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## Ecocriticism and Vitalism in *Paradise Lost*

LEAH S. MARCUS

What has happened to the “Milton bogey” of a generation ago (Froula)? With the increasing popularity of ecocritical approaches to early modern literature, Milton’s Eve has been characterized as a proto-ecologist and Milton himself hailed as a precursor of modern environmentalism and its solicitude for the well-being of Gaia, Mother Earth.<sup>1</sup> This essay will be speculative rather than definitive, and will suggest points of unexplored contact between Miltonists interested in ecocritical approaches to *Paradise Lost* and scholars of early modern vitalist materialism. What, precisely, happened to the earth through the Fall of Adam and Eve? What were the mechanisms connecting their act of disobedience in eating the apple and the “wound” (*PL* 9. 782) experienced by earth as Eve plucked the fruit? And how might the answers to these questions influence our view of Milton as a possible precursor to modern environmentalist thought? The aim of this essay is to bring ecocritics and historians of seventeenth-century vitalist philosophy into closer conversation with each other. Milton’s vitalist materialist account of the Fall of humanity is anchored in the early scientific thinking of his time, but also resonates with the thought of such modern vitalists as Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, who echo many of the concerns of twenty-first century environmentalists while also critiquing their tendency to isolate “Nature” as somehow separable from human civilization and its effects on the world around it.<sup>2</sup> This essay will hover between the poles of “presentism” and historicism in its account of *Paradise Lost*, hoping to suggest that Milton’s vitalist ideas may have something to contribute to modern views of ecology while also acknowledging that they may have functioned very differently in Milton’s own historical context than they would today.<sup>3</sup>

As Keith Thomas and others have argued, the seventeenth century saw a shift in the dominant British view of the natural world, from the position that God created all things for human use to a greater emphasis on human stewardship and responsibility for the natural world. We can recognize this contrast in emphasis as early as the book of Genesis, with its two variant versions of the creation story. The first version, often termed the Priestly or P-text, emphasizes human *dominion over* nature: God blesses the first man and woman and tells them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Gen. 1.28, King James Version). The second version, often termed the Yahwist or J-text, emphasizes human *responsibility for* nature: God creates Adam and places him in the garden of Eden “to dress it and to keep it,” suggesting that human use of plants and animals is not based so much on sovereignty as on service (Gen. 2.15). In *A Maske*, Milton famously puts an argument for human exploitation of nature in the mouth of the demonic enchanter himself, who argues that Nature would not have “pour[ed] her bounties forth / With such a full and unwithdrawing hand, / Covering the earth with

odours, fruits, and flocks” were it not to “please and sate the curious taste” of her human masters (710–12, 714).<sup>4</sup> To which the Lady responds with her own counter-argument that emphasizes human responsibility and conservation of Nature:

. . . she good cateress  
Means her provision only to the good  
That live according to her sober laws,  
And holy dictate of spare Temperance:  
If every just man that now pines with want  
Had but a moderate and beseeing share  
Of that which lewdly-pamper'd Luxury  
Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,  
Nature's full blessings would be well dispens't  
In unsuperfluous even proportion. . . .

(764–73)

We could summarize, reductively, by saying that Comus's philosophy of exploiting Nature's bounty is based upon the Genesis P-text and the Lady's argument for the regulation of consumption derives from the J-text, with its emphasis on human responsibility rather than sovereignty. In *Paradise Lost* as well, as Diane McColley has shown (see especially “Milton's Environmental Epic” and “Ecology and Empire”), Milton fairly consistently takes the more benevolent, custodial view of the proper human attitude toward the natural world.<sup>5</sup>

Here I would like to ask some questions about *Paradise Lost* that ecocritical Miltonists have left unanswered, or at least not answered in detail. Like the Bible, Milton's account of creation and the Fall in *Paradise Lost* often gives two or more seemingly mutually exclusive accounts of the same set of events; indeed, though Miltonists have expended much effort in attempting to interpret the contradictions, it is perhaps more fruitful to read them as extensions of the biblical style of narrative, which create amplitude and complexity by coming at a set of events or problems from multiple, ostensibly mutually exclusive, points of view. The divergent narratives that particularly interest us here describe the impact of the Fall on nature. By what mechanism is the Fall of Adam and Eve transferred to the natural world as a whole? Richard DuRocher considered this question in his important study “The Wounded Earth in *Paradise Lost*,” but arguably gave short shrift to Milton's vitalist materialism in that he discusses Milton's characterization of the earth as a personification with limited resonance in the epic rather than an instance of a much more pervasive design by which all natural things, not only the earth itself, are infused with sentience and purpose. In *Paradise Lost*, there are many instances in which a vitalist interpretation of the effects of the Fall runs parallel to more conventional accounts by which the Fall's detrimental effects on the natural world were instead engineered by God and his angels.

