MILTON STUDIES

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THE LIMITS OF ALLEGORY:
TEXTUAL EXPANSION OF NARCISSUS
IN PARADISE LOST

Kenneth J. Knoespel

Milton's elaboration of Ovidian stories in Paradise Lost cannot be properly understood by recourse to moral exempla or allegory alone. The reason for this is quite simply that Milton approached Ovid as an equal and not as a poet whose work needed to be opened by an external code provided by medieval or Renaissance commentary. Milton's silent imitation of the Narcissus story supplies an important example of this. Discussion of the story, however, has remained unnecessarily restricted to Eve's creation account. While imitation of Ovid's fable is concentrated in the pool scene, detail from the fable is also used to fashion Satan and Adam. More particularly Ovid's narrative provides components that psychologically animate Milton's characters. As a consequence the fable transcends its traditional setting of love psychology and becomes a means for describing human perception and its limitations. At the same time Ovid's fable helps Milton create a mental life for his characters. In the broadest sense, Milton transforms the fable from a narrative about love to a narrative about understanding.

Study of Milton's use of Narcissus has remained limited to Eve because scholars continue to approach the fable from the vantage point of Renaissance allegory. Since Addison, critics have wondered about a moral in Eve's creation account and have sought out commentaries and handbooks to locate its precise meaning. The inadequacy of such an approach is found in the proliferation of discussions which appeal to external meaning.\(^1\) The fable, however, always evokes more meaning than any single meaning supplied from the outside. In the Renaissance, fables were not simply reduced to a single meaning but were primarily used to teach Latin. Imitation of Latin style, not simple repetition of traditional meaning, was the pedagogical goal.\(^2\) The careful attention given to vocabulary, syntax, and figures of speech in Renaissance commentaries should caution us from moving too quickly from perceived allusion to meaning, for in so doing we may replace the actual text with an imaginary one. Not surprisingly, what we recall today when we think of Nar-
cissus — usually a figure suspended before his image — is a simplified version of the fable. To trust such mental reconstruction of the plot is to risk giving meaning to a recalled narrative rather than to detail in Milton's text.

Milton gives special meaning to the narrator's intervention in the Latin story, but critics continue to base discussions on a comparison of Eve and the figure before his image. By stressing deception rather than warning, critics transform the fable into a passive rather than active narrative. Eve's weakness, rather than the divine source of correction, is stressed. The source of warning in Paradise Lost finally alerts us to the most substantial alteration Milton makes in Ovid's fable. While Ovid ironically stressed the role of understanding in regard to individual perception, Milton shows through Satan and Adam as well as Eve that understanding and correction can never come from reliance on individual perception alone but must come from guidance.

Milton first brings Ovid's fable into the poem in the allegory of Sin and Death. Here the association of Satan and Narcissus is not unusual because the pride of Satan and Narcissus was commonly observed in commentaries. But Milton does not simply accept traditional meaning. By dramatizing Satan's intellective pride, he psychologizes self-love and prepares for the psychological setting of Eve's creation scene. Here careful adaptation of the fable describes the limits of perception and interpretation. This scene too, rather than being restricted to Eve, anticipates Milton's subsequent elaboration of Adam's own problematic response to divine guidance.

For Milton's seventeenth-century reader the fall of Satan was a grave warning against pride. Pride jars the hierarchy established by God, and the pride of Satan is declared early in the work:

hee it was, whose guile
Stir'd up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd
The Mother of Mankind; what time his Pride
Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host
Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
He trusted to have equal'd the most High. (I, 34-40)

A long history of commentary sought to identify the source of Satan's pride. Augustine located its source in introspection and attraction to knowledge Satan believed his own. The intellective account of Satan's

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Corruption is repeated by Richard Hooker in Ecclesiastical Polity and remains such a commonplace that it is even used by Donne in a wedding sermon. Ovidian commentaries as early as the Ovide morale added to this commentary by associating Satan's pride with the vanity of Narcissus. In the seventeenth century George Sandys concludes his commentary on Ovid's fable with a stern warning: "A fearfull example we have of the danger of selfe-love in the fall of the Angells; who interrupting the beatificall vision, by reflecting upon themselves, and admiring their own excellency, forgot their dependence upon their creator." Moral commentary like Sandys's assumed that exempla made abstractions more accessible. Within such an interpretive setting it is the moral, not the story's detail, which is given attention. This is not the case in Milton's poem. While use of Narcissus certainly may be read against the background of commentary, it goes beyond such simple relations and becomes itself a further textual elaboration of the fable.

