

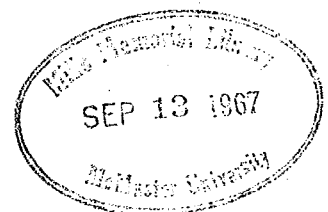
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Milton's Use of Similes  
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MILTON'S USE OF SIMILES.

|             |                                       |
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CHAPTER IClassification of Similes.

John Milton was a man with a purpose. This fact colours all of his writings; it affects not only their content but their style. Before we can begin to study or to appreciate Milton's use of similes, we must consider his attitude toward his life-work.

It was Milton's constant resolve to achieve something that should vindicate the ways of God to men, something that should justify his own possession of unique powers. He was convinced that he had a mission to fulfil, a purpose to accomplish, no less than the most fanatic of religious enthusiasts.

In the sonnet "On His Being Arrived to the Age of Twenty-Three" he is dedicated, as a priest, to the sacred tasks of the poetic life and is ready to abandon all "the earthly grossness" which dragged down the literature of his age.

Consequently in the years immediately following, he contributed to the English language about two thousand of the finest lyric verses found anywhere in that tongue. During this same period he voluntarily exiled himself from the world and in the most amazing fashion absorbed knowledge, knowledge which is reflected in his writings, particularly in Paradise Lost. So steeped was he in classical lore and in mythology, so familiar was he with the Bible and with the Latin and the English poets that he supposed his readers to be likewise. Hence many of his allusions can only be understood by the average reader after diligent study. Concerning this very point, Mr. George A. Gordon makes the following comment: "It is sometimes said that Milton

is the scholar's poet, that there is little in him to interest the average intelligent person. True, he is not for the light-minded, the superficial, the reader without seriousness. His works offer themselves slowly to the devout student; they uncover their mysteries only to the persistently faithful; they give themselves at last in all their wealth and glory to the mind and existence which they have helped to enlarge and exalt. The love of the best will at length fit any mind to enter, in some measure, into the joyous possession of the greatest things that man has done."

Mr. Pattison, an able critic, stresses this same thought in his remark: "An appreciation of Milton is the last reward of consummated scholarship."

These facts must be kept in mind in a consideration of the Miltonic similes as they do not reveal their real significance nor their deepest beauty to the casual reader. Milton was primarily an artist who worked painstakingly, accurately with words to achieve a desired result. Accordingly his similes are not inserted at random, nor are they haphazardly developed, but rather are they found where they serve a definite purpose and are logically constructed. Mr. James Whaler of Goucher College has divided them according to their degree of simplicity or elaborateness into four groups:

- I Simple
- II Complex Pattern with Perfect Homology
- III Complex Pattern with Logical Digression
- IV Complex Pattern with Four Terms in a Ratio.

I. The Simple is the most common type of simile. In it the poet presents but two terms sure that all the salient points of

resemblance will be instantly recognized. A good example is the gates of hell "cast forth redounding smoke and ruddy flame" "like a furnace mouth." Paradise Lost II 888.

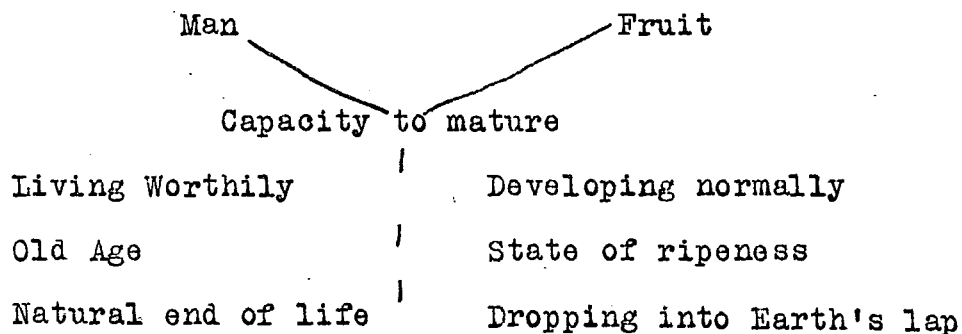
## II. Complex Pattern with Perfect Homology.

In a complex simile the poet is not satisfied with a plain statement of likeness but amplifies the simile with details. Every detail in the simile corresponds to a detail in the thing compared. This is the prevailing type of complex simile in Milton occurring five times as often as the digressive type. Lines 284-291 of Book II. Paradise Lost provide an excellent illustration.

"He scarce had finished, when such murmur filled  
Th' assembly, as when hollow rocks retain  
The sound of blust'ring winds, which all night long  
Had roused the sea, now with hoarse cadence lull  
Sea-faring men o'erwatched, whose bark by chance  
Or pinnace anchors in a craggy bay  
After the tempest: such applause was heard  
As Mammon ended."

According to Whaler the following quotation, Paradise Lost XI 535-537 contains a whole allegory compressed into three lines.

"So May'st thou live, till like ripe fruit thou drop  
Into thy Mother's lap, or be with ease  
Gathered, not harshly plucked, for death mature."  
He analyzes it thus:



|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Violent end of life      | Being harshly plucked from stem   |
| Earth man's mother       | Harvester with three possible functions<br>(a) holding apron<br>(b) gathering up fruit<br>(c) plucking it from stem |
| Death (half-personified) | Owner of orchard or overseer of estate or ultimate consumer.  |

### III. Complex Pattern with Logical Digression.

There are only thirteen of this type of simile in Paradise Lose. A simile may be so complex that only analysis can yield all the homologues and show residual digression as in the following examples;

Paradise Lost IV 980-985.

"and began to hem him round  
With ported spears, as thick as when a field  
Of Ceres, ripe for harvest, waving bends  
Her bearded grove of ears, which way the wind  
Sways them; the careful ploughman doubting stands,  
Lest on the threshing-floor his hopeful sheaves  
Brave chaff."