In Book 10, the poet describes the fall of the natural world as a process of dismantling: God perceives Adam and Eve's disobedience from on high and comes down to Eden to sentence them to death, pain in childbirth, and harsh toil amidst “Thorns” and “Thistles” (10.203). In judgment upon their crime, God allows Satan and his minions to infect the world with Discord, Sin, and hungry Death, who is eager to feast on his first mortals. God also sends down his angels to throw the created universe out of alignment so that temperatures become extreme and the earth is wracked with storms and noxious influences: “The Sun / Had first his precept so to

move, so shine, / As might affect the Earth with cold and heat / Scarce tolerable.” The moon and planets were thrown out of synchronicity; the winds were taught to blast and the earth tilted on its axis: “Some say he bid his Angels turn askance / The Poles of Earth twice ten degrees and more / From the Sun’s Axle”; and so the account of cosmic mischief goes on (10.651–719). According to this narrative, which we will call the “divine interventionist” version of the fall of nature, the act of plucking the apple does not in itself unleash cosmic discord; the destruction of nature is rather God’s punishment for that crime and is engineered by God himself and his angels.

However, Milton’s narrative does not commit itself exclusively to this explanation of causality. His account is hedged with the repeated preface “Some say”: “Some say he bid his Angels turn askance / The Poles”; “Some say the Sun / Was bid turn Reins from th’ Equinoctial Road . . . to bring in change / “Of Seasons” (10.668–78). Even in the midst of his account, Milton hints at another explanation for the fall of nature, one in which the natural world is not thrown out of kilter by the mechanical intervention of angels but deviates of its own accord. Did the angels “bid” the sun to change his route, or did the sun swerve of its (or should we say “his”) own free will? Milton asserts the former in the passage quoted above, with the hedging caveat “Some say,” but a few lines later he also suggests the latter: “At that tasted Fruit / The Sun, as from *Thyéstean* Banquet, turn’d / His course intended” (687–89). By this second account, the sun changed course as a direct aversion reaction to Adam and Eve’s tasting of the “Fruit” without any need for angelic adjustment of his course. He deviated from his usual path out of revulsion against an act of eating that Milton likens to a “*Thyéstean* Banquet”—the horrific banquet in which, according to Greek mythology, King Thyestes unknowingly ate the flesh of his own slaughtered sons. This second account attributes sympathy, antipathy, and independent agency to the sun and also a capacity for moral judgment: he perceives Adam and Eve’s eating the fruit as a form of unintended cannibalism in that they, like Thyestes, are devouring their own posterity by subjecting their future offspring to the effects of their transgression. The sun is not an inert body whose path must be readjusted by angelic mechanics, but a sentient being who swerves from evil of his own volition. This second account, I would suggest, shows us a different Milton—the vitalist Milton—whose differing accounts exist at many points in the epic alongside the more customary explanation of the fall of nature. As such scholars as Stephen Fallon and John Rogers have documented in ample detail, *Paradise Lost* is infused with animist or vitalist materialism: a natural philosophy quite popular in mid-seventeenth-century England that held that spirit is a refined form of matter, that all creation partakes of spirit in varying degrees, and that all created beings therefore have free will, the ability to perceive and make moral choices and to exert material agency.<sup>6</sup>

Let us go back a few steps to the moment in *Paradise Lost* that so disconcerted the sun, the moment of Adam and Eve’s violation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. One of the things that makes Milton of particular interest to ecocritics is that at many points in *Paradise Lost* he appears, like the modern ecological movement generally, to place the blame for the destruction of natural perfection and harmony squarely and directly on harmful human intervention in the natural world. When Eve plucks the fatal apple in Book 9, we are immediately told that an animated “Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost” (782–84). The severing of fruit from tree inflicts an actual blow on the earth, to which Nature offers an immediate, sympathetic response that

unleashes a process by which her “Works” gradually recede from their previous perfection. When Eve again violates the tree of knowledge to give Adam a piece of its fruit, earth and Nature respond more intensely:

Earth trembl'd from her entrails, as again  
 In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan,  
 Sky low'r'd, and muttering Thunder, some sad drops  
 Wept at completing of the mortal Sin  
 Original. . . .

(1000–04)

Here earth's reaction, as DuRocher has pointed out, is specifically described as a birth pang—the painful undoing of the joyous “birth” of the earth described in Book 7.276–82 and following. Interestingly, this time Nature groans and weeps, generating the first thunderstorm—a breach in the sky—out of her immediate sympathetic response to the breach in the earth.

In these passages the fall of the natural world is not a set of interventions ordered by God and engineered by angels, but described in vitalist materialist terms: the act of Adam and Eve initiates a wave of sympathetic deterioration by which the earth and Nature respond incrementally to the humans' initial transgression. The physical act of picking the forbidden fruit sets in motion a chain of events by which the earth and nature fall out of equilibrium as a direct consequence of the initial violation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So, as we have seen, the sun swerves from his intended course out of horror at Adam and Eve's transgression. In the vitalist version of the fall of nature, human beings directly bring it about; in what we earlier labeled the “divine interventionist” version, they bring it about only indirectly, through the activities of God and his angels. Which account are we to believe? Like the P- and J-texts in Genesis, the two versions of the fall of nature coexist in uneasy suspension in *Paradise Lost*, seemingly mutually contradictory, yet both contributing to a wider view of the cataclysmic process of the Fall and both somehow true despite the fact that each seems to exclude the other, at least in their attribution (or omission) of sympathy and agency to the natural world.

