"Fidelity and Ripeness": The Telos of Milton's Mature Christian Learners

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“Fidelity and Ripeness”: The
Telos of Milton’s Mature
Christian Learners

Steven McKay Hansen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“Fidelity and Ripeness”: The Telos of Milton’s Mature Christian Learners

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In this paper, I argue that Milton envisions a long view of education in which continual encounters with evil allow created beings to prove themselves and gradually approach a state like God’s—a state marked by constant righteous habits and by a dilation of subjective time with increased access to past and future knowledge. I discuss the roles of opposition in Miltonic education, illustrating how non-examples may result in apophatic revelation about the divine. Acts of rebellion in Paradise Lost demonstrate, however, that the timetable for introducing opposition proves complex, since created beings, the devil among them, act on their own initiative and tinker with the orchestration of Heaven’s agenda. Obedient beings, meanwhile, begin to approach God’s own course of time as they solidify holy habits and respond with constancy to persistent, recurring evils. By establishing a contrast of temporalities experienced between the wise faithful who grow toward God in reason and the foolish fallen who move against him at every turn, Milton’s epic poem suggests a spectrum model of Christian time—intricately ordered for those nearing God and utterly disorganized for those who distance themselves from him. I argue that in Milton’s work, those who obey develop toward the stability of eternity, participating in both cyclical and linear wholes: as the righteous obey with ever more precision, their lives revolve around their King more perfectly even as he marks a sure course onward. Those who oppose God, meanwhile, become subject to extremely chaotic and volatile experiences of time that resist organization into meaningful trajectories. My conclusion analyzes the way these claims might upset some constructions of Miltonic education in existing scholarship and outlines principles for ongoing improvement to the ways educators approach questions of challenge, assessment, repetition, and habit formation.

Keywords: John Milton, Early Modern England, Areopagitica, Paradise Lost, education, maturity, telos, error, evil, habit, virtue, time, temporality
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project owes a great deal to the support and feedback of family and faculty. Research, writing, and revision processes all yield far inferior work without the benefit of professional experience and personal encouragement throughout.

I’d like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for my chair, Brandie Siegfried. Her incisive queries consistently challenged me to give more thorough thought to my assertions, which has proven invaluable for refining my thought process in this and other scholarship. I also deeply appreciate committee members Nancy Christiansen, with her broad understanding of Renaissance education and keen eye for sentence-level detail, and Jason Kerr, whose extensive familiarity with Milton studies was a significant resource in the development of the project.

It has also been a special privilege to write a thesis alongside my wife, Becca Evans Hansen, who is also completing her degree emphasizing in literature of the same period. Her empathy and common subject-matter knowledge have been a unique and irreplaceable help to me with this paper and the program as a whole. I can’t thank her enough.
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“Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned.”
—Areopagitica

Introduction: The Divine Destiny of Education

Given John Milton’s status as an ardent public advocate of learning and his own extensive personal history pursuing knowledge, it is little wonder that today’s educators turn to the poet in efforts to capture pragmatic principles bearing on school systems and curriculum design. Furthermore, the politically active life Milton led can easily become a purposive outlet for new scholarship on learning, which in the largely secular modern spirit builds educative models that ultimately aim toward an ethics of social activism. Incisive works from Sharon Achinstein’s Milton and the Revolutionary Reader to Feisal G. Mohamed’s more religiously interested Milton and the Post-Secular Present: Ethics, Politics, Terrorism tend to frame the endgame of education as some iteration of civil engagement for successful societal governance, whether in discrete earthly democracies or, rarely, in the grander kingdom of heaven.

But even as studies of Milton and education productively distill tenets of teaching for sociopolitical application, they often risk overlooking or misrepresenting the overtly religious basis for Milton’s pedagogical philosophy. Working through the complex details of how human beings pursue, access, and compile truth, much of scholarship displaces why or to what end humans do so from a transcendent to an immanent goal. Even texts that proclaim a religious orientation toward the topic of Milton and learning (Thomas Festa’s The End of Learning):

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1 Mohamed announces this purpose from his first sentence, citing Brecht and linking “the human cost of religion in the seventeenth century and the human cost of radical politics in the twentieth” (1). The book proceeds with invaluable explorations of the political state under pre-secular, secular, and post-secular conditions.
Milton and Education and David Ainsworth’s Milton and the Spiritual Reader, among others) remain so closely focused on applied concepts of hermeneutic method that they often elide the pressing question of what such education ultimately aspires to—what vision of the future drives it onward. This study accordingly considers Milton’s theological explanations of the teleology of both education and educated humanity. Milton depicts an informed and wise humanity as possessed of Christian maturity: the developed ability to make proper decisions and approach godliness across cosmic time. I discuss how this long view of progress for learners reveals patterns and trajectories that later learning communities can turn to for continuing growth, even in the absence of Milton’s Christian framework. This admittedly more roundabout approach to education by way of theology may seem only loosely grounded in Milton’s markedly passionate civic involvement—let alone the centuries of education that have followed, with their growing secularity and spiritual diversity. However, the endeavor does yield valuable insights into the functions of time and opposition (moral evil, in Milton’s construction), both of which inform the pragmatics of pedagogy.

Admittedly, Milton portrays the ends of human existence in a way somewhat consistent with the dogmas of his Christian contemporaries: individuals live to develop obedience toward God, motivated by faith in a true understanding of Him and his laws. Wisdom is the virtue that drives the search for this right understanding, “the virtue by which we earnestly search out God’s will, hold on to it with all diligence once it is learnt, and regulate all our actions according to that rule” (De Doctrina Christiana 2.2.476). Educational structures and institutions, then, exist to foster wisdom and lead to obedience, a purpose Milton states explicitly for learning in “Of Education”: “to know

2 Here, a statement from Festa’s introduction serves to illustrate the approach: “Milton’s instinct for pedagogy . . . takes on a larger political function in his use of education as a trope for the relationship between an individual and the authority of tradition” (2).
God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him.” *Paradise Lost* could be little clearer in its presentation of these principles: Adam humbly reports to Michael after receiving prevenient warnings against sin, “Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best” (12.561), to which the archangel replies, “This having learned, thou hast attained the sum / Of wisdom” (12.575–76). But it is here that Milton’s stance on learning begins to grow thorny, for the counsel that follows seems clearly at odds with the poet’s own extensive familiarity with matters of natural philosophy—let alone the pagan writings of the classical age that establish genre conventions for the very epic in which this admonition appears:

> Hope no higher, though all the stars
> Thou knewest by name, and all the ethereal powers,
> All secrets of the deep, all Nature’s works,
> Or works of God in Heaven, air, earth, or sea,
> . . . only add
> Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith,
> Add virtue, patience, temperance; add love. (12.575–61)

The creatures formed in God’s image, evidently, gain little in pursuit of deity’s omniscience unless their heaven-sent understandings help them adopt corresponding attitudes and behaviors. Michael’s instruction is resonant with God’s own explanation of the object of creating human beings: “till, by degrees of merit raised, / They open to themselves at length the way / Up hither, under long obedience tried” (7.157–59).³ Learning, by Michael’s account, proves valuable principally as it enables obedience, since God measures and rewards his creatures’ progress on the basis of

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³ The course of progress God envisions for humankind is in effect even before the Fall. For more on the notion of raising degrees of merit despite perfection (flawlessness), see, Marshall Grossman’s “Authors to Themselves”: *Milton and the Revelation of History* and George Musacchio’s *Milton’s Adam and Eve: Fallible Perfection*. 
consistent loyalty, together with the changes to character that accompany faithfulness as the obedient acquire divine virtues like the ones Michael identifies.  

I argue that Milton envisions a long view of education in which continual encounters with evil allow created beings to prove themselves and gradually approach a state like God’s—a state marked by constant righteous habits and by a dilation of subjective time with increased access to past and future knowledge. To arrive at these conclusions, this article first traces Areopagitica’s statements on learning and maturity through Milton’s depictions of Satan, Eve, and Adam as learners in Paradise Lost. I open by exploring God’s use of what De Doctrina calls “good temptation” to evaluate individuals’ degree of obedience—the measure of how near learners have come, through effective education, to the possibility of perfect Christian maturity. Good temptation presupposes God’s use of opposition to test and try his creatures’ goodness. A discussion of the roles of opposition in education follows, illustrating how non-examples may result in apophatic revelation about the divine. Acts of rebellion in Paradise Lost demonstrate, however, that the timetable for introducing opposition proves complex; created beings, the devil among them, act on their own initiative and tinker with the orchestration of Heaven’s agenda. Obedient beings, meanwhile, begin to approach God’s own course of time as they solidify holy habits and respond with constancy to persistent, recurring evils. By establishing a contrast of temporalities experienced between the wise faithful who grow toward God in reason and the foolish fallen who move against him at every turn, Milton’s epic poem suggests a spectrum model of Christian time—intricately ordered for those nearing God and utterly disorganized for those

