The Voice of God

Milton's Divine Words

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In his commentaries on Genesis, Martin Luther draws a distinction between two kinds of language, the *Heisselwort* or "name-word", used to 'assign names to objects which have already been created', and the *Thettelwort* or "deed-word", used to actively 'cal[l] into existence the things which do not exist' (Luther et al. 22, 21). The former is the province of humanity, the latter the exclusive linguistic medium of God. God 'does not speak grammatical words; he speaks true and existent realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God' (Luther et al. 21). This terminological distinction provides a means to examine the words that Milton puts into the mouths of his divine and human characters in *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) and *Paradise Regained* (1671).[1] By analyzing the naming and doing power of these words, we shall gain insight into how Milton distinguishes divine from human language in his verse, ultimately culminating in the Son's manifestation of the word of God in *Paradise Regained*.

The role of the Father in *Paradise Lost* is almost exclusively one of speech, rather than physical action. He operates through divine decree. Milton elaborates on this concept in *De Doctrina Christiana*, distinguishing two different kinds of decree. The general decree is 'decreed from eternity' and does not control 'anything [...] which [God] left in the power of free agents' (*DDC* 53, 55).[2] The Father mentions decrees of this kind in *Paradise Lost*. Appropriately enough, one of them is 'the high Decree | Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd | [Man's] freedom', the very decree that leaves things in the power of free agents (*PL* III. 126–28). Milton does not explicitly define the special decree, only stating that 'The very first and most important special decree of God is that concerning his Son, from which also he primarily gets his name of Father' and that 'The Son of God was begotten by a decree of the Father' (*DDC* 67). This implies that the decree, being special rather than general, was not eternal, which accords with its appearance in *Paradise Lost*. It happens at a specific temporal point, 'on a day' (*PL* V. 579). In fact, by internal chronology, it is the inciting incident of the entire poem's action:

> Hear my Decree, which unrevok't shall stand.
> This day I have begot whom I declare
> My only Son, and on this holy Hill
> Him have anointed, whom ye now behold
> At my right hand; your Head I him appoint;
> And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow
> All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord. (*PL* V. 602–08)

[1] All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are taken from the twelve-book 1674 edition, as reproduced in Merritt Y. Hughes' edition (See Milton, *The Complete Poems and Major Prose*), and abbreviated *PL*, followed by book and line references. Quotations from *Paradise Regained* are taken from the same volume and abbreviated *PR*.

[2] All references to the Hale-Cullington translation are abbreviated *DDC*.

The lexis used here repeatedly refers to the act of speaking. The 'Decree' is to be 'Hear[d]', being spoken, not written, law. It shall stand 'unrevok't'—from the Latin *re-vocare*, to call back—emphasizing that God's decrees are established and theoretically, in other cases, could be nullified through speech. The Father 'declare[s]' the Son's status and has 'sworn' to him that all shall acknowledge him. They do this not only by bowing, but by 'confess[ing]', another speech-based action. Even the word 'appoint', while not necessarily denoting speech, here functions as a performative utterance: the Father appoints the Son head by the very act of saying 'your Head I him appoint'.

Gordon Teskey identifies a similar performative quality in the Father's speech in Book VII, when the Father declares that 'Necessity and Chance | Approach not mee, and what I will is fate' (*PL* VII. 172–73). According to Teskey:

> [W]e hear it almost as a command, and even as an apotropaic performative, accomplishing by its very utterance the fending off of necessity and chance: "Approach me not, necessity and chance, for what I will, despite anything you can do, is certain to occur." (Teskey 96–97)

This kind of performative, one that has an impact on the cosmic level, not merely the verbal, is specific to the power of God. Performative utterances are a recurring feature of the Father's speech in *Paradise Lost* but they do not function for the Father as they do for humanity. For us, performative utterances are a specific kind of speech, self-fulfilling only in the sense that they describe an act entirely composed of speech. For a human being to 'promise', 'name' or 'bequeath' is only to state one's intention, will or agreement for something to happen, not to make it happen. Promises can be broken, wills can be ignored, intentions unfulfilled. The statement is performative only in the sense that by saying the words, one carries out the verbal act that those words describe—promising, naming, bequeathing. It is not so with God, for whom anything can be a performative utterance. This is the distinction Luther makes between *Heisselwort* and *Thettelwort*. God speaks realities: 'when He says: "Sun, shine," the sun is there at once and shines. Thus the words of God are realities, not bare words' (Luther et al. 22).