Indeed, Milton's ambiguity about the cause of the fall of nature is based on a famous scriptural crux. According to Romans 8.19–22, the natural world, like fallen humanity, labors in hope of deliverance from its abject condition. The King James Version of this much-disputed text reads,

- 19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.
- 20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope,
- 21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.
- 22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

Verse 20 is a celebrated crux in that it leaves ambiguous the identity of the “him” who has subjected the creatures of the earth: is it God, who has punished the natural world for Adam and Eve's transgression, as implied in the King James Version cited here, where “in hope” is linked to “who hath subjected the same”? Or is it human

beings—Adam and Eve or perhaps, according to a few interpreters, Satan—who have caused the earth to groan in travail? If the “him” of the verse is capitalized, as it is in some versions of the Bible, we will assume that the actor is God. Conversely, if the comma after “in hope” is moved two words earlier to “the same,” as it is in some translations of the Bible, the message of the passage is altered significantly and humans rather than God become responsible for the subjection of the creatures. In the English Standard Version, for example, “in hope” belongs with the succeeding verse: “20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” *Paradise Lost* echoes the biblical language by which the earth “groaneth and travaileth,” suggesting the pains of childbirth to express the throes of the natural world in its newly fallen condition. (Interestingly, the English Standard Version actually translates the Greek koine of verse 22 as “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.”<sup>7</sup>) Milton also reproduces the ambiguous agency of verse 20, sometimes describing the fall of the world as brought about by God and sometimes attributing it directly to human intervention. Earth felt the pangs of the Fall “by reason of him [of whom? God? Adam?] who hath subjected the same.”

Our poet’s interest in vitalism has been at the forefront of Milton studies in recent years, but there has arguably been insufficient conversation between critics interested in seventeenth-century vitalism and those interested in twenty-first-century ecocriticism. Most recent ecocritics of Milton do not even cite such vitalist accounts as Stephen M. Fallon’s in *Milton among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England* and John Rogers’s *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton*. Modern ecocritics have performed a wonderful service in showing Milton’s concern for issues that we would now call environmental: the damage to the natural world brought about by human choices and possible remedies for it. But they sometimes risk turning Milton into our contemporary in terms of environmentalist thought by downplaying the degree to which his ideas in *Paradise Lost* are rooted in the controversies of his own time. Conversely, such critics as Fallon and Rogers who situate Milton in terms of seventeenth-century science and philosophy have opened *Paradise Lost* to a whole new world of exciting ideas but have chosen not to engage fully with the implications of Milton’s vitalism for modern environmentalism, perhaps out of fear that they would distort his work by making him appear more contemporary than he is. By now, I would submit, ecocritical views of Milton have achieved sufficient intellectual traction that they need to incorporate seventeenth-century vitalism into their accounts of *Paradise Lost*.

What is the mechanism by which Eve’s plucking of the forbidden fruit causes a wound to earth? One of the most influential recent accounts of the fall of nature in *Paradise Lost* has been that of the ecocritic Ken Hiltner, who describes the wound as an uprooting. He interprets the Fall of Eve as consisting in her arrogant attempt “to pull away from the earth” (*Milton and Ecology* 3). Up until the point of the Fall, Eve has served as the “Genius” of Eden (5)—its resident protector and ordering principle. When Satan convinces her that she should be aspiring higher, she plucks the forbidden fruit in order to lift herself from her earthbound condition to knowledge—“knowledge”—whatever that may be. According to Hiltner, the wound suffered by the earth is not “caused by something striking at the Earth, like a fist or spear, but



instead something struck *from* the earth—humanity.” When Eve “uproots” herself, “[l]ike some great tree which had simply reached too high for its roots in the Earth to support it,” she falls and “leaves a massive open wound in the Earth.” For Hiltner, this direct connection between Eve’s transgression and the wounding of Earth qualifies Milton as an environmentalist in modern terms: “With this extraordinary—though entirely plausible—interpretation of the biblical Fall, Milton delivers Christianity to the fold of environmentalists who hold that our own foolish acts have brought ecological devastation to the Earth.” But Hiltner goes further than that, suggesting that for Milton, this uprooting constitutes the ur-transgression of our first parents—what theologians might characterize as original sin: “[t]his foolish uprooting of ourselves from our place on Earth was the pivotal human act—and the source of our current sorrow” (*Milton and Ecology* 3–5). In Hiltner’s view, every subsequent human violation of the earth and its well-being is a repetition of the Fall of Adam and Eve, a confirmation of our continued “wound” of separation from a necessary, organic connection to the earth.

