SOLIFIDIANISM AND POETIC VOCATION
POETIC WORKS:
SOLIFIDIANISM AND POETIC VOCATION
IN
SPENSER, HERBERT AND MILTON

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Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to suggest some of the ways in which a tension between the Protestant doctrines of vocation and justification by faith shape the poetry of Spenser, Herbert and Milton. I argue that the Protestant poet displays a fundamental ambivalence toward his own art, which he views as simultaneously inspired and fallen. The Protestant theology of vocation provides a sanction for divine poetry, while solifidian dogma tends to repudiate human works, including poetry. The Protestant poet is therefore engaged in a struggle to define a stance that balances, reconciles or synthesizes these two tendencies, and the poem is the scene of that struggle. He expresses misgivings about the efficacy of language, thereby casting doubt on the reliability of his own poetry, but also claims (or aspires to) divine authority for his craft.

In my treatment of Spenser I suggest that Book I of The Faerie Queene constitutes a successful defence of poetic vocation, while the self-doubting or self-accusatory stance associated with solifidianism becomes more prevalent in Book VI. Herbert's defence of poetic vocation consists, paradoxically, in a gradual surrender of authorship to God. I take Milton's prophetic claims, or at least aspirations, more or less for
granted, and focus on the strategies he employs to undercut his own art and medium and suggest its, and his, fallen nature.
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Introduction: Poetic Inability and Poetic Inspiration

The theological position of the Protestant poet, or any Protestant artist for that matter, is a precarious one. Two of the fundamental doctrines in reformed theology pull the poet in opposite directions, generating tensions that come to be controlling forces in his work. The first of these doctrines, and the one that serves best to define the essence of Protestantism, despite its many variations, is solifidianism: the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This doctrine, common to virtually all Protestant denominations, carries with it an explicit denial of the efficacy of works in achieving salvation, and an implicit diminution of the value of all human activity. Such a belief clearly tends to call the value of devotional art into serious question. The second doctrine, and the one that provides a sanction for the Protestant poet, is that of vocation or calling. Protestant theology places particularly heavy emphasis on calling, and expands the concept to apply not merely to clerical life, but to every Christian's work in the world. Luther's concept of the "priesthood of all believers" (To the Christian Nobility 44: 127-129) carried with it the implication that every Christian profession is divinely ordained, and is a form of divine service. The Protestant poet, then, is led by his religious convictions to view his own art
with a peculiar ambivalence. On the one hand poetry, like any other respectable craft, is a task to which he has been called by God, while on the other hand his language and art are corrupted by the fall, and utterly unsuitable for the glorification of God.

This tension is particularly evident in Milton's Sonnet XIX. In The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry J.D. Boulger argues that "there is little in the poets, except for Milton's 'On his blindness,' directly on the subject of 'calling'," and that "vocation and justification are Puritan doctrines peripheral to the formation of literary sensibility" (87). Boulger is certainly correct in pointing out the centrality of vocation in this sonnet, but, as I will attempt to show later, I believe the tension between solifidianism and poetic vocation can be seen as a shaping force in Milton's major poetry, as well as that of his predecessors, Edmund Spenser and George Herbert. The popular title of Sonnet XIX, "On his blindness", which is not Milton's own, is at least partially misleading in its suggestion that the poem is one of personal crisis. As Gary A. Stringer has observed, "the sonnet is not essentially lyric, rather it reaches toward the narrative and dramatic, an esthetic object consciously and decisively separated from its creator" (141). While it would be unrealistic to divorce the poem completely from the poet's experience there is merit in Stringer's suggestion that the experience with which
the poem deals is generic. Stringer sees the poem as addressing
the problem of affliction, and on this basis draws a number of
interesting parallels between the poem and the Pauline epistles.
I would like to combine the insights of Stringer and Boulger,
and suggest that the issue is not so much affliction as
inability. The poet's agony is less a result of his own physical
pain, than of his sense of being unable to carry out the work
God has assigned him. This sense of inability to serve God
adequately is what Luther calls anfechtung, and in the larger
theological context the affliction in question is the fall.

Sonnet XIX functions as a dialogue between poetic
vocation and solifidianism. The lament that forms the octave of
the sonnet gives primacy to the poet's sense of calling:

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide:
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied,"
I fondly ask . . . . (1-8)

The speaker bemoans his inability to heed the call to divine
service that he so obviously hears. In the first five lines of
the sestet "Patience" offers a characteristically Protestant
response to the speaker's frustration: " . . . God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts" (9-10). This would seem to
imply the triumph of solifidian dogma over the poet's sense of
vocation, but such a resolution would be far too simple. The
poet is not willing to relinquish either doctrine. Instead the
final line attempts a synthesis by positing a passive form of service instead of an active one: "They also serve who only stand and wait". In this way the spiritual passivity usually implicit in solifidian theology is reconciled with the active stance associated with the doctrine of vocation. Here Milton is able to achieve the tranquillity that the Protestant temperament constantly strives for, and finds so difficult to achieve. The struggle to achieve this kind of repose is a recurrent theme in Protestant poetics.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that these concerns, and their characteristic expressions in poetry, are somehow the unique property of the Reformation. In fact they have clear antecedents in classical, medieval and renaissance sources, though the Reformation tends to put a "sharper point" on them, just as it does with orthodox Augustinian theology. The solifidian tendency to denigrate poetry, and sometimes all language, as products of man's corrupted nature has affinities with the "inability topos" of classical rhetoric. (Cain 10; Curtius 159-162, 409-412). The poet protests the inadequacy of his own language in order to elevate his object of praise, and at the same time, ironically, demonstrates his mastery over language through the very act of denying it. It is easy to see the attraction of this device to the Protestant poet. As we move from Spenser, through Herbert to Milton, and the influence of reformed theology becomes more pronounced, the second, ironic
function of the inability topos is gradually stripped away. This happens in several ways. As Cain points out the traditional location for inability topos is at the beginning of an encomiastic poem or oration (10), where the poet defines his relationship to his own text and to the object of his praise (whether Gloriana or God). When the poet employs the expressions of inability in the body of a poem their traditional ironic, formal and rhetorical purposes are subordinated to their explicit message. Affected modesty begins to sound more and more like genuine self-doubt. Use of the inability topos in the presentation of speaking characters in the poem, rather than in the poet's self-presentation, produces a similar effect—as when the narrative voice comments on the inadequacies of a character's speech. It can also be used by speakers other than the narrator, with reference either to their fellow characters (Raphael speaking to and about Adam in Paradise Lost), or to the poet's persona (the voice of the "friend" addressing the poet's persona in many of Herbert's poems). Such uses are often accusatory, further emphasizing the sincerity of the condemnation of language. Finally, additional force is added when the poet places the topos, in its accusatory mode, in the words of an authority figure such as Raphael or Christ. Since the inability topos is about language, and since a poem is a linguistic construct, the device is always, in some sense, a comment on the poem and the poet. That is to say, the inability
topos is always self-referential, even (perhaps especially) when the poet takes pains to remove himself from the context in which it is employed. Of the three poets I plan to consider, Spenser's use of the inability topos is clearly the closest to its classical and renaissance antecedents. Yet in spite of this there are signs of a more-than-rhetorical concern about the failings of his own medium. Herbert's use of the inability topos in lyric poetry further intensifies the sense of personal inadequacy it conveys, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* deploy it in an all-out assault on human language and learning.

If the classical inability topos provides a convenient rhetorical vehicle for the solifidian treatment of language, the classical ideal of the poet as *vates* provides a context for the Christian concept of poetic vocation. Sidney writes in the *Defense of Poesie* that "among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, forseer, or prophet", and goes on to endorse the term and its connotations in his own religious context: "And may I not presume a little further, to show the reasonableness of this word *vates*, and say that the holy David's Psalms are a divine poem" (410-411). Sidney saw virtuous poets of his own day as "right poets", who were a step removed from their divinely inspired predecessors, but whose art and medium was sanctioned by the same divine authority (415). Spenser, Herbert and Milton all attempt to go beyond the status
of "right poets" in search of a truly inspired voice.

In The Freedom of a Christian Luther summarizes his theology of justification in the most impassioned terms:

it is easy to see from what source faith derives such great power and why a good work or all good works together cannot equal it. No good work can rely upon the Word of God or live in the soul, for faith alone and the Word of God rule in the soul. Just as the heated iron glows like fire because of the union of fire with it, so the Word imparts its qualities to the soul. It is clear, then, that a Christian has all he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him. (31: 349)

Calvin's position on this subject is virtually identical, but his vision of human corruption is even blacker, and his condemnation of works more virulent:

it is the doctrine of scripture . . . that our good works are constantly covered with numerous stains by which God is justly offended and made angry against us, so far are we from being able to conciliate him, and call forth his favour towards us . . . Therefore, every help of Salvation bestowed upon believers, and blessedness itself, are entirely the gift of God. (Institutes 2: 93)

It is easy to see from this how the rejection of good works as a means to salvation can lead to a more general condemnation of human activity. Such a position is the extreme against which the Protestant poet reacts in attempting to define the place of his own art. In the Protestant scheme, good works, when they are evident at all, are God's gift to man, and not the reverse, "since to manifest the greatness of his love to us he . . . highly honours not ourselves only, but the gifts which he has bestowed upon us" (Institutes 1: 93)

As I suggested earlier, though, this is by no means a
uniquely Protestant vision. Luther's theology of justification is, in many ways, an extension of his Augustinian training.

Augustine writes in his "Admonition and Grace",

this is the right understanding of the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, by which alone men are freed from evil, and without which they do no good whatsoever, either in thought or in will and love, or in action; not only do men know by its showing what they are to do, but by its power they do with love what they know is to be done" (66)

In the same context Augustine quotes St. Paul in arguing that salvation is a result of God's "gracious choice. and if out of grace, then not in virtue of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace" (66). It is from these sources that the essential elements of reformed soteriology are derived. A number of modern critics, including William Halewood, Stanley Fish, Ira Clark and Patrick Grant, have skirted debates over the precise theological orientation of the poets they consider by referring to their Augustinianism. Grant, for example, uses the expression "guilt culture" to indicate, broadly, a spiritual and theological tradition deriving essentially from the influential thought of St. Augustine of Hippo, remaining most vital during the Middle Ages, and revived vigorously during the Reformation. (X)

In this way he stresses continuity, and avoids the difficult task of demonstrating that someone like Herbert was definitely a Protestant. I want to share, at least partly, in this equivocal position by arguing that it is not really necessary, and probably not possible, to indicate with much certainty the
extent to which Spenser or Herbert should be described as
Protestants (with Milton there is, of course, no doubt). What is
certain is that it would have been impossible for either of them
to escape the influence of reformed theology, particularly in
connection with the Protestant vision of the personal drama of
salvation, however conservative their views about matters of
church ritual may have been.

The Protestant depiction of good works as the product of
divine grace, rather than as a means of earning God's favour,
gives rise to the reformed theology of vocation. Luther
developed his notion of calling in direct opposition to the
orthodox theology of his time. As he writes in his treatise On
Monastic Vows:

all saints live by the same Spirit and the same faith,
and are guided and governed by the same Spirit and the
same faith, but they all do different external works.
For God ... provides each one with other works in
other times and places, just as he did with other
saints. And each one is compelled by the work, place,
time, persons, and circumstances, previously unknown
to him, to follow God as he rules and guides him. (44:
269)

For Luther, any "worthy occupation" is both of God, since human
actions are corrupt, and for God. And if the concept of divine
calling is expanded to include all "worthy occupations" then
surely poetry is among them. There is no doubt that Milton, for
example, envisioned the role of Christian poet as a priestly
one. While he retained the Protestant conviction that calling is
not limited to the clerical hierarchy, he did argue for the
existence of a "special" vocation, which

means that God, whenever he chooses, invites certain
selected individuals, either from the so-called elect or
from the reprobate, more clearly and insistently than is
normal. (De Doctrina Christiana 6: 455)

It is this call that Milton himself hears. As John Spencer Hill
points out in his study of Milton's concept of vocation,

Perhaps Milton's firmest conviction was that he had been
called to serve as the instrument of the divine will.
Like the Nazarite Samson, into whose characterization he
poured a good deal of his own spiritual and intellectual
biography, Milton thought of himself as "a person
separate to God / Designed for great exploits" (S.A.,
31-32) and his sense of special vocation provides a firm
conceptual framework which unifies the whole of his
literary production. (15)

Perhaps the best illustration of Milton's sense of his own
special poetic vocation is contained in The Reason of Church
Government, where he claims vatic status by comparing himself to
the seer Tiresias and the Prophet Jeremiah (1: 802-803). His
vocation is a fusion of the political, the religious and the
artistic, and his confident image of the "poet, soaring in the
high region of his fancies, with his garland and singing robes
about him" (1: 808) is linked to his great personal aspiration,

that what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens,
Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for
their country, I, in my proportion, with this over and
above of being a Christian, might doe for mine. (1:
812)

The strength of Milton's conviction is such that Russel Fraser
has been prompted to describe him as a kind of linguistic
pelagian, utterly confident in the power and appropriateness of
his own language (The Language of Adam 33).
And yet this description is the very antithesis of what we would expect from the "Puritan" Milton. Although his theology, as set forth in *De Doctrina Christiana*, defies labels like "Calvinist", the repudiation of works that is the cornerstone of the Reformation remains intact. *De Doctrina Christiana* stresses the impossibility of earning salvation through works:

> The worthlessness of our merits becomes quickly apparent when we consider that even our good deeds are not really ours but God's, who works in us, and that even if they were certainly ours they would still be no more than our duty. Moreover, however well we perform our duty it cannot possibly bear comparison with the richness of the promised reward. (6: 644-645)

Similarly, in Book XII of *Paradise Lost*, Michael offers Adam a synopsis of the reformed theology of justification:

> ... Doubt not but that sin Will reign among them, as of thee begot! And therefore was Law given them to evince Thir natural pravity, by stirring up Sin against Law to fight; That when they see Law can discover sin, but not remove, Save by those shadowy expiations weak, The blood of Bulls and Goats, they may conclude Some blood more precious must be paid for man, Just for unjust, that in such righteousness To them by Faith imputed, they may find Justification towards God, and peace Of Conscience, which the Law by Ceremonies Cannot appease, nor man the moral part Perform, and not performing cannot live. (285-299)

It is clear then that for Milton, as for any good reformed theologian, works can never, in themselves, be a means to salvation. If Milton the theologian dwells less on the essential depravity of works than Calvin it is not because of any
disagreement on the fundamental theological issue. In order to defend Milton the poet against the anti-aestheticism implicit in his own theology, he must place greater stress on the value of those works that are products of divine grace, and as such form the core of his Christian vocation.

