

MILTON'S "COVERING CHERUB":  
THE INFLUENCE OF STANLEY FISH'S *SURPRISED BY SIN*  
ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY MILTON CRITICISM

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## ABSTRACT

During a time when ideological debates between Milton critics remained largely unresolved, Stanley Fish reconciled both sides of the “Milton Controversy” with *Surprised by Sin*, positing a theoretically sophisticated method that centers the poem’s meaning in the reader’s experience. Christian and non-Christian critics became enfranchised in critical debate since their reactions, according to Fish, were valid and intended by Milton. Borrowing his intentionalist approach from A.J.A. Waldock, Fish asserts his version of both author and text while implicitly employing a radically subjective hermeneutics. Fish focuses on the multiple and contradictory linguistic meanings within *Paradise Lost*, locating the source of these contradictions in the human mind. Viewing the problems of language as a result of human distance from the originator of language (the divine Logos), Fish’s Milton strongly draws on the Christianity of C.S Lewis. In contrast to the methods of post-Derridean deconstruction, Fish’s Milton evinces the instability of language in order to strengthen the mind of his reader in a metaphysically Christian faith. Over the course of four decades, Fish’s historically plausible critical framework became accepted as a valuable basis for critical practice. However, his work also posed a challenge to later critics who disagreed with its ideological basis and its effect on critical method. Critical response to Fish’s work often reflects an anxiety that recalls the theory of Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*. Loosely following Bloom’s terms, I contend that critical reactions to *Surprised by Sin* reflect an ongoing anxiety over Fish’s effective mediation with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: AUTHORIAL INTANGLING

Ideology and personal belief have often affected the debates of Milton criticism, from Samuel Johnson's critical asides to T.S. Eliot's frank expression of disdain. Distinctly ideological antagonism has characterized exchanges between the critic and the critic's conception of Milton, and between critics themselves. Likewise, as early as Richard Bentley's 1732 edition of *Paradise Lost*, Milton's readers have "made" and "remade" the author in their own images, through editing, criticism, and creative expression.<sup>1</sup> Criticism in the twentieth century has continued these trends, with Eliot's forcefully expressed aversion following that of Johnson, and William Empson's modern sympathy with Satan in place of Percy Shelley's Romantic reading. While C.S. Lewis dissected Satan's arguments in his paradigmatic Christian reading, maintaining the success of an orthodox *Paradise Lost*, critics like A.J.A. Waldock and Empson held that Milton (intentionally or not) failed in justifying the ways of his God to modern critics. An ideological rift divided the "Christian" critics from the non-Christian, Romantic and modernist critics.

By 1967, there seemed to be two irreconcilable camps of Milton readers. That year, however, Stanley Fish brought together both sides of the Milton Controversy with *Surprised by Sin*, his widely influential thesis that the meaning of *Paradise Lost* lies in

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<sup>1</sup> See William Kolbrener, *Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements* (1997). Many studies have contributed to the Miltonic dialogue about how the idea of the author "Milton" has been envisioned in the responses of various readers—in particular, those readers who might seem to oppose the Christian, "patriarchal" view of Milton's poetry. For a fascinating study of how Milton's early women readers found liberation in his texts, fashioning a version of Milton distinct from the misogynist view (what Woolf referred to as "Milton's Bogey") perpetuated by some modern feminist critics (see Sandra M. Gilbert, "Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey," in *PMLA* 93, no. 3 [May 1978], 368-82), see Joseph Wittreich, *The Feminist Milton* (1987), and for a positive view of George Eliot's creative appropriation of Milton's texts, see Anna K. Nardo, *George Eliot's Dialogue with John Milton* (2003). For a fine consideration of the Milton fashioned by Romantic writers, see Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton* (1970).

the structure of the reader's experience. No longer was Milton either blind to or subversively complicit with Satan's appeal. Evil, the complexity of the natural world, and the imaginative power of the human mind, all had a place in the structure of Milton's epic, consciously incorporated within Milton's unifying, logocentric faith. Fish's brilliant meta-critical stance held that the negative reactions of Waldock and others were essential reading experiences and fully intended by the author as part of his strategy of guidance. Beyond its meta-critical significance, *Surprised by Sin* engaged with theory, transgressing the New Critical bounds of Wimsatt and Beardsley's "Intentional" and "Affective" fallacies with a revolutionary reader-centered approach.

Indeed, though *Surprised by Sin* is not an explicitly theoretical work, it is based on certain assumptions that radically influenced the course of subsequent Milton criticism. Fish assumes that the reader's mind is the setting for the poem's action, and thus the reader bears the primary function of bringing the text into being and bestowing meaning. These are obvious indicators of reader-response theory. In practice, however, Fish consistently refers to the text of the poem as an independent agent in the reading process, molding the reader's consciousness to the end that Fish's Milton envisions as original creator of the text. In other terms, Fish asserts that a specific written work attributed to the author-function John Milton is *intended* to fashion a fundamentally Christian outlook in the very reader whose experience of being made "fit" constitutes the work's fundamental meaning. Within his complex hermeneutic system, Fish posits that Milton's *Paradise Lost* compels the reader whose experience determines meaning to discover an undeterminable blockage: the log-in-the-eye that is the reader's sinful nature. Your perspective determines meaning, Fish contends, but Milton illustrates a disjunction

between perspective and the truth of experience: between meaning and experience, theory and practice, lies the lived sin.

While Fish originates the practice of reader-response criticism with *Surprised by Sin*,<sup>2</sup> foreshadowing his 1972 theory in “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” Fish also effectively employs a traditional, almost New Critical notion that the text is in fact a stable and independent entity that can shape the reader’s experience. Though this might seem to reflect an internal conflict, the work’s practical significance outweighs its apparent theoretical ambivalence. Fish succeeds in the affirmative reception of his work. As literary theory began to gain recognition in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Fish’s work helped to foster a critical environment for Milton studies in which ideological conflicts were largely averted in favor of other considerations. Fish shapes a powerful vision of Milton’s “single-minded” logo-centrism which has influenced and continues to shape the terms of critical debate. *Surprised by Sin*, as Fish himself writes in his 1997 preface, constitutes its own “structure of thought,” a challenge to which must take on the entire structure (de-centering the center established by Fish). From this view, critical responses must posit their own structures within or in replacement of Fish’s structure, and this is what John Peter Rumrich, for instance, explicitly sets out to accomplish. I do not intend

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<sup>2</sup> To preserve focus, I wish to distinguish *Surprised by Sin* from its author’s subsequent meta-theoretical reflections. There appear to exist, in fact, theoretical contradictions within Fish’s own body of work, as some reviewers have noted. In particular, though Fish’s later work might be in dialogue with the methods of historicism or “new historicism,” my focus is on the theory explicit (and implicit) primarily in the text of *Surprised by Sin*. “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” Fish’s first major theoretical effort, declares the primacy of interpretation in the literary text. The text, Fish writes, exists *only* in the mind of an infinite number of readers (beyond the “fit” reader of *Surprised by Sin*), filtered through the standards of various “interpretive communities.” Fish’s later theory increasingly reflects the work of Derrida in post-structural hermeneutic suspension, though his most recent Milton criticism avoids such considerations. In the acknowledgments page of *How Milton Works* (vii), Fish writes: “It may seem strange to acknowledge that one’s thoughts have not changed much in more than a quarter-century, but since one of my theses is that Milton himself changed very little, except to offer slight variations on a few obsessions that were his from the very beginning, I am comfortable with the notion that I keep discovering the same patterns and meanings over and over again.”

here to attempt a direct deconstruction of *Surprised by Sin*. Although such an attempt represents a potentially rewarding critical project, my primary emphasis is on how Fish's work is defined by and defines subsequent works of criticism. In this project, however, I do not intend on limiting my scope to that of a demographic survey. For a full consideration of the complexities of critical-theoretical influence, the currency of Fish's ideas is entirely relevant, particularly as expressed in response to his own work. In his preface to the 1997 edition of *Surprised by Sin*, Fish answers the challenges of Rumrich, conceding that the mere fact of his work's influence does not render it beneficial, denying that "because my reading of *Paradise Lost* hovers over or underwrites operations in the field that it is either true or helpfully productive" (xiii). In other words, Fish seems to acknowledge that the overbearing influence of his work, distinct from its recognized practical value, may have the potential to inhibit critical productivity. As I have stressed, like any successful work of theory, *Surprised by Sin* is validated to the extent of its practical applicability, and this productivity is observable in the positive and negative critical attention it receives.

One patent fact that yet needs reemphasis is that *Surprised by Sin* began and continues in the context of a vast and not entirely chartable community of critical work. This energetic "Milton Industry" greeted the year 1967 with volumes of published criticism, meta-critical analyses, tercentenary tributes, and symposia. By no means was Miltonism becoming extinct. The highly ideological focus of debates that characterized the "Milton Controversy" consistently received challenges from critics applying energy to heal the breach coincident with the three-hundredth anniversary of *Paradise Lost*'s first printing. Christopher Ricks and others had by then countered the challenges to

Milton's "Grand Style" posed by T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. Miltonists actively sought alternatives to the unceasing cycle of ideology. No one, it seemed, could empirically persuade another to alter core beliefs. 1967 was a fitting time for Fish's unique fusion of theory and critical practice. As Fish writes in his 1997 preface, "The advantage of this thesis, at least with respect to what was then called the 'Milton Controversy,' is that it achieved the full enfranchisement of all combatants; everyone is partly right and everyone's perspective is necessary to the poem's larger strategy" (x-xi). Thus, as Rumrich writes, "*Surprised by Sin* initiated a confederation of factions in Milton studies by putting an apparently destabilizing hermeneutics to work for traditionalist interests" (4).

While some critics, from William Empson to William Kerrigan, attempt to adapt Milton's writings to modern paradigms and patterns of understanding, Fish chooses the reverse, holding the modern perspective in suspension as subjectively valid. He challenges Waldock's standing narrative criticisms, referring, for instance, to Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in his critique of Waldock's "modern" perspective on epic narrative. Fish's response was timely, and his evidence for the currency of the notion of reader-temptation in Milton's time is plausible, as Joseph Wittreich has corroborated, for example (*Visionary Poetics* 35). However, Fish was not alone in his attempt to answer "anti-Miltonist" critiques, nor was he alone in positing an historical context for interpretation. As Patrick Murray remarks in his 1967 critical survey, "Milton's apologists pleaded continually that the reader should take into account the conventions of seventeenth-century thought, the conventions governing the style and diction of epic poetry, and the necessary differences between epic verse and lyrical and

dramatic verse” (128-29). What distinguishes Fish’s approach, in part, is the interaction of its historical and theological considerations with its theoretical stance.<sup>3</sup> The clarity of his presentation and the relative inviolability of his theory provide particularly powerful and stable points-of-reference for the Miltonist.

Fish’s approach follows the historical emphasis of Empson, stressing both Milton’s own religious writings and the writings of his contemporaries. Though Fish’s Milton also resists the epistemic substitution, or deconstruction, inherent in poststructuralist developments in literary theory, his relationship with such theorists is complex. Indeed, for Fish, Milton represents an open author-function for which Fish substitutes his own center (a center that is consistent with certain common threads of critical interpretation). *Surprised by Sin* set its own standard of evaluation, exclusive to the standards of other theorists, in the same manner that Harold Bloom establishes his own standard of poetic value in *The Anxiety of Influence*, acknowledging the potential danger of “reduction,” while naturally claiming the greater usefulness of his method over others. In effect, Bloom and Fish assert a similar and complementary type of authority in the critical realm. As a literary-critical figure, Fish shadows subsequent critics and theorists as the subjectively secure bearer of poetic meaning, a role that Bloom might term the “covering cherub” of Milton.

From his plausible presentation and almost New Critical close readings, Fish the theorist seems to say to his readers and future critics: “Your interpretation is equally valid

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<sup>3</sup> Fish cites readings that “anticipate” his own (*Surprised* 2, n.1): in particular, Anne Ferry, *Milton’s Epic Voice: The Narrator in “Paradise Lost”* (1963); Joseph Summers, *The Muse’s Method* (1962). Some representative works emphasizing reader-education and historical context that precede *Surprised by Sin* include: Douglas Bush, *Paradise Lost in Our Time* (1957 [c1945]); C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to “Paradise Lost”* (1959); Balachandra Rajan, *Paradise Lost and the Seventeenth-Century Reader* (1948); Charles Williams, *The English Poetic Mind* (1963); B.A. Wright, *Milton’s Paradise Lost* (1962). Murray also links the work of E.M.W. Tillyard and Sir Herbert Grierson with the “historical defense” of Milton (130).

inasmuch as each interpretation bears essential validity, but it may or may not function as effectively as my own structure of thought.” Fish himself asks the reader in his 1997 preface, “see if this way of reading makes better sense of the poem than the way of reading (and there always has to be one) within which you were proceeding before” (xiv). Fish rests “[his] case on the decision of [his] peers as to whether or not the change [he] urged was beneficial” (xiv). The question of whether Fish’s theory limits or enables productive Milton scholarship is for Miltonists to answer. Every proposed theory faces the same pitfall, as Harold Bloom contends, and the issue at stake “is reduction and how to avoid it. Rhetorical, Aristotelian, phenomenological, and structuralist criticisms all reduce, whether to images, ideas, given things, or phonemes. Moral and other blatant philosophical or psychological criticisms all reduce to rival conceptualizations” (94). Fish’s criticism of Milton certainly appears reductive on a moral level (“Doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction. Milton could not have wished for higher praise, and he should not be judged by a lesser standard” [*Surprised* 56]), though his application could be seen on a practical level to embody the essence of Bloom’s theory. According to Bloom, his school of critics reduces a poem, “if at all...to another poem. The meaning of a poem can only be another poem” (94). To the extent that *Surprised by Sin* represents Fish’s own (re)writing of Milton, it would certainly follow Bloom’s definition of a poem.

As Milton criticism and its meta-critical observers have taught me, there is no such thing as a truly objective reading. My own is no different, and consequently a statement of my own position is expedient, though not central to my forthcoming argument. Like many others, I find that *Surprised by Sin* has enhanced my enjoyment and consideration of *Paradise Lost*. The imaginative leap into Fish’s brilliantly

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articulated thought-structure is not impossible in my mind, despite what other modern or postmodern thinkers might assert. In particular, I find his defusing of the problem posed by Empson's God compelling, though perhaps not wholly beneficial to the dynamic of Milton criticism. In this vein, I view Fish's self-conscious assertion of Milton's authorial intention as setting a positive trend. So much energy has been spent in fruitless debate between versions of Milton that are as irreconcilable as their proponents' ideologies. Though I cannot imagine anyone actually "transcending" ideology, to me Fish's approach mitigates arguments among Miltonists that might otherwise resemble mere debates over the viability of Christianity.

