

The Language of Hell

THOMAS F. MERRILL

When he was asked during a lecture, "What would you think is the best Protestant religious picture?" Paul Tillich unhesitatingly replied, "Guernica." But where, in this picture, are the gods, the angels, the Christ figures, the madonnas, the martyred saints, the crosses, the stars of David? In fact, there are none. "Guernica" is *not* a religious painting, but, as Tillich insists, the work exposes the "disruptiveness, existential doubt, emptiness and meaninglessness" of modern existence, and thus "it does have religious style in a very deep and profound sense."¹

As in painting so in literature too. Picasso's images would not seem at all out of place in Milton's Hell. Here too we find surrealistic distortion, ontological stress, disruptiveness, emptiness, meaninglessness within a cell-like confinement. Granted, Hell's inhabitants are fallen angels, not mortals, but who would argue that despite their unpardonable apostasy, Milton painted their anguish in deliberately mortal terms? Like "Guernica," Hell is devoid of overtly religious trappings, but again like "Guernica," I would argue, it possesses a style more evocative than any of the overtly sacred scenes in Milton's Heaven, which, despite their proliferation of holy objects and symbols, remain for most readers religiously sterile.

For a long time the question of religious literary style has been hostage to Theology.² Analysts have routinely worked from the premise that the catalytic presence of the word "God" initiates a linguistic transsubstantiation, effecting semantic and syntactic change in any text in which it appears.³ David Crystal and Derek Davy, for example, conclude from their analysis of formal religious texts that "regardless of the purpose of the piece of religious language being examined—whether it be a statement of belief, or a prayer of praise or

supplication—it is the case that the meaning of the whole derives from and can be determined only by reference to this concept of ‘God.’”⁴ The proposition “God created the heavens and the earth,” for example, holds a different meaning for the believer than, say, “Christopher Wren created St. Paul’s,” a fact which has prompted the quip that “God is a very improper proper name.”⁵

To many, granting such semantic tyranny to “God” smacks of “word magic,”⁶ and recently the discussion of religious style has shifted its focus from theology to language to the point that it is fashionable for even theologians to speak of the “linguisticity” of religious experience. Gordon Kaufman, for example, contends that “there is no such thing as a raw pre-linguistic experience of ‘transcendence’ . . . [It] is shaped, delimited and informed by the linguistic symbols which also name it. Without those symbols to guide our consciousness these ‘experiences’ would not be available to us at all.”⁷ He is joined by Theodore Jennings, Jr., who adds that “the mere presence or prominence of ‘god’ in a discourse tells us very little. It is not the case that the presence of this term marks a different or new language game It is the language game that governs the meaning of the term and not the reverse.”⁸

Kenneth Burke’s de-theologizing of the issue (“whether or not there is a realm of the ‘supernatural,’ there are *words* for it”⁹) holds particular appeal for literary scholars sensitive to the hazards of rendering non-religious accounts of essentially religious enterprises like *Paradise Lost*, for although such works may still carry “something of the air of a foreign language”¹⁰ (Rosalie Colie confesses that reading Herbert’s devotional poems is like “seeing a poem in, say, Swedish”¹¹), it need not be because their comprehension is restricted to a charmed circle of believers. “God” is no verbal talisman magically rendering a style religious; to the contrary, it is style that gives “God” its meaning.

The late Bishop of Durham, Ian Ramsey, provides a practical demonstration of how that happens. Looking at such conventional theological phrases as “First Cause,” “Infinitely Wise,” “Infinitely Good,” and “Creation *ex nihilo*” he notes how in each phrase an absolute empirical “model” becomes stricken with “logical impropriety” when it is yoked to an “odd” religious qualifier. “Creation,” for