Spears of angelic squadron

Field of ripe grain

Number and movement

Swaying in their military manoeuvring -- Swaying heads of grain

At their leader Gabriel's will -- At the will of the wind

?

-- Ploughman standing in fear.

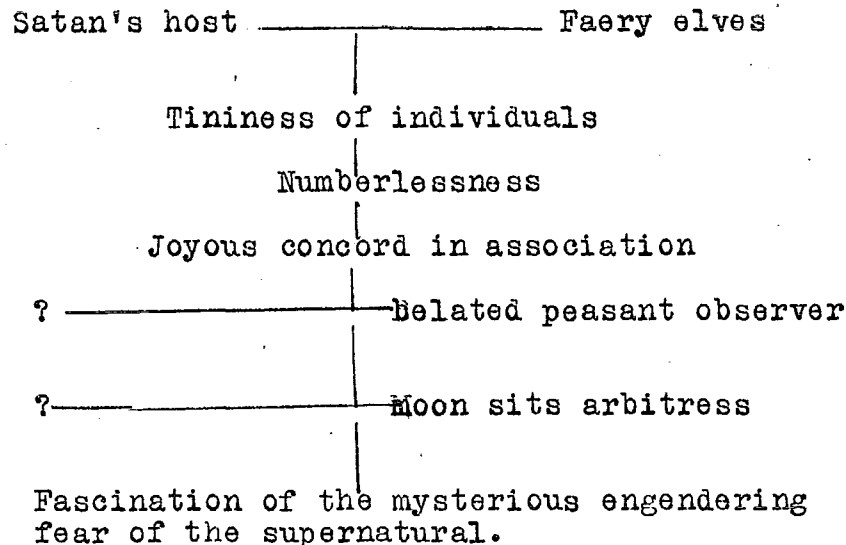
Also Paradise Lost I 781-788.

"Or Fairy Elves,

Whose midnight revels, by a forest side,

Or fountain some belated pleasant sees.

Or dreams he sees, while over head the moon  
 Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth  
 Wheels her pale course; they, on their mirth and dance  
 Intent, with jocund music charm his ear;  
 At once with joy and fear his heart rebounds."



The question arises: How are the digressions related to the Simile? The answer is that Milton usually digresses in three justifiable ways.

1. By adding human beings such as the ploughman. This is done because Milton wants to persuade us to take the point of view of the human figure introduced.
2. By adding a minimum of recollected detail to the simile when the comparison is well-known in myth and legend. This performs the function of safeguarding the forward movement of the fable. By mentioning these details, the poet can time the length of the pause.
3. By homologating the simile with the thing compared except in the single point of motive which underlies the act or the situation in the simile. By ignoring the motive in the comparison of two situations or actions the poet can emphasize a contrast-

ing picture of peace by setting it in the midst of terror or peril.

#### IV. Complex Pattern with Four Terms in a Ratio.

This pattern is used to express relative magnitudes and conceivably is liable to abuse, especially in a poem wherein the supernatural must be communicated in terms of things mundane. But Milton does not use it often; so that when he does set down such a simile, it is all the more effective. There are, in all, eight examples in Paradise Lost. One is found in Book XI. 312-313 in which man's prayer against God's degree = Breath against the wind.

Milton's similes may also be classified perhaps less learnedly but certainly more readily according to the material of the comparisons as

|     |                |
|-----|----------------|
| I   | Biblical       |
| II  | Classical      |
| III | Nature         |
| IV  | Nautical       |
| V   | Miscellaneous. |

I. Biblical similes are found in practically all of Milton's poetry but especially in the three major poems Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes. In Paradise Lost I 495 Milton's familiarity with the Old Testament is shown when he says,

"Yet who more oft than he

In Temples and at altars, when the priest  
Turns atheist, as did Eli's sons, who filled  
With lust and violence the house of God."

and again in Book III 510 when the stairs leading to the gate of heaven are described thus:

"The stairs were such as whereon Jacob saw  
Angels ascending and descending."



In Paradise Regained II. 12 the disciples' wonder at the absence of Christ is revealed in these words:

"And as the days increased, increased their doubt,  
Sometimes they thought He might be only shown  
And for a time caught up to God, as once  
Moses was in the Mount and missing long;  
And the great Thisbite, who on fiery wheels  
Rode up to heav'n, yet once again to come."

In Paradise Regained III 350 Satan tempting Christ in the wilderness says;

"Thy kingdom though foretold

By prophet or by angel, unless thou  
Endeavour as thy father David did  
Thou never shalt obtain."

We also find a Biblical reference when Samson thus questions about his birth:

"Oh! wherefore was my birth from heav'n foretold  
Twice by an angel who at last in sight  
Of both my parents all in flames ascended  
From off the altar, where are off'ring burned  
As in a fiery column charioting  
His godlike presence and from some great act  
Or benefit revealed to Adam's race."

II. Classical allusions abound in Paradise Lost and occur although less frequently in both Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes. The following comment by James Holly Hanford, Professor of English at the University of Michigan, is interesting. "The whole treasury of poetry and the whole storehouse of learning are at Milton's command. He assumes that they are also at

the command of his reader and accordingly he loads every rift of his verse with the ore of myth and legend; historical, literary and scientific fact. Of no other English style is erudition so integral a part. Classical allusion is most abundant constituting a kind of current coin of expression wherewith to convey a meaning rich in poetic and cultural suggestion."

Two illustrations from Paradise Regained will reveal Milton's method of utilizing his knowledge of the classics. When Belial, the dissolute spirit that fell, suggested that Christ might be tempted by beautiful, alluring women, Satan scoffed at the suggestion, saying:

"Or should she, confident,  
As sitting queen adored on beauty's throne,  
Descend with all her winning charms begirt  
To enamour, as the Zone of Venus once  
Wrought that effect on Jove, so fables tell  
How would one look from his majestic brow,  
Seated as on the top of virtue's hill  
Discount'nance her despised, and put to rout  
All her array."