As numerous critics have noted in complaint or approval, Fish's God is not on trial. For Fish's Milton, the verb "justify" in the opening invocation acquires the signification, "to set in order" or "align" two objects in parallel, so that the "ways of God" become recognizable and reconciled to (rather than defended in the terms of) the interpretations of men.<sup>4</sup> The critical expectation for theodicy or trial under an enlightened jury thus becomes a question of refocusing human consciousness itself; in John P. Rumrich's formulation, Fish's *Paradise Lost* represents an "ironic theodicy" ("Uninventing Milton 257). Despite my affinity for the genius of Fish's thesis, however, I do not consider it the "only way to read Milton," though the imaginative plausibility of Fish's historically referenced construction of Milton is its great strength. My interest tends toward the rigor and vigor of earlier, more ideologically conscious debates recalled by Rumrich, though perhaps I would avoid associating Milton excessively and

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<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "justify." The *OED* lists reference under the definition, "To make exact; to fit or arrange exactly," as early as 1551. However, this "pun" is primarily for my own rhetorical emphasis, rather than a suggested addition to LeComte's dictionary of Miltonic puns.

unrealistically with modern or postmodern affinities. Certainly, there exists no dearth of alternative versions of Milton in a time when theory has become the subject of theory.

Over the course of my study, I imply an opposition between subjectivist and objectivist approaches to literary criticism. This implication merits some clarification. The objectivist position I associate in part with New Critics, formalists, and other schools that consider the literary text as a relatively stable entity, capable of generating common reactions among human beings reasonably familiar with its language and cultural referents (though I acknowledge the complexities of these very criteria). For objectivists the literary text possesses inherent, at times even religious qualities, either of itself or as the product of a more-or-less definite author-figure (human or divine). In contrast, subjectivist critics view the text as an unstable and problematic conglomeration of assumptions and inferences. Represented largely by poststructuralist criticism, subjectivists consider the realm of language as uncertain as that of human nature, as unknowable as the unity of the author's identity. There is no sacred text; no author is sacred. Conjectures about meaning are always qualified by the subjectivity of the critic and submitted to other critics in an ongoing discourse. What divides subjectivism from objectivism, in part, is its denial of a Logos, a concept of divinity that unifies textual signifier with a transcendent source of significance. Absent the metaphysical certainty of a concept of Logos—which involves a common, transcendent origin of and purpose for humanity—exemplified in the Christian religious canon, textual meaning originates in the human mind, subjectively.

With *Surprised by Sin*, Fish unites elements of subjectivist and objectivist approaches in what would seem an unstable harmony. Locating textual meaning in the

reader's mind, Fish also professes critical faith in the logocentric metaphysical certainty of author and text. Milton's God is real in the critical context of *Surprised by Sin*. The reader is free to accept or deny the omnipotence and omnipresence of this deity; as Fish says, both approaches are valid and intended. However, if you accept Fish's terms as Milton's, the experience of *Paradise Lost* challenges your metaphysical view of earthly (textual and physical) realities. Words for Fish's Milton lose meaning (signifiers become detached from signified) as humanity forgets the pervasive presence of God, the origin of language (and goodness). While in his manner Fish asserts the subjectivity of literary meaning, this assertion does not preclude his approach to Milton. His thesis asserts that though the reader's perceptual experience determines meaning, the reader's perception is inherently flawed. The Fall in Fish's *Paradise Lost* represents a rupture between the subjective and objective. Fallen language, the inaccessibility of literary meaning, is a symptom of this rift. Through his intentionalist approach, Fish portrays a Milton aware of the problems of subjectivity, a Milton who warns his readers not to place faith in human language as a reliable mediator for transcendent reality. The problems that face both Fish's Milton and Fish as literary mediator are the problems of poststructural relativity; the difference is that Fish's Milton declares faith in a unifying, if linguistically distant, center of reality.

As a subjective literary interpreter, the critic must declare faith in some source of meaning. To loosely adapt a term from Derrida, the critic "substitutes" his own center of significance as a profession of critical faith. One critic might posit Satan as the center of textual meaning in *Paradise Lost*, praising the achievement of a gap between signifier and significance and locating the poet's power in that gap. Another critic, like Fish,

could just as easily substitute Milton's God as the poem's center, reading the poet's power in his declared affiliation with the deity. This substitution (profession of faith) does not alter reality; rather, it alters the critic's own perception along with that of those who adhere to his interpretation. With *Surprised by Sin*, Fish in effect contributes to an ongoing exchange or discourse of literary substitutions. He asserts his view of intentional textual meaning while realizing that in practice not every reader shares the same vision. However, Fish's vision has in fact influenced the interpretations of many of Milton's readers. Anxiety and acclaim characterize the critical responses to the overwhelming influence of Fish's version of Milton's text.

Since my critical subject is itself a critical work, I am fully aware of the pitfall (temptation), warned against by Christopher Hill, of focusing dryly on "the views of Professor Blank on the views of Professor Schrank on the views of Professor Rank on what Milton may or may not have written" (*Milton and the English Revolution* 3). However, part of my aim is to depict trends toward and against such circularity within criticism, with Stanley Fish perhaps as a Professor Rank who arguably mediates closely with the primary object of criticism: *Paradise Lost*. I do not intend to present an inclusive survey of the entire body of Milton criticism since 1967, but rather to highlight some illustrative points and counterpoints of articulate critics, both established and less-established. Employing Bloom's theoretical framework as a powerful though limited tool, I will survey the various patterns in which critics either "transume" (appropriate for themselves) or revise Fish's thesis, or altogether challenge its structural center which originates in the reader who is Fish.

## CHAPTER 2 THE READER IN *SURPRISED BY SIN*

The pervasive critical influence of *Surprised by Sin* has found expression in the writings of Miltonists for more than three decades since its publication. Perhaps the best recent articulator of this influence is John Peter Rumrich, who, in his 1996 critical study, laments that “Fish’s seminal study...is still basic to our contemporary understanding of Milton’s works” (*Milton Unbound* 2). In Rumrich’s assessment, “Fish inaugurated a period in Milton criticism analogous to what Kuhn describes as ‘normal science,’ a condition in which practitioners labor to extend and deepen a working paradigm rather than rehash fundamental issues that it resolved” (4). It is easy to be reductive in generalizing about these trends in criticism, and critical influence is as resistant to measure as any other type of literary exchange. Though no criticism occurs in a vacuum, similar conclusions and theories can easily be embraced by separate critics completely unconscious of their shared “interpretive community.”<sup>5</sup> No Fish school of criticism exists specifically devoted to *Surprised by Sin*. However, the consistent publication of works overtly or implicitly aligned with his method, as well as the recurring publication of challenges to his “hegemony,” strongly indicates the endurance of his work as a critical touchstone among Miltonists. The validation of Fish’s thesis, as he has pointed out, lies in the affirming response of his readers; these educated and outspoken readers best reflect the ripples of influence in both directions. Indeed, the reader posited in *Surprised by Sin*, corrigible or not, generates a response that defines both her own experience and the effective meaning of the text itself.

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<sup>5</sup> Fish’s phrase, from “Interpreting the Variorum.”

There is little need here for a critical defense of Fish's method, since in his 1997 preface Fish himself provides such a defense as well as an expansive explanation of his method, addressing what I have found to be the most sustained critiques of his challengers.<sup>6</sup> In terms of critical history, the provocative work of John Peter Rumrich precedes me in the task of mapping out patterns of response to *Surprised by Sin*. Likewise, William Kolbrener presents an insightful, overarching view of critical trends.<sup>7</sup> However, a brief survey and close reading of patterns of critical response, positive and negative, from the year of initial publication, will help illustrate the nature of Fish's influence.

While these patterns of response may not demonstrate the unquestioned ascendance of what Rumrich calls the Kuhnian paradigm of "normal science" in Milton studies, they certainly demonstrate a continued engagement with Fish in published Milton scholarship. Most references to *Surprised by Sin*, positive and negative, allude to its "general acceptance" in the community. For critics of Fish, such as Rumrich and even Kolbrener, this overbearing influence shadows over (sets the terms of) even its attempted challengers. In selecting my sources, I have generally found that critical prefaces and introductions provide the most cogent and revealing insights into authorial method, though sections or chapters that address significant topics in relation to *Surprised by Sin* also lend insight. The following four sections are titled in reference to critical observations from Fish and his critics relating to or expressed during the period

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<sup>6</sup> Over the course of my study, I will address relevant statements from Fish's defense in his 1997 preface, in context with other critical responses to *Surprised by Sin*. Although Fish is among the best interpreters of Fish, I intend to read this preface primarily as an extrinsic comment upon his work, rather than as a gloss upon its meaning which I am considering in terms of critical response and representation.

<sup>7</sup> Kolbrener's historiographical approach, while it presents compelling patterns of long-standing trends in Milton criticism, bears only an indirect relation to my own purposes and approach.

designated, though the implications of a clear progression are of course illusory. In preface, let me say that I harbor the highest respect for the scholars from whose opinions I have borrowed below. Both those who find value in Fish's thesis and those bold enough to declare independence have contributed greatly to the Milton community. Necessities of space and time sometimes require condensing of their larger arguments. In commenting on their work I acknowledge only one aspect of the value of their contributions.

As in the critical overviews fashioned by Rumrich and Kolbrener, my own survey faces a challenge of focus; it is of course difficult to chart a narrow course through the wildly blossoming borders of critical work on Milton. For the purposes of this study, response to Fish falls into four categories. The first accepts Fish's thesis overtly or implicitly, neither challenging nor adapting it but accepting it as a foundational premise for critical work. The second adapts Fish's method to its own critical terms, adopting the intentional approach but reformulating or translating Milton's aim in more secular or literary terms. The third response is that of a direct challenge, attempting to disestablish its perceived hegemony, generally by emphasizing its negative effect on critical production. The fourth and final pattern of response is that of conspicuous neglect; these critics write without accepting or refuting Fish's approach. Rather, their silence often speaks an attempt to quietly shift the focus of critical production. After all, the most effective way to disestablish Fish's reading is to provide a plausible and practically applicable alternative. Several reviewers that respond to the influence of Fish's work are not Miltonists themselves and thus fall outside of these four categories. In order to retain a sense of sequence in critical response, I have chosen to situate these categories within a

chronological framework. Although decades are ultimately inadequate divisions, the chronological progression I have chosen reflects the responsive movements of ongoing critical dialogue.

**(i) REFOCUSSING (1967-1977)**

The years immediately following the publication of *Surprised by Sin* find both implicit and explicit acknowledgments of the work's influence. As Stanley Fish contends in his 1997 preface, from its introduction, his thesis was "almost immediately influential" (xi). Responses to his work among published criticism during the early years are less explicit though not less significant. The immediacy of recognition, even in books published near the time of *Surprised by Sin* whose manuscripts might easily have been composed before its publication, reflects its early critical relevance.

Critical response during this period often follows the first pattern of response, acknowledging and accepting Fish's approach. John Steadman, for instance, aligns himself with Fish's emphasis on the seventeenth-century context in his 1968 collection of essays, *Milton's Epic Characters* (13). Likewise, the work of Balachandra Rajan tends to harmonize with the emphases of *Surprised by Sin*; indeed, Rajan's "*Paradise Lost*" and *the Seventeenth-Century Reader*, published in 1948, anticipates Fish's approach. *The Lofty Rhyme*, published in 1970, reflects a similar pedagogical and theoretical view in which the poetry makes "demands" on the reader, intentionally eliciting conflicted responses and requiring choice (72-74). Rajan briefly acknowledges the parallels between his own thought (in present and earlier work) and Fish's thesis (165), without expressing either anxiety or adherence.

The clarity with which Fish presents a Lewisite version of Milton prompted one early reviewer to remark, perhaps ironically, that “Mr. Fish himself is surely an orthodox traditional Christian” (Turner 422). The same reviewer, W. Arthur Turner, foretells that this book “will annoy many readers bred in the atmosphere of atheism and empiricism” (420). “But,” he continues, “as Mr. Fish says, ‘Milton did not write for the atheist’ (*Surprised by Sin* 44) ...It was for such [orthodox traditional Christians] that *Paradise Lost* was written. Where this leaves the anti-Miltonists is beyond the province of this reviewer” (Turner 422). These “anti-Miltonists” who do not share the metaphysical certainties of Fish’s Milton, then, will at the least have difficulty finding Milton rewarding, as Turner tersely speculates. Even outside the community of Milton scholars, the influence of Fish’s work is recognized early on, as this 1968 *Renaissance Quarterly* review evinces.

Where Turner’s review hints at the rippling influence of Fish’s thesis beyond the Milton community, forthcoming works on Milton further demonstrate this influence by incorporating Fish’s premises. For instance, in 1973, Leslie Brisman adapts a central aspect of Fish’s thesis in the title of his study, *Milton’s Poetry of Choice*. In a trend of appropriation displayed by many later critics, Brisman neatly restates and incorporates Fish’s experientially based thesis, asserting that, “For Milton, the awareness of fall is always of what has passed; protagonist and reader are surprised by sin that is already committed” (111). Brisman approvingly cites Fish’s comment on the poem’s accusatory tone—“you have made a mistake, just as I knew you would” (*Surprised* 9)—and, she writes, “This sense of closure characterizes the mode of narrative throughout” (Brisman 112): we readers, again, realize our error. Later critics follow this first pattern of

response, often exploring variations on Fish's themes or close textual analyses that tend to complement Fish's central contentions.

While critics during the first decade pay tribute to or adopt Fish's approach, some follow the fourth pattern of response, writing without expressing any sense of anxiety at the direction of the larger interpretive community. Following the winds of structuralist and emerging post-structuralist theory and anticipating the 1983 work of Herman Rapaport,<sup>8</sup> Donald F. Bouchard avoids Fish's hermeneutics altogether. Instead, Bouchard presents an early example of theoretically conscious Milton criticism, emphasizing the "labyrinthine" qualities of Milton's poetry. In his 1974 study, *Milton: A Structural Reading*, Bouchard offers an "approach to Milton through the methods of French 'Structuralism'" (i). Unlike later critics, however, Bouchard displays few signs of anxiety or isolation among this interpretive community, citing Fish's analyses of passages in passing without any reference to accepting or denying Fish's central thesis (83). Rather, Bouchard cites both the work of Derrida and that of structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss to illuminate his textual analysis of *Paradise Lost*. Apart from the work of Rapaport, however, Bouchard's work appears to have had little influence on later Milton criticism.

