousness of God"—is distinguished by that singular insight.

#### THE PATIENCE OF A JOB

A certain quietism has of course been ascribed to the righteousness of Job, which could be construed to have its source in a remote and arbitrary God of Aeschylean caprice, not unlike the demonic deity of Luther's religious crisis: that is, the humanly inscrutable onset of Job's affliction, and the theodicy that asserts divine prerogative over and against human expectation, could encourage and indeed enforce a posture of quietism in two senses of the word. On the one hand, Job's degradation might inhibit any effort actively to order his own or others' welfare, since such merely human efforts are subject to the arbitrary sanction of deity, in which case an insuperable abyss opens up between divine and human ideas of justice and right. On the other, his apparently causeless suffering might incline him to embrace a mystical or an implicit faith (that Protestant bugbear), which disdains all knowledge where God is concerned, so that religious action is irrational or inconsequent, motivated by either ecstatic impulse or the irresistible authority of the absolute. Either way, Job's faith seems to be vindicated by his doing nothing effectual to relieve his suffering—say, repudiating the covenant or cursing the Lord—except to endure this evil as he does the ravaging of his body, his goods, and his identity. Yet I don't think that is quite how Milton understands what he calls Job's perseverance, or what the poet brings to the seemingly impassive figure of Jesus in *Paradise Regained*, whose justification (the Father informs us) takes Job's terrible suffering as its model.

But this testimonial aside, Milton's "brief epic" has none of the scriptural story's tragic *gravitas*, since the heroic trial of his protagonist looks to involve little more than a show of sufferance. It is a problem that defies the understanding of a copiously histrionic Satan as well as many Miltonists—all of whom, after *Paradise Lost*, expect a virtue neither so fugitive nor so cloistered from the Son of God.

But if we take the encounter between Satan and the person termed "our saviour" as Milton's reading of Job, then in Wittgenstein's or Luther's sense, the difficulty comes down to a question of how we understand religious expressions—in this case, the poet's. Since very little transpires in what the angelic hosts dub the duel of wisdom between Jesus and Satan (for all that the Father smilingly adverts to this exercise in intransigence as a trial by combat or ordeal), we feel obliged to construe the narrative as a metaphysical occurrence, in which our saviour's immobility disguises an enormous symbolic activity—thus subliming the poem's imagery to offset its dramatic inertia and figural obtuseness. And like Job's patience, Jesus' passivity in the temptation scene can be read as a brief for suppressing or rejecting the impulse to do much of anything about this life except transcend it, since human thought and action appear by his responses to bear only negatively—as futile or (in Stanley Fish's always provocative reading)<sup>32</sup> dangerously ulterior—on the next. This is where Luther comes in: for in describing how Romans justifies not only its own meaning but also his life, faith, and theology, he shows how an interpretive maneuver can become a momentous historical event, without recourse to the transcendental paraphernalia of metaphysics. I would argue that Milton does the same with *Paradise Regained*: that is, when read as a conflict between two religious mentalities, the poem enacts how our image of God can convert not only the whole economy of our experience—as the field from which we derive sensation, selfhood, community—but also the shape of human possibility. For to rectify that religious picture is, at bottom, to readjust the world by altering what we think it expresses or how we imagine it is moved, and so by extension, to transform the way in which things can and should mean to us, and how we respond to them in turn. It is this wholesale conversion of the person that Job's suffering brings about, in which he is led to reconceive the very grounds of his existence by a transfigured vision of his God—the one maneuver or, more properly, justification that everybody but the devil's party performs in *Paradise Regained*.

Despite the fact that the Book of Job is neither single nor integral in its composition (to which formal concerns the poet is always alive), Milton seems to have read it as a whole in the fashion intended by the compositors and editors of scripture, and given his habitual use and facility with these texts, very likely in the original. This is not to say that he limits his understanding of the Job story to the scriptural version; for Barbara Lewalski has shown Milton availing himself of the whole literate—and, I should add, allegorical—tradition of Job's sufferings and its immense vitality of meaning for *Paradise Regained*.<sup>33</sup> Yet I think the biblical story specially explains the manner by which our saviour is

justified in his encounter with Satan, and why it is that we have such difficulty in grasping, much less approving, Milton's kind of justification, inasmuch as this incarnate God is not what he, Satan, his disciples, or Milton's readers expect.<sup>34</sup> For having refused all the conventional and obvious ways of redeeming humanity—"victorious deeds," "heroic acts," "persuasion" (LM 1.196–293)—Jesus is magically transported to the temple's top, left by Satan to stand or fall in the confidence that one way or another, this person's identity must be finally decided as God or man. But the result utterly circumvents the experiment:

There stand, if thou wilt stand; to stand upright  
 Will ask thee skill; I to thy Father's house  
 Have brought thee, and highest placed, highest is best,  
 Now show thy progeny; if not to stand,  
 Cast thyself down; safely if Son of God:  
 For it is written, He will give command  
 Concerning thee to his angels, in their hands  
 They shall uplift thee, lest at any time  
 Thou chance to dash thy foot against a stone.  
 To whom thus Jesus: Also it is written,  
 Tempt not the Lord thy God, he said and stood.  
 But Satan smitten with amazement fell.