In this interpretation, we will note, there is no such thing as a *felix culpa*. Hiltner interprets *Paradise Lost* as moving from place to space: Adam and Eve are forced out of Eden and into an uncertain future in which they have no defined place to call home; they can recover from the effects of the Fall only by somehow managing to re-root themselves in a new place, but that place cannot possibly be Eden. Similarly, we moderns can best “renew a precious bond we once had with the Earth” by allowing “ourselves to feel this shared wound at once for ourselves *and* for the Earth” (*Milton and Ecology* 5). Hiltner deemphasizes Milton’s internalization of the idea of Eden, as the archangel Michael exhorts Adam in a much-celebrated passage at the end of the epic:

only add

Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,  
Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,  
By name to come call’d Charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
A paradise within thee, happier far.

(12.581–87)

Hiltner’s emphasis on the wound of the earth is designed to raise the environmental consciousness of his readers, but his view of Milton is anchored squarely in the perception of loss. The most we humans can hope for is to feel the wounding of earth as our own wound. “Because the Earth’s sorrow at losing her connection with humanity is portrayed anthropomorphically as childbirth, the birth of each human child is going to be, in some sense, a reenactment of the events of the Fall . . . a reminder of the wound we share with the Earth, so that we might renew the bond we had with the Earth by recalling that we still share the same wound” and can repair it only by renewing our attachment to place, “our Earth-bound peasantry that was lost with Eden” (Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology* 50; see also Theis, “Environmental Ethics” 67–68). For Milton, by contrast, the Fall is reparable and does not require humans to re-experience the original wounding of earth. As Joanna Picciotto has recently argued, *Paradise Lost* echoes Milton’s project in *Of Education* to “repair the ruin of our first parents” (*Prose* 31) and the broader mid-century project of restoring Eden through the collaborative labor of attaining scientific and craft-based expertise and an

Adam-like knowledge of the natural world (Picciotto 400–507). The Milton of *Paradise Lost* was less experimentally based than many advocates of the new science, though Eve's heeding of the advice of the serpent has frequently been discussed as an instance of failed empiricism—not because her method is unsound in itself, but because she is not careful enough about weighing the reliability of her source of information.<sup>8</sup> For the vitalist Milton of *Paradise Lost*, there is weighing and testing to be done, but much more important is the mental adjustment. If people gradually refine themselves through experience and self-correction, gradually raise themselves out of their despair at their loss of a sympathetic connection with earth and internalize the virtues that are within their power, they can not only eventually re-attain Eden, “for then the Earth / Shall all be Paradise, far happier place / Than this of *Eden*,” but they can also attain a “paradise within thee, happier far” (12.463–65, 587).

In *Paradise Lost*, the loss of Eden, like so many other elements of the epic, is recounted in two versions, one vitalist and the other “divine interventionist.” According to the vitalist account, Adam and Eve expel themselves from Eden by eating the forbidden fruit. Or otherwise put, upon their action, Eden in effect expels them—as we have seen, the sun deviates in horror from his path, the earth weeps, and Nature groans in pain. Their plucking of the forbidden fruit is a breach of sympathy that motivates a corresponding breach on the part of other creatures and is immediately visible in their altered perceptions of their no-longer-Edenic surroundings after the act of eating and in their alienation from each other. According to Milton's second, “divine interventionist,” account, the loss of Eden is physical removal from the garden at the behest of God. The archangel Michael, brandishing the fiery “Sword of God,” and cherubim with “dreadful Faces” and “fiery Arms” herd Adam and Eve out of their lost home (12.633–44). Hiltner's account (*Milton and Ecology* 43–54) closely resembles the vitalist version in that he interprets the loss of Eden as based in a loss of sympathy between humans and earth, but the fact that he sees the rupture as irreparable without a rerooting in earth suggests that his interpretation of the loss of Eden is closer to the spirit of Milton's “divine interventionist” account in *Paradise Lost* in that Hiltner describes a process of physical separation that cannot be undone except through a reattachment to earth.

Other ecocritics are more sanguine. McColley succinctly states that by the end of the epic, Milton has taught us that “we cannot return to Eden, but we can make Edenic choices” (*Gust* 190). This goes considerably further, terming *Paradise Lost* a “literary work of environmental reclamation” (“Environmental Ethics” 80).<sup>9</sup> And as we have seen, Picciotto, though she does not specifically place herself in the ecocritical camp, delineates numerous ways in which Milton's account of the Fall and Adam and Eve's recovery from it participates in contemporary efforts to undo the loss of Eden. Despite the many dark moments of human history as described in Books 11 and 12, Milton insists on a human future in which, with proper application of will and experience, the descendants of Adam and Eve can gradually repair the ruins of the Fall, undo the damage they have caused to the earth, and regain Eden or a “far happier place” even than Eden.