We see the words of the Father become realities in the text. When he sends Raphael to speak with Adam and thereby 'render Man inexcusable', the narrator describes the act thus: 'So spake th' Eternal Father, and fulfill'd | All Justice' (*PL* V. Argument, 246–47). Raphael has not yet spoken with Adam, and thus Adam is not yet forewarned about the approach of Satan, yet justice is already fulfilled by the act of the Father's command to Raphael. A similar phenomenon occurs in Book III. The Father pronounces that 'Man [...] shall find grace' (*PL* III. 131). The Son describes the Father's speech as his 'sovran sentence' and states, 'Father, thy word is past, man shall find grace' (*PL* III. 145, 227). At the point of stating this, the Son is yet to volunteer himself to die for Man's disobedience. Nor is this statement simply an announcement that he is about to do so. Rather, I would argue that the Son here identifies the mechanism of the Father's deed-words. By pronouncing his 'sovran sentence', the Father has already secured grace for humanity. This grace will come in the future, but the Father's word, though stated in the future tense, is 'past'. The Father having said it, it shall come to pass. To paraphrase Teskey, what the Father wills, despite anything necessity and chance can do, is certain to occur.

This does not imply that the Father's words prevent his creatures from acting freely. As we have seen, an unchangeable decree ordains their freedom, and the Father denies that 'Predestination over-rul'd | [Man's] will, dispos'd by absolute Decree | Or high foreknowledge', insisting that Adam and Eve 'themselves decreed | Thir own revolt' (*PL* III. 114–17). Nevertheless, the Father's

speech has the effect of an act, or in Luther's terms, a reality. This is achieved through the perfect filial obedience of the Son. In Book VII, the Father undertakes the creation:

> And thou my Word, begotten Son, by thee
> This I perform, speak thou and be it done:
> ...
> So spake th' Almighty, and to what he spake
> His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect. (*PL* VII. 163–75)

Milton appeals here to the well-established doctrine of the Son being the *logos* or word of the Father, through which the Father achieves creation. Milton affirms in *De Doctrina Christiana* that creation is accomplished through this means:

> By his word. Gen. I: throughout the chapter: 'he said...'; Ps. 33: 6: *by the word of Jehovah*; v. 9: *when he speaks*; Ps. 148: 5: *when he commands*; 2 Pet. 3: 5: *through the word of God*, that is, as is taught in other passages, through the son, who appears to derive from this his title of 'the word'. (Milton, *DDC* 283)

Milton is nevertheless clear that creation is 'always to be through [the Son]; not by him, but by the father' (*DDC* 209). The Son does not create the world himself, but nor is he simply a tool. In *Paradise Lost*, the Father appears to transfer his deed-word power to the Son, telling him 'speak thou and be it done' [my emphasis].

The Father makes similar transfers on multiple occasions, conferring Godly power onto his trusted servants. He 'enlighten[s]' Michael with knowledge of the future so that he can reveal the consequences of the Fall to Adam (*PL* XI. 115). Such foreknowledge is a defining characteristic of the Father in his first appearance in the poem, on 'his prospect high, | Wherein past, present, future he beholds' and where he 'foreseeing spake' (*PL* III. 77–79). During the War in Heaven the Father 'on his Son with Rays direct | Shone full' so that the Son 'all his Father full exprest | Ineffably into his face receiv'd' (VI. 719–21). These servants maintain their own agency but are granted the powers of the Father to carry out his bidding with willing obedience.