(LM 4.551–62)

What stuns Satan is not an exhibition of godhead (which he desires and expects for his sake), but Jesus' standing where it seems humanly impossible that he should, and without any supernal machinery like those angels who shortly and allegorically help him off "his uneasy station" (LM 4.584). It is a religious act accompanied by a religious text equally incomprehensible to Satan, since the words—"Tempt not the Lord thy God"—here express the value of attitude over action, the implied over the demonstrable, the groundlessness of faith over mythic spectacle. This complex feat, like our saviour himself, is at once ordinary and incalculable, or as Annabel Patterson astutely comments, marvelous in another manner entirely from the theophany Satan imagines or the temptations by which he would elicit it.<sup>35</sup> In effect, Satan is stymied by his own ideas of the divine: beneath what he regards as the Son's human incognito, he imagines a magical god not unlike himself, one he can at once admire (or wonder at) and seduce—related ideas in *Paradise Regained* which evoke not only Satan's sensationalism, his enthrallment to the overt sense of things, but also his incorrigible expectation that revelation involves pyrotechnics. But there is no such equivalence to be had between himself and his adversary; for Satan remembers only the Son's heroic superficialities in heaven, not what they meant. One might say that the crux lies in his failure rightly to conceive Jesus' hunger, which Satan understands first as a physical necessity he can satisfy, and then translates into an equally palpable ambition for earthly supremacy. Thus, in a deft allusion to *The Tempest*, he conjures up with the usual satanic excess and superlatives a banquet, replete with every delectable thing including beau-

tiful boys and girls—an explicit eroticism that, despite his rebuke of Belial, is anticipated by Satan’s newly urbane and courtly guise, and his initially avid talk of loving and adoring the “person” of God’s Son as though Jesus were Charles Stuart:

though I have lost  
 Much lustre of my native brightness, lost  
 To be beloved of God, I have not lost  
 To love, at least contemplate and admire  
 What I see excellent in good, or fair,  
 Or virtuous, I should so have lost all sense.  
 What can be then less in me than desire  
 To see thee and approach thee, whom I know  
 Declared the Son of God, to hear attent  
 Thy wisdom, and behold thy godlike deeds?

(LM 1.377–86)

The desire to gratify and be gratified which the temptations assume is simply insignificant to our saviour, who hungers for the prophetic and invident, not the grossly apparent good with which his tempter expects to waylay him. That is why Satan’s marvels of earthly power have proven empty shows to Jesus—the illusions of “glamour” (corrupt appearance), “prestige” (deceit or slight of hand), and “fascination” (the binding force of a spell), what the *Malleus Maleficarum* defines as “the tricks of the devil”<sup>36</sup>—all of which expediently veil the tawdriness of human violence, suffering, and vanity, as our saviour reminds Satan again and again.

It is also why the solitary Jesus, instead of coming enthroned in the heavens, trailing clouds of glory, somehow stands on his own without magical facility—effortfully, strangely, and improbably—while Satan, confounded by what he sees and hears, is struck dumb and topples into the abyss. Our saviour is then immediately proclaimed “True image of the Father”—“whatever place, / Habit, or state, or motion, still expressing / The Son of God” (LM 4.596–602)—which argues that, for all its peculiar vagaries, what we have seen is indeed Milton’s version of theophany, the image of deity in the world as an incongruity that confounds both metaphysical and sceptical expectation. Similarly, the heavenly banquet that follows upon this queer triumph—complete with angelic transport “As on a floating couch” and “table of celestial food” (LM 4.585–95)—is no magical but an emblematic action, an allegory as against a supernatural apparatus, which is how Milton understands the descent of the Holy Spirit at Jesus’ baptism: “a representation of the ineffable affection of the Father for the Son, communicated by the Holy Spirit under the appropriate image of a dove, and accompanied by a voice from heaven declaratory of that affection” (CM 14:366–71, my emphasis). In other words, the angelic fanfare testifies to no wondrous infusion of mana, no apotheosis of the human, but acknowledges something that is otherwise invident—the prophetic and so world-altering significance of our saviour’s posture. For if the identity of Milton’s Jesus remains uncertain to Mary

and his disciples who stand and wait, hungering for his presence, that is because he himself attends patiently on the disclosure of a hidden God's unexampled intent. Patience here conceals under a contrary appearance an unparalleled happening in providential history, namely, the incarnation of God in humanity, accomplished not by metaphysical engineering but by the distinctive rationality of faith. That is why the angels sing—as they do in *Paradise Lost*—to celebrate a religious *interpretation* on which Jesus acts and which ordains him messiah: “Hail Son of the Most High, heir of both worlds, / Queller of Satan, on thy glorious work / Now enter, and begin to save mankind” (LM 4.633–35). Our saviour does what Satan's erotically fixed and admiring mind cannot compass: in the person of us all, he expands human possibility by his preternatural poise, expressing his belief that there is another meaning potential in his predicament than his own guilt or God's abandonment. Nor does he succumb to the ascetic idea that his fast is virtuous in itself, or load it down with symbolic freight; rather, Jesus denies his hunger any necessary significance except that “Nature hath need of what she asks” (LM 2.253). The force of his hunger and his own circumstances remain religiously indifferent, experimental, open to whatever deity and events will make of them. And it is this posture—the way he addresses himself to his experience—which is pregnant with new meaning, rife with possibility, because it does not assume that God is like us, confined to the banalities of human invention. As Mary prophesies of her son, “some great intent / Conceals him” (LM 2.95–96): indeed, the whole event goes unseen, hidden in the mundane fact of Jesus' absence, who then simply departs the field of combat and “unobserved / Home to his mother's house private returned,” as though nothing happened (LM 4.638–39). In both his absence and his return there is a meaning that does not appear as such—to Mary, Andrew, and Simon, and of course Milton's readers: faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In response to Satan's perplexity, whether Jesus' kingdom is “Real or allegoric,” *Paradise Regained* replies that it is simultaneously both (LM 4.389–90): that is, Milton's picture of the incarnation is conceptual, not hypostatic, a matter of how one envisions the experience of God; and this vision is historical, not metaphysical, accommodated to time, space, and the exigencies of human being, which is why Satan falls astonished when our saviour manages to stand.<sup>37</sup> As with “the righteousness of God” in Luther's reading, Jesus' preternatural attitude discloses God immanent in the ordinary, even as his estranging presence there works to explode, not to confirm our habitual understandings of the world. As Michael Fixler eloquently maintains, Milton's chiliasm is founded on our conceptual liberty, which is why, in *Paradise Regained*, Jesus must resist identifying himself with the false messiah of each temptation. But simultaneous with this restraint or refraining of our saviour, there is the more difficult restraint achieved by those who expect him in every sense, and who are ineluctably prey “to the pathetically human yearning to find somehow the assurance of divine justice in this life”:

Behind the impenetrable calm of the spiritual hero, the anguish inspired by the moral obscurity of history, which in turn inspired in generations of men the unsatisfiable messianic longing, is hardly evident. A trace only of that passionate awareness momentarily flickers in him, filtered through a screen of detached retrospection, but it appears more fully in the complaint of the disciples, who remind us of the entirely human background to this symbolic action in the desert. . . . It is they, not Jesus or Satan, who must confront with their uncertainty, and withal with faith, the moral obscurity of history.<sup>38</sup>

It is this parable of religious movement, a conversion of understanding, that Milton finds in the story of Job's patience. Gerhard von Rad observes that the question absorbing Job himself is not the great existential crux of human suffering (OTT 1: 408–18): why the innocent are causelessly abused in a world that deity or mind purports to make intelligible; that is, Job does not choose to address the significance of suffering per se, as a transpersonal dilemma. On the contrary, the thing that dismays him about his condition—namely, his apparent loss of righteousness—is as particular as his own sense of self, and although variously and plausibly presented as a moral issue by his friends, it pertains to a question altogether anterior to ethics and to theodicy. The idea that appalls Job is not whether his suffering implies his sinfulness, as a magical bane inexorably following upon some evil he or his children may have committed and for which he is now penalized. Von Rad comments that, for all that Job forcibly rejects it, this idea of an unknown, redounding evil speaks to his deepest and most perverse inclination; yet it holds no more terror for him than it does for the friends who expound it. That is because the analogy argued by divine retribution—of past to present action, ordinary to religious meaning, the seen to the invisible—would circumscribe the fearful indeterminacy of human things which his suffering otherwise signals. As Job's predicament stands, there is no perceptible warrant or grounds for what occurs, any more than with Luther or Milton's Jesus.

Indeed, the brand of retributive justice to which the friends—with the exception of Elihu—variously subscribe has its appeal in just this presumption of an absolute reciprocity or satisfaction of human acts with divine effects, which operates to remove the scandal from Job's affliction by placing him ipso facto in the wrong. Retribution serves as a principle of moral but equally semantic containment, where the aggrieved party—God, from the friends' point of view—determines justice by a strict and simple ratio, if not exactly a *lex talionis*. Yet their several arguments are, I think, deceptively sophisticated, because at bottom they want to assume as Satan does, that God's intent follows however impalpably upon our own: that we suffer only for cause; that what is bad to us presupposes what is wicked to God; and consequently that there is a complete if unilateral continuity between divine and human ideas of value. Even without any intelligible warrant, Job's suffering does not disturb the friends' sense of

moral order; however, the method of his complaint does, since he assumes for himself the prerogative they give solely to God, which is to justify his actions and therewith his world. For Job knows his own righteousness with such assurance that his sufferings can only strike him as incongruous and unjust; and therefore he demands redress if not from God himself, then either from some “umpire” or a future “redeemer” (Job 9:33, 19:25). And this is where he is thrown back upon himself, since he has more or less admitted into his mind and that of his friends the apparently blasphemous idea that God’s justice is not amenable or coherent in any sense we can immediately understand, but must be *made* intelligible for us.

Therefore Job’s distinctive question is whether the humanly, creaturely degradation that so abruptly engulfs him also indicts the relationship he thought he had with God, a relationship which Job for his part never relinquished and in which he still wants to believe himself fully, faithfully participating. His fierce self-righteousness does not pertain to the matter of his moral integrity, but instead to the very grounds of such justification: namely, the picture he sustains of God as the Lord of the ancient covenant, perpetually inclined toward human being in both wrath and loving-kindness but never oblivious to it. For it is God’s apparent absence or indifference that Job suffers in the interpolated sections of poetic dialogue. Von Rad observes that the other Job, the Job of the ancient folk narrative, justifies God’s word about him by serenely affirming his unconditional devotion to deity. It is this Job who may be said to reproduce the religious paradigm of seeking shelter, a covering from the incalculable in a protective faith. But while the other Job is no more perplexed by his suffering in the different, almost-irresolute colloquium this narrative frames, he undergoes a dreadful dissonance of ideas about God himself, in that he refuses to understand his state in the way it inexorably presents itself to him—as signifying the loss of that relationship’s integrity as well as his own. That is why Job pursues deity with ever more impassioned urgency, because he seeks not just his own vindication but also God’s, on whom his every human value depends:

Oh, that I knew where I might find him,  
 that I might come even to his seat!  
 I would lay my case before him  
 and fill my mouth with arguments.  
 I would learn what he would answer me,  
 and understand what he would say to me.  
 Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?  
 No; he would give heed to me.  
 There an upright man could reason with him,  
 and I should be acquitted for ever by my judge.  
 Behold, I go forward, but he is not there;  
 and backward, but I cannot perceive him;  
 on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him;

I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him.  
 But he knows the way that I take;  
     when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.  
 My foot has held fast to his steps;  
     I have kept his way and have not turned aside.  
 I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;  
     I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.  
 But he is unchangeable and who can turn him?  
     What he desires, that he does.  
 For he will complete what he appoints for me;  
     and many such things are in his mind.  
 Therefore I am terrified at his presence;  
     when I consider, I am in dread of him.  
 God has made my heart faint;  
     the Almighty has terrified me;  
 for I am hemmed in by darkness,  
     and thick darkness covers my face.