Milton never draws an explicit relation between Satan and Narcissus because he does not need to. This had been done by a long tradition of commentary. Sin's comments also evoke Ovid's fable.

I pleas'd, and with attractive graces won
The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft
Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing,
Becam'st enamor'd, and such joy thou took'st
With me in secret, that my womb conceived
A growing burden. (II, 762-67)

"Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing / Becam'st enamor'd" invites us to think of Narcissus. Here, as later in Eve's creation account, syntax supports the reflective phenomena being described. Words such as "pleas'd," "full oft," "image," "attractive graces" also anticipate vocabulary later used to describe Eve. Portrayed as an allegory, Satan's family history conveys his own mental past and amplifies the psychological detail of Ovid's fable. Milton is really not interested in imitating the plot but in internalizing a configuration represented in the fable. Knowledge in Ovid's story pertains to the comprehension of physical phenomena that may lead to deception. Without understanding that one's own visual image may be reflected by a smooth surface, Narcissus drinks at a pool and falls in love with the image he sees. Recognition that the image is his own fulfills Tiresias' prophecy — he knows himself and must die. While Narcissus literally falls in love with an extension of his physical image, we understand through Milton's allegory that Satan's love pertains to thought itself.
Milton’s allegory makes sophisticated use of the phenomena described in Ovid’s fable. Like Narcissus, Satan is at first unaware of the deceptive nature of self-love. Unlike Narcissus, however, who is warned by an unheard narrator, Satan is warned by his own physical symptoms: “sudden miserable pain” (II, 752), diminished sight, dizziness—all of which make it evident that self-reflection disrupts normal faculties. The symptoms herald illness and become elaborated through Milton’s evocation of another myth. Emerging as an “armed Goddess” (II, 757) from Satan’s head, Sin reveals herself as a strident idea and evokes the cerebral birth of Tritonian Pallas in Hesiod’s Theogony (924–26). Like the Greek goddess who instigated war between the Titans, Sin becomes a figure who threatens to draw Satan and other angels into mental idolatry.

Sin disturbs the celestial onlookers as soon as she is realized. At the sudden appearance of this fantastical shape they not only jump back in fear and amazement but speak. This sudden invention of speech stresses the unusual nature of the event they witness, for language is used to define, and thereby control that which has not been experienced before. (The threat posed by Sin is conveyed even more directly by the Hebrew word for Sin, peshah, which literally means rebellion.) By identifying Sin as a warning “Sign” (II, 760), Milton further emphasizes Sin’s birth as a linguistic event. Unable to recognize the “Sign” before him, Satan demonstrates the extent of his deformation. The fact that Milton places questions about language and meaning in an allegory enforces the importance of interpretation. Not only Satan but the reader too is suddenly reminded of his role as interpreter. Further on this interpretive motif will coincide even further with Milton’s adoption of Ovid’s fable.

The appearance of Satan’s mental image in Heaven signals that a transgression has been committed. Permanent destruction occurs, however, only as Satan falls in love with his conception. Like Narcissus, who enjoys his image apart from thebe society, Satan must separate himself from his heavenly colleagues and enjoy his mental image in secret. Bearing the heavenly likeness of her progenitor, Sin functions as a mirror image, not, however, a reflected image but more like an ever present twin inciting Satan to rebel against his fixed position in heavenly society. Only later is Satan forced to recognize the extent of his deformation. When discovered by the angels sent to guard Paradise, Satan cannot be recognized because his shape is so marred. Like Sin, his appearance is associated with flames, and the angels stand back in amazement at the image that suddenly appears before them. As he taunts the angels into recognizing him, we learn that he still has not recognized himself.