Seventeenth-century vitalists had varying theories as to how Adam and Eve brought about the fall of nature. The Digger Gerrard Winstanley suggested that Adam and Eve gradually poisoned the earth through their bodily eliminations: “The poison of mans unrighteous body dunging the earth, filled the grasse and herbs with strong unsavory spirits, that flowed from him.” When Adam and Eve died and were buried, they “corrupted the whole creation, fire, water, earth, and aire, and still as the



branches of [their] body went to the earth, the creation was more and more corrupted" (113–14; see also Rogers 150–51). Another theory comes from vitalist medicine of the period: according to Francis Glisson's important treatise on rickets, *De rachitudo* (1650–51), vital spirit is distributed about the natural world as it is within the human organism. If one being "laboring under some private Disease" disturbs the equilibrium of the whole, then the other beings react with a kind of irritability and distemper. Glisson describes the interaction among bodily organs in affective terms: the "natural spirits" are like a bride who allures and repels her groom; various organs, even bones, are living parts that exercise attractive and expulsive powers. The womb embraces and cherishes the embryo; and medicines are either "friendly" or "unfriendly" to members of the community of affective parts that is a human organism (88–89, 101, 113, 155, 299; see also Pagel; and Rogers 104–19). Milton's understanding of the Fall is closer to Glisson than to Winstanley in that in *Paradise Lost*, as in vitalist medical treatises like Glisson's, the response to the original irritant is imagined as immediate rather than gradual, as in the case of Winstanley's slowly poisoned earth.

For Milton, however, we can speculate that the original contaminant was not "some private Disease," in the sense of an illness or antipathy that is communicated to other tissues, but rather the dis-ease of absence. For Milton, as for many other seventeenth-century vitalists, God is infused through all creation. All the material universe was created out of himself, and evil is not an opposing principle to the divine but rather the absence of God. According to Milton's understanding, we can speculate, the fruit of the tree of knowledge is lethal because alone among the fruits of the garden, it implies/constitutes an absence. A rough parallel might be God's original creation of chaos by "retiring" himself from matter that had previously been incorporated into himself (7.170); perhaps God similarly "retired" himself from the tree of knowledge, or at least from its fruit, as a way of registering its special status as forbidden. When Adam and Eve ate the apple perhaps they took into themselves, unknowingly, the absence of God and that absence manifested itself in their loss of innocence and the decay of nature. Milton says cryptically that they "knew not eating Death" (9.792) and, as we have seen, compares the fruit to Thyestes's cannibalistic banquet, in which he eats his own progeny, his own future. This hypothesized absence at the root of the Fall is akin to Hiltner's treelike uprooting from the earth except that the direst limit of the suffering it sets in motion is not the lack of earth but the lack of God.

In Book 5 of *Paradise Lost* Milton delineates a gradual process of refinement through which all created things eventually refine themselves to a more spiritual state on the vitalist matter-spirit continuum:

Till body up to spirit work, in bounds  
 Proportion'd to each kind. So from the root  
 Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves  
 More aery, last the bright consummate flow'r  
 Spirits odorous breathes: flow'rs and thir fruit  
 Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublim'd  
 To vital Spirits aspire. . . .

(478–84)

In its original context, of course, this sublimation up to "vital Spirits" is offered as a possible trajectory for unfallen humanity, but the fact that Milton uses a natural flower to convey the continuum suggests that it is imbedded in natural process and may

therefore be available to fallen humanity as well. To continue our revision of Hiltner's reading of the fall of nature, supplemented by Picciotto and the account of the recreation of Eden through land reform in Amy L. Tigner's study of the Renaissance garden (225–33), if human beings were originally severed from their natural home by Adam and Eve's deracination from earth, Milton offers a remedy that gives them greater scope and mobility. According to the vitalist current in *Paradise Lost*, by which all creation exists in a state of mutual involvement and sympathy, as one element of the network improves it also enables the improvement of others. The Son of God serves humans, in Milton's view, as an example of human perfectibility. By restoring themselves by degrees, humans motivate a gradual improvement in nature by which the Fall is gradually mitigated and eventually undone: "for then the Earth / Shall all be Paradise, far happier place / Than this of *Eden*, and far happier days" (12. 463–65).

Ecocritics like Hiltner can credibly contend that Milton's vitalist belief in the perfectibility of humanity is out of place in their scholarship in that it deflects attention from the immediate twenty-first-century predicament of the damaged earth and the need for passionate human intervention to save her. But if we read Milton in the full seventeenth-century context of his vitalism, we can discover a writer who does not merely describe the human race's wrenching alienation from earth, but also proposes a trajectory for reclamation that is quite compatible with modern efforts to decrease pollution though it operates by radically different and (to us) impossibly utopian means. For Milton in his most optimistic vitalist mode of thought, a human "Paradise within" could, over time and without mechanical intervention, generate paradise in the world outside. So, as Mary C. Fenton has shown (162–67), in *Paradise Regained*, the Son of God, through a process of discovery and interrogation, raises Eden in the "waste Wilderness" (1.7; see also Edwards, "Eden Raised" 271): at several points in the brief epic, the landscape of the "pathless Desert" ameliorates itself as a result of his presence, and "wild Beasts . . . at his sight grew mild" (4.310) as an intimation of his power over fallen nature. If natural things have volition and react sympathetically to other beings in their immediate neighborhood, then through the reintroduction of a good and benevolent force like Christ or a regenerated Adam, the world can gradually right itself through the same waves of empathy that caused it to degenerate from its first perfection. As humans gradually regain their capacity for benevolence and cherishing of the beings around them, they enable the regeneration of earth and the natural world.