example, is a perfectly straightforward *empirical* notion. It has no inherent religious significance by itself. But when it is "qualified" by "*ex nihilo*," its empirical meaning is immediately destabilized.¹² A psychological process is initiated that works like this: the devotee meditates on "creation," imagining the varieties of creation ideas within his experience: building, painting, composing, birth and so forth. "*Ex nihilo*" provides a new direction to his thought. "Creation from nothing" challenges his conceptual logic. He is inspired to develop "creation stories" in his mind, which strive to accommodate "*ex nihilo*," until, eventually, at some point in the meditation, a qualitative change occurs—the "penny drops," to use Ramsey's expression, the "light dawns" and he "sees" the religious insight that has been latent in the phrase all along.¹³ "*Ex nihilo*" ruptures the linguistic complacency of its empirical model (or, as Jacques Derrida might explain it, it decenters its logocentric presuppositions¹⁴) thereby provoking a religiously salutary ontological confusion.

Ramsey's insight is that religious style deliberately promotes ontological shock by allowing an apparently uniform network of surface syntactical entailment to be ruptured by a rival logic "breaking through out of the depths." Gerhard Ebeling stresses the "polarity" of this stylistic phenomenon, characterizing it as the "dialogue of faith with the experience of the world." He explains that "the two poles of this process of language do not exist as independent entities, which as such can be disentangled from one another, . . . [but] are only what they are in their relationship with each other."¹⁵ Religious style, in other words, does not generate from the language of the world nor from the language of faith but from their dynamic entanglement.

No better literary demonstration of this entanglement exists than in the language of Milton's Hell. It is an unlikely locale for religious style, considering that it is "As far remov'd from God and light of Heav'n / As from the Center thrice to th' utmost Pole" (I, 73-74).¹⁶ Then, too, who is more profane than its leading citizen, the apostate Satan? Whose language is more rebelliously humanistic, more boastfully self-reliant, more self-consciously secular than the fallen horde? Taken as a self-contained linguistic environment, Hell seems relentlessly dedicated to unfettered self-determination: "Here at least / We shall be free" (I, 258-59).

The catch—and this is what renders Hell's language "religious"—is that Satan's words, despite their deliberately secular formulation, cannot evade dialogical entanglement with God whose challenging authority, in Tillich's words, keeps breaking through out of the depths to the surface. In his "Dungeon horrible" (I, 61), Satan is not even *linguistically* free. Like it or not, his words are *theologically* entailed. God's omniscient, totalitarian presence (like the naked light bulb in "Guernica") hovers over "The dismal Situation waste and wild" (I, 60), casting disturbing shadows on its semantic terrain. True, Satan never utters the word "God" in Hell, as we might expect, considering the threat it poses to its unsponsored autonomy, but he doesn't have to. "God's" qualifying presence has already been contextually established. Hell is no self-contained vacuum, nor is its language. The language of Hell is bifurcated conversation—a polar constituent of a larger dialogue. Satan's every apostate word jars against an unheard but strongly felt rival connotation which automatically precipitates an evocative *double entendre*. Though his words have ostensibly declared their semantic independence—like their speaker ("his form had yet not lost / All her Original brightness" [I, 591-92])—they nevertheless bear the unextinguished sparks of their original meanings—tiny connotative glimmers of lost glory which agitate Satan's speech, preventing its escape to unsponsored literalism.

Kenneth Burke may have the language of the fallen angels in mind when he speaks of the "logological" transformation of terms that occurs when theological words are "de-analogized" and returned to an empirical realm. Noting that words appropriate for supernatural use are borrowed analogically from empirical settings, Burke urges that the

order can be reversed. We can borrow back the terms from the borrower, again secularizing to varying degrees the original secular terms that had been given 'supernatural' connotations.

Consider the word 'grace,' for instance. Originally . . . it had such purely secular meanings as: favor, esteem, friendship, partiality, service, obligation, thanks, recompense, purpose. . . . [but] once the word was translated into the supernaturally tinged realm of relationships between 'God' and man, the etymological conditions were set for a reverse process whereby the *theological* term could in fact be aestheticized, as we came to look for 'grace' in a literary style, or in the purely secular behavior of a hostess.