Again when Christ refused to leap from the temple, Satan smitten with amazement fell

"As when earth's son, Antaeus, to compare  
Small things with greatest, in Irassa strove  
With Jove's Alcides, and, oft foiled, still rose,  
Receiving from his mother Earth new strength,  
Fresh from his fall, and fiercer grapple joined,  
Throttled at length in the air, expired and fell;  
So, after many a foil, the Tempter proud,

Renewing fresh assaults, amidst his pride,  
Fell whence he stood to see his victor fall."

Unless the reader is familiar with the classics, the following passages from Paradise Lost lose their significance. Who can appreciate the description of Satan given in Book I. 194 who has no understanding of Titanian, Jove, Briareus? Yet knowing these names what a conception of size and power these mighty words convey.

"His other parts besides  
Prone on the flood, extended long and large,  
Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge  
As whom the fables name of monstrous size  
Titanian, or Earth-born, that warred on Jove,  
By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea-beast  
Leviathan -----."

Or consider how replete with classical references is the account of how Satan's associates entertain themselves until their leader's return.

"Part, on the plain, or in the air sublime,  
Upon the wing or in swift race contend  
As at the Olympian games or Pythian fields."

Again we are told that

"Hell scarce holds the wild uproar  
As when Alcides from Oechalia crowned  
With conquest felt the envenomed robe, and tore  
Through pain up by the roots Thessalian pines  
And Iichas from the top of Oeta threw  
Into the Euboic Sea."

Allusions in Paradise Lost to Tantalus, to the gryphon who

pursued the Arimaspians, to the philosopher's stone, to Jupiter and Juno, to Zephyrus and Flora, to the phoenix, to Bellerophon, give some idea of the scope of Milton's classical and mythological references.

III. Dryden complained that Milton saw Nature through the spectacles of books. Certainly there is an almost unending procession of nature similes in his poems. Raleigh has pointed out that Milton exercised care in selecting those great and strange things in nature which repel intimacy, the sun, the moon, the sea, planets in opposition, a shooting star, an evening mist, a will-o'-the-wisp, a vulture descending from the Himalayas, the sea-beast Leviathan and a hundred more reminiscences of the ancient world.

Although animal similes are few, the following two noteworthy comparisons occur in *Samson Agonistes*:

"At length to lay my head and hallowed pledge  
Of all my strength in the lascivious lap  
Of a deceitful concubine, who shorn me  
Like a tame wether, all my precious fleece  
Then turned me out ridiculous, despoiled  
Shav'n and disarmed, among mine enemies."

And when Harapha of Gath is arguing with Samson he exclaims:

"Though all thy hairs  
Were bristles ranged like those that ridge the back  
Of chafed wild boars or ruffled porcupines."

Also in *Paradise Lost* Satan's spying upon Adam and Eve is described emphatically in these lines:

"About them round,  
A lion now he stalks with fiery glare;

Then as a tiger who by change hath spied  
 In some purlieu two gentle fawns at play,  
 Strait couches close, then rising changes oft  
 His couchant watch, as one who chose his ground  
 Whence rushing he might surest seize them both  
 Griped in each paw."

Allusions to birds are frequent. In the beginning of Paradise Lost the creative power of God is referred to thus:

"Thou from the first  
 Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread,  
 Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss."

Then the following verses from Paradise Regained describe the habits of the lark.

"Thus wore out night and now the herald lark  
 Left his ground-nest, high tow'ring to descry  
 The Morn's approach and greet her with his song.  
 As lightly from his grassy couch up rose  
 Our Saviour and found all was but a dream."

In Samson Agonistes there is a series of similes devoted to birds and beasts.

"And as an evening dragon came  
 Assailant on the perched roosts  
 And nests in order ranged  
 Of tame villatic fowl: but as an eagle  
 His cloudless thunder bolted on their heads.  
 So virtue, given for lost  
 Depressed and overthrown as seemed  
 Like that self-gotten bird  
 In the Arabian woods imbost  
 That no second knows nor third."

Even hornets and bees claim their share of attention.

When Samson is seeking words to express his inability to escape from his thoughts, he sighs:

"Ease to the body some, none to the mind  
From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm  
Of hornets armed, no sooner found alone  
But rush upon me thronging, and present  
Times past, what once I was and what am now."

In Paradise Lost the multitude of Satan's followers are pictured:

"As bees  
In spring time, when the sun with Taurus rides,  
Pour forth their populous youth about the hive  
In clusters."

Flowers are mentioned only generally. In Samson Agonistes Dalila is described

"with head declined

Like a fair flow'r surcharged with dew, she weeps  
And words addressed seem unto tears dissolved."

Also Manaoch on hearing of Samson's death exclaims:

"What windy joy this day had I conceived  
Hopeful of his delivery, which now proves  
Abortive as the first-born bloom of spring  
Nipt with the lagging rear of winter's frost."

These represent but a few of the minor types of nature similes.

IV. No improvement can be made upon Raleigh's comprehensive discussion of the nautical similes. Hence it is here quoted in its entirety. E

"Even as a boy Milton must often have wandered down to the

river below London Bridge to see ships come in. His poems are singularly full of figures drawn from ships and shipping, some of them bookish in their origin, others which may have been suggested by the sight of ships. Now it is Satan who, after his fateful journey through Chaos, nears the world,

'And like a weather beaten vessel, holds,  
Gladly the port, though shrouds and tackle torn  
Now it is Dalila whom the Chorus behold approaching,

'Like a stately ship  
Of Tarsus, bound for the isles.

Of Javan or Gadire,  
With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,  
Sails filled, and streamers waving,  
Courtèd by all the winds that hold them play.'

Or, again, it is Samson reproaching himself.

'Who like a foolish pilot, have shipwrecked  
My vessel trusted to me from above,  
Gloriously rigged.'