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4 Milton’s stated purpose of the De Doctrina project in its introductory epistle follows suit: since, he writes, “God has opened the way of eternal salvation solely to each person’s individual faith, and demands from us that whoever wants to be saved must have a personal faith of their own, I resolved to rely on the faith or judgement of no one else as to the things of God, but rather to take my religious belief from a faith based exclusively on divine revelation . . . . Accordingly, because I judged that I could not in conscience entrust to these guides the whole authority for my faith or my hope of salvation . . . the safest and wisest thing for me seemed to be to start again from the beginning and compile such a treatise for myself” (5, emphasis mine).
who distance themselves from him. I argue that in Milton’s work, those who obey develop toward the stability of eternity, participating in both cyclical and linear wholes: as the righteous obey with ever more precision, their lives revolve around their King more perfectly even as he marks a sure course onward. Those who oppose God, meanwhile, become subject to extremely chaotic and volatile experiences of time that resist organization into meaningful trajectories. My conclusion analyzes the way these claims might upset some constructions of Miltonic education in existing scholarship and outlines principles for ongoing improvement to the ways educators approach questions of challenge, assessment, repetition, and habit formation.5

**Trials of Trust and Timing**

However closely aligned Milton’s view on Christian destiny was with the prevailing perspectives of his time, his ideas on other doctrinal points often departed significantly from the traditions surrounding him. Notable among these precepts is his treatment of opposition. Certainly, opposing opinions flourished in early modern Britain as an increasingly literate public weighed in on issues like state reform, religious fragmentation, and global expansion. Many thinkers of the era saw the diverse opinions emerging from this discourse as a litany of errors, even amassing extensive catalogues of those popular ideas they viewed as at best incorrect and at worst willfully nefarious. Religious and theological transgressions were compiled into heresiographies like Thomas Edwards’s *Gangraena* (published in 1646, just two years after *Areopagitica*), while scientific misperceptions were documented in encyclopedic texts like Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (published in the same year as *Gangraena* and re-

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5 Any of these could form the subject of book-length studies, and merits more attention than I have space to devote here. My less ambitious aim consists of laying out a number of guiding ideas and suggesting a few possibilities for their pedagogical implementation, in hopes to leave a seedbed rich for further experimentation and research.
published in 1672 between editions of *Paradise Lost*). The titles of works like Browne’s and Edwards’s espouse the language of disease, making error something to quarantine, shun, and eradicate from the Christian experience.

Yet in stark contrast to many of his Christian humanist peers, Milton instead insists that good readers share a need to actively face falsehood and error instead of merely turning away from them. For Milton, grappling with wickedness can prove instrumental in the moral education and development of agential beings, even in a world before the Fall. Setting at odds a refined Christian goodness fomented by “fighting the good fight” with a sort of *tabula rasa* naïveté preserved in passivity, he writes in *Areopagitica*, “That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure” (20). The *OED* notes that “blank” has connotations of “void,” “bare,” and “fruitless,” while “pure” suggests instead refinement or spotlessness, which indicate experience without defect. To pursue a blank virtue indefinitely yields no change or growth; indeed, in its barrenness, blank virtue seems hardly to allow life at all. By contrast, if encounters with vice enable “pure” virtue, they bring about gradual refinement, or salience of what is precious and valuable about a person’s character until no aspect of it fails to shine. The sentiment that a soul can come out of encounters with messy problems not only untainted but even polished and improved may smack of a younger man’s pre-Revolution and -Restoration social idealism. However, this position, at least, seems unshaken by disillusionment with government reform: the body of Milton’s later poetic works evidences a continuing fixation on the latent possibilities of trial and temptation, as much for Eve and Adam in *Paradise Lost* as for Samson in *Samson Agonistes* and Jesus in *Paradise Regained*. 
As Milton poses it, the knowledge of evil seems to function as a kind of prerequisite or stepping-stone on any creature’s path to ultimate virtuous practice. Yet why does Milton, even in prelapsarian Eden, often give such primacy to teaching the existence and character of evil that it even takes priority over teaching the good? *Paradise Lost* illustrates this principle at work in angelic pedagogy: even after Raphael recounts extensive tales of disobedience against the Almighty, he tells Adam that there are things about the presumably perfect world of creation that remain “unseasonable to ask” given the new-made man’s inexperience (8.201). For Adam, as for Milton’s model citizen-reader, learning about evil is not some final step to perfect the motives of a well-versed student of righteousness; instead, instruction about wrongdoing accompanies and recurs throughout a great deal of growth to spiritual maturity. At the very least, knowledge of evil serves as a dark backdrop that foregrounds and delimits understanding of the good, even while myriad manifestations of goodness lie available to perception.

The process of “knowing good by evil” that Milton posits as an exclusively postlapsarian condition of learning in *Areopagitica* actually occurs even before the fall in *Paradise Lost*, both for the warring angels and for Adam, student to the heavenly messenger Raphael. The incidents suggest that comprehending some degree of evil may prove central to attaining higher forms of the good, which complicates questions of order and timing in providing moral instruction. Indeed, tension between learning too quickly and not quickly enough animates Milton’s treatment of evil. The education of Adam and Eve does indicate that careful, controlled exposure to evil must preparatorily precede moral action. However, evil innovates and surprises: premature encounters with evil (here, literally encounters before maturity), or exposures to evil without accompanying context to frame them, often lead to immoral decisions. This construction of evil requires readers
to reassess how they grant attention to, plan for, and practice engagements with the adversative and
the unethical, for it is these interactions that distinguish morally mature contributors to both the
social order of the commonweal and the spiritual order of Creation.

To determine those among his subjects who possess such virtue, God engages in “good
temptation,” revealing the depth of sought-for faith and obedience—whether to the credit of
righteous believers or the unveiling and condemnation of the wicked and the hypocritical. Milton
describes this principle as the process whereby

God tempts even good people for the sake of proving them . . . in order either to train or
else highlight their faith, or else their patience, as he tempted Abraham and Job, or in order
to lessen their assurance and show up their weakness, so that both they themselves may
know themselves more truly, and others may be instructed.\(^6\) (*De Doctrina* 1.8.135)

Any revelation resulting from good temptation proves instructive to the ones God tries: either
they respond righteously and become more aware of and committed to those habits that help
them to obey, or they react rebelliously and have their improper attitudes and actions brought to
their attention—sometimes forcefully, as judgment and retribution follow particularly grievous
errors. God heightens such self-awareness still further by targeting the “assurance” of his
creations. “Assurance” here does not refer to God’s promises, as it might in other writings of the
period, but rather to “security” or “self-reliance,” what we might today call “self-assuredness”
(“assurance, n.”). The phrase reveals how trials do more than confirm obedience or its absence;
they simultaneously destabilize any private path that is not God’s, even if it happens here and

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\(^6\) Complementary to good temptation is “evil temptation,” whereby God incites the wicked to reveal their sinful
nature. “This is why he probes a person’s innermost feeling; that is, he causes a person to discern clearly the hidden
evilness of his own heart, and then to become either a better person, or one who appears to all guilty and
unpardonable; or, finally, he causes both the one who acts evilly, and the one to whom the evil act happens, to suffer
the punishment of some former sin” (*De Doctrina* 1.8.132).
there to follow or intersect with the divinely appointed course. Thomas Festa succinctly captures the pattern: “Milton therefore depicts the process of learning as a trajectory from choice to recognition” (43). Festa’s acknowledgment that choices and consequences together create trajectories also parallels my own analysis of the function of time later in this article, where I identify diverging arcs of temporal experience laid out before those who gravitate toward God and those who push away from the divine. So, although good temptation does present the looming possibility of disapproval and chastisement alongside the allure of divine approbation, Milton concludes that, given its potential to correct behavior and redirect destinies in the long run, “good temptation is rather to be sought out” (De Doctrina 1.8.135).

The extreme biblical examples Milton provides, including Job’s series of tragic losses and the command that Abraham kill his own son, may make the practice seem one that God reserves for special circumstances; yet both Areopagitica and Paradise Lost present good temptation as common human experiences sewn into the very fabric of nature. The licensing tract reflects on how, merely by bestowing abilities on his creatures that stand at odds with their responsibilities, God establishes a constant test of how humankind will devote time, faculties, and energies—whether to learning of and serving him, or to wasting away what they are given in fruitless pursuits or speculations. “God,” Milton writes, “who, though he command us temperance, justice, continence, yet pours out before us even to a profuseness all desirable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety” (Areopagitica 29). This gap between command and capacity is not, in Milton’s view, unintentional: God permits man to experience temptations toward gluttony, lust, and covetousness even as He himself fills the world with the vivid, the beautiful, and the rare. The same dangerous tendency toward seeking out excessive experiences and understandings that
Milton warns against in Areopagitica resurface decades later in Paradise Lost. In the poem, the vast expanse of Creation serves the ongoing function of good temptation for Adam and humankind after him. Raphael acknowledges the ease and appeal of questioning the cosmos when such evocative richness lies before Adam, but he cautions, “Whether Heaven move or Earth / Imports not, if thou reckon right,” for God “Did wisely to conceal and not divulge / His secrets, to be scanned by them who ought / Rather admire” (8.70–71, 73–75). Once more the injunction to obedience supersedes the lure of knowledge—in effect, God’s creations face a perpetual, implicit macrocosm of the explicit prohibition instituted in the Garden.