Burke cites some other instances of logological transformation such as "create" and "spirit," and suggests that

if we would 'analogize' by the logological transforming of terms from their 'supernatural' reference into their possible use in a realm so wholly 'natural' as that of *language* considered as a purely empirical phenomenon, such 'analogizing' in this sense would be really a kind of 'de-analogizing.' Or it would be, except that a new dimension really has been added. . . . There is a sense in which language is *not* just 'natural' but really *does* add a 'new dimension' to the things of nature.¹⁷

It is not difficult to see how the word "freedom" on Satan's fallen lips has undergone such a logological transformation. Its theological connotation as the freedom *to* find self-fulfillment through obedience to 'God's' will has logologically changed to a freedom *from* constraints imposed by such obedience; the "golden scepter" has changed to "iron." And yet, a faint patina of the gold clings to the word, affording it a "new dimension" which deters readers from a total capitulation to Satan's profane literalism. Concluding that "farthest from him [God] is best" (I, 247), Satan seeks to put linguistic as well as geographic distance between his cohorts and God by flattening the logological dualism that their apostate stance automatically generates. He strives to reduce God from an omnipotent Mystery to a mere powerful adversary by subjecting Him to logical entailments appropriate to creature, not Creator. For example, rather than understanding merit as value that God confers upon those who please Him, Satan regards it as an autonomous virtue which, in his case, God has inaccurately assessed. Similarly, "grace," for Satan, is not something that is freely bestowed but instead a "de-analogized" act which incurs obligation for the recipient.

Yet for the reader these words refuse to bend completely to Satan's will. Their forms retain a glimmer of their "Original brightness" (I, 592), and the "new dimension" they carry with them assures that the center of semantic activity in Satan's fallen utterances hovers *between* the theological meanings of these words and the debased versions he accords them. The contention of these gold and iron connotations quickens their hermeneutical potential by automatically triggering a logic of encounter according to which (as we recall from Ebeling) the

language of faith and the language of the world "are only what they are in their relationship with each other." In other words, they communicate performatively through dynamic skirmish. The contention, not the substance, of these utterances is their essential meaning.

Thus, Satan's "Here at least / We shall be free" is an ontological presupposition which he can keep viable only so long as he can sanitize Hell of all theological qualification. Predictably, the fallen angels "naturalize" their allusions to God by refusing to use the word "God" at all (I, 133) and "fixt Laws of Heav'n" (II, 18). In other instances, they favor such descriptions as "the Torturer" (II, 64), "our great Enemy" (II, 137), "Th'Almighty Victor" (II, 144), "Our Supreme Foe" (II, 210), "the Thunderer" (II, 28), "Potent Victor" (I, 95), "our grand Foe" (I, 122), "our Conqueror" (I, 143), and "the angry Victor" (I, 169). While the defeated angels do concede God's political control over Heaven by the epithets "King of Heav'n" (II, 229), "Heav'n's Lord Supreme" (II, 236), "Heav'n's all-ruling Sire" (II, 264), "the King of Heav'n" (II, 316), and "Heav'n's high Arbitrator" (II, 359), they clearly indicate with these terms that they regard God as tantamount to a powerful ruler of an enemy nation rather than as their Supreme Creator. The only epithet in Books One and Two that remotely threatens to destabilize the logical neutrality of Hell is Beelzebub's "Heav'n's perpetual King" (I, 131), where the qualifying adjective "perpetual" (like standard theological qualifiers such as "eternal," "infinite," and "*ex nihilo*") threatens to liberate "King" from its worldly denotation into "model" status. Nowhere in these opening books do the fallen angels utter the word "God." But despite these overt efforts to purge the claims of faith from hellish discourse, the fallen angels are helpless to prevent an embedded theological leavening from having its way and rendering even the most consciously secular utterances religious.