With Herbert and Spenser the situation is less straightforward. While Miltonists quibble about whether Milton's theology in *De Doctrina Christiana* tends toward Arianism (Kelley; Hunter), scholars of Spenser and Herbert are engaged with the more fundamental question of whether either poet can safely be called a Protestant. This is the case for two main reasons. First Milton left us a theological treatise in which he attempted to state his doctrine in a complete and coherent manner. With Spenser and Herbert, on the contrary, we have only the poetry, and Herbert's *A Priest to the Temple, or, The Country Parson*. The latter work deals with matters of practical ministry rather than fundamental theological issues, and attempts to make theological sense of the poetry have resulted in the current diversity of scholarly opinion. The second factor has to do with the character of the time in which Spenser and Herbert wrote. In both cases there was considerably more freedom in the area of private faith than immediately before or after. Spenser published *The Faerie Queene* in the decade immediately following the decline of Puritanism as an organized political force (Collinson 385). After 1588, as Anthea Hume acknowledges
in her book on Spenser's Protestantism, identifying Puritans becomes a good deal more difficult. The situation was similar when Herbert composed the poems of The Temple, as Joseph Summers explains:

The Anglican Church before 1633 was in one sense more truly 'catholic' than the Anglo-Catholics of the nineteenth century wished to believe. So long as an individual subscribed to the Articles, attended services a few times a year, and was not too singular in his actions, a wide latitude of belief and practice was allowed. (53-54)

Herbert died in 1633, the year Laud became Archbishop of Canterbury.

The critical controversy over Spenser's theological position has been resurrected by the recent publication of Anthea Hume's Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet, in which she argues that "the religion to which he [Spenser] adhered throughout his life was a fervent Protestantism which requires the label 'Puritan' during a specific period [the late 1570s]" (9). Supporting Hume's position is J.D. Boulger, who exhibits no hesitation in placing Spenser among the poets of "Calvinist-Puritan sensibility" in The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry. Hume at least acknowledges that the weight of recent Spenser scholarship is against her on this issue (Weatherby is a recent example), and reviews the opinions of her opponents, who would place Spenser among the conservative defenders of the Elizabethan settlement. Such a position is taken by Virgil K. Whittaker in his 1950 study of The Religious
Basis of Spenser’s Thought. Whittaker concludes:

though certainly not a Calvinist, on all but one or two crucial doctrinal issues between Anglicanism and Rome, he [Spenser] was as staunchly Protestant theologically as he was politically; but, where no battle line existed, his sympathies lay with medieval Catholic ways as opposed to the Reformed. (8)

This is a complex position, and if it was indeed Spenser’s, then the confusion among scholars over the years is not surprising. I believe Whittaker’s summary does justice to the confusing array of theological ideas in The Faerie Queene, and I also believe it grants enough to Spenser’s Protestantism to give him a place in the development of a distinctly Protestant poetics, without making claims that are too difficult to defend.

Spenser can be infuriatingly contradictory in his allegorical presentation of religious ideas. The opening stanza of Book I, canto x, for example, seems an unequivocal statement of Calvinist doctrine:

What man is he, that boasts of fleshly might,  
And vaine assurance of mortality,  
Which all so soone, as it doth come to fight,  
Against Spirituall foes yeelds by and by,  
Or from the field most cowardly doth fly?  
Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill  
That thorough grace hath gained victory.  
If any strength we have it is to ill,  
But all the good is Gods, both power and eke will.  
(I,x,1)

The issue is complicated, however, by the unreliability of

* In quoting from The Faerie Queene I have modernized the letters i, u, v, and j, and have abandoned the italicization of names to permit my own italicizations for emphasis.
Spenser's narrator, and the increasing stress on good works as the canto progresses, culminating in the appearance of Charissa. There is little doubt that the experience of the Red Crosse Knight, culminating in the House of Holiness episode, owes something to the Puritan drama of salvation described by William Haller in *The Rise of Puritanism* (election--vocation--justification--sanctification--glorification), and the Knight's encounter with Despair involves at least a touch of Lutheran *Anfechtung* or Calvinist "sin-consciousness". Spenser's involvement with the "cult of Elizabeth" likewise required at least nominal Protestantism, and the anti-Roman allegory of Book I, drawing on the traditional Protestant characterization of the Pope as Antichrist, has been treated at length by D. Douglas Waters in *Duessa* as Theological Satire. At the same time Spenser, still a humanist, is clearly willing to criticize Protestant doctrines and policies. The characterization of Envy in the House of Pride seems to be an undisguised attack on Lutheran doctrine:

He hated all good workes and vertuous deeds,
And him no lesse, that any like did use,
And who with gracious bread the hungry feeds,
His almes for want of faith he doth accuse;
So every good to bad he doth abuse:
And eke the verse of famous Poets witt
He does backebite, and spiteful poison spues
From leprous mouth on all, that ever writt:
Such one vile Envie was that fifte in row did sitt.  
(I,iv,32)

The robber Kirkrapine is clearly linked to the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, and there is, of course, Ben
Jonson's observation that the Blatant Beast is a satire upon the Puritans (Whittaker 7). Whittaker's description is capable of accommodating these apparent contradictions. Spenser the antiquarian, the conservative and the moralist would certainly have disapproved of the destruction of monastic treasures and libraries, and the seizure of monastic lands, and it must have been clear to him that royal motivation was far from theological. Even the description of Envy is not so much an indictment of Protestant doctrine per se, as of the abuses to which it is susceptible. The phrase "gracious bread" (3) suggests, I think, Spenser's own moderate Protestantism. He esteems good works as products of divine grace, and condemns those Protestants too narrow-minded to see them as such. As lines 5 and 6 show, he also sees in Envy's extreme solifidianism a threat to his own poetic good works, and the defence against this threat is an important feature of The Faerie Queene.

With Herbert the situation is much the same, except that arguments for Herbert's Protestantism have gained somewhat greater currency. The orthodox position is expressed by Joseph Summers in George Herbert: His Religion and Art. Summers sees Herbert in much the same light as Whittaker sees Spenser, arguing that "Herbert believed as strongly in predestination and the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace as he believed in the significance and beauty of the ritual" (58). On the side of Herbert the Catholic there is Rosemond Tuve, who stresses the
elements of continuity and Christian tradition in Herbert's writing. A recent article by Stanley Stewart, documenting Herbert's reliance on the 'Harmonies' of Little Gidding, suggests that Ferrar and the Little Gidding community are as close as we can come to identifying Herbert's intended audience, and that the Catholic tendencies of this group should be taken to indicate Herbert's own views. Stewart is writing in direct response to Barbara K. Lewalski's Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric and Richard Strier's Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry. Lewalski's ambitious book treats Herbert in the context of a larger theory of Protestant poetics, while Strier argues that the dominant theological concern in The Temple is Luther's doctrine of justification by faith.

Again I am attracted to the middle position, as I think Herbert himself would have been. There is no doubt that the liturgical sources of The Temple reach back long before the Reformation, or that Herbert was influenced by Counter-reformation meditative practices (Martz). At the same time I find it difficult to believe that Herbert could have escaped the influence of a theological movement that was better than a century old by the time he wrote, and had been the central preoccupation of English theological writing and education for most of that time. It is not necessary to make Herbert over into a Calvinist in order to suggest that he has a place in the
development of a Protestant literary tradition.

If there is debate over the degree to which Spenser and Herbert subscribed to Protestant doctrines such as predestination and justification by faith, there is at least relative unanimity concerning their sense of poetic vocation. In a lengthy article on "Spenser and the Idea of a Literary Career" Richard Helgerson describes Spenser's ambition:

> to reverse history and reincarnate in his own time the idea of the Poet, Spenser needed particularly the life-giving breath of inspiration, for it was in losing his divine inspiration that the ancient Poet \( \text{vates} \) had degenerated into the modern amorous 'maker'. (899)

Even studies that stress Spenser's connections to classical and renaissance models, rather than those of the Reformation, point to the importance of the vatic ideal. If Spenser's project was, as Helgerson suggests, to rescue the notion of poetic calling from his utilitarian age, then the theology of the Reformation was an ally. God no longer called men to the priesthood alone, but to all professions.

In Herbert's case the roles of poet and priest were literally convergent. Walton's apocryphal description of Herbert's request upon sending the manuscript of *The Temple* to Ferrar is suggestive:

> Sir I pray deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar, and tell him that he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it, and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn
it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies. (286)

Whether or not Herbert actually uttered these words, they have come to represent the central expression of his sense of mission, aside from the poetry itself. Joseph Summers elaborates on the point:

It was impossible to distinguish the aims of specific actions, for all was done to the glory of God: the aid both spiritual and physical of one's neighbour was also an act of worship of the productive life; and any individual act of public or private worship, once communicated, could become an act of edification to one's neighbour. The ultimate method of reflecting God's glory was the creation of a work of decency and order, a work of beauty, whether a church, an ordered poem, or an ordered life. This was not confined to the artist, but was the privilege and duty of every Christian. (83-84)

While the expressions of poetic vocation associated with Herbert do not rely heavily on the classical conception of vatic inspiration, there can be no question that divine sanction for, and indeed divine participation in, his writing is a crucial factor. And yet a great many of the poems deal explicitly with the absence, real or imagined, of that divine force. Herbert's sense of his own fallenness, heightened by the spirit of his age (whether we call it Augustinian "guilt culture", Lutheran anfechtung or Puritan "sin-consciousness" does not really matter) acts not so much to frustrate the actual accomplishment of his divinely-ordained work, as to frustrate his sense of its accomplishment. Whatever our view of his poetry, Herbert was always acutely aware of its inadequacy, and this awareness is a central feature of the work itself.
What I have attempted in this chapter is to suggest a rough consensus in the Protestant (and Augustinian) theology prevalent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on two issues: the doctrine of justification by faith, and the related tendency to denigrate human works, and the expansion of the notion of calling or vocation to give "priestly" status to activities other than clerical life. I have also tried to show that Spenser and Herbert, as well as Milton, participate in this consensus to some degree, whether or not we are willing to attach the slippery labels of Puritan or even Protestant. My feeling is that the latter description, if not the former, probably applies in all three cases, but at the same time I do not think it necessary to push the issue very far. This is partly because the issues I identify as characteristically Protestant have classical and renaissance antecedents as well: in the inability topos of classical rhetoric, and in the ideal of the vatic poet. For a Protestant poet, however, an expression of authorial inability is more than an ironically self-assertive rhetorical device. As the poet's sense of the inadequacy of his work becomes more genuine it comes into conflict with the vatic ideal, and the poem becomes the scene of a struggle to accommodate both concepts.
"Afflicted Stile": Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*

In *The Faerie Queene* we can begin to see signs of the tension between solifidianism and poetic vocation that was identified in Milton’s *Sonnets XIX*. In Book I, "The Legende Of The Knight Of The Red Crosse, Or Of Holinesse," Spenser is concerned, among other issues, to establish the appropriate relationship between faith and good works in the Christian life. At the same time he is concerned with announcing his own role as poet in a more ambitious sense than was customary in Elizabethan England (Helgerson). Spenser’s depiction of Envy suggests a tendency to link these two issues together: the proper place of the poet’s linguistic works, and that of good works as a whole. Correct and incorrect use of language is also a central concern (arguably the central concern) of Book VI, "The Legend Of S. Calidore Or Of Courtesie". But where Book I may be described as a defence of Spenser’s poetic vocation, in which adversaries like Envy are introduced in order to be dispatched, Book VI, and also "The Mutabilitie Cantos," present more serious doubts about that vocation. The two monsters that frame the poem, Errour with her "vomit full of bookes and papers" (I,i,20), and the Blatant Beast with its "vile tongue and venemous intent" (VI,i,8), are both examples of what A. Leigh Deneef calls "wrong-speakers"
(3), offenders against the divine Word who attack not only Spenser's heroes but also his poem. But while the Red Crosse Knight defeats Errour with relative ease in Book I, Calidore's triumph over the Blatant Beast in Book VI is temporary at best.

In Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor, Deneef argues that any poet who would address our profit and delight, as well as move us to virtuous action, must be alert to the abuses of the poetic word to which both he and we might fall prey. Such vigilance is particularly evident in Spenser's poetry. Throughout his literary career he adopts a variety of defensive and self-defensive postures to protect his texts from potential misuse, from their being, in his words, either misconstrued or misconstrued. (3)

This defensive posture implies a strong sense of the fallenness and corruption of the poet's language and art, and hints at the characteristic Protestant suspicion of linguistic artifice. Spenser generally presents the threats to his poem as external ones (misreading and slander), but perhaps he protests too much. In one sense all of the wrong speakers in the poem must be viewed as products of the poet's own imagination and preoccupations. At the same time though, poetry for Spenser is explicitly a form of vocation. Like the knights in each of his six books, he has embarked on a quest in the service of his Faery Queen, the "Mirrour of grace and Majestie divine" (I, Proem, 4), a quest that is his divine calling. The Protestant theology of vocation is the Reformation's acknowledgement that a life devoted to sanctified works, works that are the products of
faith and divine grace, is possible in any area of endeavour—in
poetry no less than in clerical life. The centrality of the
theology of vocation in *The Faerie Queene* is evident in the
insistence with which the poem cautions against sloth, the
temptation to abandon the quest, to rest, to retreat from the
active to the contemplative life before the appointed task can
be completed. Further, the temptation to rest too soon is a sin
to which the poet and his heroes are equally susceptible
(Miller).

Both Spenser's apprehensiveness about the efficacy of
his own language and art, and his sense of poetic vocation, are
encapsulated in his use of topoi of authorial inability or
inadequacy, which recur throughout the poem. In the proem to
Book I the poet presents himself as "all too meane" (I,proem,1),
and appeals to Elizabeth, as his muse, for aid: "O helpe thou my
weake wit, and sharpen my dull tong" (I,proem,2). As Thomas Cain
points out, such

affectation of self disparagement not only serves to
elevate the subject of praise: it also draws attention
to the speaker himself. It is this paradox inherent in
the topos of inability that Spenser particularly
exploits. (Cain 10)

This reading suggests that Spenser's use of the inability topos
is predominantly ironic, and serves as an expression of the
poet's sense of vocation. This is particularly true in Book I,
but as Cain himself points out, "the poet's final posture, in
the two stanzas of the eighth canto [of Mutabilitie] . . . acts
out his own helplessness", and the poem's "final topos of inability . . . [is] devoid of any sense of covert self-assertion" (183). Spenser's declining confidence in his own ability to sustain poetic vocation against the threat of false speaking is also evident in Book VI. Spenser's use of the inability topos is, on the whole, more self-assertive than either Milton's or Herbert's. Nevertheless the appearance of the device in the context of declining self-confidence begins its transformation into an expression of the poet's fundamental ambivalence toward his own art, which is at once inspired and fallen. At the end of the poem (or at least of the poem we have) Spenser prays for the rest he has been so reluctant to grant his heroes: "O that great Sabaoth God, grant me that Sabaoth's sight" (VII,viii,2), and in doing so, reaches for the same balance between activity and passivity found in the closing lines of Milton's *Sonnet XIX*:

the last humble line cannot pass without the poet's punning on the Hebrew Sabaoth, armies or hosts, and Sabaoth, rest. In the pun resides a definition of eternity and repose where the dichotomies the poem has engaged—quest and rest, epic and pastoral, vision and experience, art and reality, encomium and truth—resolve. (Cain 183)

This view accords well with David L. Miller's insight that Spenser's career and his poetry represent a sustained effort to hold a wide array of potentially conflicting values together in a single thought, and so to preserve a generous illusion about the social utility of beautiful untrue things. (176)

Miller is here referring to the debate over the social utility
of poetry in which Sidney's *Defense* participates, but for Spenser the question of the value of poetry goes beyond that of mere "social utility."

The treatment of language in Book I of *The Faerie Queene* develops along lines that follow closely the spiritual development of the Red Crosse Knight. In fact, a reading of the passages where language, speech and words are specifically treated leads to the suggestion that Book I depicts a process that might be described as the sanctification of language. There is a movement from an emphasis on the ineffectuality of language as a fallen human attribute, and its darker potential as an instrument of deception and damnation, to a more optimistic position governed by the reformed doctrine of vocation. This movement represents a rebuttal to the uncharitably solifidian position represented by Envy. The presentation of language in the cantos leading up to the House of Holiness episode is predominantly negative, and casts doubt upon the reliability of the poem itself. This process of undercutting the validity and authority of the poetic utterance begins very early, with the portrait of the Red Crosse Knight in the opening stanzas of canto i: "Right faithfull true he was in deede and word" (I,i,2). This is the first of many appearances of the expression "deede and word", which Spenser uses to stress the link between speech and action, and implicitly, between poem and quest, poet and knight. As events show, the words and deeds of the knight we
meet in canto i are anything but faithful. Thus the words of the narrative voice in praising the unproven Knight are called into question. Later, in the House of Pride, Redcrosse sets up a false dichotomy between speech and action, which illustrates his diversion from the quest: "He never meant with words, but swords to plead his right" (I,iv,42).

The figure of Archimago serves as a warning against the deceptive and malicious power of eloquence: "For that old man of pleasing wordes had store, / And well could file his tongue as smooth as glas" (I,i,35). Two stanzas later, this power is associated with poetry, in terms that reveal the true nature of Archimago's language:

Then choosing out few wordes most horrible,
(Let none them read) thereof did verses frame,
With which and other spelles like terrible,
He bad awake blacke Plutoes griesly Dame,
And cursed heaven, and spake reprochfull shame
Of highest God, the Lord of life and light;
A bold bad man, that dar'd to call by name
Great Gorgon, Prince of darknesse and dead night,
At which Cocytus quakes, and Styx is put to flight.
(I,i,37)

Here Spenser presents the conventional analogy of poet and wizard, perhaps drawing specifically on the medieval tradition depicting Vergil, his own model, as a magician (Comparetti).

Nohrnberg points out that the poet--magician analogy "offers to equate Archimago's activity with the imagination currently shaping the poem [Spenser's]" (105), while Deneef carries the association a step further by suggesting that Archimago's "duplicitous creations threaten constantly to contaminate the
poet's" (95). This is evident when Archimago, in the guise of the Red Crosse Knight, meets Una. Not only do "His lovely words" seem "due recompence" (I,iii,30) to her, but the narrator himself seems to be taken in by the illusion, judging from his unqualified assertion at the end of the stanza: "Before her stands her knight, for whom she toyld so sore" (I,iii,30). It must be acknowledged that this naive posture is only one of the narrator's many roles. Nevertheless the fluctuations in the authority and reliability of the narrative voice heighten the sense of a certain ambivalence toward his creation on the part of the poet.

The power of language to move, lauded in Sidney's Defense of Poesie (426), appears in The Faerie Queene as particularly problematic. Duessa employs "speeches seeming fit" to "amove" Sans joy against the Red Cross Knight (I,iv,45), and "Her feeling speeches some compassion moved" even in the dark heart of mother Night (I,v,24). Whatever the corruption of the speaker the latter of these speeches seems to contain an element of genuine filial affection. The effect of Despair's vicious speech to the Red Cross Knight, "The Knight was much enmoved with his speech" (I,ix,48), is exactly the same as the effect of Una's virtuous speech to her father: "The King was greatly moved at her speach" (I,xii,35). This echo suggests that Spenser, unlike Sidney, has a strong sense of the power of language to move men for ill as easily as for good.
In fact, much in the early cantos of Book I testifies to the ineffectuality and potential misguidedness of even the best-intentioned uses of language. Una's "piteous words" (I,iii,38) in defence of the false Red Crosse Knight are morally impeccable, but utterly misdirected. Similarly when Satyrane assails Sansloy "With fowle reprochfull words" (I,vi,40) he is acting virtuously, but on the basis of false information provided by Archimago. Perhaps the most striking example, however, is Fradubio's speech in canto ii. Fradubio's story should provide all the information Redcrosse needs to recognize his own situation, but despite their truth "these speeches rare" (I,ii,32) have no effect on his corrupted powers of comprehension.

A notable exception to this pattern is the conversation between Una and Arthur in canto vii, which serves to maintain a sense of the possibility of a sanctified language. Arthur's attempt to ease the lady's suffering with "Faire feeling words" (I,vii,38) is initially rejected with an accusatory inability topos:

What worlds delight or joy of living speach
Can heart, so plung'd in sea of sorrowes deepe,
And heaped with so huge misfortunes, reach?
(I,vii,39)

Una's doubts about the efficacy of Arthur's speech are wholly consistent with the poem's portrayal of language so far. In this instance, however, "His goodly reason and well guided speach" (I,vii,42) are successful: "His chearefull words reviv'd her
chearelesse spright" (I,vii,52). It is important to note that Arthur is not merely a model of humanist virtues, but is also a questing knight, inspired by a dream-vision of the Faery Queen. Thus while "goodly reason" guides his speech, he represents the poet's ideal of visionary inspiration as well. In this sense he anticipates the movement of cantos x to xii, in which language is reformed along with the Red Crosse Knight, and the grim view of language in the early cantos is counterbalanced by a more optimistic vision of poetic vocation.

The House of Holinesse episode of canto x serves to remake not only the Red Crosse Knight, but also the poem's portrayal of language. Earlier episodes have demonstrated that both have the potential for salvation, but their fallen natures have dominated. The knight's resumption and eventual completion of his quest depends on his acquisition of the Christian virtues represented by Charissa, and the knowledge represented by Contemplation, and the Canto builds towards this point. Nevertheless, Fidelia, because she is the first to instruct Redcrosse, seems to play an important enabling role. Hume argues that a single vision propels the poem forward, a vision of how to live well, or in Spenser's own words, a vision of the "XII Morall vertues". The structure of the work informs us that the acquisition of these virtues depends first and foremost on a divine act of grace, and then consists of a lengthy process of individual development in which the mind increases in comprehension, the heart in self mastery. (67-68)

While this position does not deny the tremendous emphasis on
good works that is evident in *The Faerie Queene* as a heroic poem, it may still be too strong. Whether or not we accept Hume's interpretation it is fair to say that Spenser is working to break down the opposition between faith and works by depicting them as sisters. At the same time the chronological priority of Fidelia's teaching in Redcrosse's spiritual renewal keeps Spenser within the bounds of the conservative Protestantism described by Whittaker.

In opposition to Archimago Fidelia represents the virtuous deployment of language, of which scripture is the supreme example. Her "booke that was both signd and seald with blood, / Wherein darke things were writ, hard to be understood" (I,x,13) is a positive analogue to the poet's own "continued Allegory or darke conceit ... closdily enwrappd in Allegorical devices" (Letter to Raleigh). Deneef argues that by setting Archimago loose in the fiction, Spenser creates the necessity for a counterforce. His fictional strategies are so close to his antagonist's that he must derive a positive source for his own transforming powers, both to reveal what is dark and hidden and to 'raise againe' what is low and fallen. Fidelia provides, in short, a divinely sanctioned authority for Spenser's narrative presumptions. (99)

Language, which was the instrument of Redcrosse's unmaking at the hands of the false speakers--Archimago, Duessa and Despair--becomes the instrument of his redemption through faith:

And that her sacred booke, with blood ywrit,
That none could read, except she did them teach,
She unto him disclosed every whit,
And heavenly documents thereout did preach,
That weaker wit of man could never reach,
Of God, of grace, of justice, of free will,
That wonder was to heare her goodly speach:
For she was able with her words to kill,
And raise againe to life the hart, that she did thrill.

(I,x,19)

Some ambiguity should be noted here. It can be argued that the
emphasis on Fidelia's teaching in line 2 of the stanza is an
attack on Luther's stress on individual interpretation of
scripture. It seems to me that this reading places too little
weight on Fidelia's allegorical significance. Luther would
certainly not have suggested that one could read scripture
without the guidance of faith. Rather, redemption becomes
possible through the action of Fidelia, and knowledge "of God,
of grace, of justice, of free will" proceeds from her teaching.