Following this fourth pattern from a different, Marxist-oriented school of criticism, in 1977, Christopher Hill shifts critical emphasis toward a broader historical view, asserting that Milton (the author and man) "cannot reasonably be claimed as 'orthodox'" (*Milton and the English Revolution* 3). Without citing Fish directly, Hill decries the Lewisite trend, which Fish explicitly perpetuates, of appropriating Milton for

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<sup>8</sup> In his own work, Rapaport acknowledges Bouchard as his predecessor (*Milton and the Postmodern* 66, 188).

orthodoxy. Milton, he writes, “needs to be defended from his defenders almost more than from the declining band of his enemies” (7). Like Fish, Hill stresses historical context; yet Hill’s historical emphasis is distinct from Fish’s. Where Fish, in emphasizing Milton’s Christian “single-mindedness,” largely dissociates his Milton from the apparent contradictions of his various writings, Hill attempts to reunite studies of Milton’s poetry with the problematic revolutionary allegiances latent in his prose. “By replacing Milton in history,” Hill contends, “we shall be able to catch in his writings echoes of discussions and controversies which meant much to him and to those for whom he wrote, but which lose this resonance when they are treated in isolation” (7).

Reflecting a Marxist politico-historical perspective, Hill downplays the conflict between Milton’s revolutionary politics and his theological grounding. The “process of internalizing God’s will, and externalizing the Satanic...does not necessarily go with disillusionment or abandonment of political struggle” (389). Though he aligns himself with the “heretical” version of Milton, Hill nonetheless maintains an ideological continuity in Milton’s thought. Thus, William Kolbrener writes in 1996, Hill participates in a critical exchange that maintains contradictory versions of the poet, alternate orthodoxies that do not allow for variation or “polyvalence” in Milton’s own ideas. In Kolbrener’s scheme, Hill takes the “satanic” side, defining his terms against those of Fish and his camp of “angelic” critics though failing to address Fish’s work directly. Indeed, Hill appears to have consulted with Fish personally, alluding in various footnotes to his discussions with the author of *Surprised by Sin*. However, as an alternate reader of Milton, Hill asserts his interpretation in his own terms. In presenting his alternative, Hill makes no direct challenge to *Surprised by Sin*. Rather, to some extent, Hill’s ideological

affinity for the revolutionary Milton underlies his lack of reference to Fish's work, in a way similar to Eliot's ideologically driven attempts to focus critical attention away from Milton's poetry. Like Empson and other critics, Hill sees little use in the critical orthodoxies represented by Fish's revision of Lewis's Christian Milton. Thus, Hill indirectly affirms the influence of *Surprised by Sin*, referring to personal conversations with Fish yet conspicuously avoiding acknowledgment of the significance of Fish's thesis.

### (ii) WIELDING THE SWORD OF GOD (1977-1987)

During this span, the influence of *Surprised by Sin* finds expression in the third pattern of response: articulate critiques of Fish's hegemony. Responses in this decade become more direct and sustained, particularly in strongly worded review articles such as Lucy Newlyn's. Echoing the language of Christopher Hill, William Cain further critiques the course of the "Milton Industry" which he believes has abandoned advances in critical theory. Ideological and theoretical awareness become common preoccupations in the response to Fish's Milton during this decade. Joseph Wittreich, while conceding the usefulness of Fish's thesis in his early work, later challenges from a feminist perspective the oppressive traditionalism in Milton studies perpetuated by Fish's hegemony. Catherine Belsey likewise takes issue with the lack of ideological consciousness in Fish's approach. During this decade, the anxiety and strength of negative reactions further illustrate the continuing influence of *Surprised by Sin*. Opposing critics decry Fish's influence reflected in the work of their colleagues—such as Robert Crosman's secularized translation of Fish's ethical transformation. As Newlyn

will observe, books on Milton during this time often follow the first and second patterns of response: variations on and reformulations of Fish's thesis.

Joseph Wittreich's *Visionary Poetics*, published in 1979, supports Newlyn's contention. Here, Wittreich adapts Fish's thesis to his own model, contending that the prophet's (Milton's) struggle for expression becomes transferred to his audience's struggle for interpretation ("apprehension"), in the form of "mental exercise" through "reader harassment" (35). In an observation that recalls at once the writings of William Blake and the theory of Bloom, Wittreich continues that, "Just as the prophet requires an interpreting angel...so too does his audience" (35). Interestingly, after announcing his own affinity with Fish's thesis, Wittreich goes on to introduce the image of "an interpreting angel." Though he does not apply this image to Fish, Wittreich nonetheless summons a powerful association that illuminates his own response and that of many other critics. In his later feminist criticism, Wittreich reacts against the power of this "interpreting angel," criticizing Fish's (and Bloom's) "establishmentarian" Milton. In *Visionary Poetics*, however, he follows the first pattern of response and aligns his critical work with Fish's thesis.

Fronting a trend of direct confrontation, the third pattern of response, Catherine Belsey reacts strongly against Fish's influence in her 1980 study, *Critical Practice*. Belsey presents one of the strongest challenges to the theoretical base of *Surprised by Sin*. In particular, she criticizes the theory expressed in *Surprised by Sin* and further articulated in Fish's 1972 theoretical discussion of the reader's "experience of seventeenth-century literature" in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (32). Anticipating later critiques, Belsey states that Fish's approach is necessarily limiting and insulated from

historical and ideological consciousness (34). Belsey writes that Fish's theory contrasts with Noam Chomsky's "linguistic competence," which allows for broader interpretive possibility: "At the level of deep structure (the set of semantically important relationships within a sentence), there is a universal grammar, common to all languages, and corresponding to innate mechanisms shared by all human beings" (34). Fish's theory, however, "operates at the level of surface structure and depends specifically on the experience of reading that has permitted the internalization of the conventions which characterize particular literary discourses" (34). Belsey targets the lack of consciousness in Fish's description of the "experience" that determines textual meaning. For Fish, Belsey writes,

There is no recognition that experience is in any sense ideologically or discursively constructed. Thus, though his whole enterprise is based on the belief that individual literary experiences are the product of individual discourses, Fish makes no attempt to account in theoretical terms for the relationship between experience and language, ideology and history. As a result, what he practices is on the whole a sophisticated form of New Criticism, with concessions to literary history and the addition of a reader whose presence creates more theoretical problems than it solves. (34)

Here, Belsey laments what she sees as a lack of ideological consciousness in Fish's method. Directly confronting Fish's metaphysical assertion of meaning, Belsey contends that "What is realized...in the verbal and metrical patterns of *Paradise Lost*, is...not the presence of god but the triumphant presence of the signifier" (43). Further, she contends, each signifier that Milton employs "is a signifier whose signified is another text" (41). While Belsey observes similar deconstructive language patterns in Milton's poem, she places critical emphasis on the modern (or postmodern) perspective that Fish distills from his consideration of Milton.

In his 1997 preface, Fish responds to Belsey's contention that meaning is indeterminate, clarifying his own stance. According to Fish, his work adheres to her idea of the "textuality of truth," though he takes it to mean that "although truth is asserted to be independent of any representation of it, it is only in assertions and representations that the truth comes to us" (xl). Fish writes, "To say that textuality or mediation is an inescapable ingredient of human (and angelic) knowledge is not to deny the singleness of truth, but to specify the conditions under which it must be chosen, conditions that always fall short of what would be the case if the shape of truth were self-evident and indisputable" (xlii). Fish also takes issue with Belsey's contention that *Paradise Lost* is "two texts in one," "an absolutist poem...and a humanist narrative" (Belsey 60). "There is no 'absolutist poem,'" he writes, and

if there were, interpretations both inside it (like Satan's) and outside it (like Belsey's) would be impossible. There is instead a poem that offers to already free subjects a choice between believing in (styling) a universe presided over by a generative and omniscient deity or a universe presided over by chance, indeterminacy, opportunistic self-creation and the accidents of time. (xlv)

Of course, though Fish's later response clarifies the limitations and the freedom of the theoretical basis of his thesis, Fish responds to Belsey's argument seventeen years later. Thus Fish implies that, among the responses of others, the contentions of Belsey remained salient for almost two decades. Of course, as the response of later critics reveals, Belsey does not thoroughly derail Fish's thesis. Rather, in the manner of the third pattern, her reaction both defies and reflects the influence of Fish's study on critical method.

In critical practice during this span of time, *Surprised by Sin* seems to represent the product of an "interpreting angel," informing and providing a framework for critical

practice. Beyond the simple acknowledgment expressed by Wittreich in 1979, Robert Crosman finds in Fish a critical touchstone for his 1980 study, *Reading "Paradise Lost."* Crosman emphasizes his debt to Fish in a revealing introduction, writing that "*Surprised by Sin* is in my opinion the best book ever written on *Paradise Lost* and has helped me better than any other to understand and to enjoy Milton's poem" (13). Following the second pattern of response, adaptation and translation, Crosman's work could be seen as a secularizing revision of Fish's central terminology. After stating Fish's contribution to his "enjoyment" of the poem, Crosman continues that "Fish's Puritan 'reader' has annoyed many of his own readers," and cites William Kerrigan's joke that "Fish's reader has 'a remarkable appetite for being duped'" (13). Crosman also adopts Peter Berek's complaint that it is implausible to imagine an authentic seventeenth-century response that follows Fish's prescription of being "confused...[and] unwilling or unable to parse out the plain sense of the poet's syntax," and subsequently becoming "so sophisticated," reviewing the poem "again as though he were preparing for a Ph.D. examination" (14).

Crosman diverges "sharply" from Fish's argument "in the matter of an historic reader" (14). "In my view," he writes, this invented reader "is not only fallacious but, in its effect on many modern readers, unfortunate, since it asks us to inhibit our own responses in favor of certain official or *objective* responses" (14, italics mine). Recalling the ideological differences expressed by other critics, Crosman writes that "Fish's historic reader is as dead as the spiritual tradition from which he was exhumed" (14). Crosman implies that Fish's thesis potentially validates the modernist commonplace that *Paradise Lost* is a "monument to dead ideas," writing that, "To the extent that he requires a response that modern readers (Christian and non-Christian alike) neither have

spontaneously nor would wish to have, Fish has only managed to suggest with his model of the reader that *Paradise Lost* is a dead text” (14). Yet, though Crosman takes issue with Fish’s approach, he nonetheless follows the second pattern of response, adapting Fish’s method to his own ends.

Instead of reconstructing a monument to dead ideas, Crosman posits a translation of Fish’s theological terms into language more relevant to the enlightened modern reader. Challenging Fish’s version of the “fit reader,” Crosman contends that, “Even if there were such a thing as the reader, it is hard to see that his responses, any more than authorial intention, should govern the responses of actual readers” (14). Crosman, however, unintentionally arrives at the significance of Fish’s theoretical strategy by noting the limitations of “reader-response” approaches. Viewing Fish’s subjective approach as a limitation, Crosman observes, “if response is a key aspect of literary experience but is inescapably subjective, then criticism can have nothing to say about it...If every reader’s response is valid, then there is apparently nothing for the critic to do” (14).

As a poststructuralist like Derrida might respond, if every response is valid, then for Fish there is *everything* for the critic to do. It is in this very uncertainty (this unoccupied center) that Fish finds the space for his plausible doctrinal reading of the poem: If all readings are equally valid, his own represents not the “average” or even the “intended” reader. It represents an assertion of Fish’s *own* reading, the reader fashioned in Fish’s own response, submitted to other similarly subjective readers for approval or rejection. Fish seems to address his readers, asserting, “every other approach is valid, but see if mine works best for you in practice.” As Fish observes in his 1997 preface, the

success of his thesis is not verified by external empirical evidence; it is measured in the response of his readers, the acceptance of an interpretive community.

Responding to the influence strongly reflected during this decade by Crosman and others, William E. Cain critiques the direction of Milton studies under what he perceives to be the unhealthy reign of Fish. A non-Miltonist, Cain nonetheless perceives the influence of Fish's work. Without concluding that Fish himself presents a theoretically savvy reading, Cain implies that *Surprised by Sin* has acted as an effective "covering cherub" to Milton critics, precluding alternate readings. In his 1981 review of six contemporary book-length studies of Milton criticism, Cain decries the state of the "Milton industry," lamenting that "almost none of the writers seems aware of the work in literary theory and methodology that has been produced in the past two decades. Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Althusser, Lacan, Girard—these figures and others are conspicuously absent" (1121).<sup>9</sup> This "dismaying state of Milton criticism," he writes, is due to the influence of *Surprised by Sin* and the response to Waldock, from whom Fish takes his own influence and whose arguments he answers (1122). However, Cain writes, "Whereas Waldock objected to the deployment of doctrine in the poem, Fish embraces it" (1123). Cain implies that the theoretical naivety that he perceives reflects a preoccupation with the Christian assumptions of Fish's Milton. Critics make only "minor adjustments" to Fish's answers to the "familiar questions": "Is there a separation between narrative and doctrine? What is Milton's intention and what does he actually achieve? What is (or should be) the response of the reader" (1124). As Rumrich will

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<sup>9</sup> The works reviewed by Cain are: Robert Crosman, *Reading Paradise Lost* (1980); James A. Freeman, *Milton and the Martial Muse* (1980); Murray Roston, *Milton and the Baroque* (1980); Roland Mushat Frye, *Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts* (1978); Edward W. Tayler, *Milton's Poetry* (1979); G.K. Hunter, *Paradise Lost* (1980).

later restate, Cain writes that the very “form of the debate” is generally determined by Waldock and Fish (1124). Cain’s complaint loses relevance as developments in theory and ideological awareness inform later Milton criticism, while Fish’s influence continues to endure.

Two years following the publication of Cain’s review, William Kerrigan continues to reflect the prevalence of Fish’s influence while embedding a strong critique of the benignity of that influence in his 1983 psychoanalytically centered study, *The Sacred Complex*. Mainly reflecting the second category of adaptation, Kerrigan presents what develops into a sustained critique of Fish’s method, later cited by both Rumrich and Fish. At the outset, Kerrigan acknowledges Fish’s pervasive influence. *Surprised by Sin*, writes Kerrigan, provides a “widely accepted” solution to the dilemma of Satan’s tension between “mythopoeic grandeur” and the “discursive condemnation by the narrator and the heavenly characters” (98-99). In an eloquent gesture of deference later cited by both Fish and Rumrich and worth quoting in its entirety, Kerrigan pays tribute to the influence of *Surprised by Sin*. According to Kerrigan, Fish’s

solution [to the Milton Controversy]...has an elegance at once literary and psychological. In claiming that the tension was deliberate, Fish healed an old division in Milton studies. Provided that our sense of his splendor be corrected repeatedly by the normative declarations of discursive judgment, we may permit the romantic *and* the theological Satan to evolve in us. We are obeying intentional meaning, fulfilling the strategy of the poet, even when our feelings about the mythopoeic Satan contradict this judgment... The pious reader can entertain potentially rebellious attitudes knowing that, as signs of his fallenness, these attitudes already confirm the doctrinal content of the poem and therefore have a piety all their own. (98-99)

In other words, Fish's intentional version of the poem promotes doctrinal complacency. Here, Kerrigan both praises and illustrates the overbearing influence of Fish's thesis, which subsumes other critics within its intentionalist scheme.