Thus, Milton reconciles the deed-word power of the Father with the free will of his creatures. The Father's speech has the effect of an act because his servants obey him willingly, but absolutely. This explains how the Father can state that Man shall find grace and the Son take it as a fact: since he is perfectly obedient to the Father, for the Father to say it is for him to do it. In the case of the creation, he responds to the Father's words with the immediacy of acts undertaken directly by the Father:

> So spake th' Almighty, and to what he spake
> His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect.
> Immediate are the Acts of God, more swift
> Than time or motion, but to human ears
> Cannot without procéss of speech be told,
> So told as earthly notion can receive. (*PL* VII. 174–79)

The verse of *Paradise Lost* cannot capture the speed with which the Father's speech takes effect, as fast as 'Acts' he performs himself, yet accomplished through those obedient to him. The Son 'gave effect' to the Father's speech 'Immediate[ly]'. Likewise, when the Father commands Raphael to visit Adam in Book V, not only the fulfilment of justice but the response of the angel is immediate: 'nor delay'd the winged Saint | After his charge received' (*PL* V. 247–48).

A significant peculiarity of these vicarious actions is the terminology used to describe the Son while he is undertaking them. The Father clearly sends 'the Son | On his great Expedition' to create the world in Book VII yet once he enters Chaos, it is 'God' who does so (*PL* VII. 192–93, 232). This terminology also has a grounding in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Referring to the Hebrew Bible, Milton argues:

> The name of God seems to have been ascribed to angels because, sent from God, they bore before them the likeness of the divine glory and person, and indeed God's actual words [...] although angels or messengers seem to bear the name and person of God speaking, they do not proclaim words of their own but those of God who sent them.
>
> (Milton 167–69)

This explains the numerous occasions on which *Paradise Lost* refers to angels as 'Gods', but also the terminology used to describe the Son's actions outside Heaven.

The Father has transferred his deed-word power to the Son, as we have seen, so that when 'th' Omnific Word' speaks, creation responds. He 'said, Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds, | This be thy just Circumference, O World. | Thus God the Heav'n created, thus the Earth' (*PL* VII. 217, 230–32). The Son is 'Girt with Omnipotence, with Radiance crown'd | Of Majesty Divine' and rides 'in Paternal Glory': he bears the qualities of the Father, 'and all his Father in him shone' (VII. 194–95, 219, 196). He speaks the words that God speaks in the Genesis account, such as 'Let there be Light', creating through speech (*PL* VII. 243). Hence, he is referred to as 'God'. This is a poetic realization of the argument in *De Doctrina Christiana*, that one who bears 'the likeness of the divine glory and person' and the 'words' of God bears also 'the name and person of God speaking'.

Likewise, in Book X, the Father sends the Son to pronounce judgement on Adam and Eve, but it is 'the voice of God [that] they heard' and 'God | Approaching' them (*PL* X. 97, 101–2). Once again, the Son performs the role attributed simply to 'God' in the Genesis account, 'judgement [...] pronounc[ing]' on Adam and Eve through his words and letting his 'curse' fall on the serpent (*PL* X. 197, 174). These are performative utterances which, like the Father's apotropaic command to Necessity and Chance in Book VII, seem implicitly to take effect simply by him speaking them. God is not depicted doing anything to ensure that the serpent 'Upon [its] Belly groveling [...] shalt go' or that Eve 'Children [...] shalt bring | In sorrow forth' (*PL* X. 177–78, 194–95). He only speaks.

Milton's account of the judgement of Adam and Eve is filled with words referring to speech, much as the Father's pronouncement of his decree in Book V was. God comes to 'sentence' Adam and Eve, first discernible by his 'voice', which 'they heard', a phrase stated twice in three lines by the narrator (*PL* X. 97–99). Adam confesses that he is 'of [God's] voice | Afraid', which is lifted directly from the Genesis account, but Milton adds to the Biblical material by having God reprimand Adam for obeying Eve 'Before [God's] voice' (*PL* X. 116–17, 146). The verse suggests that the awesome power of God is audible in his voice, in his word, and frames Adam's crime as that of not listening to that word. The performative power of the voice is demonstrated in the 'curse' on the serpent, the 'Sentence' on Eve and the 'judgement [God] pronounc'd' on Adam (*PL* X. 174, 192, 197).