(Job 23:3–17)

If Job's friends, from motives disparately practical, mystical, or necessitarian, can content themselves with the analogy of retribution to explain suffering so intuitively excessive, Job finds that analogy disabled by what he experiences as God's unaccountable withdrawal from all relationship to him. Against the friends' ready imputation of guilt, Job asserts that it is God, not his sin, that "has put me in the wrong, and closed his net about me": "Behold, I cry out 'Violence!' but I am not answered; / I call aloud, but there is no justice" (Job 19:6–7). With or without sin, he has not altered his position—God has—and therein lies the source of Job's escalating horror and vehemence. For the covenant between divine and human that he continues to cherish and this passage describes promised that his very cleaving to God would guarantee him deity's presence and thus his own meaningfulness, as the individual subject of divine solicitude whether in love or wrath. But Job is bereft of this sense of relation that also defines his understanding of divine justice, in which the righteous sheerly abide in God for good or for ill as one would a parent. And the loss of that relation and his God with it provokes Job's keenest anguish when the fidelity he assumed would ensure him recourse to deity—exemplified in the passage's figure of a lawsuit prosecuted before God—is met instead with its absence, or at other moments with what von Rad characterizes as a virtually demonic assault by the God Job perceives in his sufferings.

The darkness or impenetrability overtaking Job's picture of God threatens him where his material or moral degradation could not; because without it, he is deprived of his fundamental value as a son of God, the image of self that makes his strangely individual and now repugnant existence significant. He cannot see through his suffering to the Lord, nor can he find his wonted identity

in it, so Job assumes his God either utterly to have withdrawn or horrifically transformed, thus evacuating all meaning from his world or making it ineluctably conflicted. But he has misunderstood deity's every expression but one, and from the whirlwind, the Lord tells Job as much: that he has misconceived his position in the covenant as well as the significance of his own affliction. It is not that what the friends said about a just God was true; indeed, the egregious reciprocity they assert between the appearance things have and the divine intent they signify ironically tallies with God's anger at them—"for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7)—an anger assuaged only by Job's intercession on their behalf and an expiatory sacrifice. And this double mediation, which God also uses as the occasion for restoring Job to an abundance of earthly benefits, discloses the one actuality his friends neglected in their ostensible consolation: that neither deity nor divine justice exist in a single, much less direct or continuous line with human ideas. As the Lord himself puts it to Job, "Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:8).

Rather, the contingency of this world upon deity surpasses all understanding, a truth Job is moved finally to admit in rehearsing God's own indignant inquiry: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2, 42:3). For in the intensity of his distress (as against the self-satisfaction of his counselors), Job succumbs to an error not unlike theirs, or the one Milton ascribes to his Satan: that is, Job also simplifies the nature of his relationship to God, but by mistaking the impression of deity's absence and a disrupted understanding of their bond for the virtual abrogation of divine care, on which he depends even in the depths of suffering. This of course is the real temptation offered Jesus in *Paradise Regained*: what precipitates Job's different and despairing response is his insistence on identifying the covenantal picture with the nature and extent of deity, as though the divine were bound to human expectations and human necessities of meaning. Job's attempts at colloquy with the divine—as von Rad says, invoking this image of an assiduously attentive God against the alternately silent and ferocious deity of his affliction—only trace the dimensions of the error, which must then be rectified by a separate revelation from the whirlwind. And what this theophany declares by its litany of wonders, curiosities, and monsters is not just the strange, almost perverse impetus of divine regard, extending equally to the ostrich in its seeming absurdity and to the grand mythological evil of Leviathan as it does to Job. Theophany also describes the fragile understanding between human and divine being created by the covenant, over which looms deity in all its alien, volatile, and irresistible power. By this revised picture of the Lord or covenanting God, the vindication Job seeks in which he and deity move swiftly to reason together as equal parties at law does not legitimately elaborate the covenant's force. Indeed, it is impossible in the light of divine incommensurability. So von Rad remarks:

In answering Job's question God lifts the veil a little, just so far that Job may see how many more and—in the poet's view at any rate—greater riddles lie behind it. Thus the speech starts by countering all that human *naïveté* which fancies that immediately behind each of a man's problems there equally lies the divine solution ready for him. To this extent God's answer insists upon the absolute marvellousness of his management of the world. Behind each one of its marvels lies another greater marvel, and not one of them does God allow to be taken out of his hand. (OTT 1:416)

If the covenant permits neither the facile assumption of retributive justice made by the friends nor the clear exculpation Job demands (both expressing the same view of religious meaning), it does nonetheless justify but secretly, gratuitously, by ways too wonderful and too obscure to comprehend. Even as Luther experiences it in Romans, the covenantal picture circumstantially describes an invident order of meaning that returns us to relationship with deity. And insofar as we admit and pursue that strange, unexpected significance, so we have faith and are justified all at once in Luther's theology. But the covenant does not in itself completely circumscribe or fully delineate our possible relations with God, as Job was used to think it did. What the covenant supplies is an understanding of religious things equal to our needs as participants with God, though not to our desires; and this is one significance of the theophany from the whirlwind. Job must learn the sufficiency of that knowledge—mind you, not to deity itself, but to his own affiliation with this hidden God (a harbinger of Milton's version of obedience in his last poems). Von Rad points out that the only viable response to God's picture of his own creative engagement with the world is the religious one of acceptance and adoration; for humanity is obliged to encounter divine solicitude as apparently free, groundless, and in every sense inestimable. Thus Job admits: "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, / but now my eye sees thee; / therefore I despise myself, / and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5–6).