However, after paying this tribute, Kerrigan launches a strong critique. Kerrigan contends that the "overall effect" of Fish's reading "is to promulgate a tyrannical notion of aesthetic unity at the expense of introducing, without overt recognition, a new and unheard-of flaw in the poem: the alarming idea that its mythopoesis is not generative but repetitive" (99). Kerrigan presents the seed of later challenges to Fish's "potentially reductive" thesis. Indeed, William Kolbrener will later follow this thread, asserting that critics like Fish and his opponents who assume a reductive consistency fail to properly recognize the complexity of Milton's thought. The fact that Kerrigan situates his challenge to *Surprised by Sin* in the context of deferential praise reveals a certain anxiety about directly confronting Fish's critical assertions. Indeed, Kerrigan's work does not represent a direct challenge to Fish's hegemony. Rather, like Crosman and other critics who follow the second pattern of response, Kerrigan issues a critique and reconsiders Fish in his own terms without defining his study against Fish's.

In a similar type of response, the same year as Kerrigan's publication (1983), Herman Rapaport dedicates a section of his book-length study of Milton to contrast *Surprised by Sin* with his own postmodern method. In *Milton and the Postmodern*, Rapaport offers an alternative theoretical framework for studying Milton, while like Kerrigan remaining conscious of the theoretical influence of Fish's thesis. While Rapaport provides a formidable answer to William Cain's call for theoretical awareness in Milton criticism, he does not proceed without a well-considered attempt to situate

Fish's reading within and in contrast to his own framework. Fish's work in particular overshadows Rapaport's reading of Milton, the man and the author, and Rapaport is aware of this influence. Like Crosman, Rapaport finds value in rewording and resituating the theoretical context of Fish's observations. Rapaport observes an undercurrent of deconstruction in Fish's close readings, presenting his own translation of Fish into postmodern terms. Rapaport contends that

destructuring, or deconstruction, is most obvious in those passages Stanley Fish cites when he notes the reader is 'surprised by sin,' those passages in which the innocent garden and the innocent Eve are described in terms that for us have fallen or evil import. Thus Eve's 'wanton' ringlets or the garden's 'mazy' contours signify what a poststructuralist like Derrida would call a double scene of writing, in which a bifurcated text is in play, in this case, a text in which the prelapsarian is described or perceived in terms of the postlapsarian.

Here, Rapaport like Crosman accentuates the enduring relevance of Milton's work, following the second pattern of response and rendering Fish's orthodox reading in terms understandable to a new (here, a postmodern) set of readers. Milton's poem, in Rapaport's view, stresses the limits of language. *Surprised by Sin* acknowledges these tendencies, he contends, and situates them in the context of an Aristotelian metaphysical certainty.

The error in Fish's book from a Derridean point of view (and today Fish might agree) is the attempt to locate a source or origin in a text that is cloven, whose terms are, as in the metaphor of woman, in play in the ribbon that at once separates and confuses them. (71)

Like Catherine Belsey, Rapaport stresses the indeterminacy of textual meaning, taking issue with Fish's metaphysical assertion. Thus, he implies a discontinuity between Fish's later postmodern theory and the theory latent in *Surprised by Sin*. However, Rapaport

fails to fully credit Fish's acknowledgment of the subjectivity of textual meaning as a product of the reader's subjective experience.

Fish opens the door to Rapaport's deconstruction, since his own description of God and the "fit reader" necessarily relies on a subjective critical assertion of meaning (or declaration of faith). According to Rapaport, Fish demonstrates an implicit awareness of the deconstructive tendencies of Milton's text. As Rapaport writes,

Fish shows...how Milton's epic folds contraries over into doubles when in fact it should not do so, according to strict logical expectations; however, this doubling does not occur, as Fish believes, because the reader is simply ambushed, because he is tricked into making faulty assumptions about what words mean, but because the text itself is engaged in a deconstructive discourse that transgresses or trespasses from one state to another, that makes confusion and distinction at the same time between a prelapsarian tongue and a fallen one. (71)

In other words, Milton's text does not lead the reader to a predetermined conclusion of ethical improvement. Rather, Rapaport contends, Fish misinterprets the self-deconstructing text that Milton has fashioned. "What I would argue in defense of the guilty reader," he continues, "is that it is this double scene of writing itself that opens up *Paradise Lost* to an economics of transgression or sin that begins with repealing the Aristotelian law of contradiction" (72). The Aristotelian metaphysical certitude asserted by Fish represents a negative influence for Rapaport as a postmodernist. Thus, Rapaport articulates the distinction between Fish's substitution and the deconstructive approach of postmodern critics. Rapaport writes that, "Unlike Fish's static-state theory, whose differences are always clearly marked or decidable, the poststructuralist's notion of a double scene is not an effect of a logocentric conception of thought" (72). In response to the image of Milton reflected in *Surprised by Sin*, Rapaport likewise constructs his own version of Milton, the man behind the author-function, contending that Milton's spirit is

divided: “a mind committed to...ideals of freedom and liberty...but a mind also harboring a darker fascination with dictatorial takeover, with what amounts to...absolutism...a sinister side to Milton’s thinking” (176). While positing his postmodern interpretation, Rapaport finds it necessary to deconstruct *Surprised by Sin*. Presenting a compelling analysis of the theoretical significance of Fish’s thesis, Rapaport, like Kerrigan, follows the second pattern of response, both challenging and reflecting its overshadowing influence.

Following the second pattern from a different methodological stance, Barbara Lewalski employs an intentionalist approach that recalls Fish’s pattern in her 1985 study, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*. Like Rapaport and Kerrigan, Lewalski both challenges Fish’s reading and conveys a sense of its influence. Following Fish’s post-New Critical positivism as well as his intentionalist approach to textual meaning, Lewalski writes that she is “concerned...with conscious artistic choices, with Milton’s deliberate orchestrations within the echo chamber of language” (7). Lewalski posits that “Milton’s imitative and allusive strategies are essentially heuristic” and that there is a “rhetorical and symbolic vocabulary shared by poet and reader” (7). Like Fish, she assumes the intentional view behind the poem’s pedagogy, positing with relative assurance her own Milton (which is taken for granted after Fish to be subjectively valid). Likewise, she describes the effects of the text as if it were a stable entity (again, in the manner of Fish).

As Lucy Newlyn later notes in her review, Lewalski defines her methods against the theories of Harold Bloom as well as Fish, writing, “I do not find [Milton’s] engagement with literary precursors characterized by anxiety, struggle, transumption, or

triumph” (7).<sup>10</sup> Resisting Fish’s view of a “rigorous and punitive teacher...causing [readers] to recognize and reenact their own fallenness,” she revises Fish’s corrective patterns like Crosman, depicting a Milton who advances “his readers’ understanding through a literary regimen at once intellectually demanding and delightful” (8).

Conscious of Bloom’s theory of influence, Lewalski asserts independence of both Fish and Bloom. However, Lewalski continues the methods and assumptions outlined in *Surprised by Sin*, albeit in different terms. Thus, she reflects the influence of Fish’s work while like many other critics denying any such affiliation.

In a review published the same year as Lewalski’s reading (1985), Bill Readings reacts strongly against the bold style of Stanley Fish, writing that

Fish seeks to play God to the reader, saying, ‘you may not be clever enough to understand all my points, but you must recognize that I am right.’ He thus allows himself the same process of accommodation to mere mortals that he describes God as practicing. None dare blow the whistle on Fish’s grandiose assertions. (139)

Readings thus emphasizes his concern about Fish’s practice of criticism, noting the frustrating “escape clause” of Fish’s theory, that “In fact, Fish cannot authorize his reading over anyone else’s” (140). Indeed, as Readings stresses, critics like Lewalski find it more expedient to follow the first and second patterns, implicitly or explicitly incorporating Fish’s approach into their own.

In light of critical response to Milton and later to *Surprised by Sin*, it seems difficult to avoid some form of intentionalist reading. In fact, both Fish and Kolbrener agree that, in order to speak coherently of the author’s work, some form of intentionalist approach is necessary and unavoidable (Kolbrener 6). Following the third pattern of

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<sup>10</sup> Bloom himself distinguishes Milton from the patterns of influence exhibited by later poets. Here, Lewalski in fact seems to be in accord with Bloom, though she distinguishes her method from those of

direct confrontation, Lucy Newlyn warns about the dangers of Fish's intentionalist view for critical consciousness in her 1986 *TLS* review. At the time, writes Newlyn, Milton critics faced a theoretical choice between Harold Bloom on the left and Stanley Fish on the right. Objecting to Fish's centered version of Milton, Newlyn posits several compelling questions about the future of the critical discourse:

Is the text controlled, as Fish would argue, by an omniscient narrator, who betrays the reader into fallen assumptions as part of a humiliating programme of education and reform? Or alternatively (as Blake and Bloom would see it) are fallen implications celebrated, by narrator and reader alike, as the defeat of Our Great Forbidder Reason (the ego) by Desire (the id)? (871)

Newlyn decries the "baleful effect" on criticism of the prevalent "extreme intentionalist view" directly or indirectly linked to Fish (871). Fish, for Newlyn, has become in Bloom's terms, a covering cherub barring critical innovation and the embracing of multiple meanings.

Further, Newlyn laments that the "moral scheme" Fish articulates consistently informs critical assumptions. For instance, Newlyn finds Barbara Lewalski's suggestive treatment of Milton's allusion stifled by moralistic reduction, in which evil's "disturbing likeness [to heroic figures] is seen as the ironic confirmation of reassuring difference, by which it is finally subdued" (871). Other studies relating to Milton's poetic influences consistently subordinate "the ambiguous workings of allusion" to an essentially Christian "higher truth" (871). While "Homeric and Virgilian allusions...are a vital source of tension," critics ultimately tend to dissect Satan's "version of events" in favor of a Christian reading (871). In the end, Newlyn writes, "the reader can either become ensnared in the subtext or choose to subjugate words to the Word" (871).

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Bloom's followers (who might consider Milton in light of his literary forbearer, Edmund Spenser).

Continuing her attack, Newlyn contends that a paralyzing intentionalist approach prevents critics from viewing *Paradise Lost* in light of post-Derridean theory. To demonstrate, Newlyn cites R.A. Shoaf's contention that, "More than any other text I know...*Paradise Lost* is intended. To deconstruct...would necessarily be to transgress." As Newlyn later contends, however, "allusion *is* transgression," and the ironic "subtext" of *Paradise Lost* offers a valuation of the fallen world which is integral to its meaning" (*"Paradise Lost" and the Romantic Reader* 66). As Newlyn is doubtless aware, Fish himself would agree with this assessment, yet in addition to this valuation he would reassert his view that Milton allows this "subtext" as part of his strategy in illustrating the reader's perception of fallen consciousness. It is human desires and emphases that need to be refocused, Fish implies; the poem does not need to be adjusted to modern demands. Reacting to this contextualization, Newlyn expresses her concern that the influence of *Surprised by Sin* has reached the point of *influenza*.

### (iii) CRYSTALLIZATION (1987-1997)

More than any effusive praise, sustained challenges to Fish's hegemony denote the enduring influence and critical recognition of his work during this span. Two book-length studies, both published in time for the thirty-year anniversary of *Surprised by Sin*'s initial publication, follow the third pattern and focus primarily on unseating Fish's version of Milton. As is true for Milton's God, his influence is best measured in the exertions of his challengers, among whom Joseph Wittreich asserts himself in 1987. Though in his earlier work, Wittreich finds Fish's thesis useful, his critical consideration of feminism alters this view and ignites his anxiety. This year, Joseph Wittreich publishes *The Feminist Milton*, both a call for altering the direction of "new feminist"

Milton criticism and an insightful examination of overlooked historical responses of women. Wittreich's feminist approach to critical history resembles Kolbrener's later historiographical contribution; both present sustained critiques of critical trends through a careful consideration of old and new criticism, and both follow the third pattern of directly confronting Fish's influence.

Wittreich calls for a reconciliation in the "bifurcated" feminist criticism, a division, he writes, between those who focus on "how to read Milton" and those who emphasize "how Milton came to be read" (7). Wittreich aligns himself with the "revisionary view of literary history, which sees Milton's early female readership rising up against the patriarchal tradition of Scripture and sees Milton himself as an ally in, not antagonist to, such an enterprise" (7). Wittreich continues that, "Those...engaging feminist issues often align themselves with the tired clichés of Christian humanism, while those...venturing supposedly new readings of Milton's poetry mount their antipatriarchal interpretations upon the patriarchal criticism (theoretical, literary...) of Harold Bloom [and] Stanley Fish" (8). Indeed, Fish's reader fits the "self-idealized academic male reader" which Wittreich contrasts with his "historical female readership" (8). Following the critiques of Cain and Newlyn, Wittreich claims that, though Fish's method may

foster critical independence...it simultaneously forfeits a critical consciousness. When criticism is depoliticized, so are the texts it addresses. When its texts are depoliticized, they become, along with the criticism they sponsor, compliant to the institutions of civilization and transmitters of its ideologies. By resisting social and political impingements on criticism, such neutrality also disallows political sophistication and historical engagement in the texts...it ensures the separation of art and society. A carryover from the New Critics, this neutrality is no proper servant for a feminist criticism. (151)

The “feminist criticism” Wittreich posits would offer a subjective substitution similar to Fish’s own. Wittreich’s suggested approach “would bring the stammerings of a text to full utterance...would construct positive, not negative, models of exchange between art and society” (151). Fish’s “model of exchange” in *Surprised by Sin* would certainly be unpalatable to the ideology of feminism, particularly as it is expressed by Wittreich. The full articulation of the “stammerings” Wittreich suggests would likely represent contrast with Fish’s own asserted meanings. Thus, writing in the context of feminist criticism and following the third pattern of response, Wittreich finds Fish a source of anxiety, highlighting one aspect of the ideological function of Fish’s influential thesis.

In contrast to Wittreich’s response, Marshall Grossman follows the first pattern, incorporating Fish’s thesis into his individual critical practice. In his 1987 work, *“Authors to Themselves”: Milton and the Revelation of History*, Grossman indicates a general harmony between Fish’s approach to the “fallen” reader and his own method. For example, in considering the problem of Milton’s God, Grossman writes that “The difficulty of accepting the Father is, as Stanley Fish points out, a measure of our ‘crookedness’ or, in the terms of the present argument, the exorbitance of our desires” (50). Like many critics before and after his own, Grossman translates Fish’s language into his own formula, appropriating or “transuming” the method of *Surprised by Sin* into his own framework.