Of course, this process of physical and moral purification, like other vitalist elements of *Paradise Lost*, is also articulated in a version that requires direct divine intervention rather than the quiet percolation of vitalist sympathies and that operates in a single éclat of divine cataclysm rather than gradually over time. In Book 12, the archangel Michael offers a version of the regeneration of the earth that, like Milton's depiction of the fall of earth already discussed above, also echoes Romans 8.22: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." Milton characterizes the earth as "Under her own weight groaning" until the end of time (12.539) and posits Christ at the Second Coming as regenerating the earth and its creatures in a single stroke of divine agency. He appears in the clouds

In glory of the Father, to dissolve  
*Satan* with his perverted World, then raise  
 From the conflagrant mass, purg'd and refin'd,

New Heav'ns, new Earth, Ages of endless date  
 Founded in righteousness and peace and love,  
 To bring forth fruits Joy and eternal Bliss.  
 (12.546–51)

In his account of the restoration of Eden, as in his account of the Fall, Milton offers two versions, one vitalist and one “divine interventionist,” seemingly mutually exclusive in their timing and attribution of agency, yet both necessary to an account of the renovation of the earth and its inhabitants.

For Picciotto, the mid-seventeenth-century movement to restore Eden was above all a collective phenomenon organized around joint labor and knowledge production. She sees it as an extension of the traditional “mysteries” of the English craft guilds and interprets it as operating to undermine the more otiose royalist communal spirit created around such documents as the *Book of Sports*, which sought to restore traditional rural pastimes as a way of cementing political loyalty around the king and an Anglican church that preserved vestiges of its ceremonial pre-Reformation past (Picciotto 31–128; Marcus). By adding vitalism into her account we can create a more flexible interpretation of the potential for human regeneration as it is laid out in *Paradise Lost*. According to the epic’s vitalist account, the human capacity to regenerate itself and its environment is not necessarily linked to a single time or movement, but exists as a human potential in all times and places. Milton’s version of renewed innocence does not require experimental science as part of its program, though it also does not preclude it, except possibly in the various angelic warnings to Adam and Eve to be “lowly wise” and not attempt knowledge above their capacities.

In writing *Of Education* at the request of educator and reformer Samuel Hartlib, Milton clearly affiliated himself to a degree with Hartlib’s “Invisible College” and its goal of restoring Adamic insight into nature (Picciotto 116–28), but Milton is much more interested than the Hartlib circle in the power of the poet to kindle a rebirth of innocence through his ability to communicate with the natural world. As early as his final *Prolusion*, we find Milton celebrating the Orphic power of the poet to stimulate the emotional connective power of natural things. As part of his defense of learning, he compiles an extensive catalogue showing that supposedly “brute” animals use their knowledge of physic, engineering, music, as well as astronomy to negotiate the world; then he moves even further down the vitalist matter–spirit continuum: “Why even trees, bushes, and whole woods once tore up their roots and hurried to hear the skilful strains of Orpheus. Often, too, they were endowed with mysterious powers and uttered divine oracles, as for instance did the oaks of Dodona. Rocks, too, show a certain aptitude for learning in that they reply to the sacred words of poets. Will not these also reject Ignorance?” (*CPW* 1: 305). His tone in the *prolusion* is, of course, jovial but his interest in the poet’s capacity to perceive and stimulate sympathies among things was sustained through much of his career. In *Paradise Lost* Milton creates—or awakens—an animate, vitalist universe in which the Edenic empathic connections among humans and their surroundings are first evoked for readers, then tragically lost, but finally restored as a hope for the future.

We moderns are likely to find the vitalist Milton so attractive that we may wonder why he overlaid the vitalist mode of explanation in his epic with other, less liberating forms of causality by which God imposes his will upon the world and

human and natural freedom are hedged about by divine interventions that have for many readers made God tyrannical and unsympathetic—more Hobbesian determinist than author of human liberty. On the most basic level, of course, epic as a genre inherited from Homer and Virgil requires splendid, heroic action. The quiet simmering of vitalist sympathy, by which massive changes can happen without drama and almost imperceptibly, would be difficult to invest with sufficient epic scope and grandeur. Arguably, Milton needed the more traditional, highly dramatic overlay of stories—of divine action in the world, of war in heaven and the defeat of demons in battle, of Michael’s banishment of Adam and Eve from Eden—to make *Paradise Lost* generically recognizable as a rival to Virgil, Homer, or even Ariosto and Tasso. Then too, as we have already suggested, there is biblical sanction for Milton’s narrative style: in Milton’s epic, as in many scriptural stories, the text achieves complexity and amplitude by generating multiple, mutually contradictory narratives of the same events. As Stephen Fallon has acutely noted, in *Paradise Lost* Hobbesian mechanist determinism is specifically associated with the fallen angels. Satan and his infernal crew perceive themselves as unfree, as hedged about by “fate inevitable” (2.197), and fail to understand that their feelings of mental imprisonment are self-generated. In falling away from God they become more grossly corporeal, less spiritually refined: “In turning from spirit to matter they migrate towards the pole at which Hobbes found all reality,” and choose more and more “to inhabit a dead Hobbesian universe” (Fallon 209–10). The vitalist underlayment of *Paradise Lost*, however, percolates along without them. The self-perception of unfreedom is a measure of distance and alienation from God and nature.