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Know ye not then said Satan fill’d with scorn,
Know ye not mee? ye knew me once no mote
For you, there sitting where ye durst not soar;
Not to know mee argues yourselves unknown. (IV, 827-30)

Accused of not knowing themselves, the angels reverse the charge. Their words hold a mirror in which he may see himself.

Think not, revolted Spirit, thy shape the same,
Or undiminish brightnes, to be known
As when thou stood’st in Heav’n upright and pure;
That Glory then when thou no more wast good,
Departed from thee, and thou resembledst now
Thy sin and place of doom obscure and foul. (IV, 835-40)

Even when forced to recognize his present deformed shape Satan continues to be attracted to the idea he conceived of himself in Heaven. Like Narcissus, who continues gazing expectantly at his shape in Hades (504–05), Satan continues to love his false image in Hell. Turned away from God and facing his own image, Satan suffers a fate that Christian tradition compared to Narcissus. Through the allegorical account of Sin’s conception, Milton expands the meaning of Narcissus to include the deceptive nature of thought itself.

II

When Patrick Hume comes to Milton’s imitation of Narcissus in the pool scene, he remarks that here Milton “has litt upon something so new and strange.” These new and strange qualities, however, remain acceptable because they do not appear unnatural. Actually Milton’s invention makes both Eve and Narcissus appear more natural. Eve is hardly a developed character in Genesis, and the Narcissus of Ovid’s fable fascinates but is never literally regarded as a real person. By drawing them together, Milton makes both stand forth in ways previously unknown. This is accomplished through detailed imitation of Ovid’s Latin, not through recourse to a single moral. The selective interplay between the remembered fable and the present text animates Eve and gives her a psychology. This would have been particularly strong for the seventeenth-century reader, whose familiarity with Ovidian vocabulary, syntax, and meter was as great as our knowledge of multiplication tables. He could not condemn her because she had done nothing wrong. The potential moral given to Narcissus does not converge with Eve until later. Thus detail from the fable simultaneously provides Eve with mental capacity and introduces a potential interpretation.
Before looking at the pool scene we must recognize that it is part of a larger Ovidian setting. Eden invites comparison with Narcissus’ own Theban landscape. Both are pristine, unpopulated territories which become settings for early history. Landscapes in Ovid are often sensuous settings for potential violence, and this is true of Eden as well. The natural settings in Ovid are never simple backdrops because humans so often quite literally become part of them. Eden too suggests the potential for change.

As Milton describes Eden and Satan at the beginning of Book IV, his vocabulary shows him extending his descriptive study of Satan, whose very presence brings heightened concern with the deceptive qualities of faces and smooth surfaces. He seeks to hide the depression that accompanies his fallen state. The narrator points to his “borrow’d visage” (IV, 116) and compares his mind to heavenly minds.

For heav’ly minds from such distempers foul
Are ever clear. Whereof hee soon aware,
Each perturbation smooth’d with outward calm,
Artificer of fraud; and was the first
That practis’d falsehood under saintly show. (IV, 118–22)

“Distemper” and “perturbation” even suggest that Milton is carrying out a medical analysis of Satan. Borrowed faces, counterfeiting, and words such as clear, smooth, calm, anticipate the lake which will deceive Eve. The “woody Theatre” of trees (IV, 141) and the reference to “Landskip” (IV, 153) suggest that we are viewing a masque-like stage setting that only waits for the placement of Adam and Eve. The scene is similar to the landscapes of Renaissance pastoral poetry with their enchanted fountains and streams. The fluid landscape of Paradise grows before our eyes, allowing us to hear and see the scene that was the setting for Eve’s creation.

Another side, umbrageous Grots and Caves
Of Cool recess, o’er which the mantling Vine
Lays forth her purple Grape, and gently creeps
Luxuriant; meanwhile murmuring waters fall
Down the slope hills, disperse, or in a Lake,
That to the fringed Bank with Myrtle crown’d,
Her crystal mirror holds, unite their streams. (IV, 257–63)

The scene conveys a hypnotic attraction. The personification of the water holding a “crystal mirror” anticipates the very physical quality that soon confuses Eve.