The bulk of Satan is comparèd to the great sea-beast Leviathan,  
beheld off the coast of Norway by

'The pilot of some small night-founder'd skiff.'

And in his approach to the happy garden, the Adversary is liken-  
ed to

'them who sail

Beyond the Cape of Hope, and now are past  
Mozambic, off at sea north-east winds blow  
Sabaean odours from the spicy shore  
Of Araby the Blest, with such delay  
Well pleased they slack their course, and many a league

Cheered with the grateful smell old Ocean smiles;  
So entertained those odorous sweets the Fiend.

V. There remains a large number of Milton's similes which might be separated as geographical, historical or scientific. However, this seems to be carrying classification to extremes. A few of these miscellaneous comparisons are too compelling to pass without mention. How easy it is to picture the Satanic legions, springing up at their General's command when we read these words:

"They heard, and were abashed and up they sprung

Upon the wing as when men went to watch

On duty, sleeping found by whom they dread

Rouse and bestir themselves ere well awake."

And what a surprising thought these lines contain! Who but Milton would conceive of Satan weeping as he surveys the countless host exiled from heaven through his revolt.

"Thrice he assayed and thrice in spite of scorn

Tears such as angels weep, burst forth."

Here is revealed his knowledge of ancient geography.

"A gulf profound as that Serbonian bog

Betwixt Damiata and mound<sup>t</sup> Casius old

Where armies whole have sunk."

Or

"As when the Tartar from his Russian foe

By Astracan over the snowy plains

Retires, or Bactian Sophy from the horns

Of Turkish crescent leaves all waste beyond

The realm of Aladule in his retreat

To Tauris or Casbein: so these, the late

Heav'n-banished host, left desert utmost hell

Many a dark league."



And then when Adam is inquiring about celestial motions,  
Raphael makes this beautiful reply:

"To ask or search I blame thee not for heav'n  
Is as the book of God before thee set,  
Wherein to read His wondrous works and learn  
His seasons, hours or days, or months, or years."  
Again what a vivid picture Christ's words to Satan in Paradise  
Regained call forth,

"thou with trembling fear  
Or like a fawning parasite, obey'st."  
How graphic too is this comparison found in Paradise Regained  
IV. 452

"I heard the wrack  
As earth and sky would mingle, but myself  
Was distant and these flaws though mortals fear them  
As dangerous to the pillared frame of heav'n  
Or to the earth's dark basis underneath  
Are to the main as inconsiderable  
And harmless, if not wholesome, as a sneeze  
To man's less universe, and soon are gone."  
Or who can help sympathizing with Samson as he bewails his  
blindness in these words:

"Why was the sight  
To such a tender bass as th' eye confined  
So obvious and so easy to be quenched?  
And now as feeling, through all parts diffused  
That she might look at will through every pore?  
Then had I not been thus exiled from light  
As in the land of darkness, yet in light

To live a life half dead, a living death  
And buried;"

Finally our admiration for Manach increases as he subdues his  
grief and proudly says:

"Samson hath quit himself

Like Samson, and heroically hath finished

A life heroic, on his enemies

Fully revenged."

CHAPTER II

Characteristics of the Miltonic Simile.

The two features which distinguish Milton's similes from those of his epic predecessors are:

I Homologation

II Simile Clusters.

Whaler demonstrates that Milton's similes are organically composed to a degree beyond those of any previous writer. A typically complex Miltonic simile directs each detail to some application in the fable, i.e. homologation rather than heterogeneity is the rule. According to Mr. Whaler it requires a subtle reader to catch all the suggested points of the comparison and it is a question in my mind whether quite as many implications were originally intended. For the benefit of his readers Whaler analyzes the simile in Paradise Lost II 706-711.

"On the other side

Incensed with indignation, Satan stood  
Unterrified, and like a comet burned,  
That fires the length of Ophiucus huge  
In the arctic sky, and from his horrid hair  
Shakes pestilence and war."

Satan is like the comet in fiery radiance, enormousness, and in the fact that both are ominous of impending calamity. But there is still more. Satan is a serpent - Ophiucus means "holder of serpents," hence the comet is appropriately said to fire the length of this particular constellation. Furthermore, Satan is always associated with the quarters of the north, for which Milton put Ophiucus in the arctic sky, though only with considerable astronomical freedom.

Now there is one kind of simile present in both Homer and Vergil but scarcely used at all by Milton which illustrates mental states by material images. In Milton the only extended simile of this type is Paradise Lost II 488-495 illustrative of the fiends' joy over Satan's happy ending of their debate. The clearing of their doubts and anxieties is likened to the clearing of the atmosphere after a squall when suddenly the landscape is lit up with the setting sun. This simile can be shown to be as remarkable for its homologation as for its illustration of the mental by the physical.

Homologation seems to explain several other characteristics of Milton's style. This controlling idea accounts for the scarcity of animal similes, for digressions, for the few inconsistencies and for the explanation of occurrences in time by occurrences later in time, of concrete objects by concrete objects. Milton uses animal similes very sparingly and only when he can surpass those of previous epics in suggestive homologation. This is one feature in which he differs radically from Homer who was very partial to animal comparisons. Even when Milton digresses in his similes, he does not do so as Homer and other poets do for the sole reason of drawing a diverting picture. There is always some relevant suggestion to be found if one thinks of all the associations. Thus in the celebrated comparison of the shield of Satan to the moon, Milton apparently departs from the point to tell of Galileo's telescope and even to mention the place of observation

"From the top of Fiesole

Or in Valdarno."

and he describes as well what the telescope reveals. But these

eyes of the most quick-sighted and intelligent astronomer, under the clear, dry sky of Italy. The fact that the moon is not smooth but ridged and channelled intimates the same of Satan's shield and faintly suggests the most superb shield in Homer and in literature, that of Achilles. It is then, in the completeness of its correspondences with the object that the Miltonic simile is most unique and best demonstrates the control which he exercised over his artistic imagination.