While critics like Grossman adopt and work within Fish’s terms, John Peter Rumrich follows the third pattern and takes his place as one of the strongest challengers to the influence of *Surprised by Sin*. One of the most vocal advocates of the heretical Milton during this decade, Rumrich co-edits a collection dedicated to *Milton and Heresy*,

challenging the more-than-residual influence of Fish's work from the late 1980s through the late 1990s. In 1987, the same year as Grossman writes, Rumrich publishes *Matter of Glory: A New Preface to "Paradise Lost,"* in which surfaces the seed of his later criticism of Fish's harsh pedagogy. Rumrich writes that "the catechismal version of *Paradise Lost* proposed by Fish resembles more the work of a Presbyterian didact such as the self-righteous Richard Baxter (seven citations in *Surprised by Sin*) than the work of a politico-religious Independent like Milton" (*Matter of Glory* 9-10). Rumrich again remarks ruefully in 1990 (and reformulates in his 1996 book-length expansion) that "the contemporary generation of Milton scholars seems to agree that *Paradise Lost* instructs readers by convicting them of sin" ("Uninventing Milton" 250).

Sustaining his critique for roughly a decade, Rumrich targets Fish's emphasis on punitive reader-education, referring to Fish's reading as "pedagogically disastrous" (252). He strongly critiques Fish's emphasis on "reconstructing the historically appropriate reader" while falling to the "historicist" temptation of "reducing the subject to his background" (252). In *Milton Unbound*, his 1996 expansion of his thesis challenging Fish's "hegemony," Rumrich attempts the daunting task of dismantling *Surprised by Sin* "on its own terms" (3). Rumrich takes issue with the post-Fish "invented Milton, a rhetorical artifact or paradigm foundational to contemporary Milton scholarship,"<sup>11</sup> and

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<sup>11</sup> For one example, Rumrich cites a "recent, award-winning book," Georgia B. Christopher, *Milton and the Science of the Saints* (Princeton, 1982), 144. Christopher writes that "Stanley Fish *has shown* how *Paradise Lost* is constructed for evangelical purposes so as to elicit a pattern of alternating identification with and rejection of the characters, in order to convict the reader of sin" (144, italics mine). Interestingly, the award Rumrich notes here is the Milton Society's annual James Holly Hanford Award for the outstanding contribution to Milton studies. Fish's republication of the second edition of *Surprised by Sin* with a new preface also won the Hanford Award—for "Best Book of 1997." Rumrich cites this award as a useful indicator of a work's acceptance within Milton's "interpretive community" ("Uninventing Milton" 250, n.6). If *Surprised by Sin* needed any reaffirmation, reception of the Hanford Award would indicate a positive response.

he attempts to supplant Fish's orthodoxy with "Milton's heretical materialism" (xii). Fish's work, he contends, "inaugurated a period in Milton criticism analogous to what Kuhn describes as 'normal science,' a condition in which practitioners expend their labors to extend and deepen a working paradigm rather than rehash fundamental issues that it resolved" (2).

Though this situation might seem to be a positive development, Rumrich like Newlyn finds the post-Fish stasis in Milton studies woefully unenergetic. Rumrich emphasizes the strong cultural and ideological significance of Fish's work for subsequent critics, noting that, "for some, disputes over critical methodology do not signify in comparison with what might be regarded as the cultural stakes—Milton's allegiance to an unproblematic, centrist orthodoxy" (3). "In the case of Milton scholarship," Rumrich writes,

the internal logic of what I call the paradigmatic Milton may be described as a closed dialectical circuit. The dialectical structure has helped a very misleading vision of the poet to prosper—the representation of Milton as a carping didact, aggressive misogynist, and poet of the emerging bourgeoisie. (xii)

In part using Marxist critical terms, Rumrich attempts to redeem Milton from such charges by disestablishing Fish's generally accepted "invention" of Milton. Like Newlyn, Rumrich is comfortable with uncertainty and "multiplicity," stating that "the victory of *Paradise Lost*, to the extent Milton manages it, lies in helping us to accept the ambiguity, doubt, and indeterminacy constitutional of our lives, without succumbing to the fear that our existence is meaningless, or worse, malignant" (xii).

Contrary to Fish's Milton, Rumrich holds that "material indeterminacy and inconclusiveness, in the formlessness of chaos, are for Milton constitutional of the

cosmos, of morality, and indeed are essential to the deity himself” (xii). Stanley Fish responds to Rumrich in his 1997 preface, however, emphasizing that his “assertion of a God who is really God is not at odds with human choice and its incredibly rich history in ‘the Race of time’ (*Paradise Lost* 12.554); rather, it is his absolute power that at once makes available the space of human choice and renders it meaningful by providing it with a centre” (lxiv). Fish finalizes his refutation of Rumrich by asserting the futility of Rumrich’s declared intention to attack Fish’s “structure of thought” on its own terms. Rumrich would do better, Fish implies, to assert his own independent structure as a viable alternative. Though Rumrich attempts to construct an alternative in the manner of Christopher Hill and others, his study falls primarily in the third category, exerting its energy chiefly toward decentering Fish’s own construction.

In 1988, Richard Corum follows the second pattern of response, addressing the influence of Fish’s thesis by situating it in his own critical terms. Preceding Rumrich’s later book-length attack on Fish’s thesis, Richard Corum provides an interesting psychologically based critique of Fish, summarizing *Surprised by Sin* in psychoanalytic terms. In his article published in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, Corum restates Fish’s thesis, writing that “Milton puts all the rich and beautiful adolescent trinkets about the door of the cave where the invisible icon stands.” The purpose of this array of verbal glitter, according to Corum, is entrapment, “so that those of us who are like Stephano and Trinculo can mistake this inherently imaginary, material ‘trash’—Eve’s watery image, for example, or Satan’s massive weapons—if we will, for what is truly real, namely, the symbolic structure of the adult Father’s law” (*Milton and the Idea of Woman* 147). Corum’s image-laden summary describes Fish’s work in part through language of New

Criticism, in particular recalling the title of William K. Wimsatt's landmark 1954 New Critical study, *The Verbal Icon*.

While Corum engages and appropriates Fish in his own critical terms, many other critics during this time follow the fourth pattern and work without any stated or apparent reference to Fish's approach. In 1988, *Re-Membering Milton* is published, a volume of criticism featuring a diversity of method and theoretical representation, from Mary Nyquist's essay, "The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity in the Divorce Tracts and in *Paradise Lost*," to Corlivia Herron's "Milton and Afro-American Literature." In 1994, Gale Carrithers and James Hardy consider *Milton and the Hermeneutic Journey* without deference or explicit reference to the revolutionary critical hermeneutics of *Surprised by Sin*. In short, while many critics affirm Fish's influence during the span from 1987 through 1997, that influence is also challenged directly and even more through conspicuous lack of acknowledgment among a representation of criticism.

As I have stressed, an awareness of critical anxiety often characterizes the language of critical studies of Milton criticism. It is virtually a commonplace that Milton critics, at least since Bentley, have often tended to identify with their subject to the point of asserting meaning in the name of the author. One aspect of author-based criticism, after all, is an affinity for the function—John Milton, for instance—which unifies the body of work. Not all authors inspire the response that Milton elicits, however, as William Kolbrener observes in his 1996 study of Milton criticism under what he considers the unproductive historiographical "governing trope" of the war in heaven. Among "meta-criticism," Kolbrener's *Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements* represents a formidable alternative to the view of good versus evil, angels

versus demons. Following the third pattern of response, Kolbrener both challenges the terms of Fish's hegemony and presents a historically conscious alternative.

Kolbrener views Fish's influence in a different context than that of Rumrich, setting Fish's reading among a tradition of Whig interpretations that essentially begins with Bentley's 1732 edition of *Paradise Lost*. Though Kolbrener, in contrast with Rumrich, does not see Fish's reading as overtly "dominant," he contends that the modern "satanic" readings of a heretical, revolutionary Milton define themselves against Fish's work, using Fish's terms. Kolbrener writes that

an implicit argument of this study is that Fish's angelic reading of Milton—once dominant in the field—sets the terms for a variety of contemporary satanic readings of Milton. This latest set of tensions between Fish and a new generation of neo-Marxist critics realizes a paradigm initiated in the late seventeenth century. (4)

Recalling earlier evaluations such as Belsey's, Kolbrener asserts that "Stanley Fish...constructs an 'absolutist' Milton in direct competition with the 'liberal' Milton of a previous generation" (3). According to Kolbrener, an unproductive opposition monopolizes the terms of critical discourse on Milton. Considering Milton as either orthodox or heretic, reactionary or revolutionary, modern critics follow a lexicon which fails to allow for any "polyvalence" in the author's text. Kolbrener sees Fish as perpetuating the same false either-or dichotomy. Instead of allowing for variation, Kolbrener implies, critics like Fish transmute the author's ideas through their own confining ideological terms.

According to Kolbrener, the arguments of Christopher Kendrick, "the most powerful contemporary variation of the satanic argument" (3), and others within the

“satanic” camp define themselves against Fish’s terms. Kolbrener himself adopts a historically conscious intentionalist thesis, asserting,

Though I will not go so far as to agree with Stanley Fish that ‘there is only one true interpretation of *Paradise Lost*,’ the current sets of readings, ultimately intentionalist (and thus more like Fish’s than either Corns’s or Jameson’s), argues for a Milton who produced texts, not ‘internally contradictory’ as in Corns’s reading, but *polyvalent*. (6)

Kolbrener notes that his own methodology is in some ways consistent with that of Thomas N. Corns, “whose investigation into ‘the plurality of Miltonic ideology’ has led him (following the historiographical impulse) to affirm that the ‘multiplicity of Miltons’ is ‘reflective’ of ‘the cultural and political assumptions’ of its various interpreters” (6). In contrast, Kolbrener writes, “Where Corns argues for various distinct versions of Milton, each bearing its own aspect of ‘unity,’ I am arguing for a unified *reading* of Milton which—to echo the primary metaphor of mediation in the seventeenth century, *discordia concors*—has multiple aspects” (6). Indeed, Kolbrener’s approach does follow the second pattern of response in adopting the intentional approach, though one of his main objects is the disestablishment of Fish’s hegemony.

In part by reconsidering the problems that *Surprised by Sin* assuaged, Kolbrener arrives at his own alternate reading of Milton and Milton’s critics. He states that, “In Corns’s reading, Milton’s critics have extrapolated unified readings from Milton’s ‘convoluted’ text; in my reading, it is the critics who have made Milton ‘convoluted’ by insisting upon monolithic reading of his works” (6). Here surfaces Kolbrener’s critique of the meta-critical trope of the war in heaven. Ultimately, Kolbrener argues, Milton in part employed a lexicon resistant to interpretation by post-Enlightenment readers who sought to appropriate his poetry for their own. Milton’s complex lexicon, he contends, is at least

partially responsible for ongoing (and ultimately unresolvable) disputes over Milton as a unified religious or political—ideological—mouthpiece. In view of Milton's resistance to the lexicon of post-Enlightenment criticism, Kolbrener holds that the war in heaven is "not the most appropriate paradigm for interpreters of Milton's works" (7).

To a certain extent, the success of Kolbrener's work like Fish's stands on its own critical reception. He notes his own susceptibility to his method, writing that "There may be many ways of historicizing *this* study" (7). Indeed, criticism could conceivably degenerate into infinite self-scrutiny, as Christopher Hill warns, but Kolbrener attempts to derail what he sees as the blind trends that govern critical views. Kolbrener does not claim to transcend the intentionalist identification with his author-subject; rather, in the manner of Fish, he self-consciously asserts the subjectivity of his participation in the interpretive community. In the process of critiquing Fish's complicity in the false argument of "Whig history," Kolbrener follows the logical consequences of Fish's method in his own approach. As Bloom theorizes, critics suffer anxieties similar to those of poets. Kolbrener demonstrates the pertinence of this theory, adapting Fish's contextualization of critics to include Fish himself. Where Fish places critics in two camps, each with a "valid response" to his Milton, Kolbrener presents a brilliant transumption of Fish's thesis, situating Fish as the leading expositor of an ideological lexicon that is in large part foreign to (Kolbrener's) Milton. Beside Rumrich, Kolbrener represents Fish's strongest challenger. Like Crosman and other critics in the second category, Kolbrener evinces a thorough, sustained engagement with Fish's work, adopting and adapting his methods to a new purpose. However, more than Crosman or even Kerrigan, Kolbrener directs his study to countering the influence of Fish's work.

Again, as Kolbrener has noted, the success of his work depends like Fish's on practical usefulness and positive reception.

As if Kolbrener and Rumrich had hailed the second coming of their critical subject, Stanley Fish republished *Surprised by Sin* a year later, in 1997, with an extensive preface that addresses significant challenges to his thesis over the course of several decades. Like Milton's good Christian who embraces challenges to strengthen virtue, Fish the Miltonist answers the criticism of the past decades and strengthens the faith he declares in his Milton and his poem. The conclusion of this span is heralded by the republication of *Surprised by Sin* with a new preface signifying the author's continued engagement in sustaining its influence.

#### **(iv) SLIGHT VARIATIONS (1997-PRESENT)**

During this most recent span, in 2001, Fish publishes his expansive and insightful follow-up to *Surprised by Sin*, *How Milton Works*, in which he notes that his thoughts on Milton have varied only slightly since his first consideration (i). Critical responses to and variations upon *Surprised by Sin* continue to proliferate. Likewise, an increasing volume of criticism is published in the third pattern of response, from alternative theoretical and critical standpoints. *Milton and the Grounds of Contention*, published in 2003, features psychoanalytic, historicist, and other methods from which direct reference to Fish's theory is conspicuously absent.

In her 1998 work, *The Ruins of Allegory*, Catherine Gimelli Martin echoes the anxiety of Rumrich that "most critics still adhere to the influential model outlined by Fish [in *Surprised by Sin*]" (133). Following the third pattern of response, Martin finds Fish's method detrimental to her critical practice. In particular, she critiques Fish's underlying

metaphysical assumptions. Martin laments the “suspicion of metaphor” that results from Fish’s influence, lamenting that “the Miltonic image continues to conform to the standard laws of Christianity and Neoplatonism” (133). Martin writes that under Fish’s method, the

presumed vitalism of Milton’s “symbolic” poetics is thus falsely identified with Christianity’s characteristic attempt to transcend the literal in the metaphysical Word; and so, in place of the kinesthetic dynamism of the baroque image, the reader of *Paradise Lost* supposedly discovers an archetypal world of mystified metaphors that doubly bond abstract with concrete qualities. (134)

Where Martin reads a “kinesthetic dynamism” in Milton’s use of image, she finds Fish’s Christian metaphysics hermeneutically limiting. Following the third pattern of response, Martin confronts Fish’s method as an obstacle to her own critical productivity.