Spenser praises the language of the minor as well as the
major figures in the House of Holiness, creating a sense of a
total transformation in its nature and role. The depiction of
the Mount of Contemplation explicitly connects Christian mission
with poetic vocation, as Zion and the Mount of Olives,
representative of the divine Word, are associated with
Parnassus, and the poet's divine inspiration. Contemplation
leads the Red Crosse Knight

... to the highest Mount;
Such one, as that same mighty man of God,
That bloud-red billowes like a walled front
On either side disparted with his rod,
Till that his army dry-foot through them yod,
Dwelt fortie days upon; where writ in stone
With bloudy letters by the hand of God,
The bitter doome of death and baleful mone
He did receive, whiles flashing fire about him shone.
Or like that sacred hill, whose head full hie,
Adornd with fruitfull Olives all around,
Is, as it were for endless memory
Of that deare Lord, who oft thereon was found,
For ever with a flowring girland crownd:
Or like that pleasanta Mount, that is for ay
Through famous Poets verse each where renown'd,
On which the thrise three learned Ladies play
Their heavenly notes, and make full many a lovely lay.

(I,x,53-54)

Immediately following this pronouncement of the divine status of
poetry, including, presumably, Spenser's own poem, the inability
topos reappears in the description of Jerusalem:

Whose wals and towres were builded high and strong
Of perle and precious stone, that earthly tong
Cannot describe, nor wit of man can tell;
Too high a ditty for my simple song.

(I,x,55.4-7)

This passage undoubtedly fulfils the conventional purposes of
the inability topos, to elevate the subject of description by
claiming that it is beyond description, and to draw attention to
the artistry of the poet employing the device. Yet it may also
present a genuine caution against pride and backsliding on the
part of the poet and his newly reformed language. This sense is
heightened by the echo in line 6 of the earlier line connected
with Fidelia's heavenly teaching, "That weaker wit of man could
never reach" (I,x,19). The cautionary function of the inability
topos is reinforced by the reappearance of Archimago in canto
xii. Man remains corrupted by the fall, and the sanctification
of poetic language is no permanent guarantee against false
speaking. The poet must be constantly on his guard against the
potential for duplicity that is inherent in his own art.
Book I of *The Faerie Queene* clearly cannot be called a solifidian poem. Rather, it incorporates a solifidian critique of poetry, in order to respond to it by suggesting that virtuous words and deeds are inseparable from faith. The quest upon which the Red Crosse Knight embarks is, like the poem, a work in which Spenser puts great stock. Book I constitutes a successful defence of the poet's vocation which, in the final sense, is seen as inseparable from his faith. In such a context the Protestant formulation of "faith alone" does not arise, since faith, for Spenser, never exists alone, but only in conjunction with its outward manifestations in virtuous speech and action.

Spenser's attitude toward language in Book VI is more complex, and, I think, more typical of a Reformation poet's ambivalence about his art. Numerous critics have pointed out the heightened self-consciousness and diminished self-confidence of the Book. Cain suggests that "in one sense the poet becomes the hero of Book VI", in a way that involves "a reassessment of his role, particularly with respect to Orpheus, the humanist's favourite archetype of the successful poet" (156). Nohrnberg claims that "the [Blatant] Beast threatens the poet with the 'snowballing redundancy' that was a danger in his project from the beginning ... the monstrosity that might overtake a poet who did not know when to stop" (683), while Angus Fletcher observes that Spenser "cannot vaccinate his poem against the disease carried by the Blatant Beast; language itself is the
primary medium of error and betrayal" (294). The decline of
Spenser's sense of poetic vocation is evident in the crumbling
of the ideals of Book I: the opposition between true speaking
and false speaking and the linking of virtuous speech and
virtuous action. While the first Book of the poem presents
misuse of language as a constant danger there is, in fact, very
little confusion between true and false speaking. The Book
revolves around a conflict between two clearly defined modes of
using language, and the process I have described as the
"sanctification of language" represents a clear triumph of the
divine Word over fallen human words. In Book VI the situation is
far less clear. With whom does the poet identify, and with whom
does he ask us to identify? The Book contains false speakers
analogous to those in Book I--Blandina, Turpine, and of course
the Blatant Beast--but the models of true speech turn out to be
flawed or ambiguous. Nowhere can we find a confident expression
of poetic vocation to balance the sense that language is
corrupt, inadequate or unreliable. Every attempt in Book VI to
establish some assurance of poetic vocation turns back upon
itself either through irony or simple failure of language.

In the proem the poet's invocation to the Muse and his
plea for the "goodly fury" of divine inspiration (VI,proem,2) is
followed by a solifidian-sounding caution against the "fayned
showes" (VI,proem,4) that pass for courtesy in his own age:

But in the triall of true courtesie,
Its now so farre from that, which then it was,
That it indeed is nought but forgerie,
Fashion'd to please the eyes of them, that pass,
Which see not perfect things but in a glass:
Yet is that glass so gay, that it can blynd
The wisest sight, to think gold that is brass.
But virtue's seat is deep within the mind,
And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defyned.

(VI, proem, 5)

While its subject matter may be derived from antiquity,
Spenser's poem is inescapably tied to his own age. In the
dichotomy between "outward showes" and "inward thoughts", a
poem, especially one of the scope and magnitude of The Faerie
Queene, must fall into the former category. Even more strikingly
ironic is the relationship between this and the following
stanza. Here Spenser subverts his own attempt to establish
Elizabeth as mediatrix between the vanity of his age and the
virtue of antiquity by using the previous stanza's language and
imagery of condemnation to sing her praises:

But where shall I in all Antiquity
So faire a patterne finde, where may be seen
The goodly praise of Princely curtesie
As in your selue, O sovereign Lady Queene,
In whose pure minde, as in a mirrour sheene,
It showes, and with her brightness doth inflame
The eyes of all, which thereon fixed beene;
But meriteth indeede an higher name:
Yet so from low to high uplifted is your name.

(VI, proem, 6. Emphasis mine.)

The proem explains what has happened to the dichotomy of true
versus false speaking. It has been replaced by one of "outward
showes", which would seem to include all forms of speaking,
versus "inward thoughts".

Since Calidore is the knight of courtesy, an essentially
verbal virtue, we might expect him to serve as a model of poetic vocation, or failing that, to progress toward perfection of the virtue he represents, as the Red Crosse Knight does. Sincere efforts continue to be made by critics to see him in this light.

In his massive 1976 study, Nohrnberg suggests that

the hero of the legend of courtesie is short of weaponry, but he makes up the deficiency with his fair words. The uses of speech in this legend perhaps require no detailed enumeration. It is possible that the overlapping narrative in the opening cantos is largely contrived to get Calidore into as many conversations as possible. On the side of the heroic persona we find salutation, welcome, invitation, sympathetic enquiry, counsel, commiseration, thanks, apology, appeasement, suasion and entreaty. (681)

With few exceptions, however, Calidore's use of these verbal forms is self-serving. He quickly transforms his salutation to Artegal in the fourth stanza into an occasion to describe his own quest, interrupting just as Artegal "gan to expresse / His whole exploite" (VI, i, 5). His welcomes and invitations seem to consist chiefly in the knight's inviting himself to impose on the hospitality of others, first Calepine, then Melibee, and then Colin. His sympathetic enquiries into the affairs of others are so frequent that they begin to smack of busybodying, and his apology to Colin for interrupting the dance of the Graces, by far the knight's crudest blunder, suggests that he is forgiving himself, rather than asking forgiveness: "Thus did the courteous knight excuse his blame" (VI, x, 29). The standard expression of facile praise, "courteous knight", reinforces this interpretation. These offenses might all be excused if they fell
into a pattern of degeneration and restoration of the Knight's virtue, as is the case with Redcrosse. As Richard Neuse points out, the vision of the dance of the Graces, analogous to Redcrosse's vision of "the new Hierusalem" (I,x,57) from the Mount of Contemplation, "should be Calidore's moment of truth. But neither the instant disappearance of the dancers, nor Colin's breaking of his pipe in anger at the intrusion has any real effect on Calidore" (Neuse 384). Like the linking of the Mount of Contemplation with Parnassus in Book I, the dance of the Graces is associated with poetic vocation and divine inspiration, "For being gone, none can them bring in place, / But whom they of themselves so list to grace" (VI,x,20). "The poeta's exercise of his verbal gifts, both natural and cultivated, brings on the vates' transcendent vision only when the Graces or divine grace vouchsafe their own mysterious gifts" (Cain 177). Here though, the vision of one of the poet's personas is fractured by the apparently incurable awkwardness of another. The poet is not aligned with true speaking against false speaking, as in Book I, but rather divided between the two.

The figures of Arthur and the Salvage Man also provide insight into the poet's changing attitude towards language and vocation. In Book I, Arthur appears prior to the House of Holiness episode to comfort Una, to rescue Redcrosse from Despair, and through "well guided speech" (I,viii,42) to serve
as an image of the potential for sanctification of language. In Book VI, however, it appears that the efficacy of even Arthur's language is in doubt. The inarticulate Salvage Man seems rather more successful, though this is an area of some scholarly debate. Neuse's observation that "the Savage turns out to be a model of instinctive courtesy" (375), associated with the kind of virtue whose "seat is deepe within the mynd" (VI,proem,5) has been contested by Wells, who argues the rather Victorian case that "the inarticulate Salvage acts in a dangerously impulsive manner and must twice be restrained by Prince Arthur from committing the acts of savage violence which earn him his name" (135). Yet the second of these incidents, in which Arthur prevents the Salvage from slaying Turpine, may be taken as a sign of the inefficacy of the Prince's language and the deceptive power of Blandina's. David L. Miller points out that

Arthur spares Turpine - a mistake he almost doesn't survive - because he is disarmed, so to speak, by fair shows of courtesy. He seems to be reenacting Calidore's merciful treatment of Crudor. The outcome is not the same, of course--crudity can be refined and turpitude cannot--but the difference between them lies deep within the mind . . . . It is a further irony in this episode that the Salvage Man isn't fooled for a minute. Being completely ignorant of social forms, he is also invulnerable to their abuse. (180)

This situation is another example of the breakdown of the simple dichotomy of true speaking versus false speaking. Both Arthur's "sharpe words" aimed at reforming Turpine (VI,vi,33-36) and the Salvage man's non-speech are seriously flawed. The link between word and deed, established in Book I, has been broken. Arthur
seems to be reduced to good words without good works, the Salvage Man the reverse.

Melibee provides a further example of this kind of ambiguity. Though far from a villain like Turpine, he is equally far from serving as a model of poetic vocation, despite the suggestiveness of his name. If anything he serves as a model for the retreat from one's calling that is always suspect in The Faerie Queene. While Melibee argues that his pastoral lifestyle is antithetical to "the worlds gay showes" (VI,i,22), its seductive effect on Calidore is actually the same as that of the court, and his language in particular is bewitching:

\[
\text{Whylest thus he talkt, the knight with greedy eare} \\
\text{Hong still upon his melting mouth attent;} \\
\text{Whose sensefull words empierst his hart so neare,} \\
\text{That he was rapt with double ravishment,} \\
\text{Both of his speech that wrought him great content,} \\
\text{And also of the object of his vew,} \\
\text{On which his hungry eye was alwayes bent;} \\
\text{That twixt his pleasing tongue, and her faire hew,} \\
\text{He lost himself, and like one halfe entraunced grew.} \\
\quad \text{(VI,i,26)}
\]

Calidore is not the only one who loses "himself" in Melibee's speech. Faced with a stanza containing eleven masculine pronouns the reader has a difficult time separating speaker from hearer. This confusion points to the narcissistic quality of Calidore's attraction to Melibee. The character of Melibee's speech and its placement in the Book also suggest that, in some ways, "Melibee is like Despair a sinister Orpheus" (Cain 173). At best he represents the poet's potential to delight, while only appearing to teach, and at worst, the darker power to deceive and destroy.
All this is not to suggest that Spenser has entirely given up on the notion of a vocation consisting of sanctified works and words. Tristram and the Hermit provide models of the virtuous uses to which language can be put. The link between words and works that was the ideal of Book I is expressed in Calidore's judgement of Tristram:

Much did Sir Calidore admire his speach
Tempred so well, but more admyr'd the stroke
That through the mayles had made so strong a breach
Into his heart . . . . (VI,ii,13)

The Hermit, similarly, represents the fusion of virtuous speech and action, "As he the art of wordes knew wondrous well, / And eke could doe, as well as say the same, (VI,vi,6). The Hermit explains that the cure for the bite of the Blatant Beast is as linguistic as the affliction, yet even his counsel is corrupted by a certain ambiguity. What sounds at first like an injunction to silence, or at least reticence,—"your tongue, your talke restraine" (VI,vi,7)—becomes a charge to "Shun secresie, and talke in open sight" (VI,vi,14). Significantly, these figures do not have the effect of redeeming language, as did Arthur, Fidelia and the residents of the House of Holiness in Book I. Rather their effectiveness and influence is severely limited. They provide aid in time of need and illuminate other characters by contrast—Tristram to Calidore and the Hermit to Melibee (Cain 173)—but they disappear from the poem without affecting the outcome of Calidore's quest.