That Milton's care in constructing his similes naturally eliminated most inconsistencies, critics agree. Raleigh, however, points out the following weakness in regard to spatial relationships. "The distance from the plain of Heaven to the plain of Hell is said in the first book to be three times the radius of the world or in his own words the prison of Hell is

"As far removed from God and light of Heaven  
As from the centre thrice to the utmost pole."

The great globe, therefore, that hangs from the floor of Heaven reaches two-thirds of the way down to Hell. Yet in the second book Satan after a long and perilous journey from Hell comes in view of

"This pendant world, in bigness as a star,  
Of smallest magnitude close by the moon.

So small is the world compared with the wide extent of the empyreal Heaven.'

But it is not easy to conceive how, in the limited space between Heaven and Hell, the world could so appear to Satan."

Justified as this criticism is, when we consider the number of inconsistencies in certain Shakespearean plays, the conviction remains that Milton was a very careful and a very exact writer.

Already it has been pointed out that Milton seldom illustrates mental states by material images nor does he illustrate the concrete by the abstract, nor time by anything except time.

"His figures may be called historic parallels whereby the names and incidents of human history are made to elucidate and ennoble the less familiar names and incidents of his prehistoric theme."

One cannot read Paradise Lost without discovering that frequently Milton is not satisfied with making just one elaborate comparison but proceeds from one to another. The alternative comparisons thus offered are taken from widely different fields of knowledge. These groups or series of similes are what is known as simile clusters. Thus in Paradise Lost I 775 the multitude of the host is described:

"So thick the aery crowd  
Swarmed and were straitened; till the signal giv'n  
Behold a wonder! they, but now who seemed  
In bigness to surpass earth's giant sons  
Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room  
Throng numberless, like that Pygmean race  
Beyond the Indian mount or Fairy Elves."

Again Satan's huge bulk is compared first to ancient giants overthrown by Zeus, then to the Scriptural Leviathan which is mistaken by the pilot of some night-foundered skiff as an island.

According to Whaler in Paradise Lost I 302-355 occurs the supreme example in English of how a cluster of similes may mark the successive stages in an action. We are to watch the fallen angels gradually recover from their plight to rally round their leader. Six similes within fifty-four lines are grouped in two sections of three members each with Satan's call to arms ringing

in between. The following outline makes clear how the variable application of the simile to the thing compared means a change in the content of r - the point of relationship.

|     |  |         |
|-----|--|---------|
| { S | Leaves (host is prostrate)   | 302-305 |
| r.  | Multitude, hushed supineness, helplessness                                   |         |
| { S | Sedge (host is prostrate but in wild weltering movement)                     | 304-307 |
| r.  | multitude helplessness under exterior forces                                 |         |
| { S | Crushed Egyptian army (host is prostrate nut moving under outside forces)    | 307-311 |
| r.  | Broken disorder and confused helplessness                                    |         |
|     | Satan's charge to awaken   | 314-330 |
| { S | Pickets caught asleep (Hosts are roused from trance)                         | 332-335 |
| r.  | Speed of uprising, blind obedience   |         |
| { S | Locusts (Hosts take to flight)   | 338-343 |
| r.  | Multitude, disorderly mass milling into order suggestion of plague.          |         |
| { S | Migrant northern barbarians (Hosts are rudely organized under their leaders) | 351-355 |
| r.  | Multitude, order, obedience, ruthlessness                                    |         |

Professor Hanford says that the key to this habit is Milton's passion for scholarly completeness. He is at pains, for example in describing the garden of Eden to omit a reference to no parallel happy garden which has been made memorable in song or story. The result is not an effect of pedantry but one of rich and ornate profusion.

Paradise Regained also provides examples of this unusual feature. In Book IV line 10 when Satan after several repulses still continues to tempt Christ, these words are used:

"But as a man who had been matchless held  
In cunning, over-reached where least he thought,  
To salve his credit, and for very spite,

And never cease, though to his shame the more;  
Or as a swarm of flies in vintage time,  
About the wine-press where sweet must is poured,  
Beat off, returns as oft with humming sound;  
Or surging waves against a solid rock,"  
Later when Christ is speaking of his rule he says:  
"Know therefore, when my season comes to sit  
On David's throne, it shall be like a tree  
Spreading and overshadowing all the earth,  
Or as a stone that shall to pieces dash  
All monarchies besides throughout the world,  
And of my kingdom there shall be no end."

Fortunately Milton was wise enough not to overdo the use of these simile clusters. He seemed to have the faculty of using just the appropriate number, neither too few nor too many. Their subtle distribution gives them prominence and focuses attention upon them when the writer so desires.



CHAPTER III

Functions of the Miltonic Simile

An important question to consider is "Why did Milton use similes so extensively?" It is not difficult to venture several answers to this problem. Undoubtedly the main purpose of his epic or expanded simile was to ennoble his fable. Milton desired to maintain remoteness and loftiness. "His natural port" says Johnson, "is gigantic loftiness." He needs the grand and infinite. His eyes are only content in limitless space and he produces colossal figures to fill it. No poetic creation equals in horror and grandeur the spectacle that greeted Satan on leaving his dungeon. In the history of literature by Garnet and Gosse is this paragraph.

"Milton raises our mind. The force of the objects which he describes passes into us; we become great by sympathy with their greatness. Such is the effect of his description of the creation. The calm and creative command of the Messiah leaves its trace in the heart which listens to it and we feel more vigour and moral health at the sight of this great work of wisdom and will.

'On heavenly ground they stood: and from the shore  
They view'd the vast immeasurable abyss  
Outrageous as a sea, dark, wasteful, wild.  
Up from the bottom turned by furious winds.  
And surging waves as mountains to assault  
Heav'n's highth and with the centre mix the pole.'

He brings together like Aeschylus words of 'six cubits' plumed and decked in purple and makes them pass like a royal train before his idea to exalt and announce it.