In apparent tension with this mode of good temptation issuing from the divine, there also arises temptation that creatures deviously carry out themselves, often not to help others along the path of righteousness but rather to entrench them in a mire of mindless disobedience. God’s prescience, however, allows him to anticipate such acts of temptation and provide contextualizing instruction before choices are made, thereby converting even the devil’s attempts at temptation into “good temptation.” Indeed, after initially introducing sin, Satan may thereafter offer God a service by persisting in his efforts to drag down humankind, since, in order for good temptation to properly prove creatures, they must recognize clear alternatives, with wickedness standing in direct opposition to righteousness.7 “For what, in general,” Milton writes, “is the use of virtue, what kind of a light is it, except amid evil?” (De Doctrina 1.10.142). In a universe where evil also exists, men and angels alike do well to evidence their fidelity to God as they resist the invitations of their rebellious counterparts. Once fallen, Milton explains, “assuredly we

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7 Milton’s literary writings may themselves provide a source of good temptation, enabling practice of Christian decision-making. Arlette M. Zinck goes so far as to propose that Paradise Lost itself is deliberately designed to foster tensions and oppositions for readers to interact with, leading readers “a prescribed experience of spiritual conflict.” True to the probationary pattern, “the outcome of this experience, however, is entirely dependent upon each reader's response” (44).
bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather.” But the mechanism of
reversal that resolves such impurity has only become clearer in the post-Edenic world: “that
which purifies us,” he continues, “is trial, and trial is by what is contrary” (*Areopagitica* 20). By
introducing contrariety into the human relationship with God, the scope and variety of
postlapsarian human sin paradoxically expands the tools at God’s disposal for trying and
teaching his creatures. The presence of evil calls down the chastisements of Heaven, which may
instill penitence in the fearful or repentance in the regenerate; rejecting what is contrary opens
the understanding and makes possible a fuller and more perfect faith—faith which, Milton insists
in *De Doctrina Christiana*, precedes redemptive ingrafting into Christ (see 1.20 and 1.21). The
more the devil struggles to thwart his maker, the more opportunities he gives God to prove just
how strong and good humanity can become.

But notwithstanding God’s perfect planning, Satan’s inventive misdeeds may give him
some temporary success as he turns temporality to his advantage. Because of God’s omniscience
and foreknowledge, narrations about wickedness to come could conceivably bolster divine
pedagogy even before humankind first elects sin. But given the human experience of time, if
Milton’s God were to give knowledge of evil to temporal beings before evil exists around them,
even in the effort to avoid it and its attendant consequences, the act would constitute introducing
evil into the world—a crime of which He must remain innocent.8 Festa again provides a
compelling summary of the crisis: “the opportunity to correct error resides in its perception and
therefore in the possibility of error’s existence” (43). Only after Satan sets out to undermine the
Garden does the couple learn anything of the threat he poses, though God presumably knew of

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8 Here, Milton dodges the issue of theodicy at stake—that God’s prescience and power appear limited by the
problem of evil—rather than addressing and posing a solution to it. Even so, the logic that results from this
maneuver creates a chain of new relationships between instruction and evil that merits attention for the conceptual
weight it bears.
the imminent assault long before Satan even conceived of it; in like manner, only once Adam transgresses is he taught of the extent of the horror that will result from the fall.\textsuperscript{9} The absence of sinful behaviors among his creatures seems paradoxically to bind God in time, and the angelic scramble to counsel Adam of Satan’s methods and intentions proves too little, too late. The poem’s narrator even imagines John the Revelator, “he, who saw / The Apocalypse” alerting the fated couple to the danger had time only allowed, vainly wishing “that now, / While time was, our first parents had been warned / The coming of their secret foe, and ‘scaped” (4.5–7). The fact that Adam and Eve receive insufficient guidance before facing the devil may help to explain God’s leniency with them; He foresees their impending fall and provides not a means of prevention or deferral of the temptation but of instruction and redemption in its wake.

Adequate responses to the advances of evil, then, require whatever time is needed to thoroughly understand sin and reject it—and ideally, before the possibility of wrongdoing ever presents itself. Only with time and patterns of examples can rational beings come to sensibly employ their own free choice. Accordingly, before time and experience nourish Adam and Eve’s deficient understanding of evil’s power and purposes, the couple remain “younglings in the contemplation of evil” (\textit{Areopagitica} 20). While their literal lifespan may not yet have reached even the age of their bodies’ appearance, the measure by which they are young or immature is not physical but moral, consisting of their degree of preparedness to confront evil. In \textit{Areopagitica}, Milton measures adulthood in capacity to resist wrongdoing, not limiting it by literal age. For example, he describes eating and reading as tasks entrusted to God’s mature servants: “God commits the managing so great a trust, without particular law or prescription, wholly to the demeanour of every \textit{grown man}” (19, emphasis mine). The word “grown” refers

\textsuperscript{9} Though told he will surely die if he partakes of the fruit, Adam’s ignorance of the concept becomes clear after partaking, when Michael shows him the death of Abel and he cries, “But have I now seen Death?” (11.462).
here to more than physical attainment to one’s full stature; rather Milton references the growth of
spirit and reason that enable “the highest that human capacity can soar to”—obedient decision-
making (50). Such growth necessarily entails the passage of time, which figures as a central
characteristic of modern maturity concepts: like delayed gratification and inhibition, many
practices that mark maturity involve withholding immediate decisions, thereby allowing time for
judgment and counsel to determine the most proper way forward.

If the ability to consistently make ethical choices grows only gradually, a period of
directed instruction must precede individuals’ full immersion into society as public decision-
makers; wise teachers must move carefully from prescribing behaviors for inexperienced
learners to granting them personal freedoms. I push back, then, against the idea Pierre Lurbe
advances that “Milton’s Areopagitica is a passionate plea for the unlicensed freedom of the
reader,” since Milton’s own logic tells us that some readers remain unprepared for complete
liberty to digest complex texts. It is in this vein that Raphael sees fit that Adam should live for a
time “freed from intricacies, taught to live / The easiest way, nor with perplexing thoughts / To
interrupt the sweet of life” (8.182–4). But there is no indication that Adam’s education will
confine him to “a perpetual childhood of prescription”; to the contrary, his ongoing instruction
clarifies the conditions under which he must elect to follow God (Areopagitica 19). Milton
extends the principle to the common moral reader with the insistent query, “If every action which
is good or evil in man at ripe years were to be under pittance, and prescription, and compulsion,
what were virtue but a name, what praise could be then due to well doing?” (28). While
prescription and modelling may mark the early stages of education, Areopagitica rests on the
premise that to become mature and virtuous, readers must reach a point where they can learn and
choose with greater independence. By the same token, change must eventually take place for
Adam and Eve as they gain the knowledge to act, fully conscious of the nature and consequences of their choices.

Yet even early prescription during a period of youthful learning cannot equate to coercion, and premature entrance into the realm of decision-making cannot be prevented though its results may prove catastrophic. Milton once again makes the case in relation to reading. He explains that books may, to the adroit, function to remedy ills just as medicine does. “Children and childish men,” meanwhile, “who have not the art to qualify and prepare these working minerals, well may be exhorted to forbear; but hindered forcibly they cannot be” (24). The expression “childish men” once more drives home how Milton does not imagine an arbitrary age at which men become erudite “doctors” capable of wise discourse, but instead envisions a series of prerequisite experiences for learning about morality. Interestingly, Milton’s own sentiment in Areopagitica about coming to know both good and evil together may trap immature readers, as it does Eve when expressed from the mouth of Satan: “To happier life, knowledge of Good and Evil? / Of good, how just! of evil—if what is evil / Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?” (9.697–99). The attitude “Why not known?” toward evil leads many adolescent learners to eschew counsel of parents and other teachers even when they remain as yet unprepared to encounter the evils about which those same leaders would eventually have given them further instructions. This early exposure gives young learners the illusion of maturity, just as Eve prays to the Tree as she had observed Satan do: “dieted by thee, I grow mature / In knowledge, as the Gods who all things know” (9.803–4). In directing her words toward the tree as the source of her sustenance, she

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10 And in Milton’s eyes, there is also a time for instruction in goodness that precedes any contemplation of evil. Still, with time, “years and good general precepts will have furnished them [students] more distinctly with that act of reason which in Ethics is called Proairesis: that they may with some judgement contemplate upon moral good and evil. Then will be required a special reinforcement of constant and sound indoctrinating to set them right and firm, instructing them more amply in the knowledge of Virtue and the hatred of Vice: while their young and pliant affections are led through all the moral works” (“Of Education”).
displaces God as the source of knowledge, wisdom, and wellbeing, just as Adam had done earlier as he grew preoccupied with the firmament instead of with its Author. The couple fall to temptation as they willfully grapple with it before developing the strength and wit to do so triumphantly. Blair Hoxby describes the act eloquently, writing, “Eve sins with ‘rash hand in evil hour’ (9.780). The hour is not evil simply because it marks the time of Eve's transgression: it is evil because the trial comes too soon” (Hoxby 159). Note how Milton associates brief and premature time with evil. Patricia Parker finds this rushed ambition characteristic of the tempter as well as the tempted: “The Fall, then, is . . . an attempt to hasten the ascent, to circumvent the process of education by degrees, and to repeat the error of the angel who thought that ‘one step higher’ would set him ‘highest’ (6.50-51) and just as he treats the barriers to Paradise when he “over-leaped all bound” (4.179).” The ultimate aspirations God harbors for his creations likely differ little from their own machinations; what marks the difference is how he perceives key intermediate steps. Adam and Eve need not abandon their hopes for advancement, but they must learn to trust that others may see the path to arrive there more clearly than they do themselves.