The achievement of the quest, as Neuse observes, "occurs
almost as an afterthought in the latter part of canto 12 rather than as the climax of a spiritual struggle" (386). The subsequent escape of the Blatant Beast seems to be of greater import than his temporary capture. The identification of the Beast with the poem and the poet, or at least with the darker side of poetic potential, has been remarked upon with greater or lesser insistence by several critics. The Beast's triumph, along with Calidore's disruption of the dance of the Graces, is usually taken as an indication of Spenser's "decay of might / . . [and] dulled spright" (VI, proem, 1), the disintegration of his sense of poetic vocation. Richard Helgerson has described "Spenser's idea of the poet . . . [as] an unstable but necessary union of two ideas, embodied in two roles: shepherd and knight, Colin and Calidore - neither of which could be renounced in favour of the other" (907). I do not think it is forcing the issue unduly to see in this an analogy to the union of active and passive stances in Milton's Sonnet XIX. The poet must somehow "serve" as a questing knight, and yet "stand and wait" like a patient shepherd for divine inspiration. By the end of The Faerie Queene, such a union is no longer possible.
Herbert's Temple of "Guilded Clay"

When we encounter the poetry of George Herbert we move closer to a uniquely Protestant poetics, characterized by the tension between a solifidian repudiation of linguistic artifice (and sometimes all language), and a desire to perform divine service through that same medium. The two sides of this tension have been admirably documented by Stanley Fish (Self-Consuming Artifacts), and Barbara K. Lewalski (Protestant Poetics) respectively, though there has yet to be a satisfactory synthesis of their views. Fish's central point is that the insight that God's word is all is self-destructive, since acquiring it involves abandoning the perceptual and conceptual categories within which the self moves and by means of which it separately exists. To stop saying amiss is not only to stop distinguishing "this" from "that", but to stop distinguishing oneself from God, and finally to stop, to cease to be. (Self-Consuming Artifacts 156-157)

His argument is based on Platonic and Augustinian aesthetics, or perhaps more properly anti-aesthetics (3), which, as Lewalski notes, "must finally depress the significance of poetry along with all the arts of human discourse" (Protestant Poetics 6). In her own introduction, Lewalski responds that we should . . . approach Augustinian aesthetics not in medieval but in Reformation terms, taking account of the important new factor introduced by the Reformation--an overwhelming emphasis on the written word as the embodiment of divine truth. In this milieu the Christian poet is led to relate his work not to ineffable and intuited divine revelation, but rather to its written
formulation in scripture. The Bible affords him a literary model which he can imitate in such literary matters as genre, language and symbolism, confident that in this model at least, the difficult problems of art and truth are perfectly resolved. (6-7)

Yet Lewalski’s book fails to do what the first sentence of this passage advocates. Rather than re-interpreting Augustinian anti-aesthetics in light of the new sanction for poetry provided by the Reformation’s emphasis on the written word, she ignores the former to focus exclusively on the latter. It is important to remember that the spirit of the Reformation was overwhelmingly Augustinian, and that in many respects the Reformation represents a continuation or even an intensification of medieval theological ideas. It was, after all, viewed from within as a re-formation of the pure doctrines of the early church. To do justice to Herbert’s poetry we must acknowledge the simultaneous presence of anti-aesthetic impulses and a sense that the work of poetry had divine sanction.

Barbara Leah Harman’s Costly Monuments: Representations of Self in the Poetry of George Herbert attempts to establish a territory between the positions of Fish and Lewalski, and does so with some success. But Harman’s discussion, conducted in the language of contemporary critical theory, is limited by its modern and secular flavour. In response to Lewalski she points out that “if the Bible is a sponsor and ally it is also . . . an opponent over against which, around and through which, poetic speakers are forced to move” (26). In response to Fish she
argues that his reading "cannot . . . account for the way in which the self as an independent entity not only dissolves but persists" (33). Harman's own thesis is captured in her comments on "Jordan (I)" and "Jordan (II)"

It seems that we need to read them in order to know that we need not read them. So while the poems send us back to a reduced or minimal sort of speech . . . their very presence stands as a contradiction of these instructions, suggesting that the representation of experience has virtues that cannot be ignored. (45)

Harman makes the crucial recognition that Herbert's poems neither simply undercut nor celebrate themselves, and the poetic self behind them, but do both simultaneously. She fails, however, to provide a theological context for what is clearly a theological issue: the place, if any, of poetry in Christian life and faith. For the theology of the seventeenth century at once sanctions poetry, as Lewalski suggests, and warns against its capacity for prideful self-indulgence and falsehood.

This ambivalence about the nature and value of poetry is captured in the double sense of the word "prevent", as in Herbert's "The Thanksgiving": "Oh King of wounds! how shall I grieve for thee, / Who in all grief preventest me?" (3-4).

"Prevent" functions here and elsewhere in Herbert with both its contemporary meaning of forestalling, and its archaic meaning of anticipating and sanctioning. As C.A. Patrides observes, the

* In quotations from Herbert's poetry, unless otherwise noted, italics are as in the original.
"liturgical stanzas [of "The Sacrifice"] 'prevent' (anticipate) the complaints to be heard in later poems by placing them in advance of their articulation within the context of Christ's Passion" (19). And if Christ's sacrifice "prevents" the poet's complaints (verbal sins), it equally "prevents" the praise (verbal good works) that The Temple contains. In fact Christ, the divine Word, "prevents" in both senses, all of the poet's words. These two senses of the word "prevent" correspond respectively to the Protestant doctrines of vocation, which asserts that all forms of honest human labour are divinely ordained, and justification by faith, which asserts that human works are superfluous where salvation is concerned. The Temple represents a sustained effort to resolve the tension between these two doctrines, sustained both in the sense that it occurs on several levels, and in the sense that the effort is never completely successful. Fish's description of Herbert's poetry as dialectical is apt in this context (Self-Consuming Artifacts). The doctrines of vocation and justification by faith speak to each other across the divisions between the three sections of the book, and across the spaces between poems in the book's central section, "The Church", as well as within individual poems. What looks like a perfectly balanced resolution of this tension in one poem is subsequently undermined, and the poet sets out to establish a new balance.

One conventional way of seeking an accommodation between
these two doctrines is to point out that the doctrine of justification by faith refers to the Christian's inner spiritual life, and to the question of personal salvation, while the doctrine of Christian vocation pertains to the externals of the Christian's life in the world, and to his obligations to his fellow man. Herbert seems to exploit this type of distinction quite consciously in the three-part structure of The Temple where, as Barbara Lewalski points out, "'The Church Porch' ... sets forth a series of dry, didactic prescriptions regarding the externals of the Christian life, and the behaviour fitting a Christian profession" (Protestant Poetics 288), "The Church" dramatizes the spiritual struggles of the individual Christian, and "'The Church Militant' shifts from a spatial to a temporal scheme to present a third dimension of the Christian Church on earth--its public, visible form" (289).

As one might expect, the first and third sections of the book are devoid of inability topoi, which in "The Church" signals the poet's radical doubts about his standing before God. Rather, "The Church Porch" and "The Church Militant" represent confident expressions of Christian mission that stand in sharp contrast to the poet's tortured inner struggles. "The Church Porch" opens with an ambitious humanistic expression of poetic vocation, a Christian adaptation of Horace's dulce et utile dictum:

Thou whose sweet youth and early hopes enhance
Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;
Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance
Rhyme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.
A verse may find him, who a sermon flies,
And turn delight into a sacrifice. (1-5)

For all its ambition (the poet's desire to use his art to turn souls toward God suggests an apostolic role) the vision of poetic vocation here is entirely conventional. Herbert aspires to be a Sidneyan "right poet"; the divine poet is still some distance off. He proceeds to deploy this poetic vocation in an extended attempt to outline the nature of Christian vocation in general, though the content and context is, again, distinctly worldly. In "The Church Militant", which deals with the history and mission of the visible Church in the world, a powerful sense of vocation is conveyed by the poem's unrelenting pace. Though "Sinne and Darknesse follow still" (272) throughout the Church's history, and its falterings and backslidings are carefully documented, there is an overwhelming sense of inevitable movement. This sense is captured in the central metaphor that equates the Church with the sun making its day's journey from the eastern to the western sky. There is no time to pause and agonize over the trials and sufferings of the Church, or over its inadequacies. The goal that is the poem's final line (save for the refrain), the "time and place where judgement shall appeare" (277) is constantly in sight on the horizon, and its arrival is never in doubt.

In contrast doubt and the attempt to resolve that doubt are central features of "The Church". One of the primary objects
of doubt is the status of the poems themselves—the poet's works—in the eyes of God. By my count, roughly one third of the poems in the "The Church" address this issue in one way or another. Herbert employs two basic strategies, both dialectical, in the attempt to establish a proper balance between the danger of claiming too much for his poems, and that of doing too little to serve his God. The first strategy is to incorporate some poems that risk erring in each of the two directions, setting up a dialectical interaction in which one poem corrects and modifies another. Thus a number of poems in "The Church" seem to be supremely confident expressions of poetic vocation, while others, in isolation, seem virtually to demolish the poet and his art. Herbert's lyrics demand to be read in light of one another in this way. His often-quoted assertion in "The H. Scriptures (II)" that "This verse marks that, and both do make a motion / Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie" (5-6) is, as critics have noted, as much a set of instructions for reading The Temple as for Scripture. Herbert's second strategy is to incorporate the clash between these two tendencies in a single poem, as for example in "The Collar", where the poetic consciousness and self-confidence runs amok—"my lines and life are free" (4)—and must be silenced by divine intervention:

But as I r'ed and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thoughts I heard one calling, Child!
And I reply'd, My Lord. (33-36)

The first group of poems I want to examine, those that
seem to constitute an unqualified expression of poetic vocation, perform the same kind of function in "The Church" as "The Church Porch" and "The Church Militant" perform in "The Temple" as a whole. That is to say they express Herbert's strong sense that the Christian poet has divinely-ordained work to do, and that this work can be accomplished with God's help. Perhaps the poem that expresses this thought most clearly is "Lent", in which the poet examines the large issue of Christian duty, albeit in a stanza that has little of the grace of Herbert's best lines:

It's true, we cannot reach Christ's forti' th day;  
Yet to go part of that religious way,  
Is better then to rest:  
We cannot reach our Saviour's purity;  
Yet we are bid, Be holy ev'n as he.  
In both let's do our best. (31-36)

In focussing on the importance of virtue in the Christian life, and urging against the tendency to rest from striving to please God, Herbert cautions against the extreme (and perverse) solifidian position that would repudiate good works altogether.

Numerous poems extend this positive view of human ability to the language of prayer and of poetic praise. In "Prayer (I)", for example, Herbert suggests the fullness and richness of the language of prayer by describing it as "the Churches banquet" (1). The words of prayer are sanctified and effectual because they are "God's breath in man returning to his birth, / The soul in paraphrase" (2-3). Prayer is "a kind of tune, which all things heare and fear" (8), and most important, it is "something understood" (14). Herbert claims for the
language of prayer some of the power and perfection of Adam's pre-lapsarian language. And yet the poem that describes the sufficiency of language also enacts its failure. The long succession of ambitious metaphors for prayer suggests that each is somehow inadequate. In the final phrase Herbert abandons metaphor altogether and shifts to the passive voice, revealing that the source of prayer's efficacy is not the speaker but the hearer.

Ambitious claims are also made in "Love (II)", in which the poet prays to be visited by the "greater flame" which seems to represent both the pentecostal tongues of fire, and the consuming apocalyptic fire. In return he promises,

Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain
All her invention on thine Altar lay
And there in hymnes send back thy fire again. (6-8)

Again the tone is supremely confident, and the poem lacks even the slightest suggestion of poetic inability. This confidence is, in fact, at once presumptuous and absurd: presumptuous because the poet is engaged in bargaining with God over the price of divine inspiration, and absurd because the payment the poet offers is God's in the first place. This calls attention to the dialectical nature of the poems in "The Church". The onesidedness of a poem like this is such that it implies its opposite and demands correction.

Other poems that fall into this category of unqualified expressions of poetic vocation employ the inability topos in the
traditional manner. This represents a desire to magnify the object of praise, and an ironic attempt to call attention to the poetic speaker, rather than a sincere attempt to cast doubt on the efficacy of the speech. "Providence", for example, opens with two stanzas in praise of divine poetic inspiration:

O sacred Providence, who from end to end  
Strongly and sweetly movest, shall I write,  
And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend  
To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right?

