

Eve's Otherness and the New Ethical Criticism

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I

TWO DECADES AGO, Sandra M. Gilbert described Milton's *Paradise Lost* as "the story of woman's secondness, her otherness, and how that otherness leads inexorably to her demonic anger, her sin, her fall, and her exclusion from that garden of the Gods which is also, for her, the garden of poetry."¹ Gilbert was not the first reader to reach the conclusion that *Paradise Lost* narrates the story of women's first and therefore supposedly "natural" exclusion. As early as the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson referred to Milton's "contempt of females."² But after Gilbert, Eve's otherness becomes a central topic of the poem; subsequently, for example, Karen Edwards can sketch "an adversarial debate between 'prosecutorial' and 'apologetic' critics,"³ between those who think that Milton places Eve in a secondary position of otherness and those who see Milton as ahead of his time "in granting women a dignity and responsibility rarely conceded in the seventeenth century."⁴ In this essay, I argue for a third way, one that relies precisely on what Gilbert calls Eve's "otherness" to reconcile the "prosecutorial" and the "apologetic" approaches.⁵ For Gilbert, Eve's otherness makes the poem antifeminist. Those who disagree usually explain this otherness away, as for example by contextualizing it in seventeenth-century terms. In the third way I am proposing, however, what both sides treat as the scandal of the poem—Eve's otherness—becomes instead its topic.

The recent "ethical turn" (descending largely from the work of Emmanuel Levinas) in literature makes possible accepting Gilbert's prosecutorial recognition of Eve's otherness while reading *Paradise Lost* in both apologist and feminist terms. For both sides underestimate how the poem might be concerned precisely with a consideration of Eve's response to having been placed in the position Gilbert describes as "her otherness." Since Gilbert first articulated her claim, literature has learned—from feminist arguments such as Gilbert's, from postcolonial approaches, from deconstruction, and from Emmanuel Levinas—to take otherness into account in reading.⁶ In this essay, combining recent reconsiderations of otherness in general and Gilbert's point concerning Eve's otherness, I argue that *Paradise Lost*—specifically through the

relationship between Adam and Eve—tells the story of (the difficulty of) what Thomas Docherty describes as “an articulation of the ethical relation to alterity.”⁷ The challenge facing Adam is, using Docherty’s terms, “to find a means of addressing *l’autre* without reducing it to *autrui*” (A 7), of addressing Eve without reducing her to an other, of taking her singularity into account without turning that difference itself into an otherness. As Gilbert shows, Adam fails spectacularly. But Adam’s failure is so spectacular that it seems to represent one of the central points of the poem, constituting as it does the process to which Eve’s central decision is a response. It is one thing to exclude, as Adam does to Eve at the beginning of their relationship, and quite another to choose to separate, as Eve later does. The latter represents a rejection of how Adam had tried to turn her into an other.

II

What Lawrence Buell calls “the new ethical criticism” focuses on three related problems: how to describe otherness, how to relate responsibly to an other, and how to compare an idea of otherness to the experience of reading a text.⁸ In the way it addresses those issues, new ethical criticism is part of what Zygmunt Bauman calls *Postmodern Ethics*. As Bauman points out, modern ethics emphasized the *similarity* between one and an other. Using Georg Simmel as the representative modernist, Bauman explains that modern ethics “stripped man of all ‘particularistic’ trappings and pared him to the (assumed) ‘all-human’ . . . so that—it was hoped—‘what is common to all man as such, can emerge in him as his essence.’”⁹ For Simmel, “all relations with others are thus ultimately mere stations along the road by which the ego arrives at its self.”¹⁰ In other words, in the modern conception, particularity is removed, as we all participate in a commonality, and it is the responsibility of the other to help the self move toward that similar perfection that is posited in each of us. By contrast, as is well known, postmodern ethics emphasize difference, especially through the influence of the work of Levinas, who, Bauman writes, “accords the Other that priority which was once unquestionably assigned to the self” (PE 85). In this postmodern conception of the other, in Levinas’s terms, “there is no fusion: the relation to the other is envisaged as alterity.”¹¹ Such otherness is a kind of opposition, an irreconcilable difference of singularities.