Although both Eve and Narcissus approach the pool innocently, they do so for different reasons. Narcissus is attracted to the spring by the beauty of the setting and by thirst from hunting (413–14). “A murmuring sound” (435) draws Eve’s attention to the spring. Milton transforms Ovid’s personification of Echo back into a natural phenomenon. Just as Narcissus is immediately attracted to the sound of an answering voice, Eve is drawn by aural stimulation. She approaches the spring in which it will help her identify both herself and the plane she is in. Because Eve approaches the pool with an expectation that is not present in Ovid, she is consequently aware of more than her own image when she first looks into the lake. She has a desire for knowledge not found in Narcissus. At first the water appears as another sky. When she suddenly sees a figure before her in the water her reaction, like the angels at the sudden appearance of Sin, is one of surprise: “I started back” (462). Pleased that another figure appears in this vacant landscape, Eve quickly looks back into the lake. The syntax of lines 460–65 conveys the interaction of Eve and her reflection.

As I bent down to look, just opposite,
A Shape within the wat’ry gleam appear’d
Bending to look on me, I started back,
It started back, but pleas’d I soon return’d
Pleas’d it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love. (460–65)

Her reactions are mirrored syntactically: “I started back / It started back,” “pleas’d I soon return’d / Pleas’d it returned.” In lines 464–65 Milton describes Eve’s own sympathetic response to the image through description of the reflection. Here too references to “answering looks” conflate the visual and aural phenomena and alert one to the absence of any vocal response.

Ovid too emphasizes Narcissus’ interaction with his reflection through syntax: “se cupit imprudens et, qui probat; ipse probatur, / dumque petit, petitur, pariterque accendit et ardet” (“Unwittingly he desires himself; he prays, and is himself what he prays; and while he seeks, is sought; equally he kindles love and burns with love” (425–26). The sequence of active and passive forms (probat and probatur, petit and petitur) even obscures the difference between subject and object. Narcissus, like Eve, is attracted by the correspondence between his own actions and the behavior of the figure before him.

In both stories a sequence of interaction between subject and figure precedes a turning point. For Narcissus interaction with his image leads to destructive self-recognition:
quaevis es, huc exil quid me, puer unice, fallis
quaee petitus abis? certe nec forma nec aetatis
est mea, quam fugias, et amaran te mea quaque nymphae
spem mihi nascio quam vultum promittis amico,
eumque ego porrex tibi brachia, porrigis ulmo,
cum risi, adrides; lacrimas quaque sapaet notavi
me lacrimante tuis; nutu quoque signa remittis
et, quantum motu formosus suspicior oris,
verba referas aures non perveniens nostras!
iste ego sum: sensi, nec mea fallit imago.

[Whoever you are, come forth hither! Why, O peeress youth, do you elude me? or
whether do you go when I strive to reach you? Surely my form and age are not
such that you should shun them, and me too the nymphs have loved. Some ground for
hope you offer with your friendly looks, and when I have stretched out my arms to
you, you stretch yours too. When I have smiled, you smile back; and I have often
seen tears, when I weep, on your cheeks. My beck you answer with your nod; and,
as I suspect from the movement of your sweet lips, you answer our words as well,
but words which do not reach my ears. — Oh, I am he! I have felt it, I know not
my own image.]

Narcissus' recognition is the product of deductive reasoning. He begins
to list the ways the other figure is compatible to him in an attempt
to understand why it continues to elude him. His own figure is beautiful;
it has attracted Echo and others; why should it not attract the person
before him? The figure responds by stretching out his arms when Nac-
rissus tries to reach him; it smiles, it cries, it moves as Narcissus does;
it even appears to speak but its words do not reach his ears. Suddenly
Narcissus recognizes himself. Precisely the inability to hear the figure leads
Narcissus to the realization that the voiceless figure is a reflection of him-
self. Even in self-recognition, however, Narcissus cannot separate himself
from his image. And this, of course, is the paradox at the center of
Ovid's story.