John Rogers has argued that Milton’s concept of “dregs” in his depiction of chaos deconstructs the vitalist universe of the epic by suggesting that, contrary to mainstream vitalist thought, there is a sludge at the bottom of the continuum between matter and spirit that is impervious to the spiritualization of divine influence, despite its ostensibly divine origin. In Milton’s account of the creation, chaos infused with divine spirit is the generative source of all created things, producing the natural world through its own material power to unfold and order itself: “once the abyss has been impregnated with a self-activating *divina virtus*, the effective control over generation devolves on the now self-generating matter of chaos.” Milton’s more elaborate account of the six days’ work in Book 7 “dutifully” repeats the language of Genesis in describing the creation of plants and animals successively by divine fiat, but this, according to Rogers, is what we are here terming a “divine interventionist” overlay based on traditional accounts of God’s paternal authority. Milton’s underlying vitalist account of creation portrays chaos, once activated, as producing the world of its own free will; the earth, paradoxically, gives birth to itself (Rogers 114–15). However, as Rogers notes, in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, chaos is portrayed not as divinely embodied animate matter but as constantly warring atoms allied with the inert matter of Hobbesian mechanistic philosophy: “The personified Chaos that Satan encounters in Book Two is rebellious and anarchic, and the particulate matter of chaos itself bears none of the seeds of the virtuous, rational self-determination that Milton’s theology would seem to demand” (130).

Rogers interprets this contradiction in the portrayal of the nature of chaos as registering Milton’s political disappointment, as he modulated from the vitalist optimism of mid-century to a later pessimism about the lumpish human “dregs” in England’s political landscape who refused to interact with the mutual sympathy necessary for the creation of a successful democracy (103–43). But if we

recall Fallon's observation that the appearance of voluntarism recedes in *Paradise Lost* as we travel down Milton's continuum from the most refined spirit to the heaviest matter, we can speculate that the anarchic, apparently warring chaos of Book 2 is, in vitalist terms, a formerly healthy, vibrant potential network in the throes of a new dis-ease—its encounter with the relative deadness and vacancy of the fallen Lucifer. Later on in Book 10, Milton describes Sin and Death as spreading their bane through the universe: "the blasted Stars lookt wan, / And Planets, Planet-strook, real Eclipse / Then suffer'd" (412-14). The universe recoils from the vacancy of Sin and Death as we earlier saw the sun recoiling from the self-destructive action of Adam and Eve. Similarly, in Book 2 chaos assumes an appearance of Hobbesian atomism as it reacts with aversion to Satan's precipitous descent down the vitalist-materialist continuum from the freedom of an angelic spirit to the self-adoption of dead mechanistic determinism.

Satan at one point refers to himself and the other fallen angels as self-generated, "self-begot, self-rai's'd / By our own quick'ning power" (5.860-61)—an assertion that has a curiously vitalist ring to it (Rogers 122). But he and the other fallen angels portray themselves much more typically as hedged about by fate and divine prohibition, "enthral[ed] to Force or Chance" (2.551), heroic victims of unjust patriarchal oppression. It should not surprise us that in imagining their relationship to nature Lucifer and his cohort pass the victimization down the line to the natural world, taking the Genesis P-text's and Comus's view that the earth and her fecundity exist to be mastered and exploited. In keeping with their determinist mindset, the fallen angels are despoilers of the natural world, and modern ecocritics have found it noteworthy that *Paradise Lost* associates depredation of the environment with demonic influence.<sup>10</sup> The presence of Lucifer is associated with noxious air, fire, and belching smoke—the debased remnants of his heavenly status as a bearer of light. Even before the fallen angels make it to earth, Mammon's crew rape the ground of hell by digging in her bowels for precious minerals and building materials; in doing so, they inaugurate the practice of mining, by which humans later perform a version of incestuous rape upon the earth, violating her inner parts for valuables: taught by Mammon, humans "Ransack'd the Centre, and with impious hands / Rif'd the bowels of thir mother Earth / For Treasures better hid" (1.686-88).<sup>11</sup>

Many of the technologies that we now associate with the pollution of air and water were initially devised in hell, according to Milton's account: the refining of metals, deforestation of mountains, and creation of technologies of death. Milton tells us that the landscape of hell was, in "divine interventionist" terms, "A Universe of death, which God by curse / Created evil, for evil only good, / Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds, / Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things" (2.622-25). But a vitalist interpretation of hell's bleak landscape would associate it with the antipathetic state of mind of its inhabitants: their extreme turning from God forces Nature, "perverse," to turn away from them. As Satan later states, after he has escaped the landscape of hell, "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell; / And in the lowest deep a lower deep / Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide . . ." (4.75-77). To us, the idea of Satan's "mind forged manacles" may sound rather Blakean, but it would be more accurate to suggest that the Romantic poets got their ideas of cosmic animism and individual self-imprisonment at least in part from seventeenth-century vitalists like Milton.