Ultimately, if Milton asserts in Paradise Lost the need for a safe interval in which to learn moral literacy before advancing into more involved roles in the moral war of ideas, he may in doing so reframe many falls of humans and angels as disobedience against heavenly timing and not necessarily against the true sequence of the divine design. Certainly the epic’s universe allows for and undergoes significant advancement and change; but in order for that change to yield positive and meaningful results, it must originate in the decree of the Almighty. Adam, however, does not always seem entirely content with the arrangement. He yearns to accelerate further learning of the heavens—reaching, in a sense, beyond his station—and in doing so prefigures his own disposition
toward the Fall, paralleling Eve’s, of choosing the lure of possible knowledge over present duty.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet God does not sentence the couple to an everlasting stasis of intellectual infancy: under a system in which the monarch actively issues new orders and makes new appointments, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Adam and Eve might have received further responsibilities and powers upon obeying the first injunction given them (to have children, something both recognize as impending according to the poem [9.246–7]). Raphael even leaves open the possibility that “time may come when men / With angels may participate” (5.493–4). Instead, the angel asserts that there are merely things “unseasonable to ask”—not wrong to ever hope for (8.201). In fact, heaven’s hosts themselves “inquire / Gladly into the ways of God with Man” as they recognize the significance and centrality of these new creations (8.225–26). Yet by contrast, the planetary motions Adam asks after lie beyond any immediately relevant scope; he need not know all at once in order to adequately fulfill his stewardship of the earth, but must merely remain content to wait on God’s times and seasons.

Conversely, then, Satan’s error may lie not in his ambition or envy, but in his impatience for change that is not immediately necessary\textsuperscript{12} or that may have eventually come about had he contented himself with conformity for a time. Satan comes to a “fixed mind” of which he will not “repent or change,” becoming immutable not in unyielding patience but in inflexible stubbornness (1.96–7). The willful angel appears not to believe in the power of God to reveal something new later on, faithless that later circumstances might adjust to his joy and benefit:

\bibliography{milton}

\textsuperscript{11} Once again, and as noted in the introduction to \textit{De Doctrina}, the tension surfaces here between Milton’s theoretical subscription to the Protestant belief that any believer can access truth through personal searching on the one hand, and his lack of confidence on the other that anyone is in reality faithful or wise enough to do so (himself sometimes excluded). Depravity, and not some Catholic God of mystery, appears to stand between humankind and revelation.

\textsuperscript{12} Hoxby provides plentiful evidence of Milton’s characterizations of Satan and Eve as hasty to arrive at the provocative conclusion that Milton in fact “frames almost all moments of choice as problems of timing” (149). I agree that at least many such key decisions, including these, do have a distinct temporal component.
instead, in the moment of another’s success, he rashly “thought himself impaired,” and, unable to see immediately possible any long-term improvement of his own, determines that his initiative should take precedence over God’s (5.665). Accordingly, his pride is found not (or not merely) in the aspiration to office, but in the distrust of God’s good time—disregarding how heaven’s order, as demonstrated by the appointment of the Son, alters, adapts, and accommodates. Both Adam’s and Satan’s stories reinforce Christ’s New Testament practice of not teaching a higher standard except to those prepared to become responsible for living according to that new understanding (Matt. 11.15, Luke 23.34), since a failure to wait and an insistence on immediate transformation works against the grand and gradual design of God for those still developing and in progress. Adam and Satan may have merely been immature “readers” of divine missives at the time of their respective falls, unprepared to take adequate time to digest and incorporate the new truths they were unexpectedly faced with; their failings were as much measures of their maturity as of their morality. Such maturity crucially weighs, with God-given patience, the proper timing of choices, drawing on Heaven’s foreknowledge both to await eventual rewards for righteousness and to anticipate the swift and terrible consequences of sin.

**The Holy Habits of Christian Maturity**

Milton maintains that moral readers must come to an understanding of things immoral so that they act not by rote, but as a matter of conscious choice between alternatives. *Areopagitica* identifies a person mechanically performing what others have prescribed, even when living correct principles, as a “heretic in the truth,” one who remains incapable of independently sorting good from evil. In contrast to this unthinking follower stands the “true warfaring Christian,” who, in order to claim victory over the opposition, carefully studies the enemy’s traps and tactics while planning
The passivity of Milton’s unquestioning inheritor of tradition stands in stark contrast to a good Christian soldier’s active role in drawing on all available knowledge and resources, especially God’s, to succeed in matters of moral conflict. The exigence of knowing the enemy thus helps explain why angelic commissions from God in *Paradise Lost* frequently consist of narrativizing wickedness to man. Both Raphael and Michael speak mostly warnings about evil; in fact, Michael’s description of the royal leadership of Israel captures rather well the tone of his whole account to Adam: “Part good, part bad; of bad the longer scroll” (12.336). The content of true messages given of God, it turns out, is adversative rather than affirmative in the main; Adam and Eve are to learn of the good by identifying and shunning its opposite. Adam is audience not only to the whole account of Lucifer’s dissent, but to several stories of sin as yet unacted; Milton presents prophetic teaching, crucially, as an exposition of evil that functions to “utter odious truth” about sin to humanity (11.704). Scriptural (or, in the case of the instruction Adam receives, proto-scriptural) assertions about who God is not and what he will not condone serve as a complementary negative theology to more conventional claims to doctrine. Evil, in other words, becomes an ongoing series of apophatic assertions whereby Satan’s relentless efforts evoke God’s constancy in a godless world: the presence of evil may function instructively as to the nature of an absent good. Milton’s truly adept readers must learn to access the divine both directly, by way of the Spirit’s revelations of the good, and through the instruction elicited by the Adversary, apophatically affirming God’s truths as they learn to turn devilish falsities, trickeries, and hypocrisies on their heads.13

In the poem, then, knowing evil is not incidental, but pivotal to the destiny of beings created with the capacity to choose. Knowing good by evil does necessitate real encounters with

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13 Warren Chernaik describes the successful learners in this environment of heated debate: for Milton, he posits, “the ‘fit’ are few, and that fitness is defined by choice, resistance to external pressure” (126). Much as human notions of God take on definition by apophasis, Chernaik suggests that the character of Milton’s fit Christian learner takes shape negatively, by opposition to that which she or he views as ungodly.
evil, but this does not equate with participation in sin itself. True, new realization can result from disobedient action, as the Fall illustrates all too clearly; Lucifer, too, recognizes how evidence of the true relationship between forces may result from rebellious action, boasting, “Our own right hand / Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try / Who is our equal” (5. 864–66). But at the core of each of these moments lies a clash between good and evil, the evil no less central than the good—and the results become clear to all participants, not just the resistant ones. So the opposing host may with equal authority goad the Dragon in return, “taste thy folly, and learn by proof” (2.686). Indeed, even secondhand accounts of such conflicts, rather than direct involvement in them, may sometimes prove sufficient learning experiences to distinguish good from evil. Adam reflects on these two alternative modes of acquiring knowledge: “But apt the mind or fancy is to rove / Unchecked, and of her roving is no end; / Till warned, or by experience taught, she learn” (8.188–91). A discourse of warning takes misconduct as its focus in efforts to pose a hypothetical conflict and draw lines of distinction. Jameela Lares argues that Michael’s entire address to Adam takes this form: “By announcing his subject as dis-obedience, Milton is operating in the recognizably homiletic mode of correction.” Sermons of this sort relied on terms “which were, grammatically speaking, contradictives, that is, terms which reflected the mere contrary of another term” (Lares 100). A corrective discourse on the vice of intemperance, for instance, would seek to instill the corresponding virtue of temperance through a condemnatory approach to its opposite. Adam, then, is to learn the positive quality of obedience as Michael familiarizes him at length with myriad manifestations of harmful disobedience—a lesson that

14 See, too, Abdiel’s warning to Lucifer: “Who created thee lamenting learn, / When who can uncreate thee thou shalt know” (5.894–95), as well as the fallen archangel’s eventual response in kind: “Put forth at full, but still his strength concealed, / Which tempted our attempt, and wrought our fall. / Henceforth his might we know, and know our own” (1.641–43). In both instances, the power of God here becomes more evident and comprehensible to humankind because it is tried against a (now) known force. Rebellion has been met with revelation.
soon proves effective (“Henceforth I learn,” Adam says, “that to obey is best,” 12.561).
Although the content of Michael’s account is primarily a string of sinful behaviors, because they
jar with Adam’s tender sentiments, Adam’s own values take more defined shape.