That leavening shows itself in the logological transformations of key words, to be sure, but it also resides in the landscape of Hell. Murray Roston sees Milton's Hell as a baroque achievement which, unlike "the ethereal dimensions of the celestial battle," is a "more solid, limited setting, human in scale." He surmises that Milton "needed the scene in Hell as a stepping stone to the celestial vision."¹⁸ Rather than a stepping-stone, I would suggest that Hell's landscape is more

like a glass through which we see celestial visions darkly, for even though Roston may be right in appreciating a baroque corporeality in these scenes, there is also a marked *translucence*. We see this translucence in such famous phrases as "darkness visible" (I, 63), which introduce us to the powerful potentiality of religious language to "denaturalize" description and render it currency for religious insight. Here we have a typical example of a model-qualifier situation of the sort Ramsey discusses. The logical impropriety it sponsors clearly announces that the descriptive language of Hell is anything but straightforward. Its mood is not indicative (offering explications of "the way things are") but, to use a theological term, kerygmatic, that is, language which deliberately destabilizes linguistic and experiential complacency with the rupturing impact of the Word of God.¹⁹ Rather than creating a mirror image of a presumed state of affairs, kerygmatic language sponsors ontological shock. As Jennings points out, "It is the interruption of structure that brings the structure into view,"²⁰ and this is what kerygmatic language does; it makes the darkness of Hell visible by exposing its contingency.

Although the disrupting dialogical nature of kerygmatic description evokes more than what is seen, it does not deny or supplant the baroque corporeality of Hell. One of the most misunderstood features of religious language is that its roots are firmly anchored in empirical soil; it resists what Frederick Ferré has called "logical docetism"—a form of so-called religious expression so insulated from practical human experience, so rigidly other-worldly, that "the value of the human is minimized, denied, and deplored, ostensibly to glorify the miraculous inspiration of the divine." Such language, Ferré concludes, "violates the debased human by the divine" and "instead of 'inspiring' the human, assaults and replaces it."²¹ We may recognize this sort of logical docetism in the speeches of God in Book Three where the *absence* of religious style is so unfortunately evident.²² These speeches are metaphysical rather than religious constructions and seem to have their formal roots in scholasticism, although literary scholars have labored hard to devise a host of alternative rationalizations for their opaque austerity.²³ But in Hell Milton's style is not constrained by arid scholasticism nor by arbitrary principles of internal decorum but cleaves to the dictates of Christianity's most unique literary form, the

New Testament parable, which consolidates all of the features of religious style which, up to this point, have been variously characterized by the words "encounter," "polarity," "kerygmatic," "logological," and "logical impropriety."

Biblical parables have often been demeaned to the status of mere fables in the course of exegetical history ironically because they are anchored to the realism of worldly experience and seem to offer ethical counsel even though, as students of the parable acknowledge, their essential distinctiveness is kerygmatic, that is, their encouragement of a religiously salutary confusion of moral and ontological values. Protestant exegetical tradition in particular has scrupulously isolated the parable from standard literary tropes, insisting that it is functionally distinct from such secular kin as allegory, fable, and even metaphor itself (when by metaphor is meant the mere analogical process of saying one thing and meaning another). Christian hermeneutics has generally regarded the parable as a form which effects the interpenetration of worldly and divine realities. C. H. Dodd, for example, defends the acknowledged "realism" of the biblical parables by declaring that "since nature and supernature are one order, you can take part of that order and find in it illumination for other parts."²⁴

Milton's hell vividly depicts a situation where the divineness of a fallen order is illuminated, and it does so, like the New Testament, parabolically. Milton employs none of the standard analogical forms of scholasticism such as *analogia entis*, *analogia gratiae*, the analogy of proportionality, or even (as he later does with Raphael) "accommodation." These forms stress the discontinuity of worldly and transcendent realities and encourage the sort of logical docetism that threatens to flatten religious style into either sentimental piety or secular indifference. The key to Milton's success in the early books of *Paradise Lost* is that he gives full measure to worldly realism without sacrificing religious potency. As Wiley Sypher once put it, "*Paradise Lost* secularizes, in a grave and special way, the transcendental."²⁵ Like the New Testament parables, it exhibits the extraordinary in the ordinary and not *beyond* it.