With that admission, the ancient narrative and the interpolated dialogue converge so as to reassert the only appreciable grounds of Job's justification, which his anguish over his lost God and the very privilege of theophany differently implicate. His righteousness does indeed consist in adhering to the way and words of the covenant and so in fidelity to the Lord; for humanity knows no other access to God. At the same time, it requires Job's ultimate and agonistic recognition that the covenantal God is a picture accommodating deity to us as an extraordinary revelation of its care; but like Milton's image of God, the figure of our saviour in *Paradise Regained*, that picture never defines or exhausts divine possibility. And what Job understands or "sees" is this tremendous and still terrible reality—that deity as he knows it touches restrictedly and uncertainly upon an infinite, inconceivable agency. And in thus depriving him of any false security, not to mention the presumption of real parity with this being,

he is left shaken to his very soul and vindicated where Satan is not. For in a most disquieting way, the Book of Job shows what it means to have the creator as one's personal God, whereby the absolutely other chooses the most familiar and vulnerable of human affinities—a loving, faithful inclination—in which to express its intent toward humanity. Every aspect of the covenantal picture consequently assumes an extraordinary vividness or intensity of meaning, since the God of Job's theophany has invested himself in it, becoming for us the person and Lord whom the covenant variously portrays: a parent, a spouse, a lover, a maker, a guardian inviting us to relationship; yet someone whose fidelity and care, jealousy and disaffection always carry with them the dreadful, inexplicable force of the divine.

The voice Job hears out of the whirlwind reproduces this conflict obtaining in deity's expression of itself, insofar as that particular theophany asserts two seemingly opposed modalities of divine intercourse with the world. For the private complaint Job makes against deity is answered ironically by a revelation of its sovereign freedom of will over and beyond the covenant to which Job individually appeals; and this is a knowledge he cannot help but find awful even as the singularity of its communication further conduces to personal intimacy with that God. Moses' dangerous sight of the divine glory in Exodus 33, to which I will return, has a certain resonance here. It illustrates the conceptual antagonism potential in even the most tender encounters we have with deity, this humanly repugnant effect accompanying its revelation. So von Rad remarks that "Even if Job suddenly and rapturously experienced the God who was his friend, he is nevertheless not able to delete the reality of the God who is his foe" (*OTT* 1:415). The dissonance of idea and emotion to which these conflicting apparitions or aspects of God contribute recurs in the grotesque extremity of suffering the Lord condones to exhibit Job's faithfulness and formally justify his own regard, exposing the gulf that separates our expectations of deity from its unfathomable reality. On this head, von Rad points out that the role of the "adversary" in the prose narrative is not satanic, which is to say, the workings of a malignant will opposed to God's (*OTT* 1:408). On the contrary, this person is a "son of God" in good standing and also an examiner or inquisitor of the sublunary, who comes to the assembly "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it" (Job 1:6–7). So he puts his question about Job's motives on the Lord's behalf, and proceeds with divine consent to use any degree of suffering that does not inflict death as the instrument of trial.

Difficulty is therefore presented as a condition always potential, always threatening in this relationship, with the result that Job—lacking a palpable fault in himself and ignorant of the preliminary exchange in heaven—can account for his inconceivable suffering only with the terrifying blank of divine will that theophany equally exerts. And this intent he cannot debate or resist, for "how can a man be just before God?" when it is in the power of deity to shape how things must mean: "Though I am innocent, my own mouth would

condemn me; / though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse” (Job 9:2, 20). His predicament therefore appears to him as arbitrary, nonsensical, a double bind integral to human being. Yet the contradictions attending theophany in Job’s experience—of the absolute freely electing to be finite and conditional; of the vast imperturbable holy experienced tensively as intimate, personated relationship; of affliction as a return for righteousness—oddly enough adumbrate the arguments made by Christianity for God’s Incarnation and Atonement. The Book of Job makes quite clear that these incipient theses are not presented as an ontology of God: that is, they say nothing whatsoever about deity in itself, incarnate or otherwise. Rather, what they characterize are the pathic and noetic dimensions of our fellowship with the divine as laid down by its revelation, but which we like Job are compelled to learn and relearn in the maintenance of this unique bond.

For the propensities of our human nature as well as the manner of deity’s revelation predict that the bond can be sustained only by the acutest self-consciousness, with a departure from those habits of thought which perpetually incline us to reduce God to a single evident and contradictory agency—like the friends who in the face of Job’s suffering postulate an indifferent, Draconian divinity against the covenant’s picture; or a thriving Job whose deity is a beloved companion, and in a profound sense household God, until affliction renders the divine an implacable nemesis. However, there is an important difference among these ways of construing God’s expression of himself in human suffering. Like Luther, Job still insists on knowing deity’s meaning as it can only be known—in pursuing the revelation, not the absence or abeyance of a God whom he understands to have us in unceasing if inscrutable care. And neither the framing narrative nor the poetic dialogue detract from Job’s fidelity to this God, the personate image of deity expressly sensitive and accessible to humankind with whom Job insists on being allowed to plead his case. But experience amends his picture by giving him a painful sense of its constraints and its wonder: that a power so inordinate and autonomous as the deity out of the whirlwind would thus temper its expression to fulfill our peculiar demands of relationship, and that any human concept like covenant or personality could manage to sustain the enormous pressure of this strange, impending force.