In contrast to Martin, without expression of anxiety or attack on Fish’s hegemony, Robert McMahon provides a compelling revision of Fish’s thesis in 1998 with *The Two Poets of “Paradise Lost.”* Following the second pattern of adapting and revising Fish’s thesis, McMahon situates Milton’s narrative voice in the epic tradition, presenting a solution to the standing critique of the harshness of Fish’s pedagogical narrative. Instead of the “chastening” narrative voice of Fish, who ignores the figure of the narrator and identifies Milton “solely with the author of the poem,” McMahon posits that “Milton created a narrator who is imagining his poem in an ongoing present” (11). This narrator (a Bard in the oral tradition) experiences the poem’s temptations temporally, with the reader; here, “the reader is chastened because the Bard chastens himself” (11). Here, while allowing for the preservation of Fish’s thesis, McMahon employs a distinction Fish fails to make between Milton and his narrator, disarming critiques of Fish’s pedagogy by rendering the narrator a sympathetic sharer in the reader’s experience.

Where McMahon revises Fish's thesis to render Milton's narrator more sympathetic, Neil Forsyth does the same for Satan. If any work after Fish effectively renders a cohesive vision of Satan's incumbency in *Paradise Lost*, that work is Neil Forsyth's 2001 study, *The Satanic Epic*. Forsyth alleges "a conscious attempt by orthodox, pro-God critics (whether actively Christian or not) to deflate Satan's wonderfully persuasive rhetoric and show forth his moral flaws" (4). Yet, rather than challenging *Surprised by Sin* as a work of "pro-God" criticism, Forsyth primarily follows the first and second patterns of response, drawing on Fish's method in harmony with his own. Assuming, like Fish, a view of the text as an agent interacting with the reader, Forsyth presents a reading in line with Fish's but in sentiment affiliated with Romantic readings. According to Forsyth "The poem...invites us, during its concluding dialogue with the angel, to take seriously the possibility that Adam might rejoice at his own sin. If that is the Satanic choice, so be it. The poem frequently invites similar choices from its readers, and makes the choices hard" (73). Forsyth shares with Lucy Newlyn an affinity for indeterminacy, a belief in Milton's own uncertainty about Satan, though he does not reject Fish's central pedagogical emphasis. Milton, living in an "age of controversy," realized that "Satan was the vehicle for the articulation of such controversies" (73). According to Forsyth, "some of the fascination of his poetry lies in...how close he makes one side feel to the other" (73). The reader here still learns his own weakness; what Forsyth stresses is the over-rationalized impact Satan actually has on the unsuspecting reader. Forsyth's reading reflects a sustained engagement with *Surprised by Sin*; as he acknowledges, his reading is not in direct argument with Fish. Rather, Forsyth demonstrates that the appeal of Satan and his revolutionary associations is not lessened

by reading *Paradise Lost* through Fish's method. In adapting and enhancing Fish's thesis, Forsyth follows the second pattern in acknowledging Fish's work as a functional and essential part of his Miltonic critical heritage.

Joanna Picciotto presents another compelling and perhaps more straightforward variation on Fish's thesis, while incorporating elements of Newlyn's critique<sup>12</sup>. Picciotto embraces the potentially destabilizing similarities between fallen and unfallen language, while situating them again in the reader's experience of edification. Adhering to Fish's premise that *Paradise Lost* aims to experientially correct the reader's fallen perception, Picciotto argues that Milton's language emphasizes a disturbing continuity between fallen and unfallen states, rather than the "rigid boundary" that Fish renders between the two realms of experience (40). Instead of sharp lapsarian distinctions surprising the reader, it is disturbing continuity that challenges the reader's complacent perception of a distant, incommensurable Eden. Picciotto argues that "Milton's famous dips into apparently fallen syntax when describing life in paradise are just what they seem to be: attempts to *unsettle* an at once naive and corrupt understanding of innocence as a reassuringly alien and irrecoverable condition to which no 'fallen' modifier could ever be usefully applied" (40). The challenge for Picciotto's reader, then, is that the original state is recoverable, but only through constant work. Picciotto essentially reformulates Fish's emphasis on Christian edification, rather than asserting a wholly independent structure of interpretation. Indeed, the innovative readings of Picciotto, Forsyth and McMahon represent only a few noteworthy contributions within the grand sweep of critical work on Milton during this time frame.

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<sup>12</sup> For Newlyn's argument, see above, p.32.

The responses I have analyzed over the course of this chapter follow four basic patterns in addressing Fish's view of Milton: acceptance, revision, challenge, and refocusing. As I have stressed, each pattern reveals a continued critical acknowledgment of the significance of Fish's work for Milton scholarship. Criticism is an ongoing dialogue, and *Surprised by Sin* itself has become the object of such a sustained exchange. This dialogue has helped to clarify the enduring value of Fish's work. As angels and demons acclaim and accuse, what emerges is a continually dynamic artefact of Milton criticism. However, the method articulated by Fish is obviously not the only major discourse among Miltonists. Other critics continue to follow the fourth pattern and refocus their debates within the terms of feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, or poststructuralist theories. All theory sets the dimensions for critical allegory (a Marxist, for instance, might construct a complex economic allegory), and Fish posits a plausible set of terms for *Paradise Lost*: the Christian allegory. Where postmodern critics interpret Milton's poem according to their own dimensions, Fish operates on the assumption that Milton's affirmation of faith is fundamentally distinct from those of postmodern theorists. Thus, critics attempting to refocus critical allegory away from Christian terms find the emphasis of Fish's practice unhelpful (if historically plausible). In the following chapter, then, I will discuss the relation of Fish's Christian metaphysical assumptions to his continued critical influence.

### CHAPTER 3 SURPRISED BY THEORY: THE CRITIC

An influential work of criticism can reconfigure the terms of its own discussion, and, as the critics surveyed have implicitly and explicitly attested, *Surprised by Sin* achieves this effect. Though Fish's text represents one critical voice among many, its combined stance in theory and practice fortify it from straight empirical disapproval. Realizing the limits of the "objectivity" reflected in earlier critical writing and refined in the methods of the New Critics, Fish boldly forays into uncharted critical terrain. Where critics like Brooks and Wimsatt religiously dodge subjectivist pitfalls (the "intentional" and "affective" fallacies), Fish jumps directly into the fray, defining the author's intention as the creation of an affective experience. Assuming the mantle of subjectivity, Fish fuses New Critical assertive confidence with theory, describing Milton's text as an objective entity in the context of his subjective experience as reader. Fish surprises the critical establishment by reformulating the "traditional" Milton, using theory to solve a controversy ultimately rooted in theory.

As Patrick Murray observes in his critical survey published the same year as *Surprised by Sin*, "The Milton Controversy has often been less concerned with the merits and defects of *Paradise Lost* than with the claims of rival critical theories" (10). Where, during this controversy, "Milton and his work have been drawn into literary politics, into arguments about the merits of Christianity" (Murray 10), Fish offers an escape from such thinly veiled theological and metaphysical disputes. Both ideological camps hold valid positions, in Fish's schema, and Milton intends their reactions to his text. However, rather than deconstructing Milton's text from a postmodern view, Fish centers his version of *Paradise Lost* in Lewis's orthodox Christianity.

In reconstructing a literary-theoretical version of the orthodox Milton and *Paradise Lost*, Fish posits his own versions of both author and text. Where critics as early as Blake questioned Milton's affinity for his God, Fish posits that Milton's God truly exists for Milton as the generative, metaphysically real, perfect being. Fish's Milton places the onus of interpretation on fallen humanity rather than blaming God for failing to reach those who chose to disregard him. Thus, critics who expect Milton to conform to modern standards of poetry and ideology end up like Eliot condemning the poet and his poem. *Surprised by Sin* challenges the expectations of modern critics, constantly stressing Milton's emphasis on Christian virtue in contrast to the view of Milton as a prototypical liberal humanist. Thus, Fish asserts a Milton who acknowledges and rejects the modern metaphysical perspective that linguistic meaning has no transcendent origin.

In elaborating his method, Fish describes his critical strategy as a metaphysical "politics of being," acknowledging in his 1997 preface that his defense of *Surprised by Sin* seemingly "turned objectors into devils and replied to their points by hitting them over the head with mine" (lxv). Fish further articulates the critical significance of his method, proclaiming from his subjective pulpit that

a criticism that puts its faith in empirical research is condemned because it flies in the face of the politics of being (as if the politics of being were an established fact and not a disputable thesis), which is also to condemn it for reversing the priority of first conceptions over the realm of experience...which is also to condemn it for being idolatrous in that it looks for meaning and value in all the wrong places. (lxv)

In parentheses, Fish circumscribes and highlights the contingency, the internal "structure of thought" of his theoretical stance. He can assert this self-referential circularity without apology because it is consistent with his Milton; thus, he maintains that "circularity, of a deep not meretricious kind, is what I attribute to Milton's *universe* where...all virtues are

one virtue” (lxv). Elaborating on his original argument in a 1996 article, “Why We Can’t All Just Get Along,” Fish stresses the perceptual limitations of the “modern liberal-enlightenment picture of cognitive activity in which the mind is conceived of as a calculating and assessing machine that is open to all thoughts and closed to none” (26).

In *Surprised by Sin*, Fish not only illustrates the challenges of Milton’s fit reader; he asserts the inadequacies of the modern critic in interpreting Milton’s work. Thus, critics who would define Milton in terms of modern ideology react strongly against the influence of Fish’s thesis. The following two sections further explore the theoretical underpinnings of Fish’s work and influence, both in the assertion of a consistent, orthodox substitution of Milton’s author-function and in the metaphysical assertion of the centrality of Milton’s God. A consideration of *Surprised by Sin* in the context of the poststructuralist theory of Derrida and Foucault, in particular, I believe, will further illuminate the nature of Fish’s “hegemony.” As I will emphasize, the critical anxiety reflected above in part stems from the theoretical posturing discussed below.

#### **(i) MILTON: THE AUTHOR-FUNCTION**

The visceral responses of critics since Milton’s own time indicate that the name “John Milton” represents a formidable author-function among English literary figures, challenging the central beliefs of his readers. As Kolbrener contends, Milton’s readers often attempt to appropriate the author for their own ideological ends. Thus, critics like Rumrich object to methods that “imply that Milton is a trophy in an intellectual war, an object secured only by removal to the camp of the victors” (“Uninventing Milton” 251). Though Milton as an author rarely seems to evade controversy, particularly in his prose writing, the reception of his poem *Paradise Lost* has never unambiguously affirmed

either its heterodoxy or its orthodoxy. As the work of Joseph Wittreich evinces, a historically diverse readership found significance through the culturally revolutionary elements latent in the poem's subtext. In contrast, Fish criticizes what he calls the "liberal-humanist" version of Milton, in his 1997 preface, decrying the liberal synthesis of the author which maintains that, "despite aspects of his theology and ethics that seem unyielding and ungenerous, Milton is really a good hearted celebrator of difference, and a proto-postmodernist to boot" (xli). More recent controversies over authorial intention have focused on the relation between Milton's prose, particularly *De doctrina Christiana*, and his poetry.<sup>13</sup> As W.H. Auden wrote that Freud became a "climate of opinion" more than a name, so the author-function Milton has come to represent a wide range of opposing opinion.<sup>14</sup> The name Milton when used in critical discourse hardly calls to mind a cohesive point of reference; rather, it performs what Foucault might describe as a "classificatory function" (147). Conscious or unconscious exploitation of this function, for instance, would allow critics who seek to appropriate Milton for the "satanic" camp to read Milton's prose writing as a more-or-less direct gloss upon his poetry.

Earlier and more recent controversies over the attribution and significance of *De doctrina Christiana* attest to the significance of the questions of authorship and the actual coherence and interrelation of Milton's vast array of writings. These questions touch the core of literary criticism and theory: Do we read *Paradise Lost* (or any other poetic work

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<sup>13</sup> A good summary of this controversy can be found in John P. Rumrich, "The Provenance of *De doctrina Christiana*: A View of the Present State of the Controversy," *Milton and Heresy*. For original essays on this controversy, see William B. Hunter, "The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*," *Studies in English Literature* 32 (1992): 129-42. Responses by Barbara K. Lewalski and John T. Shawcross, as well as rebuttal by Hunter, follow Hunter's essay under the title "Forum: Milton's *Christian Doctrine*," 143-66.

<sup>14</sup> Auden writes upon Freud's death, "to us he is no more a person / Now but a whole climate of opinion / Under whom we conduct our different lives" ("In Memory of Sigmund Freud [d. Sept. 1939]," *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, 1976, 217).

ascribed to Milton) as an independent entity, distinct in purpose, time, and context, even from other works of the same author? In discussing conceptions of the “heretical Milton,” Stephen Dobranski poignantly observes that “Modern criticism’s strategy for defining the author requires the resolution of inconsistencies” (*Milton and Heresy* 146). Dobranski thus finds a valuable comment on the various controversies involving Milton in Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” The notion of author, as Dobranski cites Foucault,<sup>15</sup> “constitutes a principle of unity in writing,” and “serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts” (146).

Kolbrener’s “angelic” and “satanic” camps both deploy this strategy, with the angelic side either struggling to downplay the governing unity of the author-function in this case, or attempting to remove *De doctrina Christiana* as a subheading of John Milton altogether. Satanic critics in response employ similar tactics in reverse, enacting a critical debate for which Kolbrener’s trope of the war in heaven becomes an apt metaphor. It is, of course, possible to read Milton’s heterodox prose writing, as Fish has, in terms of a public challenge put forth to evoke an equally strong response from his audience, thereby invigorating the faith of his hearers. Thus, for example, Milton challenges the “fugitive and cloister’d virtue” of his countrymen in *Areopagitica* (*Selected Prose* 213). As such, the author, who emphatically denies the possibility of achieving absolute truth through fallen human eyes (*Selected Prose* 234-35), formulates his heresies as contentious assertions, arriving at what some critics see as heretical conclusions. Yet these critics make the same mistake ascribed to “orthodox” critics,

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<sup>15</sup> Dobranski cites Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, 1977), 113-38. The translation I use can be found in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. and trans. Josué Harari (1979), 141-60.

subscribing to a counter-orthodoxy in the closed binary opposition to which Kolbrener alludes. What these critics miss, Fish might argue, is the inconclusiveness of Milton's theological search. The further error, then, is that heretical critics affirm a critical stasis in denying the function of "ethical self-interpretation" to Milton's works (Rumrich, "Uninventing" 251). Milton alludes to this function in *Areopagitica* when he states that "Bad books" (by implication heretical, revolutionary, countercultural books) "to a discreet and judicious Reader serve...to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate" the reader's preexistent faith (*Selected Prose* 211). When critics assume *De doctrina Christiana* or any other prose work as a doctrinal gloss on *Paradise Lost* or any other poem, such critics construct an alternate version of a complacent, doctrinal Milton.