The absence of self-recognition that accompanies Eve's interplay with
the figure before her is the major component that distinguishes the two
narratives. Significantly here too sound becomes a turning point. It is
not, however, the absence but the presence of a voice which makes the
crucial difference. A heavenly voice interrupts Eve's pantomime before
the reflection and leads her from the deceptive image.

What thou seest,
What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself,
With thee it came and goes: but follow me,
And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
his excitement indicates that his identity is already bound to the shape that was formed from his own. "I wak'd / To find her, or for ever to deplore / Her loss" (VIII, 478–80). His mental image of her must become materialized.

Adam's remembrance of Eve's first moments in Paradise gives us a significantly edited version of what we have already learned from Eve. The heavenly voice, not the "smooth wat'ry image," is recalled. Milton, however, does not permit us to forget the visual phenomena, because Adam idealizes her very form. When she approaches he is spellbound.

I now see
Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh, my Self
Before me. (VII. 494–96)

Likeness, not difference, becomes the more important. This is not surprising, for having conceived her as a reflection of himself, Adam cannot imagine her different from himself. Consequently he misrepresents what has taken place. "Virgin Modesty" (VIII, 501), not attraction to a "wat'ry image," caused Eve to turn away from him and "pleaded reason" (VIII, 510) gained her return. But neither modesty nor reason pervades the scene. What appears as modesty is desire for an illusion; what Adam recalls as reason is an emotional appeal reminiscent of Narcissus' own plea to his disturbed image.

Attracted to Eve as a corporeal image of himself, Adam is unable to fix his attention on the godlike image he bears within himself. Reason is disoriented in Eve's presence. Even though Adam has a conceptual awareness that differences exist between himself and Eve, it remains passive and unarticulated.

For well I understand in the prime end
Of Nature her th' inferior, in the mind
And inward Faculties, which most excel,
In outward also her resembling less
His Image who made both, and less expressing
The character of that Dominion given
O'er other Creatures; Yet when I approach
Her loneliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded; Wisdom in discourse with her
Loses, discount'nace, and like folly shows. (VIII. 540–53)

The speech recreates the configuration implicit in Eve's creation account. In each case attraction to a beautiful image establishes the necessity for choice. Here, as earlier, the passage shows rational choice impeded by emotion. In Eve's presence reason appears like folly. The parallel is carried even further when we recognize that Raphael's warning recalls, indeed repeats, God's warning to Eve. "For what admirs't thou, what transports thee? / An outside" (VIII, 587–70). Here substance and syntax recall God's warning to Eve: "What thou seest, / What thou seest, fair creature, is thy self" (IV, 467–68). Both in turn invoke Ovid's Latin: "quod petis, ut nusquam, quod amas avertete perdes!" ("What you seek is nowhere; but turn yourself away, and the object of your love will be no more"). (433).

Adam's response to Raphael's warning shows a weakness in his understanding. Because he is unable to comprehend its significance, he argues against it.

Neither her out-side form'd so fair, nor aught
In procreation common to all kinds
(Though higher of the genial Bed by far,
And with mysterious reverence I deem)
So much delights me as those graceful acts,
Those thousand decencies that daily flow
From all her words and actions, mixed with Love
And sweet compliance, which declare unfeign'd
Union of Mind, or in us both one Soul;
Harmony to behold in wedded pair
More grateful than harmonious sound to the ear. (VIII. 596–606)

As he seeks to clarify his position, Adam actually displays the confusion that Raphael's discourse sought to correct. It is not Eve's beautiful form itself which poses the greatest threat but Adam's satisfaction with her presence. He cannot make the necessary distinction between himself and his "other self." When he should experience difference, he finds "unfeign'd / Union of Mind" and harmony that is "more grateful than harmonious sound to the ear."

While the comparison of mental harmony to sound is hardly unusual, it does stress the personal nature of perception. Like the perception of sound, the judgment of one's relation to another person is subjective. The attention given to sound also invites us to recall the motif of aural deception present in the fable. Sound, even more than optical imagery, can be deceptive and requires interpretation. Actually, within the religious setting of Paradise Lost, sound - as a medium of speech - is
his excitement indicates that his identity is already bound to the shape that was formed from his own. "I wak'd / To find her, or for ever to deplore / Her loss" (VIII, 478–80). His mental image of her must become materialized.