Yet because Job is never shown doing anything to detract from his devotion to the covenanting God, whom he invokes ceaselessly against the deity he dreads, the way he appears to justify his righteousness (and the Lord’s word about it) is once again inevident to our habitual understanding of the world; that is, justification seemingly consists in his doing nothing but, unchanged in the commitment of his faith, enduring the torment imposed by what one philosophical theist has called “a ruler of grotesque primitivity, a cosmic cave dweller, a braggart and a rumble-dumble, almost congenial in his complete ignorance about spiritual refinement.”<sup>39</sup> Despite this ostensible quietism, Job in the end is brought to confess that he has indeed done something wrong—“uttered what I did not understand, / things too wonderful for me, which I did not

know" (Job 42:3)—which suggests that the grounds for the adversary's charge against Job are in fact explicable, for all that they do not leap to the eye. From his words, it would seem that the faithful conduct which earned Job a reputation for piety in heaven and earth was somehow lacking in a certain significant attitude or understanding, which Milton's Jesus has. But this aspect of his predicament goes unexpressed until the moment of theophany, at which point Job perceptibly executes a "turn" or conversion in his attitude toward God, in order to meet the Lord's altered inflection of himself. Walter Eichrodt observes that the word *sub* or "turn" was the figure employed (mostly in prophetic writings) to capture the force, the palpable actuality, of this renovated intelligence about God that Job acquires, imbuing the religious relationship with a new meaningfulness: "The metaphor was an especially suitable one, for not only did it describe the required behaviour as a real act—'to make a turn'—and so preserve the strong personal impact, it also included both the negative element of turning away from the direction taken hitherto and the positive element of turning towards."<sup>40</sup> Thus Job's turn in his understanding of deity is a matter of attitude, at one and the same time a physical addressing of thought and action toward deity and also an abstinence or restraint from the ideas of God he previously entertained. The text's own discontinuous action manages inadvertently to expand this perplexing effect of engaging and refraining from something that articulates Job's conversion of ideas, since the shift in his attitude toward deity also subsides and recurs in his speeches, definitively to reappear when he confesses his error to God and intercedes for the friends.

But if Job misunderstands divine revelation, he nonetheless clings to it in his suffering despite a soul-killing sense of contradiction, from which a transfigured picture of the Lord ultimately releases him. And it is by such a conversion that Job is justified before God, because his faithfulness is meaningful in a way it wasn't before, inflected by a right understanding of the relations between deity, the world, and humankind. This revised understanding emerges phoenix-like from the remains of Job's old picture of God, ruptured both by his extravagant, groundless suffering and by the terrific intrusion upon him of the creator God out of the whirlwind; that is, it is accompanied by a sense of aberrancy or contradiction in the order of things. Moreover, their sheer somatic and subjective force alone suggests that these events should be seen as a wholesale violence perpetrated by deity upon Job's human nature, whose claims then compel him to debate (within himself and with the Lord, never really with the friends) not just what is due to his righteousness, but what sort of God would so betray his trust. Thus Job is made by suffering to reconceive the very axis of his world, which he had understood to be a kind of sensible—and in Milton's sense, satanic—analogy of character and impulse between himself and the Lord of the covenant, guaranteed by his own faithful if not necessarily impeccable life. But this good understanding between them is altogether undone by the fearfully anomalous happenings of the story, which deprive Job of both his own identity and the identity of his God.

The sundering of this dependency as Job experiences it—of divine regard on his sense of shared feeling with the Lord, of God's righteousness on his own scrupulously faithful performance—does not compromise the covenant itself, which continues intact in all its provisions for relationship between humankind and deity. Instead, his passing from utter degradation to personal theophany may be said to enlarge Job's vantage on both himself and God, so that the nature of their dependency in the covenant is newly revealed. Job is led to see that the weird propinquity of divine regard, which the theophany enacts as well as describes, isn't simply the concordant effect elicited by his personal worthiness or establishing it. Rather, this particularity of attention follows upon the creator's willing but enigmatic turn toward its creatures, which the credence Job gives to the covenantal picture enables him to see. Similarly, the picture he now has of deity cannot be contracted to one single image of the Lord and his own concerted likeness to that image: to continue the perspectival metaphor, this figure of the Lord has been foreshortened relative to theophany's endless and astounding landscape, which Job now recognizes as being also an expression of God. That landscape, it should be said, is not creation as we ordinarily know it but as religious understanding discloses to us, only erupting into human view with momentous perversities like Job's affliction that run athwart our notions of an orderly world, or with the miraculous and no less estranging onslaught of divine revelation. Job is then made to comprehend the Lord as the lone intelligible link within a vast nexus of deity's impalpable and indefinite dispositions toward the world, only one of which is given us—in the shape of the covenant—to own and observe as human knowledge of God. In other words, the original contingency in their relationship does not rest with himself as Job had once thought, whereby the devout person brings an otherwise latent or quiescent God into sensible, meaningful expression. For neither magic however defined, ritual, nor reason can compel the attendance of this deity on us; its holiness does not belong to taboo, the contagious or associative variety of the numinous, but works in exactly the opposite direction, emphatically severing as against propagating connections with the world as we receive it. Therefore any affiliation between humanity and the hidden God must begin with deity's choosing to attend to us and for its motives, not our own, with the consequence that the dispensing of divine regard may seem erratic even as its grounds—in the merit of its recipients—may appear wholly obscure. Indeed, the abrupt dislocation of Job's wonted understanding by suffering and theophany shows it to have been an egoistic device, inasmuch as he had presumed that the covenant would thoroughly account for his life if he lived it righteously. But, in fact, the covenantal God performs the inverse function, that of accommodating God to our frailty, with deity giving itself an image, a face we can apprehend and use for fellowship's sake—"use" in the sense that this God invites us to project meaning onto it, to engage with its expressions *as though* (the force of the Miltonic *as*) we would with another person. The covenantal picture is always presented as a dispensation or grace bestowed by the divine,

and we are not therefore to treat our projections of the Lord as if they made manifest the whole being of deity—containing, not just conveying God, which is how Job had approached the covenant. So when the creator shows himself in theophany, revealing a divinity that unimaginably exceeds the God of Job's estimate, the neat edifice of false expectation he had built on that picture collapses like the tempter in *Paradise Regained*, forever to go unreplaced: that is to say, Job must accustom himself to a world whose meanings and possibilities are not contained or legislated by his own needs and desires, and to a picture of God that includes the idea of its distinction from the infinite reality the Lord adapts (without distorting or falsifying) to our human condition. He must approach the relationship as two disparate worlds yoked together—uneasily, incongruously, sometimes violently—by an inscrutable divine will, which the Lord makes present and knowable to us, but whose expressions will always appear potentially outrageous in our experience, as Job's suffering was.