"There is, of course, no patented way to read Milton," New Critic Cleanth Brooks humbly acknowledges, thirteen years before Fish copyrights his own compelling reading (173). In 1954, Brooks takes issue with "misapplied biographical interest [in Milton] and misapplied interest in his ideas." Commenting on the Milton Controversy, Brooks continues that "a great deal of the distaste for Milton's poetry in the last seventy-five years has sprung from a dislike of Milton the man." Brooks warned about the dangers of portraying Milton's ideas in the context of literary criticism, asserting that, "though Milton's ideas are important—*Paradise Lost* is not just a superb organ music throbbing in an intellectual void—still, our concern for this theological and philosophical consistency can push us into ruinous distortions of his poetry" (173). While Brooks' New Critical method has been challenged by Rajan and Fish, among others, his distinction between Milton the thoughtful poet and the Milton the prose thinker reflects a healthy respect for the complexity of the author's body of work. What Rumrich,

employing a now-familiar qualification, refers to as “Fish’s version of the author of *Paradise Lost*” (“Uninventing” 250), is thoroughly Fish’s creation. There is no dichotomy between the text and the ideology Fish ascribes to Milton; the author’s personality is present in every dramatic situation and clever linguistic trap. However, Fish places the onus of properly valuing Milton and his work upon the reader. Fish’s Milton challenges the reader to both recognize and transcend the limits of individual (subjective) human perspective.

While the meaning or literary-critical significance of *Surprised by Sin* cannot be wholly determined through Fish’s own body of work, his theoretical stances illumine the strategy implicit in his early criticism. For instance, in his article, “Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony,” Fish answers Wayne Booth’s “distress” at “an infinite regress of unstable interpretations” in determining “literal and ironic meanings.” Concluding his argument, Fish contends that “rational debate” is possible only through historical context—filtered through a shifting “structure of assumptions and beliefs” (196). Characteristically and here in step with poststructuralist theorists, Fish sees in this uncertainty infinite possibility, a “reassuring sequence in which one set of obvious and indisputable facts gives way to another” (196). What Rumrich refers to as Fish’s “destabilizing hermeneutics” in *Surprised by Sin* enables Fish both to challenge New Critical taboos (which preclude locating textual meaning in either author or reader) and effectively to follow New Critical practice by asserting his (subjective) perspective on *Paradise Lost* in objective terminology, employing a “language of appropriation” that challenges its own readers with an absolutist assertion (safe from general criticism in its theoretical subjectivity).

As I have discussed, through his essentially orthodox Christian approach, Fish fashions a logocentric Milton similar to the Milton outlined in Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. Although Bloom does not affirm Milton's Christian orthodoxy (a task often attributed to Fish), like Fish he asserts Milton's logocentric resistance to the "anxieties" of modern authorship. In his reading, posited like Fish's for the approval of his interpretive community, Bloom affirms a similar Milton, writing that

To Milton, all fallen experience had its inevitable foundation in loss, and paradise could be regained only by One Greater Man, and not by any poet whatsoever.... Milton—as both Johnson and Hazlitt emphasize<sup>16</sup>—was incapable of suffering the anxiety of influence, unlike all of his descendents. (34)

For many of Fish's readers he has conveyed his subject with such conviction that it almost seems that the author knows—indeed, becomes—the poet himself. In the manner of Bloom's strong critic,<sup>17</sup> he has taken and (perhaps mis-) read Milton, ultimately seeming to identify personally with the author-forbearer in his own work.

If Milton designs *Paradise Lost* to educate its reader towards an improved interpretation, then *Surprised by Sin* effectively performs a similar task, teaching the reader how to interpret the poem that will then teach the reader how to interpret itself. *The Anxiety of Influence*, published six years later, relates to *Surprised by Sin* directly; for both works, Milton is a prominent subject. Bloom's theory offers an interesting comment on the nature of Fish's central subject and bearer of meaning—the reader. In his "Interchapter," Bloom asserts that "we deny that there is, was or ever can be a poet as

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<sup>16</sup> Bloom cites Johnson's emphasis that Milton "did not refuse admission to the thought or images of his predecessors, but he did not seek them." (*Anxiety*, 34).

<sup>17</sup> Though he is a "deliberate revisionist" to Freud's emphases, Bloom maintains that a "family romance" underlies all of poetic history. The struggle to become one's poetic father, to attain Victorian "priority in the natural order and authority in the spiritual order," characterizes the history of poetry after Shakespeare, when the "flood" of anxiety swamped poetic (and critical) consciousness (11).

poet—to a reader. Just as we can never embrace (sexually or otherwise) a single person, but embrace the whole of his or her family romance, so we can never read a poet without reading the whole of his or her family romance as poet” (94). While Bloom’s modified Freudian emphasis is of limited use here, it provides an interesting gloss on Fish’s assertion of Milton’s authorial intention.

In writing *Surprised by Sin*, Fish participates to some degree in what Bloom depicts as a “family romance” of literary relations. To the extent that Fish is accepted or seen as a force to be reckoned with among other Milton critics, he becomes a new father figure, as well as a “covering cherub” for Milton scholarship. “All criticisms,” Bloom writes,

that call themselves primary vacillate between tautology—in which the poem is and means itself—and reduction—in which the poem means something that is not itself a poem. Antithetical criticism must begin by denying both tautology and reduction, a denial best delivered by the assertion that the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but another poem—a poem not itself. (70)

To the extent that Fish follows the model of antithetical criticism, he follows it in a practical manner: in Bloom’s terms, *Surprised by Sin* could be interpreted as a poem itself, incorporating and subsuming the original into its own order. For, to Bloom, “Critics are more or less valuable than other critics only (precisely) as poets are more or less valuable than other poets. For just as a poet must be found by the opening in a precursor poet, so must the critic” (95).

Stanley Fish, in Bloom’s terms, might be “found by the (poststructural) opening” in John Milton (95). Indeed, Bloom’s theory represents both a comparison with and a commentary upon Fish’s own critical-theoretical stance. “Poetry,” Bloom writes, “is the anxiety of influence, is misprision, is a disciplined perverseness. Poetry is

misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misalliance” (94). Patterns of Fish’s critical reception indicate that, although many align themselves implicitly or explicitly with Fish’s reading, there are a good number of critics who maintain that Fish has in fact misunderstood, misinterpreted Milton. Some critics, in fact, complain about the stasis, the lack of energy that *Surprised by Sin* has inflicted on Milton studies. “Influence is Influenza—an astral disease,” Bloom asserts. “If influence were health, who could write a poem? Health is stasis” (95). Indeed, Rumrich contends that Milton criticism after Fish has become far too healthy, comparing it to the unquestioning embracing of assumptions necessary for “normal science.” For Rumrich and other critics, the stability he posits is artificial and deadly for interpretation of Milton’s poetry.

#### (ii) FISH’S GOD: SUBSTITUTING THE SOURCE

The overshadowing and underlying presence of what Fish calls the “monist” deity of his Milton contextualizes all overt (Fish might use the term, “superficial”) patterns of conflict, as opposed, of course, to the pleasant interrelations of harmony provided by this God.<sup>18</sup> As I have discussed above, before the time of *Surprised by Sin*, critical debates around *Paradise Lost* reflected a strong emphasis on ideological and theological interests.<sup>19</sup> The orthodox Christian Milton which Fish appropriates, reformulates, and in part helps to establish, occupies a unique place in the context of several historically

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<sup>18</sup> William Kolbrener presents a fascinating discussion of the problems of monistic and dualistic readings in *Milton’s Warring Angels* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); however, apart from the elaborate construction of Kolbrener’s historiography, I find that though this term bears complex and misleading associations (one possible interpretation of monism might be associated with Manichaeism; in another interpretation I have heard that it bears connotations of pantheism), in the context of Fish’s usage this simply and effectively refers to the unifying theme of God’s sustaining presence (as opposed to the theological view of God’s necessary and limiting or limited union with manifested creation).

<sup>19</sup> For a revealing discussion of the ideological debates of the earlier part of the twentieth century, see Carl Freedman, “How To Do Things With Milton: A Study in the Politics of Literary Criticism,” in *Critical Essays on John Milton*, ed. Christopher Kendrick (1995), 19-46. Also see Christopher Kendrick’s introductory essay to the same collection. As I have mentioned earlier, Patrick Murray presents a definitive consideration of the “Milton Controversy” in *Milton: The Modern Phase*.

oriented comparisons between religion and literature. Marxist critic Terry Eagleton observes from his historical view that, since the Victorian period, “As religion progressively ceases to provide...affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be welded together, ‘English’ is constructed as a subject to carry this ideological burden” (21). “The failure of religion,” Eagleton writes, not to mention the declared death of God (the advent of the modern perspective), required a more effective alternative (21). Critics from Matthew Arnold to Northrop Frye have attempted to endow literature with the mythic value of religion, engaging with what Eagleton calls the “deep-seated a-rational fears and needs” common to humankind (20).

At this point, an opposition develops within literature between the objective, doctrinal voice represented by Milton’s God and the subjective, heretical voice of Satan. “Literature from Arnold onwards,” writes Eagleton, becomes “the enemy of ‘ideological dogma,’ an attitude which might have come as a surprise” to John Milton (22-23). Indeed, theorists with evident ideological impulses like Eliot and Leavis attempted to effectively forget Milton. Likewise, Arnold, according to Eagleton, tried “to dissolve away the embarrassingly doctrinal bits of Christianity into poetically suggestive sonorities” (23). In a feminist consideration of Milton’s literary significance, aligned with feminist challenges to the anointed literary canon, Christine Froula writes, consistent with Eagleton’s evaluation, that “Since Matthew Arnold, the institution of literature has been described in terms which liken its authority to that of religion, not only by outsiders—Woolf’s woman ‘divining the priest’—but by insiders who continue to employ the stances and language of religious authority” (324). Using early Christian religious controversies as an allegory, Froula sees parallels in the modern literary

institution. Fish's Milton of course employs the metaphysically imposing "stances and language" of this authority, an observation not lost upon his critics, including Rumrich.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in spite of or because of its theoretical qualification, Fish's reading, restores the full metaphysical significance to Milton's poetry. Fish conveys this metaphysical unity (which almost seems here to transcend the poetry and govern the universe) in an assertively worded statement of apologetics for his version of Milton's deity, Fish writes that

The fact that those who seek to escape God's sphere (to impair him) are repeatedly reclaimed and brought back within it (they never really left) does not mean that the act of containment is either illegitimate or unsuccessful; it means only that the structure of the poem and the structure of the universe is such that all free creatures—angels, men, women, readers—have many more ways to go wrong than go right, and that when they do go wrong, the safety net of a fortunate universe, presided over by a God who can bring good out of evil, will always be there to catch them whether they welcome it or not. (lxvi-lxvii)

Fish reads a God that to his Milton is fundamentally and necessarily good, desiring only good for his creatures. The qualification, "whether they welcome it or not" is the key of perspective. The reader can inhabit Milton's universe, he implies, but there are consequences for perspectival inflexibility.

Fish's God also represents an interesting phenomenon in the context of the post-structuralist theory which he in part draws upon. Where, as Eagleton contends, English literary studies had begun to assume the ideological function of a substitute Christianity, Foucault and Derrida respond to the ideological risks of the modern literary institution by attempting to free the literary discourse from limiting metaphysical constructs. Where Fish's work restores a conception of doctrinal, non-literary Christianity, both theorists

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<sup>20</sup> For an interesting feminist literary application of "Gnostic" interpretation, see for instance Froula, "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (December 1983): 321-45.

advocate a system of substitution and suspension of metaphysical certainty. Post-structuralist theory focuses on decentering, while Fish's Milton is overwhelmingly centered. For Derrida and Foucault, varying substitutes can provide the "center" of discourse; the concept of "subject" or author is hopefully complex and uncertain. For both theorists, antagonistic language must be employed in the same world which requires the author-function.

In his essay, "What Is an Author," Michel Foucault focuses on the decentering of the "privileged position of the author," noting the similarities between St. Jerome's Christian exegetical concept of author and that of modern literary religion (151). "We are accustomed," writes Foucault, recalling the assertive power of Fish's God, "to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations" (145). Advocating multiplicity, as opposed to the monism of Fish's Milton, Foucault writes that "We are used to thinking that as soon as [the author] speaks, meaning begins to proliferate indefinitely" (146). In fact, Foucault writes, the author stands as an ideological bulwark against such a "proliferation of meaning" (146). In what amounts to an attack on the literary religion championed by Arnold, Frye, and the New Critics, Foucault asserts that "Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character" (147). Eagleton echoes the observations of Foucault, noting that the "ultimate truths" of religion, "like those mediated by the literary symbol, are conveniently closed to rational demonstration, and thus absolute in their claims" (20). Beyond opposition, Foucault continues, "It is not enough...to repeat the empty assertion that the author has

disappeared...we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (144). Once one has moved beyond a preoccupation with the author-function, one can focus on the discourse itself, while questions of subject-functions sink to a background murmur.

Beyond the problems of the author-function, Derrida explores the origins of this theoretical language, asserting that a historical "rupture" occurred when "the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought" (878). Fish fills the space of this rupture with his own structural substitution. After this historic rift, Derrida writes, metaphysical certainties began to erode; "it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a being-present...had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (879). Fish's Milton, however, defines this swirling "siege of contraries" in opposition to a metaphysical center. At the moment of antagonism, Derrida writes,

language invades the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse—provided we can agree on this word—that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*. (879)

This de-centering "maintained its most radical formulation," Derrida writes, under the deconstructive discourses of Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger (880). Where these theorists embrace the opposite of his faith, Fish's Milton affirms the pervasiveness of a "transcendental signified." Derrida confirms the tension between deconstruction and

Fish's own critical project, writing that "we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (880). As Fish observes in his 1997 preface, one cannot challenge his "structure of thought" from within; rather, the critic must challenge the *entire structure*, substituting an alternate center. Derrida writes, seeking to engender consciousness of these binary oppositions, "we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity" (880). Fish contends that the critic cannot challenge his thesis, as Rumrich attempts, on its terms. She must set her own terms of interpretation as Fish has done.