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parisons of divine guidance and refreshing water in the Bible (Rev. xxii, 1). But the figure also invokes an Ovidian description.

dumque stitum sedare cupit, sitis altera crevit,
dumque bibit, visae corruptus imagine formae
spem sine corpore amat, corpus putat esse, quod
umbra est.

[While he seeks to slake his thirst another thirst springs up, and while he drinks he is smitten by the sight of the beautiful form he sees. He loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow.]

Internal detail also draws the passage into an Ovidian configuration, for it recalls the “murmuring sound” that first attracted Eve to the lake. Here, however, the “liquid murmur” is a figure of speech which leads to aural not visual phenomena. Not surprisingly, hearing is stressed frequently in surrounding passages. When he urges Raphael to continue, Adam observes that what he has heard has caused “full wonder in our ears, / Far differing from this World” (VII, 70–72). At the end of Raphael’s higher discourse, hearing is again referred to in a passage which invites comparison with Ovid’s fable.

So Charming left his voice that be a while
Thought him still speaking, still stood fixed to hear;
Then, as new wak’t, thus gratefully repli’d
What thanks sufficient, or what recompense
Equal have I to render thee, Divine
Historian, who thus largely hast allay’d
The thirst I had of knowledge.

Adam’s ringing ears once more call attention to the preceding revelation of higher wisdom and prepare for more common discourse. The addition of these lines to the 1667 edition emphasizes their function as a transition to subsequent exchanges on cosmology and physics. But the special attention given to aural phenomena once more raises the problem of interpretation. Momentarily suspended in anticipation of additional sound, Adam invites comparison with Narcissus’ suspension before visual phenomena. At the same time that the passage alerts one to revelation of higher knowledge, it also questions human capacity to comprehend divine guidance. For this reason the passage complements the pool scene. The charming effect of Raphael’s exemplary discourse on Adam corresponds to the spellbinding force of God’s voice on Eve: “what could I do, / But follow straight, invisibly thus led?” The passages resonate in other ways as well. While Eve is fixed expectantly before a visual illusion, Adam remains momentarily fixed in anticipation of more sound.
Each is also described as waking. Eve literally awakes to misperception and correction. Adam figuratively awakes in a setting pervaded by the need for interpretation.

Even though Adam looks into the mirror of heavenly doctrine repeatedly, he cannot adequately apply its meaning to himself. Because he cannot distinguish himself from Eve, he reflects her inferior and finally distorted image. When she tastes the forbidden fruit he follows her actions.

I with thee have fixt my Lot,
Certain to undergo like doom; if Death
Consort with thee, Death is to mee as Life;
So forcible within my heart I feel
The Bond of Nature draw me to my own,
My own in thee, for what thou art is mine. (IX. 952–57)

Just as Ovidian detail accompanies Milton’s account of their first meeting, it now also accompanies the account of their mutual degeneration. As Adam testifies that his fate is joined with Eve’s words once more recall Narcissus: “hic, quid diligis, vellem diuturnor esset; / nunc duo concordes anima moriemur in una” (“I would he that is loved might live longer; but as it is we two shall die together in one breath”) (471–73). Here too we are reminded of the earlier depiction of Satan. Just as Satan’s godlike image came to bear the distortion first seen in Sin, Adam’s godlike image is marred when he shapes his actions after Eve. For both Satan and Adam a capacity to participate freely in godlike wisdom is disrupted by self-conceived, goddeslike figures that have sinister births.

We have been considering the way Milton uses detail from Ovid to create an atmosphere of limited comprehension. Satan, Eve, and Adam are animated with detail that helps convey their response to mental, visual, and aural phenomena. Now a distinction already made must be repeated. Milton’s use of the fable is not confined to sensory deception but emphasizes, above all, interpretation. In particular it is the narrator’s intervention, not Narcissus’ suspension before his image, which deserves most attention. The iconographic representation of Narcissus in Renaissance painting, sculpture, and emblem books has less importance for the poem than Milton’s own inventive application of the fable to narrative. The passive image of the deceived Narcissus forever captured by his reflection is augmented by a far more active image of warning which is continually present in Milton’s narrative. The fact that the warnings themselves are not completely understood show that Milton actually uses the fable to raise questions about interpretation.