The *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* instructs us that

Were we to speak of the word of God as a seed we might be said to use a metaphor, but in that case we transfer the properties of the seed to the Word; the seed itself, having suggested the particular property upon which we wish to dwell, vanishes from our thoughts. But when as a part of instruction by parable we use the same expression, the idea of the seed abides with us, and the keeping before our minds of its actual history, that we may ascend from it into another sphere, is a necessary part of the mental process through which we pass.²⁶

The parabolic metaphor never "vanishes from our thoughts" but "abides," maintaining continuity with, not segregation from, its referent. In this regard it resembles what Max Black calls an "interaction-metaphor" which has the "power to bring two separate domains into cognitive relation by using language directly appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other; the implications, suggestions, and supporting values entwined with the literal use of metaphorical expression enable us to see a new subject matter in a new way."²⁷ The parable, like religious language generally, far from segregating transcendent from natural logic, merges them in such a way that it "is the bearer of the reality to which it refers. The hearer not only learns about that reality, he participates in it. He is invaded by it."²⁸

Of all the inhabitants of Hell few rival Mammon for sheer material realism, and few are less likely instruments of religious discernment. Milton's depiction of him as a fallen angel in Hell seems appropriate enough, but "what it implies about Heaven" has given at least one critic pause:²⁹

Mammon led them on,
Mammon, the least erected Spirit that fell
 From Heav'n, for ev'n in Heav'n his looks and thoughts
 Were always downward bent, admiring more
 The riches of Heav'n's pavement, trodd'n Gold,
 Than aught divine or holy else enjoy'd
 In vision beatific . . . (I, 678-84)

The worldly realism of Mammon's portrait seems in conflict with the decorum of Heaven. Can an as yet unfallen Mammon show signs of avarice? Can wealth hold attraction for a denizen of Heaven? Is it not a "terrible reduction of heavenly existence to picture one so high in spiritual excellence bent over musing on the worth of Heaven's

pavement"? These are improprieties that understandably occur to readers unaccustomed to the parabolic nature of religious style; instead of looking *through* the passage toward the religious discernment it was designed to arouse, they look *at* it, mistaking its means for its end. True religious style is rooted in empirical soil, but it is also in active conversation with the transcendent. In other words, it is theologically qualified which more often than not shows itself in logical improprieties. Robert Funk, for instance, says that

like the cleverly distorted picture puzzles children use to work, the parable is a picture puzzle which prompts the question, What's wrong with this picture? Distortions of everydayness, exaggerated realism, distended concreteness, incompatible elements often subtly drawn—are what prohibit the parable from coming to us in the literal sense.³⁰

Funk's description could just as easily fit "Guernica" or Milton's Hell, for the style of the parable is the style of all authentic religious expression—something is always "breaking through out of the depths to the surface" bearing a disquieting disclaimer to any assurance that "Here at least / We shall be free."

How then, do we honor the religious style of the Mammon passage? The classic definition of the parable is C. H. Dodd's:

At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.³¹

"Strangeness" seems to be the most troubling characteristic of parabolic religious style. To some the Mammon passage violates common sense. The pieces refuse to fall into place, and "strangeness" becomes synonymous with "mistake." Others, however, may find the rush of provocative questions that the passage spawns (each one bearing its own fresh cargo of articulation possibilities) are full of potential religious disclosures: How odd that Mammon, "the least erected Spirit," should be a "leader." And the humorous wordplay with "least erected" and "downward bent." What a provocatively ambivalent blend of words denoting both status and physical description. Mammon, of course, is "least erected" both actually and figuratively, but he is

perhaps more significantly "bent" physically over to admire the golden pavement at the same time that such an activity is his "bent." Even the word "riches" takes on an irony from context; to think that "riches" in heaven are what the divine denizens "trod" upon provides a richly ironic value judgment. The point is that the passage is literally alive with hermeneutical and even logological activity which the common sense point of view simply ignores or, worse, cites as Milton's "irresponsibility toward language." Mammon's description is indeed "vivid and strange" in the parabolic sense of those words, and it is this very quality which affords it a religiously salutary purposefulness.

