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Milton's Use of Similes
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Milton's Use of Similes.

Chapter I Classification.

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CHAPTER I

Classification 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:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Man</th>
<th>Fruit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to mature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Worthily</td>
<td>Developing normally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Age</td>
<td>State of ripeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural end of life</td>
<td>Dropping into Earth's lap</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violent end of life</th>
<th>Being harshly plucked from stem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earth man's mother</td>
<td>Harvester with three possible functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(a) holding apron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) gathering up fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) plucking it from stem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death (half-personified)</td>
<td>Owner of orchard or overseer of estate or ultimate consumer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. Complex Pattern with Logical Digression.

There are only thirteen of this type of simile in Paradise Lost. 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
Become chaff."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spears of angelic squadron</th>
<th>Field of ripe grain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number and movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Swaying in their military manoeuvring -- Swaying heads of grain
At their leader Gabriel's will -- At the will of the wind

Also Paradise Lost I 781-788.

"Or Fairy Elves,
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side,
Or fountain, some belated peasant 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."

Satan's host —————— Faery elves

Tininess of individuals
Numberlessness
Joyous concord in association

? ———— Related peasant observer

? ———— Moon sits arbitress

Fascination of the mysterious engendering
fear of the supernatural.

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 dissolutest 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 Lichas from the top of Oeta threw
Into the Euboic Sea."

Allusions in Paradise Lost to Tantalus, to the gryphon who
pursued the Arimaspian, 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 Shafed 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
Whomoe 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 desory
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
Time's 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 Manaoh 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.

"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, Courted 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 compared 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 likened 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 wont to watch On duty, sleeping found by whom they dread
Rouse and bestir themselves are 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 Casius old
Where armies whole have sunk."

Or
"As when the Tartar from his Russian foe
By Astraean over the snowy plains
Retires, or Bactrian 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 Manaoh 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.

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{S Leaves (host is prostrate)} & 302-305 \\
\text{r. Multitude, hushed supineness, helplessness} \\
\text{S Sedge (host is prostrate but in wild weltering movement)} & 304-307 \\
\text{r. Multitude helplessness under exterior forces} \\
\text{S Crushed Egyptian army (host is prostrate but moving under outside forces)} & 307-311 \\
\text{r. Broken disorder and confused helplessness} \\
\text{S Satan's charge to awaken} & 314-330 \\
\text{S Pickets caught asleep (Hosts are roused from trance)} & 332-335 \\
\text{r. Speed of uprising, blind obedience} \\
\text{S Locusts (Hosts take to flight)} & 338-343 \\
\text{r. Multitude, disorderly mass milling into order suggestion of plague.} \\
\text{S Migrant northern barbarians (Hosts are rudely organized under their leaders)} & 351-355 \\
\text{r1 Multitude, order, obedience, ruthlessness} \\
\end{array}
\]

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,
Still will he tempt the blissful Eden, till..."
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 us-
ing 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, 802, 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.

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 related to analogy. For ex-
ample 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."

(o) 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
Fly, 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 agi-
tation 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
A 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,
Lost on the thresher-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 causey 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
Wont 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
"I thought 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 motes 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 nectared sweets
Where no crude surfeit reigns."

"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
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
0-1037 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 con-
 viction, 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 rhym-
ing 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
it 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.