Of all the creatures both in sea and land  
Only to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,  
And put the pen alone into his hand,  
And made him Secretarie of thy praise. (1-8)

What begins here as praise of God very quickly moves toward praise of the poet, his divinely-ordained status, and his divinely-guided script. This suspicion of poetic presumption is confirmed a few stanzas later where the poet, employing Herbert's characteristic metaphor of God as landlord, comments, "And just it is that I should pay the rent", as if man had the capacity to "pay" for God's blessings. The poem proceeds to catalogue those blessings, continuing to waver on the brink of praising the recipient of the gift (himself) instead of the giver. It then concludes with an inability topos asserting the impossibility of listing the bounty of Providence:

But who hath praise enough? nay, who hath any?  
None can expresse thy works, but he that knows them:  
And none can know thy works, which are so many,  
And so complete, but onely he that owes them. (141-144)

By this time it is clear that the speaker's perception of who exactly "owes" (owns) God's gifts is suspect. By asserting the
inexhaustibility of the list he implicitly makes very large claims for his own knowledge and understanding of God. This is a wholly traditional use of the inability topos in which the poet elevates himself by asserting the unmasterability of his subject, while deploying all his resources in an effort to master it.

In this case, however, it should be clear that the inability topos is in a sense doubly ironic, in that it is sowing the seeds of genuine doubt that will appear in other poems. It is also important to note that these confident (or over-confident) poems do not appear in a group, but are distributed throughout "The Church", interspersed with others expressing the opposite view. Their assertions about poetic vocation are constantly challenged by other poems that oppose them by deploying the inability topos in a wholly sincere manner, suggesting that human language is hopelessly fallen, and that man truly cannot even begin to praise God.

Poems of this sort are immediately recognizable by their titles: "Frailtie", "Decay", "Miserie", "Conscience", "Vanitie", "Dulnesse", "Grief". These poems explicitly or implicitly condemn poetry as part of the "gilded clay" ("Frailtie" 5) that on earth "Is styled honour, riches, or fair eyes" ("Frailtie" 3), and offer "silence" ("Frailtie" 1) as an alternative. They also employ increasingly complex variations on the inability topos, variations that serve to undercut the self-assertive
aspects of the topos, leaving its self-deprecatory qualities intact. Eventually this too goes overboard as the poet seems to deprive himself of a place to stand in the sight of God.

The first step in this process of transforming the inability topos into a medium of genuine self-criticism takes place in the famous "Miserie". Somewhat paradoxically, in order to remove the element of self-assertion, the poet must first remove himself from the issue altogether, and so the inability topos becomes accusatory, directed at man in general:

My God, Man cannot praise thy name:
Thou art all brightness, perfect purity;
The sunne holds down his head for shame,
Dead with eclipses, when we speak of thee:
How shall infection
Presume on thy perfection?

As dirtie hands foul all they touch,
And those things most, which are most pure and fine:
So our clay hearts, ev'n when we crouch
To sing thy praises, make them less divine. (31-40)

In spite of the "we" and the "our" here (34; 39) the role of accuser seems, as Fish has noted (Self-Consuming Artifacts 181), to exempt the speaker from the indictment. This exemption is crucial for it permits the speaker to make the accusation as forcefully as possible, and it is this in turn that gives the poem's final line much of its power: "My God, I mean myself" (77). The inability topos suddenly regains its self-referential quality after the shift to an accusatory mode has intensified its condemnation of humanity.

"Conscience" involves an even more complex use of the
inability topos, in which the device is, in a sense, turned against itself. On the one hand the injunction to silence repeated throughout the poem, "Peace pratler" (1), is a reiteration of the solifidian attack on language found in "Miserie". The speaker insists that speech is no aid, is in fact a hindrance, to his spiritual progress:

My thoughts must work, but like a noislesse sphere;
Harmonious peace must rock them all the day:
   No room for pratlers there. (8-10)

On the other hand, however, the "pratler" seems to represent that very same anti-aesthetic and anti-poetic sensibility:

   Not a fair look but thou dost call it foul:
   Not a sweet dish but thou dost call it sowre:
      Musick to thee dost howl. (2-4)

The speaker's stance is at once aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. The "Conscience" of the poem's title seems to refer both to the "pratler" and the speaker, the first of whom attacks the pleasures of the senses--sight, taste and sound ("Musick" in line 4 should, I think, be taken to refer to all harmonious sound including poetry and speech)--and the second of whom attacks the other's speech. Of course the "pratler" is really the poet's own anti-aesthetic impulse, found in poems like "Frailtie", and his pratling speech is Herbert's own poetry. So the attack on the anti-aesthetic impulse turns out to be little more than another manifestation of that same impulse. The aggressive, accusatory, anti-linguistic version of the inability topos turns against itself. Herbert condemns the speech that
condemns speech. If the speakers in Herbert's vocation poems claim too much for their language, then this speaker/"pratler" seems equally to condemn too much.

In "Grief", similarly, the anti-poetic impulse goes too far, virtually unmaking the poem in the end. This poem seems to be a direct response to several of Herbert's vocation poems, in which a somehow incomplete poem is completed by divine inspiration ("Deniall"), by the words of scripture ("Jordan (I)"), or by God's actual voice ("A true Hymne"). In this case, instead of being completed by a power outside the poet, the poem is fractured by the enormity of the emotion that occasions it. "Grief" would be a sonnet were it not for the insertion of a fourth quatrain, and, of course, for the agonized final line "Alas My God!" (19). Significantly the quatrain consists of an inability topos that wrenches the final couplet away from the poem's ostensible theme--the magnitude of the poet's grief--and attaches it to the theme of the quatrain--the inadequacy of the poet's craft:

Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise
For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumbe and mute,
Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,
And keep your measures for some lovers lute,
Whose grief allows him music and a rhyme:
For mine excludes both measure tune and time.
Alas, my God! (13-19)

The limits of the poetic form are such that it cannot, even extended by four lines, contain all the poet's grief. His grief will not "allow" the sonnet's strictly regulated rhyme scheme
and meter, and he deliberately fractures it by the addition of the short, unrhymed final line. In fact the poem, as Helen Vendler suggests, seems to look forward to "a time of no more poetry at all" (269). It should be noted, though, that if "Grief" is a dialectical response to vocation poems like "Deniall", Jordan I" and "A true Hymne", its own response is provided in advance in "The Sacrifice" and "The Thanksgiving". Christ's agonized refrain in "The Sacrifice", "Was ever grief like mine", "prevents" the anti-poetry of Herbert's "Grief", just as "The Thanksgiving" predicts: "How shall I grieve for thee, / Who in all grief preventest me?"(3-4).

The most famous of Herbert's poems, with some notable exceptions, are those in which a dialectical exchange occurs within the poem. In many cases the two sides of the dialectical tension operating in these poems can be associated with the anti-aesthetic tendencies of the doctrine of justification by faith, and the pro-aesthetic impulses associated with poetic vocation. This tension is present, if rather muted, in the opening "emblem poem", "The Altar". "The Altar" can be described in terms of the distinction between solifidian doctrine as a guide in man's inner life, and vocation as an expression of man's role in the world. The poem also has inner and outer parts, in this case the supporting pedestal, and the top and bottom platforms. The poem's outer lines, the first two and the last two, are expressions of poetic vocation in which the poet
first describes the gift he has made for God -- "A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares, / Made of a heart, and cemented with teares"(1-2) -- and then begs God to accept the gift in exchange for Christ's sacrifice -- "O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine, / And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine"(15-16). If one reads only these lines it is clear that the poet views himself as an active agent, raising an admittedly flawed ("broken") altar to his God. The very admission that the altar is "broken" argues against seeing it as God's creation, and in the final lines the speaker implicitly claims responsibility for the altar's creation when he asks God to adopt it. The inner part of the poem, however, the central pedestal, presents a very different view of the construction of the altar:

A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy name.
(5-12)

The tone here is strongly solifidian: man does not have the power to transform his own heart. Only God can turn a heart into an altar. The construction of the poem may serve as a metaphor for Herbert's faith (as well as for "The Temple" as a whole), in which the quintessential Protestant doctrine of justification by faith provides the supporting pillar, while man's obligation to serve God forms the outer surface. "The Altar" juxtaposes these
two potentially conflicting doctrines in such a way as to posit a reconciliation. The resolution is perfect in that neither doctrine "wins" or "loses" in this exchange, but flawed in its excessive simplicity. A man of Herbert's convictions could not sustain such a separation of inner and outer life, and so the dilemma recurs throughout "The Church" as the poet tries repeatedly to achieve a satisfactory resolution.

"Praise (I)" and "The Quidditie" are both poems that bring expressions of poetic ability and inability into direct conflict. In the former poem each stanza moves from self-reproach, as the poet enumerates his shortcomings, to the promise to deliver "more" if only God will come to his aid. In spite of protestations that "Man is all weaknesse" (9), the poet seems confident in his ability to "do more". His sense of vocation triumphs over his feelings of inadequacy with little difficulty. In The "Quidditie" the inability topos is sustained through ten of the poem's twelve lines. The poet lists the inadequacies of poetry for the purposes of a courtier's service and praise of his monarch:

My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in France or Spain;
Nor can it entertain the day
With a great stable or demain:

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall. (1-10)
Up to this point the poem implies that poetry is utterly useless as a devotional medium. The final two lines, however, bring about a radical transformation of this view: "But it is that which while I use / I am with thee, and Most take all" (11-12). The nature of the Lord in whose service poetry is employed is completely different than that suggested by the first ten lines. What seemed at first to be an inability topos suddenly appears as a means of expressing the special nature of poetry. It is precisely because "a verse is not a crown" (emphasis mine), or any other earthly treasure, that it is a suitable medium for divine service. This runs directly counter to "Frailtie"'s view of poetry as partaking of the shallow sensuality and illusory beauty of the fallen world.

In "Jordan (II)" Herbert returns to a tone of contempt for the sensual and metaphorical excesses of poetic language, only to posit, in Harman's words, "the possibility of a new kind of writing (duplicating or copying) in which the self would not be entangled" (48): "There is in love a sweetnesse prent'd: / Copie out only that, and save expense" (17-18). Harman sides with Barbara Lewalski in rejecting Fish's suggestion that this represents a poetics of silence. Nevertheless it does seem to involve a renunciation of the poet's role as giver of gifts and author of praise. The confidence and ambition of the poet who promised to "do more" is replaced by the hope of one who would serve passively, by transmitting God's own divine Word.
The poet is still able to describe a special, divinely sanctioned place for his art, but that place is becoming progressively smaller.

This process of reduction of the space in which the poet is able to speak and act is dramatized in "The Holdfast". Here the poet's expression of vocation, his resolve to follow the moral precepts laid out in "The Church Porch", is presented as an act of rebellion: "I threatened to observe the strict decree / Of my deare God with all my power and might" (1-2). Compare this with "Lent"'s counsel that we "do our best" to "Be holy ev'n as he [Christ]". The will to serve is the same, but the presentation of that will is very different. "The Holdfast"'s wiser, though rather perverse, second voice thwarts the vocational impulse at every turn. In the final stanza speech itself is the activity that is denied to the speaker: "But to have nought is ours, not to confesse / That we have nought" (9-10). As Harman points out "the speaker's difficulties are not a function of the mistaken positions he holds but the fact that, with every line, he asserts his independent agency as a speaker" (54). If we had not arrived at a poetics of silence in "Jordan II", there seems little doubt that we are very close by the time we reach "The Holdfast". To be sure the poem ends on the reassuring note "That all things were more ours by being his. / What Adam had, and forfeited for all, / Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall" (13-14). But the essential point remains
unequivocally solifidian: man can do nothing of his own accord.

There is, then, a kind of loose progression taking place through the dialectical interaction of solifidianism and poetic vocation in Herbert's poems. The goal is always to defend the poet's territory, his sense of his own special role or place, but the successful defence turns out to be surrender: the admission that the territory is not his at all. Herbert manages to retain the possibility of poetic vocation by claiming less and less for this role with each poem. In many poems near the beginning of the volume the poet is, or believes he is, the originator of his own art. In "Easter Wings", for example, he is merely imitating and drawing strength from God: "if I imp my wing on thine" (19). In "Jordan (I)" the poet "who plainly say[s] My God My King" (15) draws his words from scripture, but still wants to take credit for them himself. In "Jordan II" the pretence of authorship is relinquished as the poet realizes it is better merely to "copie" the divine Word. In "A true Hymne", toward the end of the collection, even the role of inspired plagiarist is no longer necessary, as God steps in to write the final word of the poem himself. Paradoxically, this last stage in which the poet is most diminished, is also the one in which he is most elevated, for if he has lost all claim to independent authorship, he has gained a kind of co-creator status alongside God. In this way poetic vocation is salvaged through the process of giving it up.
Milton's "Partial" Song

I wish to begin my discussion of Paradise Lost precisely where Stanley Fish begins his in Surprised By Sin:

I would like to suggest something about Paradise Lost that is not new except for the literalness with which the point will be made: (1) the poem's centre of reference is its reader, who is also its subject; (2) Milton's purpose is to educate the reader to an awareness of his position and responsibilities as a fallen man, and to a sense of the distance which separates him from the innocence once his; (3) Milton's method is to re-create in the mind of the reader (which is finally the poem's scene) the drama of the Fall, to make him fall again exactly as Adam did and with Adam's troubled clarity, that is to say 'not deceived'.