In Comus he tells how

'the gray-hooded Even,  
Like a sad votarist in palmer's weed  
Rose from the hindmost wheels of Phoebus wain.'  
and speaks of

'All the sea-girt isles  
That like to rich and various gems inlay  
The unadorned bosom of the deep.'"

Raleigh emphasizes that terror was never more magnificently embodied than in the phantom figure of Death,

"The other shape -  
If shape it might be called that shape had none  
Distinguishable in member, joint or limb:  
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,  
For each seemed either - black it stood as Night  
Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,  
And shook a dreadful dart; what seemed his head  
The likeness of a kingly crown had on.  
Satan was now at hand, and from his seat  
The Monster moving onward came as fast  
With horrid strides; Hell trembled as he strode."

Or who can read the similes devoted to the description of the multitude of Satan's followers without a sense of awe? What powerful comparisons are these!

"As when the potent rod  
Of Amram's son in Egypt's evil day  
Waved round the coast up called a pitchy cloud  
Of locusts -----  
So numberless were those bad angels seen."

or in Paradise Lost, Book II, 901 where it is said Satan's legions

"Swarm populous unnumbered as the sands  
Of Harea or Cyrene's torrid soil."

Again we are told

"About him all the Sanctities of Heaven  
Stood thick as stars, and from his sight received  
Beatitude past utterance."

Thus aggrandizement was Milton's prime motive in using the simile as it gave him the opportunity of using classic myth of making encyclopedic reference to scientific research, geography, history and the Bible, of discarding worn images for the novel and unusual which he craved.

II

In the second place Whaler says that Milton used his similes for the purpose of illustration. If he wanted us to (a) imagine clearly a process he resorted to analogy. For example in P. L. 706-709 part of the construction of Pandemonium is described thus:

"A third as soon had formed within the ground  
A various mould, and from the boiling cells  
By strange conveyance filled each hollow nook  
As in an organ from one blast of wind  
To many a row of pipes the sound-board breathes."

Again in Raphael's description of the creation of the universe we find this explanation:

"Down sank a hollow bottom broad and deep  
Capacious beds of water: thither they  
Hasted with glad precipitance, uprolled  
As drops on dust conglobing from the dry."

(b) Sometimes to clarify the picture of living beings Milton uses a summarizing comparison. Hence when Raphael comes to visit Adam

and Eve in the garden we are told

"Like Maia's son he stood

And shook his plumes, that heavenly fragrance filled

The circuit wide."

(c) Frequently Milton's similes serve to furnish outline, perspective and proportion to the supernatural which it is otherwise hard to visualize. Notice this description of Satan on his solitary flight.

"As when far off at sea a fleet descried

Hangs in the clouds, by equinoctial winds

Close sailing from Bengala, or the isles

Of Ternate and Tidore. Whence merchants bring

Their spicy drugs: they on the trading flood

Through the wide Aethiopian to the Cape

Ply, stemming nightly toward the pole: so seemed

Far off the flying fiend."

or this account of the Satanic host.

"As when to warn proud cities war appears

Waged in the troubled sky, and armies rush

To battle in the clouds, before each van

Prick forth the aery knights, and couch their spears

Till thickest legions close;"

Sometimes they are used to describe a place or an action.

(d) What a definite picture these few lines convey of the heavens in Paradise Lost VII 358.

"then formed the moon

Globose and every magnitude of stars,

And sowed with stars the heav'n thick as a field."

(e) How vividly Satan's action is here portrayed Paradise Lost IV

"As when a spark  
 Lights on a heap of nitrous powder, laid  
 Fit for the tun, some magazine to store  
 Against a rumoured war, the smutty grain  
 With sudden blaze diffused inflames the air;  
 So started up in his own shape the fiend."

(f) Occasionally Milton describes an abstract idea by presenting an analogous concrete thing or experience. When Satan begins his bold enterprise against God and Man, he falls into many doubts with himself and many passions, fear envy and despair. This agitation is expressed thus:

"Now rolling boils in his tumultuous breast  
 And like a devilish engine back recoils  
 Upon himself."

(g) Occasionally a simile clarifies the relation between two characters as in Paradise Lost IX 670-676. when Satan is tempting Eve.

"As when of old some orator renowned  
 In Athens or free Rome, where eloquence  
 Flourished, since mute, to some great cause addressed.  
 Stood in himself collected, while each part,  
 Motion, each act won audience ere the tongue;  
 Sometimes in highth began, as no delay  
 Of preface brooking through his zeal of right:  
 So standing, moving or to highth upgrown,  
 The tempter all impassioned thus began."

(h) Sometimes the simile directs and focuses our emotions through logical digression. One of the best examples of this use of

simile is found in Paradise Lost IV 980-85.

"and began to hem him round  
 With ported spears, as thick as when a field  
 Of Ceres, ripe for harvest, waving bends  
 Her bearded grove of ears, which way the wind  
 Sways them; the careful ploughman doubting stands,  
 Lest on the thrshing-floor his hopeful sheaves  
 Prove chaff."

III. A third main purpose served by Milton's similes is relief. When the tension of the supernatural, the awe and majesty of his theme have become excessive, Milton refreshes us with a taste of the commonplace. Concerning this Raleigh says "Some of the comparisons that he chooses to illustrate scenes in Hell are taken from the incidents of simple rustic life and by the contrast with the lurid creatures of his imagination come like a draught of cold water to a traveller in a tropical waste of sand and thorns. It is almost as if the poet himself were oppressed by the suffocation of the atmosphere that he has created and, gasping for breath sought relief by summoning up to remembrance the sweet security of pastoral life." Satan's legions are said to lay entranced

"Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks  
 In Vallombrosa where th' Etrurian shades  
 High overarched embower."

When the devils are shrunk to enter Pandemonium they are compared to

"Faery elves  
 Whose midnight revels, by a forest-side  
 Or fountain, some belated peasant sees.