Throughout the progression of his argument, Fish heavily stresses the singular Christian focus of *Paradise Lost*. Fish's Milton writes in order to lead his readers to perceive the truth of a unified, living divine deity. Milton's purpose, Fish says, "differ[s] little from that of so many devotional writers, 'to discover to us our miserable and wretched estate through corruption of nature' and to 'shew how a man may come to a holy reformation and so happily recover himself' (Richard Bernard, *The Isle of Man*)" (ix). Further articulating his intentionalist thesis, Fish continues that "what Milton describes in the *Areopagitica*—the piecing together of the shattered image of truth—is no more than this, the recovery of the unified moral vision of Edenic innocence; and it is the task he sets the reader in [*Paradise Lost*]" (160). Fish's characterization shapes a self-assertive author who remains conscious of his theoretical foundations in Christianity. "In Milton's monistic universe," Fish contends, "where 'all things are of God' (*de deo*), a sin against the source is a sin against all" (159).

For Fish's Milton, problems such as politics, history, and race are subsumed in a Christian context of the individual's (really, the reader's) relationship to the Father:

A proper sense of one's relationship to God will yield a proper attitude toward everything that flows from him, since all relationships and the values embodied in them depend on his sustaining power. To turn away from God is to turn away from all values and to default on all obligations, whether they be racial, political or familial. (159).

In Milton's monistic universe, writes Fish, "faith, discipline, obedience—they are one, along with heroism and love; and none of them can be invoked to sanction a movement away from God" (159). Fish continues that, "While the moral structure of the universe—its radical unity—survives the Fall, man's ability to perceive it does not. The impairment of his vision is reflected in the nature of the acts he is required to perform" (159).

Prelapsarian Adam and Eve "discharge their obligations to all derivative forms, keeping the whole law by keeping one point of it (which is the law). But fallen man must keep every point in order to fulfill one."

We the fallen readers must allow ourselves to be led from shadowy types of worldly politics to recognize the truth of God's pervasive plan. The goal of Fish's *Paradise Lost* is the cultivation of virtue, living according to God's plan. The limitations of his fallen perspective stem from a single, all-encompassing act of disobedience—eating the fruit of one tree:

In the Fall, the issue is confused when alternative considerations are created (i.e., Eve's welfare) and as punishment this momentary confusion becomes part of man's intellectual equipment. That is to say, he is no longer able to see the oneness of God's law and is delivered to the Mosaic law, the perfect reflection of his divided vision. (160)

The historic progression of the scheme of Fish's Milton moves from the multiplicity of law to the unity embodied in Jesus Christ. In the mainstream Christian literary canon, the

gospel of John proclaims the advent of a transcendent origin, bearer of meaning, and unifier—an embodied Logos. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”<sup>21</sup> This union of signifier and signified is restored through the person of a transcendent Logos; as Fish writes, “Those who accept Christ live again in prelapsarian freedom because they fulfill the entire law through the *single* decision to believe that he has redeemed them; this belief is the belief Adam and Eve evidence as long as they do not eat” (160). This tenet underlies centuries of Christian doctrine and moral and social guidelines, centered on the person, author, and subject, Jesus Christ. While Fish embraces a destabilizing reader-centric theory, he does not employ it to suspend a metaphysical tradition but to substitute his own version of that tradition, a version which does (as Wittreich has pointed out) exhibit a patriarchal emphasis. For Fish’s Milton, Derrida’s “absence of the transcendental signified” becomes realigned with the metaphysical certainty that Derrida so emphatically withdraws. As Rumrich observes, “In what is becoming a familiar irony, *Surprised by Sin*...accomplished the theoretical liberation of Milton studies by placing a destabilizing hermeneutics in the service of conservative ideology” (250). Instead of following the methods of Foucault and Derrida in the advent of theoretically conscious criticism, many Miltonists have turned to Fish, who unites his historically conscious approach with a method of “theoretical liberation.” It is Fish’s eloquent consideration of the author’s faith, of his metaphysical certainty (as opposed to doctrinal loyalty), that continues to attract new generations of adherents.

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<sup>21</sup> John 1:1-14, KJV (King James Version)

## CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: FISH'S "GRAND STYLE"

For more than a quarter-century, Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin* helped define both positively and negatively the methods of the Miltonists who engaged his work. The direct influence of Fish's thesis, however, is not evident in the writing of every major Miltonist. The work of J. Max Patrick, C.A. Patrides, and Northrop Frye, to name a few prominent critics, has not reflected any explicit influence or dramatic methodical alteration directly attributable to *Surprised by Sin*. Balachandra Rajan, a relative contemporary of Fish's, incidentally acknowledges similarities of thought without expressing either debt or anxiety.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, without the recurring outcry of reviewers and critics Fish's work might seem incidental to the larger pursuits of Milton critics. Often, as Rumrich has observed, Fish's influence is reflected in subtle critical tactics such as Kerrigan's masking his underlying critique with a gesture of apparent deference.

The pervasive power of Fish's reading follows, as I have discussed, from his assertion of an objective system of metaphysics, presided over by a sustaining deity, whom the characters in the poem (and therefore it is assumed, the readers of the poem) cannot reject without experiencing dissatisfaction. Indeed, Fish's substitution of Milton's God as textual center conveys such force that critics, Fish writes,

often assume that it is my ambition to be the third in an unholy trinity: God surrounds and circumscribes the motions of his creatures; Milton wants to surround and circumscribe the motions of his readers; and Fish tries to surround and circumscribe the motions of all those who study and teach the work of Milton. (*Surprised* xii)

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<sup>22</sup> See above, Chapter 2, Section i.

Elaborating on this aspect of Fish's influence in a special 1977 issue of *Genre*, Susan Horton highlights some interesting similarities between the rhetorical strategies Fish attributes to Milton and the strategies of Fish's own writing.

If we... begin with the assumption that any piece of criticism contains not only a critical strategy aimed at a text, but also a strategy calculated to 'entrap' the reader of that criticism, and if, as Fish's basic assumption has it, literary language is best seen as strategies directed towards readers rather than as language intended to communicate information, we ought to begin by seeing Fish's style as strategy rather than as communication. Seen in this way, Fish's 'What we have here is...' is easy to explain. It is a calculated attempt to obscure the fact that what we have here is not, necessarily, or only, what he says at all. Any interpretive strategy other than Fish's own would necessarily yield a different predicate nominative after that is. Fish knows this is so. As he says in his essay in the *Modern Language Notes* 'Responsibilities of the Critic' volume, 'Declaratives create the conditions to which they refer.' (445)

The declarative effects of Fish's language that Horton describes provide an interesting comment on the critical significance of *Surprised by Sin*. Within the relativity of critical opinion, Fish's work represents a seeming contradiction, asserting subjectivity and practicing objective, literary-positivistic criticism. Fish's profession that meaning is subjective and "experiential" provides the basis for his confident assertions of textual and authorial authority, fashioning a personal Milton and *Paradise Lost* in objective language. "One can almost see the accompanying hand gesture," Horton writes, "the gesture of the creator. Whoosh, and out of nothing there is—if not light, at least a new theory of a new interpretation or a new assertion about the nature and function of criticism" (445-46)."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Since Horton's commentary is not in the context of a work of Milton criticism or a direct response to the influence of *Surprised by Sin*, I do not include it among my representation of such responses (Chapter 2). Horton's article represents a consideration of Fish's style in general, which includes but is not specifically focused on the style of *Surprised by Sin*.

In the context of Horton's valuation, Fish seems to acquire the poetic function Bloom ascribes to Milton's Romantic descendents. Bloom claims that,

In departing from the unitary aspiration of his own youth Milton may be said to have fathered the poetry that we call post-Enlightenment or Romantic, the poetry that takes as its obsessive theme the power of the mind over the universe of death, or as Wordsworth phrased it, to what extent the mind is lord and master, outward sense the servant of her will. (34-35)

The Romantic poetry Bloom describes defines itself by appropriating Milton's poetry, assuming the poetic authority of Milton. In a similar manner, Kolbrener contends, a complicated tradition of Milton criticism has appropriated Milton's text. The Fish described by Horton, who declares that "declaratives create the conditions to which they refer," shares what Bloom terms the "post-Enlightenment" view of the mind's mastery over the outward sense, perception, or interpretation.

Fish's critical relationship with Milton has dramatically influenced the direction of Milton studies. Through introductory or prefatory expressions of method, critics over the course of almost four decades, from various schools of thought, have expressed the shaping presence of Fish's application of theory, *Surprised by Sin*. This work helped establish grounds for producing future criticism by averting unproductive ideologically based disagreements. Whether or not one agrees with Fish's interpretation, few critics have found such opportunity and success as he. The institutional recognition of *Surprised by Sin* among Milton scholars is undeniable; the work's lasting influence, however, is difficult to measure (its continuing recognition from the Milton Society is one significant way). Brilliant and insightful works have been, and no doubt will be, published without reference to Fish's thesis. However, with the recent reprinting of the second edition, along with an extensive preface answering and anticipating critical

attacks, Stanley Fish's initial experiment seems geared to challenge another generation of critics. While I have theorized about the influence of *Surprised by Sin*, the best any critic can do in this context is to stress suggestive parallels and trends of thought. The task of my critical survey, distinct from Kolbrenner's framework of "Whig history" and Rumrich's challenge to Fish's "structure of thought," has been to outline trends of reception in the criticism of *Surprised by Sin*, arriving at a clearer conception of the nature of Fish's success and the theoretical significance of his masterwork of Milton criticism. The theory of Bloom, though limited, provides a valuable point-of-reference for my study, both as a commentary upon and in comparison with Fish's theoretical strategy.

In large part, the success of Fish in the twentieth century lies in his sophisticated post-Lewis exposition of and apologetics for Milton's Christianity which in Fish's *Paradise Lost* is essentially orthodox. Though Fish's critical and theoretical writings appear incompatible to many critics,<sup>24</sup> the poststructural aspects of his later theory do not preclude his manner of practicing criticism. The evaluation that textual meaning is indeterminate, as I have discussed earlier, allows for "infinite substitution." For Fish the Christian reader does exactly what the shrewd literary theorist would do: declare faith, and by declaring that faith, set the terms for experiencing the world.

For Milton's Satan, in Fish's terms, this act of substitution (profession of faith) results in misery because his faith is misplaced—his "declarative" creates the condition to which it refers, even if that condition is unpleasant. One sees what one chooses to see, and Satan chooses to see a world of self-creation *ex-nihilo*. The practical consequences

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance, Edward T. Oakes, "Stanley Fish's Milton," *First Things* 117 (November 2001), 23-34.

of this choice are disastrous in Milton's cosmos, as seen by Fish, because though literary expression creates meaning, meaning itself exists only in the mind. A declarative, thus, cannot pave a pothole. Satan *says* that God is impaired, and what subjectively he *means* is that he has taken something substantially away from God. However, Satan's meaning constantly inverts. Like Stanley Fish's declaratives, when Satan asserts, "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 1.254-55), there is a double-meaning. Romantic readers would interpret this as a positive assertion, viewing the speaker as credible and the narrator as unbelievable. In Fish's interpretation, this assertion is a double-edged sword. The mind's declaration of faith creates the terms of existence, and as Fish emphasizes, this "textual truth" is directly linked to experience. When Satan declares faith in himself as source of his own life, originator of his own good (soon to be dubbed evil), "self-begot, self-raised, / By [his] own quick'ning power" (5.860-61), Fish's reader sees that his vaunted profession of faith leads him to inward pain—again, the surprise of sin.

As the reader, Fish contends, your mind is the setting of *Paradise Lost*, and the experience which creates the poem for you is thus always valid; however, in bringing your modern perspective to the poem, you may not like what you see (or experience). In theory (in my mind, Satan's mind, Empson's mind), every substitution is conceivable; in application, however, the results will vary, as will the success of your posited critical interpretations of Milton. Fish's explicit stance against empirical criticism, further articulated in his 1997 preface, follows from this view. As Derrida emphasizes, one can never escape the terms of the discourse one wishes to critique; nor can one criticize

Milton without addressing the terms of Christianity in some form. In short, you as a critical reader may be surprised by your own sin.

Though this experience might not appeal to every modern critic, as Fish observes in his 1997 preface, the influence of his work is measured largely in its use among his colleagues. Thus, Fish notes with satisfaction the positive response he has received from teachers who found that “*Surprised by Sin* made it possible for them to teach *Paradise Lost* to modern students” (xv). To varying degrees, Fish’s work provides an influential tool for educators. Indeed, the very nature of Fish’s *Paradise Lost* is pedagogical, and he emphasizes the importance of teaching with vigor. “The imperative is ‘read!’” Fish writes,

and by not giving up, by not closing the book, by accepting the challenge of self-criticism and self-knowledge, one learns how to read, and by extension how to live, and becomes finally the Christian hero who is, after all, the only fit reader. In the end, the education of Milton’s reader, the identification of his hero, and the description of his style, that is, of its effects, are one. (207)

Generous participation in Milton’s epic is its own reward, ennobling the reader. Further, in constructing a plausible imaginative framework for his pedagogical poem, Fish ensures that worthy readers will keep returning to the original text, seeking the deeper meanings more than hinted in Fish’s subtle, deft analyses.

In the end, literary critics who find significance in the writing of John Milton will doubtless continue to select the theories and methods most appropriate to their individual approaches. Stanley Fish knows this and emphasizes his reliance on a critical acceptance which more than any empirical demonstration will “prove” him right. There is imaginative value in Fish’s substitution, the grandeur of a “grand central” Christianity in the vein of C.S. Lewis reconstructed through the writings of Milton and his

contemporaries and based on a vastly complex but fundamentally simple assertion: Milton's God, the God of the third book of *Paradise Lost* is (problematically, but emphatically) the author's center.

Critics who appreciate only the grand "organ music" of an age whose values are untranslatable might find Fish's Milton less desirable. Practically speaking, although there are relatively few critics who overtly dispute and refute the *validity* of Fish's thesis; it is the ideological *desirability*, or lack thereof, which most affects the perpetuating acceptance of his work. Critics and theorists resistant to the ideological tradition invoked by Fish, particularly Rumrich, find his work undesirable for the future practice of criticism. Historically conscious approaches such as Marxist criticism may find Fish's work compelling in its very employment of ideology, just as Milton has been the subject of similar analyses. Far from a distant archeological artifact, however, *Surprised by Sin* remains vital among Milton critics. The powerful influence of Fish's work endures in the recurring revival of critical response, of adherence, transumption, challenge, and refocusing. Like the writing of John Milton, Fish's masterwork continues to incite visceral reactions, positive and negative, challenging and invigorating the core beliefs of its readers. Indeed, it sometimes seems the ideological debates that once centered on Milton now find their focus in Fish. Stanley Fish has instituted his version of Milton and Milton's epic, and after almost four decades, *Surprised by Sin* remains a force that demands reckoning.

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## VITA

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