Emphasis on interpretation does not depend entirely on Ovid’s fable.

It also relies on Christian epistemology and is encouraged by the metaphoric use of mirrors in scripture. The material mirror that destroys Narcissus is balanced by God’s word identified in the New Testament as a corrective mirror. Passages such as 1 Corinthians xiii, 12 provided commentators with a mirror expressive of man’s limited vision when he sought to fathom God. When he looked at the scriptures, heard them read, or considered God’s creation, man’s vision was limited like his sight when he peered into a metal mirror. Just as faith was required if man were to correct himself after the indistinct image in the mirror, faith was required when one sought to make out God’s presence. When attention was fixed faithfully on God’s word, guidance and correction would shine forth and lead toward a fuller realization of God’s image. When attention was focused only on the material mirror, all that appeared was self-reflection and knowledge which distorts the observer’s relation to the creator. A distinction between these two mirrors stands behind Milton’s use of Ovid’s story.

The mirror metaphors used in scripture stress that understanding requires faith. As we know, Protestant emphasis on personal faith could lead to inspired understanding as well as doubt about the certainty of one’s perception. But understanding, whether inspired or the result of a rational process, is only one step toward shaping a godlike image. Only active response to God’s guidance reveals our understanding.

But be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man beholding his natural face in a mirror. For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and immediately forgettest what manner of man he was. But whosoever looked into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth in it, he being not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. (James i, 22–25)

Milton’s adaption of Ovid’s fable must finally be viewed within such a scriptural setting. Once again it is the narrator’s intervention in Ovid’s text which deserves special attention. While it conveys an ironic warning, it also concludes with a challenge to action complementary to the scriptural admonition: “si tu discere possis!” (436). Even in Ovid’s story comprehension is not enough. The image requires interpretation which in turn demands action.

IV

Milton’s use of the Narcissus fable is not confined to Eve. Rather than being used as an exemplum or a story to be moralized, the fable provides narrative detail for the characterization of Satan, Eve, and Adam. In each case amplification of Ovidian detail contributes to the
portrayal of psychology or the internal senses. The Metamorphoses had long been regarded as a collection of personal histories that could also function as a manual for psychology. Milton's use of Narcissus shows us that he does not regard Ovid's text (or more specifically the meanings given to the fable through commentary) as an end but a beginning of meanings. At the beginning of this essay I indicated that impetus for such amplification comes in part from school exercises. Another factor which deserves more study may be mentioned. When the adaption of Narcissus is compared with the Latin text, it is apparent that Milton has ignored all fantastic detail in the fable. Mythological elements such as Liriope, Cephisis, and Tiresias are omitted, and, unlike Ovid's personification of Echo, Milton's references to Echo direct attention to natural phenomena. Actually the detail that he does use is amplified to appear even more believable. This suggests that seventeenth-century interest in demythologizing classical fable informs Milton's approach to Ovid. Thus while Milton's textual imitation carries an implicit criticism of allegory it comes from euhemerism rather than any interpretive innovation. By assuming that all fable recounts the action of actual figures, euhemerism not only provides an alternative to allegorical criticism but urges the psychological amplification of ancient fable.

Milton's use of Ovid witnesses to the changing perception of Ovid in the seventeenth century. This is not sufficiently recognized. While fables were approached through moral allegory and provided models for the depiction of mythological matter in the first half of the century, they become matter for witty and often bawdy jokes by the end of the century. At the same time, however, they also begin to provide details useful in the portrayal of mental life. Recent work shows how Ovid supplies psychological detail for characters in Restoration drama. Ovid's Heroides supplies both models and matter for psychological characterization in early epistolary novels. Thus even though allegory becomes a less popular mode of interpretation and composition, interest in Ovid continues and even expands. In the broad sense, Milton's use of Narcissus in Paradise Lost is part of the shifting perception of Ovid in the seventeenth century.