Or dreams he sees, while overhead the Moon  
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the Earth  
Wheels her pale course."

Relief similes might easily be employed to suspend the narrative, but this Homeric function Milton seldom uses.

IV. The proleptic or anticipatory use of simile is particularly distinctive of Milton. In *Paradise Lost* X 306-11 he likens the construction by Sin and Death of a causeway across Chaos to reach the world and enslave mankind to the bridge which Xerxes built over the Hellespont.

"So if great things to small may be compared,  
Xerxes, the liberty of Greece to hoke,  
From Susa his Memnonian palace high  
Came to the Sea, and over Hellespont  
Bridging his way Europe with Asia joined,  
And scourged with many a stroke th' indignant waves."

In so doing he not only illustrates the action but to the knowing reader suggestively foreshadows later events. The Persian expedition came to nought and the same for all their present ostentatiousness is to be the history of Sin and Death. Other examples of this type of simile are to be found in *Paradise Lost* I 201-209, 338-343, 767-775, II 662-666, III 534-551.

V. Some similes are introduced merely to please. If this is their sole function they may fairly be called decorative. The majority of Milton's similes, however, serve some other purpose as well. One instance of the decorative comparison is that in which the spacious hall of Pandemonium is compared to -

"A covered field, where champions bold  
Went ride in armed and at the Soldan's chair  
Defied the best of Ponim chivalry  
To mortal combat, or career with lance."



CHAPTER IV

Distribution of Similes.

Similes are by no means evenly distributed throughout Milton's works nor even equally in Paradise Lost where they are most abundant. The long-tailed comparisons which Milton uses in his great epic would be obviously out of place in his sonnets or in his lyrics. Yet in these earlier poems we catch a glimpse of the mastery with which Milton later handles this figure of speech. In his second sonnet "On the detraction which followed upon my writing certain treatises" these lines foreshadow his famous classical similes.\*

"When straight a barbarous noise environs me  
Of owls and cuckoos, asses, apes and dogs  
As when those kinds that were transformed to frogs  
Railed at Latona's twin-born progeny  
Which after held the sun and moon in fee."

And in the sonnet "On His Deceased Wife" this comparison occurs  
"Methought I saw my late espoused saint  
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave."

In the "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity" the following similes are found. Little wonder that the shepherds were amazed

"When such music sweet  
Their hearts and ears did greet  
As never was by mortal finger strook."

Then the trump of doom is said to

"thunder through the deep  
With such a horrid clang  
As on mount Sinai rang  
While the red fire, and smouldering clouds outbrake."

In the two poems L'Allegro and Il Penseroso similes are still but sparsely used.

Mirth is urged to bring

"Nods and Becks and wreathed smiles

Such as hang on Hebe's cheek."

and in paying his tribute to music Milton says "and Orpheus'

self may heave his head and hear

Such strains as would have won the ear

Of Pluto, to have quite set free

His half regained Eurydice."

At the very beginning of Il Penseroso vain, deluding Joys are urged to take possession of foolish fancies with gaudy shapes

"As thick and numberless

As the gay notes that people the sunbeams

Or likest hovering dreams,

The fickle pensioners of Morpheus' train."

In Comus Milton begins to exhibit his partiality for similes connected with the stars when he says

"Swift as the sparkle of a glancing star

I shoot from heav'n, to give him safe convoy

As now I do."

Once again the lure of the classics is upon him:

"But beauty, like the fair Hesperian tree

Laden with blooming gold, had need the guard

Of dragon watch with unenchanted eye"

and later he says,

"How charming is divine philosophy

Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose

But musical, as is Apollo's lute

And a perpetual feast of noctared sweets  
 Where no crude surfeit reigns."

and

"Yet a cold shudd'ring dew  
 Dips me all o'er, as when the wreath of Jove  
 Speaks thunder, and the chains of Erebus  
 To some of Saturn's crew."

Nor are nature similes lacking in Comus.

We find the attendant spirit saying,

"I came not here on such a trivial toy  
 As a strayed ewe, or to pursue the stealth  
 Of pilfering wolf."

And Comus makes this remark:

"See here be all the pleasures  
 That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts  
 When the fresh blood grows lively and returns  
 Brisk as the April buds in primrose-season."

In Lycidas we find these striking lines

"As killing as the canker to the rose  
 Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze  
 Or frost to flow'rs, that their gay wardrobe wear,  
 When first the white-thorn blows;

Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear."

Yet in spite of these examples it is in Paradise Lost that Milton displays his skill in the handling of simile. Why is this? In the first place it is because the tone of an epic would be too often bleak and austere but for these fleeting views of an earth we know, these apt reminders of things men have done and endured. Without them how difficult it would be to picture

Satan, his infernal host, his punishment and his revenge.

A second question to be answered is "Why do we find these similes massed particularly in the first four books?" The reason is that at the outset Milton wants his conception of Satan and the host of fallen angels to stand out in sharp relief. Who could fail to picture Satan when he is likened to a Titan, to Leviathan, to the sun in eclipse, to a fleet, to a comet, to a gryphon, to a ship of the Argonauts, to a ship of Ulysses, to a weather-beaten vessel, to a vulture, to a wolf, to a burglar, to a church hireling, and to a heap of gunpowder. Then in these early books Satan's host is likened to leaves, to sedge, to an Egyptian army, to locusts, to devastating barbarians, to giants, to trees lightning struck, to bees, to pygmies, to elves, to winds.

With such a host of illustrations at the beginning it is evident why later the similes are fewer. Still in the later books we do find Satan compared to a morning star, to an earthquake, to a planet, to a city dweller, to a tacking vessel, to a classic orator and his followers to stars, to dewdrops, to pearls, to buds, to herds, to Tartars, and to snakes.

Whaler gives the following reasons for so few similes in books V, VI, VII, VIII and XII.