If relations of wrongdoing do not necessarily transmit transgression, but instead merely
attune their audiences’ attention to boundaries, it follows that “reading matter . . . cannot be the
origin of sin, no more than knowledge itself originates disobedience” (Festa 41). Texts serve
instead as proving grounds, opportunities for readers to encounter the lures of sin while they, in
Milton’s terms, “yet abstain, and yet distinguish” (Areopagitica 20). David Ainsworth
compellingly describes this landscape so rich with potential idols and ideals: “Books provide
both an object for this struggle and a means by which we may educate ourselves in the ways of
virtue and truth, either by extracting them from the text we read or by defending those qualities
against textual attack” (16). While “books” as such do not appear in Paradise Lost, accounts of
misdeeds do, allowing, in the classical notion of the tragedy, for cathartic wrestles with the
temptations of the flesh. Even as the world of words is stage to conflicts with adversity both real
and imaginary, it allows perceptive Christian warriors to prepare for more still more dire
attempts on their souls. The battles are thus doubly “make-believe”—at once imagined and
faith-building. In this light, the story of the war in heaven becomes an extended cautionary tale:
“Let it profit thee to have heard,” Raphael tells Adam, “By terrible example, the reward / Of
disobedience” (6.909–11). In accordance with this model, Milton shows that centuries of
angelic and prophetic instruction result in books of scripture that preserve detailed records of
evil even as they champion the good. Paradise Lost makes this abundantly clear as Adam hears
for the first time of horror after horror (murder, adultery, war, rejection of the prophets, etc.)
from no other source than the narratives that after him were to compose the canon of sacred
texts in the Christian faith. Milton goes on in Areopagitica to admit, “the Bible itself . . .
ofttimes relates blasphemy not nicely, it describes the carnal sense of wicked men not
unelegantly” (21). If the very word of God, Milton implies, does not discuss sin “nicely” (that
is, “gingerly,” “sparingly,” or “lightly”), the thinkers, readers, and writers engaging with
scripture ought not shy away from engaging with the subject of evil (“nicely, adv.”). Even so,
he admonishes, “Law can discover sin, but not remove” (12.290). Merely keeping records of
wrongdoing, even holy ones guided by divine inspiration, does not prevent the recurrence of sin
by those who follow. Instead, reason and choice must convert examples from a scriptural past
into patterns for readers’ lives. Learning about others’ flawed decisions has profound
ramifications, one way or the other, for the decision-making capacities wielded by audiences.

Until this point, “knowing good by evil” may have come across as a simple process of
comparison and contrast; 15 but I see the word “by” in Milton’s construction “knowing good by
evil” to mean not merely “next to” (“situated by”) but “through” (“by way of”). That is, all
beings but the omniscient then understand the good more completely because of the inception of
evil among them. Both the armies of Heaven and the frail mortals of Earth, for instance, fail to
grasp the extent of the Son’s love and authority until opposition gives him the opportunity to
exercise them; contrast with the divine is operative and not merely instructive. For Lucifer
(“Author of evil, unknown till thy revolt”) and the rebellious angels, filial might and wrath
manifest in their destructive capacities for the first time, matching veritable signs of power to
what had before been only words (“him named Almighty”) without manifestation for referent

15 However, Milton does also endorse this simpler practice of juxtaposition. The notion sees its most explicit
explication in a tract published near the end of Milton’s life: “In Logic they teach, that contraries laid together
more evidently appear: it follows then that all controversies being permitted, falsehood will appear more false,
and truth the more true, which must needs conduce much, not only to the confounding of Popery, but to the
general confirmation of unimplicit truth” (“Of True Religion” 16).
The Son himself notes his enemies’ inability to gauge his might, determining to display “in battle which the stronger proves; they all, / Or I alone against them; since by strength / They measure all” (6.819–21), and indeed, his strength leaves them “astonished” (6.838). Without precedent of quelling insurrection, the Son’s capacities were theoretical; the presence of evil “now known in arms” (6.418) made goodness manifest itself in wholly unique ways—“till then who knew / The force of those dire arms?” (1.93–94). Thus, while I am little persuaded by the case made by several scholars over the years for Milton’s God as a non-example of true divinity, I do think that readers like Michael Bryson who explore the notion of negative theology enrich the scholarly conversation by considering ways in which Milton teaches apophatically in “an effort to show what God is not” (37). But I do not find in Paradise Lost, as he does in Samson Agonistes, an imperfect God, there to instruct Milton’s readers what the God of reality is not. Instead, I argue that Milton presents a just God engaged in great sweeps of give-and-take with the imperfect beings around him, humans and angels alike, whose forays into a variety of disobedient acts makes manifest corresponding facets of an infinite deity in answer. A negative theology, in other words, arises in every sinful act, demonstrating what God cannot be; even as evil carves out new territory for its deviance, complementary, positive assertions about God’s true nature appear in response.

Satan’s innovation of falsehoods and heresies becomes by this reasoning a knowledge machine through which God accelerates human learning—although, of course, to the detriment of sinners. The introduction of evil into a society or even into a theology thus paves the way for revelation alongside provocations of righteous retribution, provided that individuals seeking the good have opportunity to witness punishments (or clear consequences) and examine them for truths brought to light as God shines out against darkness. Milton explains that “evil conscience”
is one instrumental mechanism at work in this recognition of evil, describing it as “each person’s mental judgement, doubtless derived from the light either of nature or of grace, of its own evil works, and its disapprobation of them; it should rather be called a ‘consciousness of evil’” (De Doctrina 2.2.486). Innate in humankind, then, lies a God-given faculty that produces guilt for wrongdoing and helps¹⁶ to identify improper behaviors, which shrewd observers may learn to observe in others as well as self by association, comparison, or empathy. Milton finds evil readable, or susceptible to analysis for additional understanding: “whatever thing we hear or see, sitting, walking, travelling, or conversing, may be fitly called our book” (Areopagitica 30).

Given this principle, when he claims that “to a discreet and judicious reader” even bad books “serve in many respects to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate,” not only published writing but the acts of evil themselves can serve instructive purposes to those who learn to discern and read them (18).

Milton’s tract thus looks beyond the specific practice of licensing publications to the larger principle of an educated person’s exposure to wrongdoing. It asserts that human beings motivated by wisdom can draw upon—and perhaps even participate in—the judgments and foreknowledge of God as they study wickedness punished in the past and prophesied of the future. When Michael, for instance, informs Adam of “what shall come in future days,” he cautions, “good with bad / Expect to hear; supernal grace contending / With sinfulness of men” (11.357–60). The intended outcome, however, lies beyond Adam’s initial reaction of mourning and lamentation. Michael goes on to describe the function that such expositions of evil may serve for his human student: Adam is told of wickedness

¹⁶ It quickly becomes evident by the proportion of attention this principle receives in Milton’s writings that it operates only as a complement or supplement to humanity’s reason and God’s revelation, which, since they require no wrongdoing, remain higher and more perfect forms of knowing.
thereby to learn

True patience, and to temper joy with fear
And pious sorrow; equally inured
By moderation either state to bear,
Prosperous or adverse. (11.360–64)

Recognizing and understanding vices, it appears, can lead the way to developing resilient, preventative virtues when adversity tempts humankind to yield. By helping human beings see ahead to sin, God allows them to escape the temporal bounds of their limited perspectives in order to cultivate permanent, prescient attributes like his own. And for Milton, the principle that attention to folly can produce future wisdom holds true even when the prophets of error are mere mortals rather than angelic beings—writers, publishers, and lawmakers all participate in the process of disclosing forward-looking knowledge “which they foresee may advance the public good” (Areopagitica 1). Milton here seems to generalize to the ability of each wise reader a principle Evan Gurney identifies in Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce only of divinely appointed spokespersons: “Prophecy, it seems, or at least responsible prophecy, is simultaneously rational and revelatory for Milton, a spiritual endeavor that deploys laborious, well-digested study” (33). Wise Christians develop the ability to accurately perceive time beyond the present, as God does, by reaching toward truths of the deep past and future.

Practiced and tried, this God-given capacity for understanding across time becomes a virtue—a holy habit that proves consistency and faithfulness. While Milton describes several such habits explicitly in De Doctrina Christiana, the most relevant for my purposes is “understanding of spiritual things,” which he defines as “a habit engendered by God whereby those who are faithful and ingrafted in Christ—with the darkness of their native ignorance dispelled, and their intellect
enlightened so as to perceive heavenly things—having been thoroughly taught by God, know everything needful for eternal salvation and for a truly blessed life” (*De Doctrina* 1.21.258).

Milton’s emphasis on righteous knowledge as a habit, rather than a completed achievement or acquisition, suggests the need for ongoing use and upkeep even by those enjoying promised salvation. 17 Elsewhere he describes how faith “does not mean the habit of believing but the things habitually to be believed” (1.1). Here, again, believers abandon what Milton identifies as heretical rote practice and must instead actively reinforce their commitment to truth. Thus the angels continue to employ reason even as it becomes largely “intuitive” in their holier state closer to God (5.488).

By a similar token, the saved Christian ingrains persistent practices, never graduating from them because the need for them remains constant: “Well knows he who uses to consider, that our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion Truth is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of illegible conformity and tradition” (*Areopagitica* 43). “Progression” here signals ongoing movement, not necessarily progress in the sense of forward motion: a fountain has a stationary origin even given its continuous action, while an alternate symbol such as a river would emphasize travel away from where life springs forth, and an ocean would have no centered point of beginning or end ordering the energy at work in the turmoil of its system. The uniquely coalescent image of the everlasting fountain follows from Milton’s worldview, since for beings created by God, origin and destination are one. The cycle of proceeding forth from God and returning to him unceasingly requires constant motion without necessitating any end but the beginning. The rebellion

17 This is not to be taken as a sign that human works can qualify individuals for salvation, a function only Christ’s intercession can accomplish. In the poem, God announces that “merit / Imputed shall absolve them who renounce / Their own both righteous and unrighteous deeds” (*Paradise Lost* 3.290–92, emphasis mine). Virtues as patterns of holy action are thus not themselves salvific, but instead are merely accompanying evidences or signs of true faith; it is faith that serves as an appeal for Christ’s works to save one’s soul. “Works cannot be absent from a true, living faith” (*De Doctrina* 1.22.276).
of the angels in heaven illustrates all too well that no matter how close creatures grow to their
Creator, they must remain diligent in the pattern of trusting and learning from him or risk losing
their station and bliss when their habits are shaken. The image of the fountain does not preclude the
existence of change, or chaotic entropy, either in the flourishing forth of Creation or in the natures
and behaviors of created beings; however, it does balance such entropy with cyclical returns that
reaffirm order, as flurries of dazzling, arcing motion gradually subside to stillness and are
recentered. God, in other words, establishes perfect unity between change and stability, and those
nearest him most closely live out this pattern.