What Fish says about the reader in Paradise Lost applies with equal force to the poet. Milton, as a fallen man, is as much the subject of his poem as anyone else, his mind has at least as much right to claim to be the "scene" of the poem, and, most important, Milton is "not deceived" about any of this. This apparently simple extension of Fish's reader-response position, which consists only in making the poet a reader of his own poem, actually works a significant transformation on Fish's thesis. His argument that the poem re-creates the fall in the mind of his reader demands that we assume the poet's success in re-creating Adam's unfallen speech, along with the speech of angels and even the speech of God. I would like to assert precisely the reverse, that Milton, as a fallen man, had to fall short in his project, that he knew it, and that this knowledge
is manifest both in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*.

Arnold Stein's position in *The Art of Presence* is much the same as Fish's. Stein asserts that "though he does not register the claim explicitly the author of *Paradise Lost* is convinced that poetry has an inspired power to recreate the original state of human perfection" (16). Stein also recognizes the magnitude of the task, and the fact that Milton's attempt to accomplish it is a trial before the judgement seat of God:

In the largest sense the poet's trial is continuous throughout the poem; the evidence ranges from the minutiae of consonants and syllables to the choices of greatest consequence to his design, which test the truth and the merit of his action. (31)

The implication that is evident throughout Stein's book is that Milton is equal to the task. But perhaps it is best to recall Milton's own words on the subject of merit:

The worthlessness of our merits becomes quickly apparent when we consider that even our good deeds are not really ours, but God's who works in us, and that even if they were certainly ours they would still be no more than our duty. Moreover however well we perform our duty it cannot possibly bear comparison to the richness of the promised reward. (*De Doctrina Christiana* 6: 644-645)

The man who wrote this could never have believed, without reservation, that a poem could adequately "justify the ways of God to men", but at the same time he must, as Stein suggests, have believed that he and his poetry were instruments for the revelation of divine truth.

Boyd M. Berry recognizes this paradox:

*a Puritan epic is . . . a sort of oxymoron. The values of a poet or singer who deals by trade in words, clash
with the values of the advanced or radical Protestant. This fact has made some students of Milton ill at ease. Milton seems immensely confident about his words and his ability securely to use them. (3)

Berry attempts to resolve the paradox by suggesting that Milton's "verbal dexterity was, at least in part, the aesthetic counterpart and expression of a newly emergent, radical optimism, a poetic parallel to the pragmatic acts of a Puritan making a revolution" (4). But this does not really answer the question. Where has the characteristic Puritan anti-aestheticism and mistrust of linguistic artifice gone? The answer, as Book IV of Paradise Regained shows very clearly, is that it has not gone anywhere at all. Milton's doubts about the efficacy of the poet's work are contained in both poems, in variations on the topos of authorial inability, and in the use of language by the poems' several characters. In Milton's poetry, however, the mistrust of eloquence goes a step further than in either Spenser or Herbert. Language is more often depicted as an instrument of evil, deception and destruction. It is not merely the poet's craft, his mastery of his medium, that is called into question. Rather it is the moral status of the medium itself. Expressions of confidence in the poet's art, linking language with apostolic or priestly vocation, are present throughout both poems, but these are constantly juxtaposed with the darker possibilities of that same art. What is perhaps most noteworthy in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained is that Milton makes little attempt to synthesize these conflicting impulses and establish the kind
of balanced resolution found in Sonnet XIX. This suggests, I think, that the dynamic clash of these ideas, rather than their resolution, is the central issue. To borrow some terms from Catherine Belsey's Critical Practice (85-102), the text that purports to be "declarative" in its intent to "justify the ways of God to man" turns out to be "interrogative", in raising questions to which it does not posit any answer.

Milton's use of the terms "Word" (singular), and "words" (plural) highlights the fundamental distinction between language as a positive and as a negative force. "Word" in the singular is almost always capitalized when it appears in Paradise Lost, signifying the Logos of John 1:1 with its symbolic and theological associations. These associations are so important in Milton's poems that J.H. Adamson describes him as a "poet of the Logos" (Bright Essence 81). The divine Word is not subject to the limitations of language, which seem to preoccupy Milton throughout the poem, because it signifies God's power to create reality by his mere utterance. For God to express a thing is for that thing to be so. The plural form, "words", however, applies to language in the conventional sense, and whether words are employed by men, angels or devils they are subject to limitations. The multiplicity of words corresponds to the potential for multiplicity in their meanings, and duplicity in their use. While the "Word" is purely good, "words" have tremendous potential for evil use. This is suggested, in
particular, by the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton unleashes a torrent of demonic words upon the reader.

Confronted with the devils' eloquence the reader is pressed at the outset to adopt a Puritanical stance. Either he mistrusts language, or he risks aligning himself with Satan and his "high words, that bore / Semblance of worth, not substance" (I, 528).

In contrast to the plurality of speeches and opinions in Hell, the conversation between God the Father and God the Son in Book III is the expression of a single will:

> Son of my bosom, Son who art alone
> My word, my wisdom, and effectual might,
> All hast thou spok'n as my thoughts are, all.
> As my Eternal purpose hath decreed. (III, 169-172)

The distinction between the "Word" and "words" appears again in Book VII, where Raphael attempts to explain to Adam the nature of God's power:

> So spake th'Almighty, and to what he spake,
> His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect.
> Immediate are the Acts of God, more swift
> Than time or motion, but to human ears
> Cannot without process of speech be told,
> So told as earthly notions can receive. (VII, 174-179)

Here Raphael draws a sharp distinction between the immediacy and perfection of the divine "Word" and the human "process of speech", which is bound by time and motion.

This is not to say that Milton views human language as utterly corrupt, in a rigidly Calvinistic sense. There are at least two instances in *Paradise Lost* where human language evokes the poet's explicit praise. The first occurs in Book VII where
Raphael and Adam discuss the latter’s creation. First the angel compliments Adam on his speech:

Nor are thy lips ungraceful, Sire of men,  
Nor tongue ineloquent; for God on thee  
Abundantly his gifts hath also pour’d  
Inward and outward both, his image fair:  
Speaking or mute all comeliness and grace  
Attends thee, and each word, each motion forms.  
(VIII, 218-230)

Then Adam, a few lines later, describes his first words:

... to speak I tri’d, and forthwith spake,  
My tongue obeyed and readily could name  
Whate’r I saw.  
(VIII, 271-273)

Adam’s unfallen language appears, in these passages, to be Godlike in its accuracy, if not in its immediacy. This, as Raphael points out, is a function of his creation in God’s image. All this takes place in spite of the fact that Raphael has just commented on the inadequacy of the human "process of speech" a few lines earlier (174-179). The argument that Adam can describe perfectly his earthly surroundings, while still falling short of the ability to relate heavenly events, comes readily enough. It does not, however, obscure the evidence of Milton’s fundamental ambivalence about language itself. If Raphael’s praise of Adam’s unfallen language constitutes an expression of poetic vocation, an image of the linguistic perfection that Milton is striving to recover, it also includes a warning that this language can only be God’s gift, and not man’s accomplishment. Another passage in Paradise Lost that treats human language in a strongly positive tone is the
reference to the Apostles in Book XII. Here again language is a
divine gift, intimately connected with the concept of calling:

... for the Spirit
Pour’d first on his Apostles, whom he sends
To evangelize the Nations, then on all
Baptiz’d, shall them with wondrous gifts endue
To speak all Tongues, and do all Miracles,
As did their Lord before them. (XII, 497-502)

It is particularly important to note that this is a gift given
to fallen men, and therefore it provides a sanction for Milton’s
own poetic ambition.

Many of the references to language in *Paradise Lost*,
however, deal with its negative attributes. These range from its
ineffectuality in expressing matters of a spiritual nature to
its potential for use as an instrument of evil. In this context
we can recall that the first, and some of the most impressive
speeches in the poem are found in the debates in Hell, where
eloquence is intimately connected with faulty reasoning and
wicked designs. Even after the debates are concluded the fallen
angels entertain themselves with the linguistic arts of song and
intellectual discourse:

Thir song was partial, but the harmony
(What could it less when Spirits immortal sing?)
Suspended Hell, and took with ravishment
The thronging audience. In discourse more sweet
(For Eloquence the Soul, Song charms the Sense,)
Others apart sat on a hill retir’d,
In thoughts more elevate, and reason’d high
Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate...

Vain wisdom all, and false Philosophy:
Yet with a pleasing sorcery could charm
Pain for a while or anguish, and excite
Fallacious hope, or arm th’obdured breast.

(II, 552-568)
This characteristically Puritan vision of song and speech demonstrates just how much Milton is risking in writing *Paradise Lost*, which, if it should turn out to have been written without divine guidance, would be nothing but a human version of the devils' "pleasing sorcery". Even granted divine inspiration Milton's is a "partial" song, though less so than that of the fallen angels. Milton's poem can do nothing to relieve fallen man's burden of sin, but can only provide comfort with the promise of redemption through God's grace.

Fish uses Raphael's praise of Adam's speech to argue that "the loss of the perfect language is more than anything else the sign of the Fall, since in Eden speech is the outward manifestation of the inner Paradise" (*Surprised by Sin*, 118). Yet the weaknesses of language extend even to Adam's unfallen language, despite this praise. The first passage that comes to mind in this context is Raphael's speech in Book VII, which has already been mentioned in connection with the distinction between the "Word" and "words":

> Immediate are the acts of God, more swift Than time or motion, but to human ears Cannot without process of speech be told, So told as earthly notions can receive. (VII, 176-179)

Here Milton deploys the topos of inability through Raphael, in order to magnify its force. If the poet makes ambitious claims in attempting to relate the speech of angels, he is careful to stress the inadequacies of the medium in which the feat is attempted. This is so even though Milton purports to be
writing—and Raphael speaking—in the language of un Fallen Adam, the language that was sufficient to name all creation. Another similar occurrence of the inability topos emphasizes the point, suggesting the degree of Milton's concern over this issue. In Book V, before beginning the main body of his narrative, Raphael comments at length on the shortcomings of human language for such a task:

• how shall I relate
To human sense th'invisible exploits
Of warring spirits;[?] . . .

• what surmounts the reach
Of human sense, I shall delineate so
By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,
As may express them best . . . . (V, 563-574)

Raphael's problem is precisely Milton's problem, and his solution, clearly a "partial" one, is to employ metaphor, doing his best with the crude tools he has at hand. But metaphor and "process of speech" avoid, rather than capture the immateriality and atemporality of heavenly beings and heavenly events. Human powers of expression and comprehension are simply inadequate. Here we see Milton faced with the central dilemma of the Protestant Poet. What his divine calling demands can never be satisfactorily accomplished.

When Satan speaks, language is not merely untrustworthy, but an actual agent of evil and deception. In these passages Milton comes very close to the stereotype of the seventeenth-century Puritan, with his avowed mistrust of verbal facility. This movement, from a concern over the inadequacies of language,
to a sense of its awesome adequacy for evil purposes, marks the shift from a mildly Protestant poetics to a Puritan one. As I have been suggesting, the risks of the poet's endeavour, and his causes for anxiety, are magnified in this process. From being an ordinary sinner whose verses contain the spiritual struggles of every Christian, the Protestant poet becomes either a Puritan saint, or an agent of the powers of darkness in the apocalyptic struggle that the Puritan mind saw in the contemporary world. There is little doubt that Milton saw himself in the first category, but like most sincere Puritans he could never completely rule out the latter.

Milton's depiction of Eve's temptation reveals these tendencies. Satan's "words replete with guile" (IV, 733) are what prompt Eve to taste the forbidden fruit, but this much is evident in the Judeo-Christian tradition in any case. Milton's embellishment of the traditional story gives away his Puritan tendencies, and the degree of his insecurity about the status of his own linguistic artifice. In the Miltonic version of the fall the fruit is intimately tied to the power of speech. Eve is first attracted to the Serpent because she is amazed at his ability to speak. Yet there is no suggestion in the Genesis account of the Fall that a talking serpent should be in the least surprising. Milton's Serpent, however, claims to have gained this miraculous ability from eating the forbidden fruit:

Sated at length, ere long I might perceive
Strange alteration in me, to degree
Of reason in my inward Powers, and Speech
Wanted not long, though to this shape retain’d. (IX, 598-601)

When Satan finishes, Eve's little hymn of praise to the
forbidden fruit reveals what has tempted her most:

Great are thy Virtues, doubtless, best of Fruits,
Though kept from Man and worthy to be admir'd,
Whose taste, too long forborne, at first assay,
Gave elocution to the mute, and taught
The Tongue not made for Speech to speak thy praise.
(IX, 745-749)

It is not merely Eve's weakness in allowing herself to be
persuaded by the devil's speech that brings about her downfall;
it is her fascination with language itself. In this sense
language is as much the tempter as Satan.