- "
1. Milton could find no range of simile which would illustrate the heavenly wars, and creation and the post-Adamic history and at the same time be comprehensible to Adam's limited experience.
  2. Suppose that Adam could have comprehended such similes as are in Book I, even then, in the later books, Milton would surely have striven for the illusion of natural propriety in conversation and would, therefore, have introduced scarcely more simile than he has done.

3. In relating his battles Milton must have felt that this necessity to avoid a usual epic convention could in his unique field be turned into a virtue.

Professor Hanford explains that the uneven distribution of simile, metaphor and personification may serve to direct our attention to the fact that Milton really has two styles corresponding to two different kinds of object or to two qualities of poetic inspiration. The one is abundant, highly colored, pictorial, figurative; the other direct, closely woven and relatively plain. The first is the language of Milton's impassioned visual imagination; the second of his ethical and intellectual intensity. Many passages to be sure show the two modes in combination. The contrast between them in their purity is strongly marked. It may be already discerned in *Comus* but it is clearest in the later poems. In the sonnets, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* the barer style predominates though there are patches of the other as in the description of the banquet spread for Christ or the nightly storm followed by a serene dawn or the choric description of Samson's descent upon the Philistine like an eagle upon tame villatic fowl. In *Paradise Lost* they are balanced fairly evenly. Hell, Chaos, the Garden, Satan lying on the burning lake, the loves of Adam and Eve - these are objects of a style brilliant with the wealth of Ormus or of Ind. The soberer dialogue in Hell, the correlative Council in Heaven, all exposition of doctrine is couched in language relatively plain but full of lofty dignity and capable of both eloquence and passion. The rich and glowing splendours of Milton's visual imagination are doubtless of a more immediate appeal: the intensity of ethical and of human meaning in the other at its best is equally characteristic and perhaps more enduring.

CHAPTER V

The Value of the Miltonic Simile

Since Milton's similes form such an integral part of his art, passing judgment upon them is really passing judgment upon his style. Consider how Paradise Lost would suffer if all the similes were blotted out. Gone would be many a vivid picture, gone would be many a magnificent conception, gone would be our ideas of Satan and his host, gone to a great extent would be the fame of Paradise Lost.

Somehow in our minds the names of Shakespeare and Milton are definitely associated. Why is this? Certainly Shakespeare has a greater following and makes the more universal appeal. Certainly the art of two people never formed a greater contrast. Milton would have been ashamed of some of the work which Shakespeare dashed off when necessity demanded or when he desired only to please himself; for Milton was a careful artist and Shakespeare was not. Why then do we group them together? We do so because "like Shakespeare Milton had the rare, divine and unmistakable gift of fusing thought and language in such a way, and with such fire of genius as to render the combination overwhelming, never-to-be-forgotten, irresistible." What strange and memorable pictures Milton formed from common words, what haunting melodies and majestic strains he produced! Nowhere is this gift of word magic more evident than in his similes.

Critics, Christian or atheist, admit the magnificence of Bible diction. Milton was a Bible student,; devoted to the study of this great Book. Its influence is seen not only in the general tone of his writing but in his direct Biblical allusions, many of which are in the form of similes. Concerning

Milton's diction Matthew Arnold has said "Milton of all our English race is by his diction and rhythm the one artist of the highest rank, in the great style whom we have; this I take as requiring no discussion, this I take as certain."

Then remember that Milton's ambition was to accomplish something of permanent value. To catch the passing fancy of a crowd is fairly easy, but to secure the admiration of generations is a prodigious task. It is now two hundred and sixty-eight years since John Milton sold Paradise Lost for a paltry ten pounds, yet it is still read, still quoted. Why? Partially, because of its similes. Someone has said that if a piece of literature comes direct from the mind and heart of a great writer or of a great age, however remote in time or place, it has a contemporary value and may be just as fresh and as vital as the most recent product of the printing press. Perhaps we have outgrown some of Milton's theology but have we outgrown the marvels of the universe? The stars, the lightning, the thunder, the sea, do they not still awe and mystify us? Do they not still give us a conception of remoteness, of majesty, of power, a sense of human frailty? Wise was Milton when he chose these glories of nature for use in his comparisons. An unusual tribute was paid to Milton in an article which appeared in the April 1931 issue of the Golden Book. There is recorded a conversation between Edwin Mims and a banker friend of his who said "I read one night the description of Satan's journey from the gates of Hell through Chaos to earth and the next morning in the newspapers I read the account of Lindbergh's flight to Paris. And do you know," he added, "Milton wrote the best account of it."

Yes, the business man was right. If you will read lines 990-1037 Book II you will find that by omitting some of the lines and changing slightly others, you have a highly imaginative-not fanciful - phrasing of Lindbergh's journey. In line 927 you find these words:

"At last his sail-broad vanes  
He spreads for flight, and in the surging smoke  
Uplifted spurns the ground; thence many a league  
As in a clouded chair ascending rides  
Audacious."

Students to-day are still ready to pay tribute to scholars and Milton was indeed a scholar. What more than his similes proves the breadth as well as the depth of his knowledge? He spoke not with uncertainty, not by hearsay; he spoke with conviction, with sincerity. Hence his utterances carry weight. This comment on Milton's influence appeared in the Living Age. "The publication of Comus did indeed mark an epoch in English literature; henceforward our poetry could never be the half-unconscious thing that it had been before. In Milton's hand it became an elaborate product, the outcome of patient care and infinite craft. The ideal poem was 'not to be raised from the head of youth or the vapors of wine, like that which flows from the pen of some vulgar amorist, or the trencher fury of a rhyming parasite nor to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her Siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge and sends at his Seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases; to this must be added



industrious and select reading, steady observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs.'" Such was the spirit which went to the making of the similes of Paradise Lost.

Because they illustrate Milton's superb use of the language, because they form an important link between the present and the past, because they exhibit the poet's scholarly attitude, Milton's similes are essentially a part of his greatness.