By redirecting otherness away from a form of commonality and toward a form of difference, Levinas articulated “a most dramatic reversal of the principles of modern ethics,” as Bauman puts it (PE 85). But the question, then, is how to respond ethically to otherness. In the

modern conception of otherness, the other is there to serve the self, which is "seeking in every intercourse merely a chance to nourish his identity" (*PE* 83). In Levinas's version, by contrast, it is the reverse: the self is there to serve the other. "All thought is subordinated," Levinas contends, "to the infinitely other in the other person" (*AT* 97). For Levinas, it is difference itself that results in the ethical treatment of the other: "The self is non-indifference to the others," he writes in *Otherwise than Being*.¹² On the one hand, this ethical "non-indifference" means not being indifferent to others, noticing them, caring about them, having a concern for them, and so on. At the same time, because of the double negative implicit in the phrase, "non-indifference" is also difference itself; not indifference is difference, which means that for Levinas difference and awareness are related, causally, to each other.¹³ This "not indifferent" response to the difference in the other Levinas calls "proximity" (*OB* 46, 100, 166), a concept that reworks Heidegger's "being there." Where Heidegger's *da sein* emphasizes "being," Levinas emphasizes "there": "Signification," Levinas argues, "occurs in proximity." This being *there*, attending the other, noticing the fullness of their difference, Levinas describes "as the supreme passivity of exposure to another" (*OB* 46, 47). The attitude of exposure, of proximity, of what Laurence Buell calls "conscienceful listening" (*IPE* 11), "is a 'signifying-ness dealt the other,' prior to all objectification," in Levinas's terms (*OB* 48). This presumption that the other's difference is meaningful Levinas calls "Saying" (*OB* 47, 48).¹⁴

Related to the discussion over how otherness should be understood and treated, there is also for new ethical criticism the question over how otherness is related to the study of literature. Generally, there are two tendencies: for the first, we read texts for stories about how to respond to others ethically; for the second, reading texts is itself the story of responding to others ethically. The first approach is perhaps most associated with philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre or Martha Nussbaum, who, while there are important differences between them, have both turned to literary examples in their considerations of ethics.¹⁵ MacIntyre, for example, proceeds with the assumption that narrative "provided a moral background to contemporary debates" (121). Similarly, Nussbaum argues that "certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative."¹⁶ In this model, which Nussbaum calls "literature as moral philosophy," and which we might also call reading *about* ethics or reading *for* ethics, literature serves an almost demonstrative or ostentive role, showing readers how (or how not) to treat others ethically (125).

In a distinction that follows generally the difference between the so-called modern and postmodern versions of ethics, such reading *for*

ethics posits a similarity between narrative and real situations of ethical decision, while the ethics *of* reading usually focuses on the difference between the text and the ethical situation it is purported to represent. Rather than focus on the ethical response of one character to another in a narrative, this latter approach pays attention to the text as a linguistic artifact, describing it as other to the reader (or, conversely, the reader as other to the text). J. Hillis Miller, for example, claims that there is “a necessary moment in that act of reading as such,” that it is reading itself which raises the ethical questions as much as (or more than), say, the narratives read.¹⁷ In this model, the text is itself an other, and reading it thereby represents responding to otherness generally. Derek Attridge describes “reading as an attempt to respond to the otherness of the other.”¹⁸ Insofar as the text-as-other, following on Levinas, is here understood as different, this approach prioritizes whatever in the text resists assimilation to the same. So, for example, interpretive ambivalence, verbal ambiguity, linguistic complexity, poetic compression, and ironic reversal are emphasized in this understanding of reading ethically. For Attridge, a text is “something like a field of potential meaning awaiting realization without wholly determining it in advance” (25). This second tendency of the new ethical criticism takes this attention to other possibilities for signification from Levinasian ethics and develops it for textual and interpersonal contexts (the former representing the latter). As Thomas Docherty puts it, interpretation requires “an adequate attention to alterity as such” (A 2).

III

Other as similar, other as different, others for self, self for others, reading for ethics, and ethics of reading: Milton’s *Paradise Lost* addresses each of these approaches. Adam and Eve’s story moves from the first to the second of each preceding pair, privileging at the end, I argue, the perspective offered by postmodern ethics or what is also called the new ethical criticism. At the beginning, what Gilbert calls Eve’s otherness is the result of Adam’s seeing Eve as, literally, part of himself, which is to say, the same as himself. Adam treats Eve as if she were there to fulfill his process of self-fulfillment, especially prior to their separation in Book 9. By the very end of *Paradise Lost*, as “they hand in hand . . . took their solitary way,” Adam and Eve have moved to a more Levinasian understanding of otherness.¹⁹ Their differences (the “solitary”) are part of what bind them (either their “way” or their “hand in hand”). In Derrida’s terms, they have learned to “*respect . . . the other as what it is:*

other" (VM 138). To make such an argument is to read for ethics, to consider the decisions made by characters in a narrative (including Adam learning to respond more sensitively to an other). At the same time, though, *Paradise Lost* combines this reading for ethics with the ethics of reading, for it is also, as Stanley Fish has shown, a story *about* reading. When Thomas Docherty claims that "poetry, we might say, exists in this model as a peculiar form of deferred intimacy between reader and writer," he highlights a central assumption of the new ethical criticism: reading is a relationship between reader and text. For Docherty, that intimacy is deferred because of the "'belatedness' of the reader, who always comes to the poet's message 'too late' and who, as a result, cannot fully understand its content."²⁰ At the end of Book 12, Adam's "deferred" response to Eve represents, as we shall see, a way of reading ethically, understood in Levinas's or Derrida's terms.