True evil, by contrast, removes order from the equation of holy habits, posing deliberate
and continual obstructions, interruptions, and oppositions to God’s life-source. Damning as
damming—a cessation of progress, like a stagnant pool closed off from and unstirred by God’s
rejuvenating fountain—provides a clear foil for ongoing, active Christian attributes. Satan’s early
words to his hosts in the poem evoke the language of unremitting obstruction: “ever to do ill our
sole delight, / As being the contrary to his high will / Whom we resist” (1.160–62). In this use of
opposition to define identity, the distinction between evil and mere error (which I have at times
treated above somewhat more fluidly) takes clearer shape. Catherine Gimelli Martin articulates
the difference neatly:

Both the Christian and rationalist traditions . . . discriminate between unwitting or
passion-induced error and “mortal sin” or deliberate evil. The unruly senses, appetites,
and passions all play a part in both types of transgression, but as Milton especially
emphasizes, real evil only comes into existence through conscious, rational choice. (“The
‘Reason’ of Radical Evil” 165)
God can afford no mercy to the sinner who understands evil and persists in deliberately choosing it nonetheless; meanwhile, the ignorant remain subject to the law’s same punishments, but may receive a temporary and conditional possibility of amnesty. Because Satan and his hosts fall “self-tempted, self-depraved,”18 God appears to foresee the finality of their knowing choices: having so brazenly elected incompatible courses, these angels seem determined only to move further away from the possibility of grace. If God’s fountain models continual outpouring and return, Satan petulantly rushes roaring from some great precipice, descending deep into the “muddy pool” below and, in doing so, placing obstacles between himself and his own restoration (Areopagitica 43). “Man,” meanwhile, “falls, deceived / By the other first: man therefore shall find grace, / The other none” (3.128–32). Without ongoing commitment to sin or sure knowledge of the lengths the Fall will take them to, Eve and Adam’s disobedience plots as yet an unsteady path diverging from the divine. God’s insistent angelic correspondence with Adam does evidence a willingness to extend pardon, but it also shows that ignorance cannot long remain an excuse for continued wrongdoing, which will make permanent the departure of mind and heart from faithful obedience. Ultimately, inattention or permissiveness toward opposition can result not only in a susceptibility to sin, but in damning ignorance of and distance from God’s attributes and his expectations. To the God who has sworn, “Unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear,” lack of knowledge itself becomes a willing act of refusal and disobedience, for salvific truths lie open to all who seek them faithfully (Isa. 45.23). Christians who cultivate holy

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18 Clearly, God often draws from the forays of some into disobedience to admonish others toward rectitude; yet Milton’s account of a first rebellion does not offer such an instructive foil to Lucifer and his hosts, even in light of God’s omniscience and the plentiful examples he could provide for them of future disobedience. Milton may have considered Lucifer’s education extraneous to his purposes, but the omission could also evidence the nagging difficulty of reconciling the problem of evil with God’s foreknowledge: if God were to warn his creatures of evil before the first evil act ever took place, would he be responsible for introducing the notion into his perfect Creation? Yet foreknowledge of the advent of evil seems to demand a deity who will denounce the devil, before he even exists as such, as a gesture of loving instruction to those who might desert without fully understanding their actions.
habits seek out revelatory learning actively and on a continuing basis, while creatures less committed to God either let their learning come to sluggish standstills or wander without direction away from the surest source of truth to pursue their own paths. Ignorance, whether idle or willful, rejects the habitual by adopting lifestyles less rigorously active or purposefully consistent than is necessary to participate in the unfailing ways of God.

**A Spiral into Orbit: The Teleological Trajectory of Learning**

As Christians form strong habits of mind, rejecting stagnation or even lulls from pious learning, they cultivate the continuity and reliability that characterize God himself. Because God, in Milton’s view, is omniscient and constant, the teleological end of creatures made in his image includes approximating his attributes of all-encompassing knowledge and consistency. *Paradise Lost* consistently indicates that reason is the trait which most distinguishes humanity from other parts of creation, like plant and animal life with their less lofty “bounds / proportioned to each kind” (5.478–79). And concurrent with the growth of reason, Milton suggests, occurs a dilation of temporality, such that, in the light of reason, human and angelic experiences of time more resemble God’s eternity. Raphael’s description of human reason accordingly shows it to rely heavily on temporal supplements in its infantile state: the angel details the gradual growth cycle of fruits and flowers from which humans can derive “life and sense, / Fancy and understanding; whence the soul / Reason receives, and reason is her being”

|19 While mind, spirit, and soul constituted synonymous categories in the period, the passage still marks a transition from corporeal dependencies to a state more capacious of reason. |
temporary crutch to help them begin generating the truer, richer sustenance of reason themselves on a lasting, permanent basis. For humans as yet, reason remains largely “discursive,” or dependent on mediation (by the mind and others to discuss matters with), while angels have no need of such external supplements and access reason intuitively, turning from food for thought to thought for food (5.488–90). Discourse, as Raphael’s accommodated relation of God and the war in heaven illustrates, takes longer than intuition, and may appear thereby to refute my presentation of a temporal continuum along which angels are closer than man to God. However, while discourse indeed often feels capable of dragging on to eternity (a characteristic doubtless familiar to my readers in academe), what is of note here is not the extent of time demanded by discourse, but the way intuition allows righteousness to operate both instinctually and constantly—in effect, to function across time immediate and distant alike. In this way, reason made intuitive reflects how a virtue refined becomes constant, almost, as God himself.

Raphael’s assertion that angels are able to instantaneously recognize and pursue wisdom thus evidences a righteous habit that has in effect transcended time; while still in use, it has taken on the permanence of an attribute of God, approaching his omniscience and endlessness. Indeed, angels evidently observe the passage of time only for its aesthetic interest, not its importance: “For we have also our evening and our morn,” Raphael explains, “We ours for change delectable, not need” (5.628–29). Raphael suggests that humans may move toward, or even through and beyond, time experiences like the angels’ in their own pursuit of God; they, too, may take on more appreciation for the beauty of the spheres even as their faith wavers less and less with the seasons. Meanwhile, for those distanced from God, attention to the grueling particulars of time becomes essential to survival; the Fall thus makes the human experience of time less like God’s by requiring seasonal labor for living any life, even one of faith and reason.
Even Areopagitica anticipates this connection between proximity to God’s attributes and approaching his eternity, warning that a soul who destroys knowledge “kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, . . . slays an immortality rather than a life” (7). Acquiring God’s understanding weaves the Christian soul into those traits that transcend time, like patience and humility; disregarding divine perspective, meanwhile, insists on time’s importance by seeking immediate gratification—which often results, in Christian history, in abrupt downfalls.

There arises from the various degrees of time experience in Milton’s writings a kind of spectrum, in which erratic and brief encounters with time lie furthest from God and consistent and enduring courses of time lie closest to him. Predictably, neither a linear nor a cyclical model, then, best matches Milton’s projected course for human time. Instead, a model of a curve approaching God like an asymptote into infinity, or, perhaps, a spiral into an orbit about him better reflects the decreasing rate of variance humans should strive for as they approach God in tighter and tighter proximity until their courses—their “ends”—become virtually indistinguishable. In the figures that follow, I have attempted to represent pictorially this synthesis of Milton’s narrative statements on time. The developing understandings of orbits and revolutions in the physical sciences studied by Milton and his contemporaries proves no coincidence here: while it would be anachronistic to ascribe to Milton the concept of an “asymptotic orbit,” the key elements of a phenomenon well observed in modernity all surface in his poetry and prose. Adam’s response to Raphael’s reflections touch on several of them, imagining a universe revolving around the God at its center, with the possibility of an approach to him in stages:

Well hast thou taught the way that might direct

Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set
From center to circumference; whereon,

In contemplation of created things,

By steps we may ascend to God. (5.508–12)

Once more, reason and knowledge here provide the thrusters for human course adjustments, enabling created beings to approach God in both location and degree of similarity—even, the angelic state indicates, a more expansive capacity for memory and prophecy, effectively extending their perception into the far reaches of time. Models of Christian time have, of course, always run into the snags of reconciling various levels and patterns of time phenomena, and the view Milton begins to articulate here proves no exception. But the uniquely continuous gradient he presents of a time conditioned by heavenly reason reveals a trajectory of learning that blends linear and cyclical elements with individual and communal components.