The identity of the being who visits the newly created Adam in Book VIII is never stated outright as Son or Father. Adam only states that 'One came, methought, of shape Divine', while the divine shape himself says that 'Whom thou sought'st I am [...] Author of all this thou seest' (*PL* VIII. 295, 316–17). Given Milton's assertion that God's emissaries may speak with his words, rather than their own, this could be Father or Son. In light of the Son's other appearances outside Heaven, in which he does indeed seem to represent God in such a way, and the emphasis placed on

the Father's 'invisib[ility]' to the eyes of all save the Son in Book III, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that the divine shape is indeed the Son acting in this capacity (*PL* III. 375).

Adam in fact asks 'by what Name' he may call the divine shape (*PL* VIII. 357). John Leonard highlights two interrelated desires in Adam's speech here. He wishes to know God's name and to know 'who partakes' with him (*PL* VIII. 364):

> Adam's asking after God's name and his asking for a companion are both direct consequences of his naming of the animals. Adam's 'sudden apprehension' of the creatures brings home to him, for the first time, how far even he is from apprehending his Creator's glory. (Leonard 25)

Leonard does not, however, address the fact that only one of these desires is answered. Admittedly, the question about God's name is rhetorical, for God 'Surpassest far [Adam's] naming' (*PL* VIII. 359). This is Leonard's point, that Adam is far from apprehending God. Nevertheless, God does have names and it is significant that while in the scenes in Heaven Milton has Father and Son frequently and explicitly distinguish each other by those same titles, outside Heaven's gates neither the narrator nor the divine shape does so. In Books VII and X he is 'God' and in Book VIII he is anonymous, referred to only by descriptors such as 'Author of this Universe' and 'Universal Lord' (*PL* VIII. 360, 376). It is striking that in the section of the poem that concerns Adam's naming of the animals, the divine shape will not name himself, even by the word 'God', which could refer to Father or Son.

That Adam's first job after being created is to name God's other creatures sets him up as the speaker of Luther's *Heisselwort* or "name-word". It is his role not to 'cal[l] into existence the things which do not exist' but to 'assign names to objects which have already been created' (Luther et al. 21, 22). Adam is the first human being, meaning that it is his duty not only to call things by their name, but to speak those names for the first time. According to Leonard, these names are not chosen randomly, but according to the properties of each creature. Nevertheless, 'the name is a means whereby Adam apprehends the nature' of the creatures; 'it is not an inevitable consequence of the nature' (Leonard 12). In other words, the choice of names is not arbitrary, but nor is it predetermined. Adam uses the names as tools to understand the creatures themselves.

There is an inventive, if not creative, element here. The names are not inevitable but chosen by Adam: they do not exist until he says them. Thus, Adam's name-words take on a little of the power of the deed-word; by virtue of being said, they are so. This is a privilege granted only to him, as the first man, and Eve, who 'gave [...] Names' to the 'flow'rs' of Eden (*PL* XI. 277, 273). Leonard argues that 'In naming the flowers Eve shares in Adam's understanding of and lordship over Creation' (Leonard 47). I would further contend that in doing so she shares in his experience of the almost divine power of the primordial name-word, giving a name to something for the first time and thereby making that name its right name. Expelled from Eden, she loses these flowers, for they 'never will in other Climate grow' thus losing that to which she gave identity (*PL* XI. 274). With the Fall, she loses the privilege of the primordial name-word.