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NOTES

This study has gained much from discussions with my friend and colleague Richard J. DuRocher, Milton and Ovid (Ithaca, 1985). Anyone working with Ovid and Milton must also happily acknowledge Louis L. Martz, Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry (New Haven, 1980).


6. The early Church Fathers emphasize that idolatry could take place in the mind. In De Idolatria Tertullian observes that "inimic et sine idolo idolatria fiat" ("idolatry may take place even without idolatrous images") (Pat L I, col. 740). He further suggests that language is the means by which idolatry enters the mind. "Meninicum demibus etiam in verbis quoque idolatriae incarnans: praecependit" ("We must remember that idolatry enters our minds even in words and take precaution") (col. 768). The conceptual idolatry Milton portrays in Satan should be placed within such a theological tradition.


11. Examination of sixteenth-century Ovidian commentary suggests that the voice of God may also be a symbolic manifestation of the Echo motif. In the sixteenth century
Echo was regarded as a symbol for God's spirit. An example of such a reading is found in Alexander Palla's Settencario (Vicenza, 1571), p. 224: "L'Echo inamorata di Narciso significa esso divino spirito discendente alla illustrazione dell'animo nostro" ("Echo, enamored in Narcissus, signifies the holy spirit descending to illuminate our minds"). A similar interpretation is found in Robert Estienne (Stephanus), Dictionarium historicum, ac poeticon (Lyons, 1579), no pagination: "Echo, Nympha, nullo oculo visa, & a pane, pastorum deo, mirum in modu adamat: quae quidem physice coerit harmoniam significare dicitur, solis amica, tanquam domini, & moderatoris omnium corporum coelestium expulsum ipsa componitur, atque teperatur" ("Echo, a nymph who remains invisible; a nymph loved in wondrous manner by Pan, the god of shepherds; a nymph who is even said to signify in a physical sense celestial harmony; friend of the sun, the lord, the ruler of all celestial bodies of which she herself is composed, and lovingly warmed"). For a thorough study of Echo see Friedrich Wieseler, Narziss: Eine Kunstmythologische Abhandlung (Gottingen, 1856); for a more recent commentary on Echo in Milton see John Hollander, The Figure of Echo (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981).


13. Discussion of feminine vanity appears often in the writing of the Church Fathers. Their discourses were often directed toward women recently converted to Christianity. Because Christianity required faith in the unseen, any behavior that exaggerated the appearance of the body required censorship. Mirrors are repeatedly condemned. Near the beginning of his treatise De cultu feminarum, Tertullian expresses the fallen angels first invented mirrors and then used them to corrupt women (Pat L I, p. 1420). Tertullian ironically observes that the mirror would have reminded Eve of her destructive vanity: "si jam et spectulo tantum mentiri liceret: et haec Eva concepit de paradiso ex pulsa, jam mortua, opinior?" ("If the mirror had been able to deceive so much, I think Eve would have desired to be expelled, already dead from Paradise"), (col. 1419). In his treatise Paedagogus, Clement of Alexandria specifies that Narcissus is an exemplum of the destructive nature of mirrors: "neque enim (ut est in Graecorum fabulis) formosum Narcissus recte susceptis, quod suae fuerit contemplator imaginis. Quod si Moyses praecipit hominibus nullam facere imaginem, quae Deum arte praepossest: quomodo haec recte fecerint mulieres, quae fallaci personae fictione suas per reverationem imitantur imaginibus?" ("Neither was the beautiful Narcissus [as the Greek fable says] successful in contemplating his own image. But if Moses admonished men not to make any images which represented God through artifice, how can women justly make up images of themselves to be admired by others"?), (Pat C VIII, col. 571).


15. For careful consideration of the relation between vision and language, see Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr., Visionary Poetics: Milton and His Legacy (San Marino, Cal., 1979); also helpful is Michael Lieb, The Poetics of the Holy: A Reading of Paradise Lost (Chapel Hill, 1981).