Figure 1: A dotted curve representing humanity turns from an initial descent or fall to approach the upward trajectory of a constant and infinite asymptote, representing God’s course.

Figure 2: A dotted curve representing humanity is pulled from a path without destination into a gradual approximation of the course of God, orbiting it in ever tighter rings and reaching stable periodicity.
Milton wrote amid a centuries-long history of thought about time in the Christian universe. Étienne Bourdon captures in brief some of the core tensions at play in these Christian conceptualizations of time: “The time of God is not only this long linear course towards the end of times. It is also . . . the cyclical time of the week going through the chronology of Creation” (41). The salvation narrative operating on God’s grand scale of time seems at odds with human experiences of temporal cycles, from agricultural seasons to the meticulous liturgies established for worship by year, month, and day. But an orbital model resolves these apparent incongruities, allowing the lives of satellite souls to ceaselessly revolve around and turn toward a central God, even as the deity they gravitate toward may carry out his own linear trajectory onward. David Houston Wood draws attention to another means of conceptualizing competing times in the period with his studies on the humoral qualities of the body and their effects on time perceptions. “Synthesizing of microcosm and macrocosm,” he writes, “of self and environment, has implicitly temporal connotations” (23). Wood identifies a shared etymology that cements his point, since human temperament, or disposition, is indeed inflected by temporality (23). By way of Milton’s materialism, this principle may be productively extended to matters of the soul: temperament toward God, whether reckless obstinacy or patient perseverance, influences an individual’s experience of time. Chaotic actions opposed to God lead only to fleeting pleasures and inevitable terminations; actions in harmony with him grant an assurance of salvation, effectively dilating life beyond its apparent mortal bounds. At work here is more than a simple shift in perspective—as human beings approach God, their time becomes gradually more like his. The temporalities described in Paradise Lost therefore build upon and modify the Augustinian concept time as experience within the mind;20 for Milton, time is still coterminous with the mind, but no longer

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20 In the same chapter, Wood succinctly articulates Augustine’s theory of time, which clearly informs Milton’s: Wood describes how Augustine “concludes that all that exists of time revolves around the mind’s cognizance of
as mere perception. The poem’s construction of reason allows the spirit to actually extend into past and future with its diligently preserved habits and divinely procured revelations.

Milton’s materialism, a belief in continuity between physical and spiritual realms, thus extends to the time of those distinct spheres as well. There is no disjunction separating God’s time from man’s; rather, both exist on the same spectrum, with God’s eternity and vision at one extreme and Satan’s impulsiveness toward the fleeting and momentary at the other. Raphael makes the principle a universal one, albeit in passing, during his relation of the appointment of the Son, explaining, “Time, though in eternity, applied / To motion, measures all things durable / By present, past, and future” (5.580–82). God does not stand outside of the description of eternal time, since he is definitionally and archetypally “durable.” Instead, Milton places God within material time and makes his infinitude mathematically describable (as indicated by the calculus functions operating to generate the figures above). Other recent scholarship has addressed Milton’s radical stance on time. 21 Catherine Gimelli Martin, for instance, arrives at a conclusion on the fate of divinely created spaces similar to my own on divinely created beings:

Milton regards incompleteness and open-endedness as intrinsic ingredients of perfection . . . his Eden is and must remain accessible not only to time but also to its ravages. Yet even this temporal monism takes on a potentially positive valence for Milton, who does not regard time as the traditional enemy but rather as an ultimately benign ingredient of eternity. (“The Enclosed Garden” 148)

memory (past), attention (present), and expectation (future), which he identifies as the three-fold present. It is this concept of time that Augustine proposes as the distention animi, or the extension in time of the mind or soul itself” (37).

21 Stephen J. Schuler devotes more space to elaborate a compelling argument that Milton’s God exists within time, from which I reference two representative quotations: “Milton always depicts God as having both real memory and real foresight” (181), and “Milton proceeds to define time as merely one more adjunct, or inessential quality of things. Time is a circumstance, just like place or color, which Milton explains is always extrinsic to the thing itself” (165).
I concur with Gimelli Martin’s assessment that the spectrum of time on which Creation exists remains “open-ended” both to the of infinite durability through righteousness or death and decay through wrongdoing.22 I find, however, that the suggestion that no object’s place on that continuum is permanently fixed merits further attention, since it begins to elucidate how even an angel like Lucifer, presumably complete with intuitive reason (the habitual virtue of wisdom) can remain in jeopardy of a great and perilous fall. The notion that no being can cement a righteous trait in place, but must constantly exercise virtuous attributes, means that even those beings closest to God in might and glory are not set in their spheres.

The ever-present possibility that even the most loyal may spin off into some dark corner of the universe like Satan’s might threaten to induce anxiety; yet the kinetic potential of a fall in fact proves pivotal to the maintenance of a tight and precise orbit around a central good. The ongoing efforts by the hosts of evil to destabilize righteous souls’ constancy toward God thus become key forces driving the continued periodicity of the Christian future, since their temptations provide ongoing opportunities to reaffirm loyalty and reinforce holy habits. Ayelet Langer provides an incisive reading of the role of evil in enabling righteous stability: “The combination ‘still good’ in the phrase ‘with good / Still overcoming evil’ (12.565-66), may be understood as an immobile and changeless good, but it is, at the same time, persistently and perhaps even endlessly (‘still’) overcoming evil.” The word “still” functions for her “in both its meanings as immobility and persisting through time, in this way creating the paradox of the Miltonic aevum” (15). The power of continual opposition to produce power, like the firmness of

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22 J. K. Barret, too, finds something volatile in the circularity of the Miltonic future: “Despite troubled glances at a straightforward future, Milton does not settle on this version of aftertimes. Rather, the poem ends with the vocabulary of romance, and, in so doing, continues a long string of vacillations about time and its circles. For example, Sin’s offspring—‘yelling monsters’ that ‘surround’ her—are ‘hourly conceived / And hourly born’ (2.795–97)” (Barret 219).
a wind turbine, resonates with my own reading of the poem; where Langer and I diverge is the model of the *aevum*, a single middle stage of time between God’s and man’s, which I find too reductive a state to account for the full fluidity and range of human and angelic time experiences suggested by the poem. What I see resulting from the “stillness” of the righteous is not an absolute stasis, any more than a planet’s movement when it maintains a consistent distance from a star. Rather, it is the relationship between the spheres—planetary and astral, satellite and central, human and divine—that becomes fixed, even as both humans and God chart a larger course across the cosmos.

If Christian constancy derives even in part from battling evil “still,” the war between good and evil serves a larger, cosmic purpose. A macrocosm of the situational “good temptation” of God, it takes advantage of beings who refuse God’s constancy across time (i.e., Satan and his hosts) to give humans and angels in a state of variability the chance to push back against them toward a stable existence more like God’s own. To their ironic doom, when the armies of Satan attempt to stir the pot, they inadvertently disturb the potential stagnation of tradition Milton warns against. John Spencer Hill sees cosmic conflicts like these constitutive of the very universe of *Paradise Lost*, where “the antinomies of order and disorder, perfection and imperfection, harmony and disharmony, that characterize the oppositions of the geocosm and the macrocosm also reflect the balanced antitheses that constitute the paradox of human nature itself, so that even the physical setting images the epic’s human theme” (65). I argue that these parallels exist because Milton envisions a materialist union between physical and spiritual states, in which proximity to God can only occur holistically, taking in both visible location and inner disposition. Distance from God brings about entirely the reverse—chaotic motion to match the disorder of an interior state of rebellion. Milton drives home this point in his descriptions of
Satan’s frantic restlessness. He depicts the devil in both internal and external states of frenzy: even as Satan writhes in a mental state of turmoil (“in his tumultuous breast, / And like a devilish engine back recoils / Upon himself,” 4.15–17), his gaze wanders, equally lost (“Sometimes towards Eden . . . his grieved look he fixes sad; / Sometimes towards Heaven,” 4.27–29). The adversary himself recognizes the aimlessness brought about by living in opposition to the only sure course, crying, “Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?” (4.73–74).

Illustrative and exemplary beside Satan’s pitiful purposelessness stands the Son, whose confident trailblazing marks the path for all created beings after him. *Paradise Lost* begins to imagine the trajectory set forth by Christ’s scriptural proclamation, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14.6). The Son models the course of created beings; extending his obedience into the far reaches of time qualifies him for a more godlike state. Named Son of God “by merit more than birthright,” the birthright of God’s earliest creation still appears to bear some weight in the decision (3.309). While the Son’s unity with God appears to be exceptional, it may also be simply too soon to say: no other creations have had as ample an opportunity in time to prove themselves as the Firstborn has had—his existence is the most extensive, and not merely the most impressive, temporal source in which to observe obedience to God. Viewing the Son’s appointment this way may open a theological can of worms by appearing to make possible a kind of polytheism in the deep future as other beings

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23 Without Christ to correct their course, fallen humans would follow fallen angels in their endless wanderings: “Disobedience may well be a slippery slope, but God seems less concerned that Adam’s ‘now bolder hand’ will sin again than he is worried about the consequences: gaining immortality, or even the ‘dream’ of it, occasions preemptive expulsion. God does not elaborate on the dangers of eternal life, taking for granted the perils of merely desiring a time that finds “no end”’ (Barret 214).