But this turn in Job's understanding of God is not a prelude to transcendence, in which we happily repair from our incoherent experience of deity to a mental or numinous domain of perfect if not necessarily rational apprehension. Instead, the wisdom literature of which the Book of Job forms a part is distinctively pragmatical, even homely in its impetus: at different junctures and by diverse ways, the religious idea is creatively returned to the mundane fold, where it finds expression in the intractable but commonplace riddle of living rightly and well in the world as we find it. Except as this would entail relinquishing assumptions prejudicial to the ordinary, it is a religious provision designed precisely to *stop* our inveterate and misguided impulse to escape our own condition—as Wittgenstein implies, a condition we seem doomed to find disappointing, inadequate to our aspirations. Wisdom literature reproduces this limit insofar as it expresses an order reserved away from us as unknowable, with our participation in it partial and allusive, as something the world may express but never fully divulge to the mind—a knowledge that there are intervals in our understanding and that our speech to be true must be forever contingent, provisional. This is the force of our saviour as the image of God in *Paradise Regained*. Thus Eichrodt talks about the human reflex of wisdom as an understanding that effaces itself before the mystery of things,<sup>41</sup> and von Rad speaks of its humility in deferring to the limits placed on what can be humanly known:

Wisdom thus consisted in knowing that at the bottom of things an order is at work, silently and often in a scarcely noticeable way, making for a balance of events. One has, however, to be able to wait for it, and also to be capable of seeing it. In such wisdom is something of the humble—it grows through having an eye for what is given, particularly through having an eye for man's limitations. It always prefers facts to theories. To be wise is therefore just not to think oneself wise. Thinking oneself wise is the hall-mark of the fool, who is no longer open to suggestion, but trusts in himself (Prov. XXVI.12, XXVIII.26). (OTT 1:428)

Such a knowledge is less a body of ideas than it is a distinctive rationality, a conceptual tact about knowing things of value where there is no attempt made outright to secure truth. Thus there is no immediate or necessary movement to definition, as Milton's Satan would do but not his Jesus or his Mary, who herself observes: "But I to wait with patience am inured; / My heart hath been a storehouse long of things / And sayings laid up, portending strange events" (LM 2.102–4). Wisdom means that the quality of knowledge we call true emerges from what lies before the mind, not beyond it. So this kind of knowing does not try to push through appearances to some other more perspicuous and truthful world. Nor does it struggle to get between the image which conveys meaning to some "thing-in-itself," since it is *our* domain of experience that we are given to see and know differently. Rather like the Lord of the covenant, our examined lives articulate the religious order of things to us at the same time that they are not analogous to that order in any facile way, acknowledging the distinction that obtains between the mind and the world, between the self and God. For representation itself—the covenantal picture of the Lord or the gospels' son of man and God—fosters their otherwise impossible engagement. Indeed, what Job discovers is that neither the world as we know it nor our faculty of understanding incorporate in themselves or transcribe the hidden, sustaining forces of our existence, whether one thinks of this as a principle of causation, an order of meaning, or an intelligence. But almost miraculously, they assimilate to us something incommensurable with human being and its self-image.

Such a recognition by no means promotes an aporia in human understanding; it stresses rather the observance of a boundary within which the knowledge we come by will make a viable sense that can content us, without growing complacent in its self-imposed restraint. By seeking after the signs of something truly other than itself, while recognizing an ineffable difference between those expressions we have of truth or deity and their consummation, wisdom describes a lifetime of religious desire—the peculiar hunger for God that afflicts Milton's Jesus but also Mary, Andrew, and Simon, and from which Satan himself suffers, if perversely (LM 2.245–59). The qualities of wisdom could be called largely receptive, having to do with imagining the thing sought: it involves a tolerance, even a value, for disruption and delay; a sense of pregnancy in what passes for ordinary experience and an attention or alertness about it; a scepticism about the intellectual technologies humanity invents to acquire truth and which often preempt it; and a disdain for those religious practices which do not respect the reservedness of deity and its reflexes. Yet the wisdom articulated in this biblical literature is neither esoteric nor occult, nor can it be methodically elicited in the presumptive fashion of Socratic dialectic, which it seems not a little to resemble. For there is no web of correspondences, no train of analogy here that could exult in having seen truth itself; and that is because there is no continuity however remote between our ideas and the reality of things that comes to rest in God. Rather, as Job is brought to acknowledge, the analogy that must be explored and constantly adjusted pertains to how we

understand whatever knowledge deity in its expressions chooses obliquely to provide us. Luther would say that wisdom consists in our negotiating between the scriptural image of God and the picture of him we get from both our ordinary and our exceptional experience of the world. To a crucial extent, the meaning of either picture depends on the character of their inevitable intersection, which is not simple or fluent but conflicted in some fashion, like Job's two Gods or Luther's, whose opposition actually describes the irreducible contingency of divine meanings.