Let us turn, finally, to *Paradise Regained*. Like the Father in *Paradise Lost*, Jesus' role in the shorter epic is to do nothing, but speak much. He refuses all of Satan's temptations through verbal retort, remaining passive, which drives Satan to demand of him 'What dost thou in this World?' (*PR* IV. 372). The phrasing is not accidental. The Son has a thoroughly active role in *Paradise Lost*, giving effect to the Father's words in Chaos and on the plains of Heaven. Here 'in this World' his role has changed: he is now only a speaker, and it is through this switch from action to speech that he becomes more like the Father, a Son growing into his Father's shoes. The epitome of this switch is the climax of the poem:

> To whom thus Jesus. Also it is written,
> Tempt not the Lord thy God; he said and stood.
> But Satan smitten with amazement fell. (*PR* IV. 560–62)

There is much critical dispute over what the Son achieves in these lines. John Rogers highlights three significant arguments: that the Son's response 'confirm[s] [Satan's] terrible suspicion of Jesus' divine nature'; that the Son identifies himself as 'the second person of the Trinity, coequal and coeternal with the Father'; and A.H. Gilbert's argument that Satan here realizes that 'the Son's manhood is indeed perfect, and that perfect manhood is itself divine' (Rogers 592).

The first of these arguments is, I think, true, but only summarizes part of what takes place in these lines. Rogers himself argues that 'it is not the knowledge of who the Son is, but who the Son *was*, that is the unacknowledged object of the unacknowledged quest that structures Milton's poem' (Rogers 594). What the Son persuades Satan of at this moment that he is the same Son of God who defeated the rebel angels in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*. Thus, Jesus' divine nature is indeed proved, but there is more going on here.

The second argument cited by Rogers, that the Son identifies himself as 'the second person of the Trinity, coequal and coeternal with the Father' makes little sense. Milton's theology, as expressed in *De Doctrina Christiana*, is Arian. The Son was begotten by '**special decree**', meaning that he is not coeternal but came into being at a specific temporal point. He is 'not of the same essence as God', meaning that he cannot be coequal (Milton, *DDC* 67, 171). Nevertheless, the Son does seem to be labelling himself 'God' at this moment, instructing Satan not to tempt him, Jesus, the Lord thy God. It appears to be the realization that the Son in some sense is God that smites Satan with amazement. Hence, Gilbert's argument, that this moment centers on the realization of perfect divine manhood, is unconvincing. It is not manhood that Satan recognizes at this moment, but Godhead.

Why then, does the Son seem to refer to himself as God? William Kerrigan argues:

> When the man who began the poem "Son of *Joseph* deem'd" (1.23) deems himself "the Lord thy God," he is imaginatively transmuting the Yahweh faith practiced in the temple beneath him into Christianity and standing between the Father and his worshipers, precisely as he did in *Paradise Lost* when exalted to a position between the Father and the angels. (Kerrigan 97)

This argument accounts for Milton's Arianism, as it does not place the Son in a position equal to the Father's, but in that of an inferior intermediary. However, it is hard to see how the phrase 'only begotten Son' would not accomplish the same mediating effect, as it did in *Paradise Lost*, elevating the Son above the other angels without appearing to make him one and the same as the Father. Kerrigan further suggests that the name of God may be the Son's birthright 'as in the earthly entitlement by which John Milton was the son of John Milton' (Kerrigan 98). This would explain why Satan's doubts as to whether Jesus is the Son of God are finally answered by him naming himself 'God', but I would argue that something more transformative is occurring here.

I contend that the Son here names himself God because he is God in the sense that he was in *Paradise Lost*. He bears 'the name and person of God' because he 'do[es] not proclaim words of [his] own but those of God who sent [him]' (Milton, *DDC* 167–69). His final refutation of Satan is not through his own words, which have featured extensively in the dialogue of *Paradise Regained*, but through the word of God, the text of Deuteronomy 6. 16. Therefore 'the name of God' is 'ascribed' to him. This gives the incarnate Jesus, second Adam, in this moment a power strikingly like Adam's, to give things their right and irrevocable names. By naming himself God, he gains

the title, for he does so using the very words of God. This is the final realization of the Son as the word of God. As God and Man, the Son, over the course of the two poems, unites in one figure the use of both deed- and name-words.

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