It is not surprising, therefore, that language is the
Devil's chosen tool for frustrating the divine will. In the
debates in Hell he suggests a choice between two options:
"Whether of open War or covert guile, / We now debate" (II, 41).

While the suggestion of possible violent conflict is always
present, and Satan threatens violence in his encounter with Sin
and Death, the only devices he ever really employs are verbal
ones. As Berry points out, Satan continually collapses the false
dichotomy of force versus deceit through "a series of stagy
(sic) verbal magic tricks" (211), demonstrating that deceit is
really his only weapon, and it is a linguistic one. God's praise
of Abdiel, when the latter returns after defecting from the
rebel angels, also serves to illustrate Milton's sense of the
power of language as an instrument of evil. Raising once again
the dichotomy of language versus force, God testifies to the potency of language in praising Abdiel for having "borne / Universal reproach, far worse to bear / Than violence" (VI, 33-35).

The irony of the fact that language, the medium of the poet's divinely ordained vocation, has such potential for evil is inescapable. If the fact of having written *Paradise Lost* stands as testimony to Milton's conviction that he was "a person separate to God" (*Samson Agonistes* 31), these passages, which challenge the reliability of language and therefore of the epic itself, demonstrate that the divine poet's role was not an easy one. If Milton undercuts the authority of his own poem, I would suggest that he does so precisely because he recognizes it as a work, in the theological sense. It is at once a work he has been commanded by God to undertake, and one that he can never accomplish. The opening lines of the poem's final paragraph capture the poet's ambivalence. Eve, who was first tempted by Satan's language, greets Adam with "words not sad" (XII, 609), telling of her dream and the "Promis'd Seed", the redeemer of mankind. Adam, who earlier conversed with Angels, does not respond: "So spake our mother Eve, and Adam heard / Well pleas'd, but answered not" (XII, 624-625). Adam is "well pleas'd" with Eve's words, and yet he recognizes that any words are somehow inappropriate. Eve's speech may be taken as an expression of the poet's sense of vocation, of fallen man's need
to "serve", to rejoice aloud over God's grace; Adam's silence of the need only to "stand and wait".

This same ambivalence is manifested in *Paradise Regained*. The preoccupation with language is still evident, as is the association of eloquence with deceit and corruption. Satan is, after all, the great talker in the poem. He speaks in a "traine of words" (III, 266), using "fair speech" (II, 301) and "persuasive rhetoric" (IV, 4). The poem is a dialectical exchange, not merely between vice and virtue, but between vicious and virtuous deployment of language, in which the poet's status as servant of God is at stake. In this context Christ's victory in the dispute—never really in doubt—should be an indication that language too is saved from corruption, but the issue is not that clear. Milton is clearly in search of a kind of "elect" language, and asserts in his invocation that silence is, for him, the only acceptable alternative to divinely guided speech: "Thou Spirit . . . inspire / As thou art wont, my prompted Song else mute" (I, 8-12). Only a "prompted song", a poem not generated by human artifice, will do. The tone of the poem is thus overwhelmingly solifidian. In a passage worthy of Calvin himself, Milton has Christ ask,

But why should man seek glory? who of his own
Hath nothing, and to whom nothing belongs
But condemnation, ignominy and shame? (III, 134-136)

The solifidian tone is also suggested by the nature of the temptation itself. In the counsels in Hell Satan rejects
Belial's suggestion to "Set women in his eye and in his walk" (II, 153). Better estimating the nature of the foe, he argues that

... with manlier objects we must try
His constancy, with such as have more show
Of worth, of honour, glory, and popular praise;
Rocks whereon greatest men have oftest wreck'd. (II, 225-228)

What Satan proposes is actually not a temptation of "objects" at all, but one of works. The desires he hopes to capitalize upon are "lawful" (II, 230) ones (or those that seem so). The sense of this passage is "desires permitted by law", but in the larger context of the poem it perhaps suggests the distinctly Protestant interpretation of "works commanded by law", and the Protestants' favourite passage of scripture: "therefore by the deeds of the law there shall be no flesh justified in his sight" (Rom.3:20). Satan appeals to Christ's sense of "zeal and duty" (III, 172): "Zeal of thy Father's house, Duty to free / Thy Country from her Heathen servitude" (III, 175-176). To tempt Jesus to be a great and just ruler, or a philosopher or scholar, is to tempt him to rely on the merit of his own works. As with the temptation of Eve, Milton's invention and embellishment on the foundation of a Biblical story is the surest indication of his own position. In depicting a Christ faced with the temptation of pelagianism Milton reveals the strength of his solifidian convictions.

These two aspects of the poem, the central place of
language and the repudiation of human works, of which language is one, point to the same ambivalence about the poet's station that is found in *Paradise Lost*. Indeed this ambivalence is stunningly evident in Book IV where Milton turns violently on his own renaissance-humanist antecedents, and his ambition to do for England "what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country" (*The Reason of Church Government* I: 812). In *Paradise Regained* only the ancient Hebrews remain as exemplars, and Satan's description of Athens, "native to famous wits" (IV, 241), seems a parodic attack on the poet's earlier enthusiasm. The bewilderment of the reader at this intellectual flagellation is understandable, yet the attack on humanism, art and learning in *Paradise Regained* is a logical extension of the undercutting of language and eloquence in *Paradise Lost*. In comparing the two poems Barbara Lewalski points out that in *Paradise Regained* Milton's "claims and aims are not accompanied, as they are in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, by an insistence in image and statement on the difficulty of the task, and on his own inner darkness and chaos" (*Milton's Brief Epic* 326). It is quite clear from reading Book IV of the poem, however, that these issues still plague Milton. Indeed he is concerned not so much with his own personal inadequacies (expressed in the inability topos in the invocation of *Paradise Lost*), as with the inadequacies of scholarship and poetry as forms of human
endeavour, or perhaps with human endeavour itself. Lewalski makes this connection as well when she examines Christ's response to the temptation of Athens:

the concepts . . . implicit in the poem--that spiritual truth comes only from above, that human learning is wholly irrelevant in the spiritual order, that the minister must not commingle the doctrines of human learning with the divine revelation--are central to reformed Protestantism. (Milton's Brief Epic 286)

Milton is not, as a cynical reader might suggest, simply succumbing to the narrow anti-intellectualism and anti-aestheticism of his Puritan contemporaries. Rather he is feeling the agonizing self-doubt that is characteristic of the Protestant mind (Luther's Anfechtung), and incorporating that self-doubt into the poem. Paradise Regained is a Protestant poem because it doubts itself, just as Milton doubts himself.

As in Paradise Lost, the details of Milton's treatment of language in the poem support this view. The Satan we meet in both poems is a grand orator, or to be more precise, grand oratory is presented as an attribute of the devil in both poems. Satan's words have a hypnotic effect even upon his fellow devils: "his words impression left / Of much amazement to th' infernal crew" (I, 106-107). Jesus, of course, recognizes that Satan is "compos'd of lies / From the beginning, and in lies wilt end" (I, 407-408), and rejects his "weak arguing and fallacious drift" (III, 4). Even so, Christ does not underestimate the persuasive power of the language that successfully tempted Eve:
Yet thou pretend'st to truth; All Oracles
By thee are giv'n, and what confest more true
Among the Nations? That hath been thy craft,
By mixing somewhat true to vent more lies.
But what have been thy answers, what but dark,
Ambiguous, and with double-sense deluding,
Which they who ask'd have seldom understood,
And not well understood, as good not known. (I, 430-437)

In fact, just as Eve finds Satan's language his most tempting
attribute, a more perceptive Jesus finds it among his most
offensive, and the directness of his response provides a sharp
contrast: "I never lik'd thy talk, thy offers less" (IV, 171).
In both cases Satan's language is as much a part of the
temptation as the offers he makes.

In the temptation of Athens in Book IV language is
closely associated with deceit and false knowledge. The wisdom
Satan offers is dependent upon the powers of speech and the arts
of persuasion:

The Gentiles also know, and write, and teach
To admiration, led by Nature's light;
And with the Gentiles much must thou converse
Ruling them by persuasion as thou mean'st. (IV, 227-230, emphasis mine)

Satan portrays Greece as the "Mother of Arts / And Eloquence"
(IV, 240-241), and urges Christ to devote himself to their
study, as a means of fulfilling his mission, arguing that "Error
by his own arms is best evinc't" (IV, 234). As Satan's
temptation offers language, Christ's rejection denounces it,
whether in art or persuasion. The Stoic philosopher is dismissed
as bogus, "For all his tedious talk is but vain boast / Or
subtle shifts conviction to evade" (IV, 307-308). Christ's rejection of Greek learning, including a denunciation (albeit mild) of both Socrates and Plato implies a rejection not merely of Satanic sophistry, but of the entire dialectical method, which, ironically, is a shaping force behind Paradise Regained. While Luke's Gospel provides scriptural authority for the temptation of the kingdoms as a whole, the temptation of Athens, with its non-material riches, is Milton's creation alone. The intangible things Satan offers Christ here are things to which Milton the renaissance poet is powerfully drawn, and yet he feels compelled to reject them. These are the human works that bring man closest to divinity, and yet they fall far short of divinity because they are still human works. They are the materials of the poet's divine calling, and yet he feels compelled to acknowledge their worthlessness. As we know, however, this is not Milton's last word on the subject. The very existence of Paradise Regained, and especially of Samson Agonistes with its tremendous debt to Greek tragedy, indicates that, as in Sonnet XIX, Milton is not willing to surrender his poetic vocation to the solifidian anti-aesthetic impulse. Rather, he employs his art to give voice to ironies and tensions that engender it. The almost magical resolution of the tension between solifidianism and poetic vocation, that occurs in the final line of Sonnet XIX, is, however, nowhere to be found either in Paradise Lost or Paradise Regained. I take this as a
struggle, rather than the resolution, may be the central feature of Protestant poetics.
Closing Speculations

It is tempting, and it would certainly be fitting, to close with an inability topos proclaiming the unmasterability of my subject, and apologising for the feebleness of my treatment. Except to suggest the possibility (as I have just done), I will resist the temptation and move off in a completely different direction. My initial suggestion was that Protestant poetics involves a simultaneous elevation and diminution of the poetic enterprise. If this point is granted for a moment some provocative possibilities arise for discussion of more recent works in the Protestant tradition, and even for literary theory. Perhaps, for example, the ineffectuality of Nathaniel Hawthorne's articulate intellectual male heroes is another kind of inability topos, and the power of his silent female characters a version of the Protestant/Augustinian poetics of silence. An even more powerful figure of this type is Faulkner's Addie Bundren, who asserts from the silence of the grave that "words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (As I Lay Dying 163).

Representing the Protestant preoccupation with vocation there is John Updike. Updike is a meticulous literary craftsman himself, and for his characters, life and work are absolutely inseparable. "Rabbit" Angstrom's Bunyanesque flight from job and
family (Rabbit, Run) perhaps constitutes an abortive attempt to live, in Luther's words, by "faith alone". Pressed to defend the runaway husband, Reverend Eccles describes him as "a good man". Pressed still further he muses, "Must you be good for something? . . . Yes, I suppose you must" (Rabbit, Run 142). The central feature in all three Rabbit novels, as in much of Updike's other fiction, is the world of work, and the struggle to have not just a job but a purpose.

In the area of literary theory this insight might be used to account for some of the different kinds of textual self-reflexiveness. Linda Hutcheon writes of two distinct kinds of "metafictional texts: those that thematize . . . the inadequacy of language in communicating feeling, in communicating thought or even fact . . . [and those that] thematize the overwhelming power and potency of words, their ability to create a world more real than the empirical one" (Narcissistic Narrative 29). It may be that this broad distinction corresponds, roughly, to a distinction between Protestant--Germanic and Catholic--Latin cultural influences. The "Catholic" metafiction of a Calvino or a Borges seems to me to be fundamentally different from the "Protestant" metafiction of a Pynchon (there is some evidence that Pynchon's upbringing was Catholic, but his New-England cultural tradition is undeniably Protestant). In the first case a few carefully chosen words suffice to erect entire cities or intricate labyrinths; in
the second, seemingly endless pages of words, stories, lists, songs, formulas, and poems fail to generate the tiniest germ of "truth" or "knowledge". Instead, Pynchon's ultimate vision of order and harmony is the deaf-mute's dance in The Crying of Lot 49. In the context of this kind of schema the work of writers who change cultural and religious idioms--Eliot, James, Hopkins--becomes particularly interesting. What aspects of Protestant poetics are they fleeing, and what features of Catholic literary sensibility are they reaching out for?
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