What kind of applications does the Mammon passage recommend? No specific one on the face of it, but it is suggestive of an attitude that emerges from the logical oddities, the puns and the paradoxes that make up the very fabric of the description. We have, for example, all the necessary raw material for developing a Christian colloquy on riches or even a reconfirmation of the entire Christian value system. The passage also teases us with the mystery of sin (How does it occur? When does it occur? Is sin inevitable? What constitutes the committing of a sin?). But most important of all, the passage applies itself to us viscerally by forcing Mammon upon our very personalities. We become Mammon through a deliberately designed identification process. Here is this angelic abstraction, laden with its impressive cargo of symbolic significance, suddenly incarnated before our eyes, and immediately the frailty of *that* flesh we see as the frailty of *our* flesh. Mammon is "arrestingly vivid" because we see ourselves in him; he is "strange" because he is simultaneously an angel caught up in the awesome drama of heavenly apostasy. Suddenly it must occur to us that the great cosmological drama of divine treason which Mammon "leads" is the identical drama that is reenacted daily in the individual Christian's soul. Mammon brings two worlds together; the homely and the cosmic meld. His predicament is discovered as our predicament, and we are stricken with the realization that it is not we who are interpreting Mammon but Mammon who is interpreting us.

There is no indicative mood in the grammar of Hell, only a performative one intent upon teasing our minds into active thought and our hearts into fundamental change. As a descriptive account of "how things are" in the "Dungeon horrible" its style is as inaccurately

chaotic as "Guernica," but as a *prescriptive* parable it generates the same ontological anxiety that makes Picasso's painting so disquietingly evocative of human contingency. In both works there is an implicit polar tension—a disrupting awareness of something breaking through from the depths to the surface, which Tillich identifies as the hallmark of religious style.

Wiley Sypher characterizes Milton's style by suggesting that "as a poet he is the maker of resplendent images, as Puritan he is a mighty image breaker—*Eikonoklastes*," and that consequently, he is "so enthralled by the wealth of his haptic imagination that he does not appear to be fully awake to the contradictions between his baroque sensuousness and his Puritanism."³² This may well be, but perhaps a less labored explanation of the alleged "dissociation" is to acknowledge it as the natural conduct of a superbly functioning religious style—a style as venerable as the New Testament itself.

The University of Delaware
Newark

NOTES

¹Paul Tillich, "Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art," in *Christianity and the Existentialists*, ed. Carl Michalson (New York: Scribner's, 1956) 142, 183.

²One notable exception is Erich Auerbach's stimulating contrast of biblical and Homeric epic styles in "Odysseus' Scar," *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953) 1-20.

³The literature on religious language is vast, but for an introduction to the subject I would particularly recommend Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic and God* (New York, Evanston, London: Harper Torchbook, 1969); Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1970); David Crystal and Derek Davy, *Investigating English Style*, English Language Series, gen. ed. Randolph Quirk (London: Longmans, 1969); Gerhard Ebeling, *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language*, trans. R. A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1973); John Macquarrie, *God-talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (London: SCM, 1967); D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965); and Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language: an Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946) and (ed.) *Words about God: the Philosophy of Religion* (London: SCM, 1971).

⁴Crystal and Davy 166.

⁵I. M. Crombie, "The Possibility of Theological Statements," *Faith and Logic*, ed. Basil Mitchell, Oxford Essays in Philosophical Theology (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957) 40.

⁶Jennings argues that "an understanding of 'god' that makes it irrelevant how this term is related to, for example, 'sin' is of no use whatever for understanding the language game in which these two terms . . . co-determine one another. . . It is as if we transferred the attributes of the 'being of God' to the term itself" (*Beyond Theism: A Grammar of God-Language* [Oxford: OUP, 1985] 143).