Recent ecocritics have made significant claims for Milton as a proto-environmentalist. Nick Pici has suggested that

One might even speculate that Milton, had he lived today, would have developed a deep and solemn concern for the world's current environmental crises and could probably have done much in the way of writing to help protect the environment and in affirming those increasingly elusive yet deeply felt connections between humans, nature, and the spiritual realms. *Of the Rights of Nature*—that certainly has the ring of a potential Miltonian prose tract. (49)

Although Pici's comment may be a bit overstated, he articulates something about Milton that has important pedagogical ramifications for us now. In my experience, bringing students into contact with the vitalist Milton helps to wean them away from the "divine interventionist" Milton that many of them find so difficult to admire in *Paradise Lost*. But even as we acknowledge the existence of an ecocritical Milton, we need also to acknowledge the distance between our culture and his, between our ways of understanding "felt connections between humans, nature, and the spiritual realms," and the tenets of seventeenth-century vitalism. For Milton, mechanistic materialism was demonic—a symptom of Satanic self-alienation from the natural world and its highly spiritualized web of beings vibrating in mutual sympathy. But in the intervening years, mechanistic materialism has become one of the underpinnings of modern science and engineering, the very technologies we typically mobilize to improve the environment. Such neo-vitalists as Latour and Bennett have challenged this dominance, pointing out that it tends to generate over-simplified explanations of causality that fail to identify subtle forms of connection that may operate together to bring about large and unexpected effects. Although Milton's vitalism was clearly rooted in some of the same intellectual endeavors that led eventually to the modern faith in the disinterested objectivity of science, he was operating at a time when vitalism and materialism had not yet parted ways. We are now at a pivotal moment in which vitalism has reentered our conversations about the relationship between humans and the natural world. Ecocritics who wish to challenge twenty-first-century scientific discourse as a viable avenue for environmental recovery are beginning to engage with vitalism, at least as a way of thinking about the complex interactions in what we now call a "climax ecosystem"—a very diverse, complex grouping of natural things living in a relatively stable balance with each other and with their non-living environment.

Of course modern environmentalists are unlikely to find Milton's prescription for human virtue a sufficient catalyst for restoring the earth—unless, that is, they accept the poet's complex notions of causality, by which something that appears from an outside perspective to be determined can from the inside turn out to be voluntarism. But Milton's vitalism is worth recovering and placing in dialogue with twenty-first-century vitalist materialism. We need to learn much more about how vitalist philosophy functioned for its adherents in its own time, even as we acknowledge the limitations of this seventeenth-century world view as a philosophy that we can now credibly imagine as saving the earth.

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## NOTES

The author would like to thank the audience in Tokyo, where this essay was first presented as a keynote address at the International Milton Symposium in August 2012, and the anonymous readers for *MQ* whose many suggestions that have greatly improved the essay.

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the studies discussed below, see Edwards, "Eden" and *Milton*; Hiltner, *Renaissance Ecology and What Else*; Munroe and Laroche; Fenton; Tigner; and Shullenberger.

<sup>2</sup> See Bennett; Burwick; Marks; Latour, *Politics and Reassembling*; and Fraser. The new vitalist thought represented in these works is beginning to influence Shakespearean environmental scholarship: see in particular the essays by Watson and Egan.

<sup>3</sup> The problem of weighing ecocritics' need to approach literary works in terms of our present environmental crisis versus an equally pressing need to strive for historical accuracy in interpreting them is much debated in recent studies. See in particular O'Dair, "State" and "Is It Ecocriticism."

<sup>4</sup> Milton, *Paradise Regained*. Subsequent Milton quotations will be cited by line number in the text either from this volume, from *Paradise Lost*, or by page number from *Prose Selections*.

<sup>5</sup> See also Theis, "Environmental Ethics" and Borlik 156-57.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Fallon and Rogers, I am also indebted to the grand synthesis in Martin; and to Kerrigan, who started us thinking about vitalism (193-201).

<sup>7</sup> Here and throughout, biblical references are cited from [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com), April 30, 2012. My thanks to my Vanderbilt Divinity School colleague Paul Lim, for reminding me of Rom. 8.19-22 and its pertinence to accounts of the fall of nature. For the sometimes acrimonious early modern theological debate about its meaning, see Rudrum, "For then the Earth."

<sup>8</sup> See in particular, Edwards, *Milton* 20-21; Picciotto 475; and Munroe's more negative assessment in "Mother."

<sup>9</sup> See also Theis's "'Purlieus of Heaven,'" and Tigner 195-240.

<sup>10</sup> See in particular Tigner 198-211 and Hiltner, *What Else* 95-124.

<sup>11</sup> See Theis, "Environmental Ethics" 76, and Lieb 118.

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