24 In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton stands by the importance of merit, rather than innate right, as a prerequisite to rule—although, in this case, to condemn a ruler rather than uphold one as he does in *Paradise Lost*: “Aristotle and the best of political writers have defined a King, him who governs to the good and profit of his People, and not for his own ends, it follows from necessary causes, that the titles of Sovereign Lord, natural Lord, and the like, are either arrogancies, or flatteries” (11).
demonstrate fidelity with comparable consistency or depth. But whether or not other creatures can attain to the status of deity themselves (God does call his hosts “all ye Gods” when instructing them to adore the son, 3.341–2), their ultimate union with God, when he “shall be all in all” (3.341) means emulating Christ’s example of tireless, faith-filled obedience. The language describing his union with the Father once more evokes a harmony among celestial spheres:

in orbs

Of circuit inexpressible they stood,

Orb within orb, the Father Infinite,

By whom in bliss imbosomed sat the Son. (5.584–97)

This moment interrupts the harmony in the heavens, as it provokes the envy of Lucifer. Hereafter, Christ wheels about in a fiery chariot to curb the assaults of the adversary. Alongside his indefatigable vigilance guarding “the empyreal Heaven, extended wide / in circuit,” human telos becomes not a point, but a trajectory, a ceaseless, cyclical progression embodied by the fountain of living waters, complete with its bursts of entropy regularly reassimilated into an ordered whole (2.1047–48). And with a common course inscribed before them, human beings take on a shared destiny for their political and religious organizations as well as a private, spiritual injunction; in uniting themselves to the Son, they simultaneously link themselves to one another—one more sense in which “God shall be all in all.”

**Conclusion: Periodicity and Progress**

My readers will rightly ask what so ideologically inscribed a vision of the future can offer today’s institutions of education—most of them distanced from any form of religiosity, let alone Milton’s curious cocktail of Christian beliefs. I do not mean to suggest with this piece that
centuries-old theological musings must demand more pressing attention than contemporary questions of ethical decision-making across a variety of social and political issues. I appreciate the value of making more immediate connections to any such “ethical mission” set out by Milton that may productively be extended to or modified for today’s readers, as Achinstein does (208). But what I find so informative about this kind of long-view attention to Milton is the rich picture it renders of the potential drivers and destinies of the colossal endeavor called learning, in light of which educators may take stock of both the available tools and intended outcomes of their profession. The current study, for instance, is meant to provoke some reevaluation of the role of adversative and challenging material in today’s information and entertainment outlets. It also offers additional perspective about cycles in the history of human learning that seem to indicate only regression or lack of forward progress.

I offer here one small example of how broad theological inquiries can inform critical method, offering alternatives to conclusions drawn from more immediate connections between Milton and the political sphere. As suggested by the subtitle of his book (Ethics, Politics, Terrorism), Feisal G. Mohamed approaches Areopagitica with an especially shrewd eye when it comes to social issues. As he assesses the tract’s discussion of good and bad books, he identifies in Milton’s work an elitist ideology that, he claims, does not truly foster open political discourse but instead promotes the freedom of Milton and those he agrees with to write and speak freely: bad books, by Mohamed’s interpretation, should never see the light of day. Yet Milton’s treatment of the theology and teleology of evil inclines me to disagree. Although Milton doubtlessly maintains a bias that champions the political power of intellectuals, I take a key line from the tract about not destroying a good book to mean something quite different from what Mohamed suggests. Instead of concluding that “bad
books” would have been better off had they never existed, I reassert the necessity Milton would have seen in allowing such publications to come to light, weighing them and their ethical ramifications, reasoning through a rebuttal that may unearth new principles, and only then destroying the offending texts found guilty. The sequence matters, because while the final fate of the destroyed works remains the same, its readers and reviewers would miss out on a crucial learning opportunity if they were never to address seriously the faulty ideas contained in such works. Here again surfaces the principle of defining the good by opposition, which holds up in Milton’s own political practice. Margaret Olofson Thickstun has invaluably illustrated how dissent movements like Reformation, Revolution, and radicalism had come to define the poet and many contemporaries negatively in terms of the things each opposed, from papacy to absolute monarchy (98). Of course, the intervening centuries have evidenced ways in which Milton himself might have better understood and battled evils (misogyny, for instance). Still, Milton’s stance on the role of evil in the Christian universe would ostensibly celebrate the availability of his work to public scrutiny and even rejection, provided his critics were well versed in reason and sought a better way forward.

Milton’s perspectives on opposition and evil do shed light on paths modern educators might take to further the efficacy of their efforts. One rule of thumb entails controlled yet consistent exposure of learners to material that challenges their moral codes. This means at once preventing rash encounters with evil like Adam and Eve’s before maturity, and ensuring thorough, lifelong battles with opposition throughout life’s entirety, such that habits never grow lax and weak. Even people on fairly good courses will find that such trials “lessen their assurance,” encouraging further striving and seeking so that habits do not become merely rote behaviors and lose their reasoned, soulful vitality. The applications of these principles are
numerous, but I will highlight just a few here. On the one hand, early availability of personal
devices with access to overwhelming waves of information may lead to premature exposure to
excessively challenging evil, making it likely that readers—and viewers and listeners, thanks to
the same technologies—will find themselves insufficiently informed and equipped when they
must begin making decisions involving ethics. The response of educators, themselves more
mature learners (at least, so one hopes), might include reassessment of movie and video-game
rating systems, media ban policies in public school districts, parental controls on Internet-
connected devices, and more.

Yet more stringent control is not the answer across the board, for while perhaps very
young children’s access to challenging content needs to be restricted further, youth and young
adults might be productively introduced to more complex issues than some institutional barriers
currently allow them to engage with in safe settings. Ironically, arbitrary barriers currently
disallow young people from accessing informative media on matters they experience in their
day-to-day lives, like profane language, drug abuse, and sexuality, with the safety of a book or
film as buffer to the crucial hour of decision-making. Presenting material that poses
appropriately increasing challenges to adolescent and young adult learners requires teachers and
administrators who see the practice of jarring students from mindless conformity and
complacency as central to their work. Such educators do not content themselves with merely
introducing or describing societal problems, but instead continually complicate and deepen
student understandings of their scope and dangers; they present difficult moral dilemmas for
student reflection and discussion, then couple hypothetical treatment of issues with real
opportunities for ethical decision-making in schools, homes, and communities. These educators
must remain willing to stand up to parents’ and coworkers’ overprotective efforts to have
suitably difficult material removed from classrooms—even under threat of litigation or termination of employment. Teaching maturity, it is evident, requires maturity, and a good deal of courage besides.

Even once learners finish their formal education, the problem of insufficiently engaging with evil may persist into adulthood. This may occur, for instance, as entertainment media employ a simplifying trope for conflict, whereby the settings that should be venues for adults to maturely treat the complexities of evil and respond with inventive, creative solutions, like art and social discourse, are reduced to formulaic presentations of straightforward good-versus-evil scenarios. The often black-and-white worlds of supervillains and caricatured public figures invites little treatment of nuance, and adult learner–audiences accordingly remain juvenile, even infantile in their abilities to address real, multi-faceted opposition. Answers to this problem prove more difficult still, since educators and administrators have no special influence in these matters other than as consumers. While an emphasis in the classroom on transfer to the social sphere could begin to bridge this gap, admirable civic engagement must follow suit. Public action directed at this problem may include efforts to direct critical acclaim toward strides in ethics over spikes in entertainment, and, politically, to grant our attention to law and logic before lies and libels. And educators can model ongoing commitment to collective and individual improvement by sharing nuanced perspectives, both digitally and in person, on less obvious or less publicized issues. For Milton, encounters with even the subtlest of evils can serve valuable functions, yielding insights and increased integrity—but only when skilled learners practice scripting, rehearsing for, and improvising in those encounters, rather than constantly leaping in unprepared or, perhaps worse still, refusing to consider the possibility of an enemy when one has crept already past the garden gate.
And Milton’s teleological view of learning has implications for perspective, and not just pragmatics, when it comes to societal education in the modern world. While Milton’s model suggests that evil may never be completely eradicated and will resurge in cycles so long as free choice exists to bring it about, educators must not despair that the return of racial, sexual, and economic injustices signals that no progress has been made by the human race. Instead, they should look to the responses toward such evils as indicators of progress: how rapidly errors are identified, how many people and which groups of people rally to condemn and correct them, and how thoroughly restitution is made, both in magnitude and precision. When unfairness is inscribed in cycles—even, it becomes increasingly apparent, some as visible and chronologically adjacent as election cycles—those seeking truth and the good may feel that to travel in a circle is to futilely spin one’s wheels in the mud. But even without sharing Milton’s Christian worldview, it is possible, and preferable, to share his vision of cycles that occur simultaneously with larger arcs and trajectories, movement of whole systems in spite of some smaller, internal orbits. We must remember that, when we seem to be coming no closer to a noble goal, just perceiving the same obstacles to joint human goals may indicate how we gravitate toward the same ideals, and the ability to recognize a pattern in the loops, cycles, and returns may prove pivotal to traversing some reaches of conceptual space. Even developing the resilient habits of keeping a value in sight and pushing constantly toward it may well determine what sphere we ultimately revolve around, since any matter has its own larger course to chart across the expanse of the future. We may find that our destination lies in the trajectory itself.
Works Cited