⁷Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars P, 1975) 5.

⁸Jennings 143, 144-45.

⁹Burke vi. Burke's view gains theological endorsement from Gerhard Ebeling: ". . . the subject matter of theology itself is words, not only because the gospel in fact takes the form of words, which is obvious, but also because it is not possible to encounter the content of the gospel other than as something conveyed in language" (203).

¹⁰The words are Gerhard Ebeling's (26).

¹¹Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966) 191.

¹²Burke points out that "the negative is a peculiarly linguistic invention, not a 'fact' of nature" (20), and so the negative qualification of an empirical model has particular supernatural force.

¹³See *Religious Language*, especially the chapter devoted to "Models and Qualifiers," 55-102.

¹⁴While the interests of theology and deconstruction would seem to be diametrically opposed, on the linguistic level, at least, there would seem to be some points of mutual agreement. John Dominic Crossan, for example, observes that "it is Jacques Derrida's *différance*, which, beyond concept and word, beyond hearing and almost beyond understanding, raises most explicitly the problem [of] . . . how might one mediate divinity or transcendence, . . . within a thematics of *différance*, even, presumably, by deconstructing Derrida" (John Dominic Crossan, "Difference and Divinity," *Semeia* 23 [1982] 31); and Herbert Schneidau wonders "if all of Derrida's work does not owe something to the possibility of the kerygmatic, understood not so much as the proclamation of a master name but as a decentering and deconstruction in itself" (Herbert N. Schneidau, "The Word against the Word: Derrida on Textuality," *Semeia* 23 [1982] 14).

¹⁵Ebeling 191.

¹⁶Citations for *Paradise Lost* are to *John Milton: the Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1985) and appear parenthetically in the text by book and line numbers.

¹⁷Burke 7-8.

¹⁸Murray Roston, *Milton and the Baroque* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1980) 99, 100.

¹⁹*Kerygma* (preaching) is defined by C. H. Dodd as "the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world" (*The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963] 7), and in using the phrase "kerygmatic language" I wish to suggest its appropriateness to Ebeling's characterization of the language of faith as "the dialogue of faith with the experience of the world. And the language of the world as such is a confused

and concealed dispute about faith" (*Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* 191).

²⁰Jennings 153.

²¹Ferré 89.

²²See, for example, Isabel MacCaffrey's *Paradise Lost as "Myth"* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1959) 39, 44-45.

²³One of the most popular defenses of God's language in *Paradise Lost* derives from the commonly held convictions of pulpit rhetoric: that Milton used language throughout the epic as an indicator of ethical status. God's "plain language," because it is innocent of the artificial adornment of rhetoric and metaphor, is more spiritually pure and religiously appropriate than ornate language which, of course, offers more opportunity for deception and is therefore of the devil. William Haller has much to say on this point throughout *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), esp. 130-32.

²⁴C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribners, 1961) 10.

²⁵Wiley Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style: Transformations in Art and Literature 1400-1700* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1955) 198.

²⁶*Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, ed. John McClintock and James Strang (New York: Harper and Bros., 1877) 7:644.

²⁷Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1962) 46 and 236-37.

²⁸Robert Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 140.

²⁹My argument is directed against the position of anti-Miltonic critics who complain of the alleged "inconsistencies" of *Paradise Lost*. While such "inconsistencies" may be apparent to those restricting *Paradise Lost* to standards of literary decorum, they cease to be so when perceived as instruments of religious insight. I specifically challenge the position of H.R. Swardson because of the deliberately hostile stance he assumes toward *Paradise Lost* and because of the concise clarity with which he isolates his objects. In answering to Swardson, I hope to answer to the critical persuasion he represents at large. See *Poetry and the Fountain of Light* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962) 108-12.

³⁰Robert Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and the Word of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 152.

³¹C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribners, 1961) 16.

³²Sypher 195.