What wisdom tells us is that these two Gods are really two experiences of deity which we are asked ceaselessly to adjudicate, and that an appropriate positioning of our thought can reconcile them, that is, until the inevitable moment when they next conflict. The resurgent dilemma about how we think the world should mean is always being precipitated by how we choose to read either picture of God: for it was not the Lord who was in contradiction with himself but Job's ideas of him. It follows that we encounter the relation of these two pictures and, by extension, the truth about things as a brief but sudden glory which satisfies our need for conceptual clarity only for a time. So if anything, wisdom is what one means by a religious attitude toward the world as the territory of revelation, in that the hiddenness of truth requires our active reverence and a posture of suggestibility, one in which it would be possible to entertain a new idea. And the kind of meanings wisdom propounds are accordingly tentative or experimental and open-ended, waiting on the separate impetus of experience for their coherence, if not their final truth to be disclosed. This sense of pregnancy in things is evoked in the reply that the Job of the ancient narrative makes to his wife—"Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"—thus allowing to deity its freedom of will and expression over the world it created (Job 2:10).

As a reflex of such sovereignty, the ancient Job appears to distinguish in his response between the human sense of suffering as an evil and God's intent in inflicting it, which cannot be wrong. His faithfulness promises him relationship, not identity, understanding, not explanation, from a nature incomparable to his own. This may seem at first glance to be a mystic's excuse for historical self-subjugation; yet I would argue that the ancient Job does not so much surrender his right to understanding as he revises its direction and force. At least in their effect, his reply and his equanimity refute Job's counselors by rejecting the glib if heroic rationalism that would make God the servant of human judgment, or would equate human suffering with deity's wrongdoing. And in such a discriminate understanding, he is not threatened with despair like the poet's Job, because he is not driven by a false idea of their correlation to condemn God's actions or his own as evil. The ancient Job is left free to think about himself or God without detriment to either, and consequently without losing confidence in his own meaningfulness or the world's. But the poet's Job, our Job, knows no such equanimity or amelioration in his suffering, and indeed is susceptible to

the signal error Milton ascribes to the Satan of *Paradise Lost*: namely, of mistaking the incommensurable in God for the unjust, and his inscrutable will for an eternal tyranny that aggressively holds the whole of creation in thrall—translating that which is supremely, impenetrably different from us into a monstrous hostility, a point D. Z. Phillips makes against philosophical theism.<sup>42</sup> For when Job interprets the covenant in such a way that it does not admit of a distinction between his righteousness and deity's, he ignores the crucial fact that its purpose is mutually to accommodate both "persons"—to place him in relationship with God despite his human nature, not because of it. He therefore treats as actual what remains only an instrumental fiction of their parity: if the question of faithfulness is put by the heavenly inquisitor to Job, on earth Job presumes to put the selfsame question to God, since the reciprocity by which he understands their relationship dictates that any compromise of his own moral worth should imperil divine integrity as well—that is, until the theophany of the creator God reproaches him unanswerably.

This estranging and impervious deity, which the more affable Lord of the covenant veils from us, impinges by its very existence on the special sense we have of our human nature as somehow being like God's, an idea implicit in Job's presumptive fellow-feeling with his maker. Thus the supposition that he can work out his status with God requires some correspondence of kind beyond shared terms and values, from which his justification would get its legitimacy as well as its persuasiveness. But the theophany discloses that Job has misunderstood the sort of resemblance to which he intuitively lays claim; that is, we resemble God in the aspect of exceptionality, yet we do not enjoy this likeness through any singular power or integrity of our nature, but in the complicated, uncertain meaning of our self-revelation—Freud's endless parapraxis of psychic expression. Like deity and truth, we have a life both hidden and revealed, in a way still mysterious to ourselves. Thus when Job acknowledges an order of dependency in religious things other than the one he had previously imagined, he must also revise his idea of human affiliation to God—how he is, as it were, the son and image of God—and what is more, how he identifies himself on that account. Since the motive for divine regard which once resided in his righteousness has now been left inscrutable—namely, as a faithful person intrinsically attractive to the Lord—he cannot pretend to an affinity that both his suffering as well as the argument of theophany in large measure deny.

Having experienced God as an assault upon his very humanity, Job must approach the covenant as expressing something other than kindredness between our ideas and the divine. And I think the poet meditates this conversion in Job's picture of his own nature as well as God's, simply by interpolating the exchange with the friends. For while the ancient narrative makes God huge with possibility, it gives Job in his very fidelity little expressive (although much conceptual) room in which to maneuver and thus to manifest his different kind of life. But that expressive latitude is what the section of dialogue supplies: a

realm of enigma and potentiality at either end of this precarious relationship between divine and humankind. For the poet's Job—in his impassioned self-consequence alternating with enormous self-pity, in the ugliness of his anger against the friends, in his voracious demand that deity itself justify him—is no simple man of God like the ancient Job, even when the seemingly indomitable force of his personality abruptly attenuates to acknowledge the impact of theophany. This different sense of Job's perseverance invites us to reconsider the way we understand what Milton means by justifying God's ways, because in *Paradise Lost* that decision of the speaker arises from just those circumstances of suffering, incoherence, and seeming injustice which attend Job's encounter with his hidden God. It is our incorrigibly human predicament Milton would describe there, by way of answering the speaker's question:

Say first, for heaven hides nothing from thy view  
 Nor the deep tract of hell, say first what cause  
 Moved our grand parents in that happy state,  
 Favoured of heaven so highly, to fall off  
 From their creator, and transgress his will  
 For one restraint, lords of the world besides?

(LM 1.27–32)

I too will try to describe the problem of Milton's two Gods in this instrumental sense, by way of offering a solution to our strangely kindred conflicts with the poem, a solution which begins with the peculiar hiddenness of the reformers' God and how that hiddenness informs their own ideas of the way religious things mean.