While considering the question of Eve's otherness in the light of new ethical criticism, this essay focuses on a few scenes that testify either to the status of Adam and Eve's relationship or to their understanding of each other—specifically, their accounts of their first moments together (Book 4), their separation (Book 9), and their relationship at the end of the poem (Book 12). There are of course other important scenes that also relate to their eating the fruit (for example, God's words in Book 3 or Satan's speech in Book 9). But the focus here is on the relationship between Adam and Eve, for it is in their relationship that the othering occurs, and, insofar as they are to be taken as representative humans, where othering matters most. This reading suggests that Adam and Eve are involved in a seemingly postlapsarian relationship, even in their prelapsarian state. But I agree with Millicent Bell's argument that Milton "constructed an account of the Fall which subtly obscured any sharp division in the drama, any 'before' and 'after.'"²¹ Slavoj Žižek claims that "life in Paradise is always pervaded by an infinite melancholy," which is perhaps particularly true of Paradise as Milton describes it in *Paradise Lost*: Satan visits, and angels struggle to protect Adam and Eve (even telling Adam that they need protection).²² As we shall see, this is not to say that the "completing of the mortal sin / original" (9.1003–4) does not matter, but that it is instead treated as something that signifies a change rather than a "Fall" per se. "In a situation of forced choice," Žižek argues, "the subject makes the 'crazy,' impossible choice" (FA 150). Eve makes such a choice in eating the fruit. Maybe it is too strong to say that the choice is "forced," but it could nonetheless be seen as her response to the otherness to which Adam consigned her. In this way, her decision is a way to provoke a better "conversation," to use Milton's term from the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*.

IV

In her recounting of their first meeting, Eve reports that Adam's last words—as he chased after her—were: “Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim / my other half” (4.497–98). In this, Adam is conceiving Eve as an other similar to himself, the conception of otherness Bauman associates with modernism. As far as Adam is concerned, Eve is actually his other, his “other half,” an other version of himself. He thinks Eve is there to complete him, to make him whole, in several senses. Of course, it is, he believes, “his flesh, his bone” that makes Eve possible (4.483). Moreover, Eve reports that Adam implies that he sees himself in part as her creator: “to give thee being I lent / Out of my side to thee” (4.483–84). Not only does Adam say that he gave Eve being, but he also claims that his rib was *loaned* to her. Thus, when his other half does arrive, he is there to reclaim what he thinks is rightly his from the other who is very much the same. At the same time, Adam has been expecting Eve to complete him metaphorically as well. Adam contends that he needs another, similar being for “conversation” (8.418). Before Eve is even created, it is similarity, “proportion due” (8.385), that motivates Adam's initial interest in having a companion. The last words Adam heard before Eve was created were “Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self, / Thy wish exactly to thy Heart's desire” (8.450–51). So, this other is defined as both a similarity—a “likeness”—and a compensation—“help.”

It is significant that Adam believes it is he who is “defective” (8.425), that it is he who has a lack (even if in this case it is a rib). Adam's self-deprecation helps some readers make a progressive claim for *Paradise Lost*. For an “apologist,” Adam's declaration of imperfection counters the traditional presumption of his Edenic authority.²³ After all, Adam, presumably the first “first of the masculinists” (PP 370), concedes his many weaknesses, emphasizes “his defects,” and believes that a new being would compensate for his “imperfection” (8.423). But even where Adam seems to imply that there is a difference between them, he basically claims that Eve is a better version of himself—the “last and best / Of all God's works” (9.895–96). Adam furthermore assumes that Eve is there to help make him better too. Adam, like Simmel, believes that the other is there for his own fulfillment. Moreover, Adam's repeated insistence that Eve is “perfect” (10.138) is part of the othering in the relationship between Adam and Eve. It is Adam who is claiming that Eve is perfect, not Eve. What we have here, then, with Eve, is something that might be called the epistemology of the pedestal: she has been placed in the position reserved for perfection. After the Fall, Adam goes so far as to blame Eve's perfection for their sin. Eve is “So good, so

fit, so acceptable, so divine / That from her hand I could suspect no ill" (10.139–40). Adam ate the fruit because Eve was the "perfect gift" (9.138). In the process, Adam blames the Fall on a perfection Eve never claimed.

Despite Adam's insistence that Eve is a better version of himself (and that she will help him improve), Eve's experience in her first moments, by contrast, emphasizes a profound differentiation. According to Eve's report, when she "bent down to look" (4.460) into a clear lake and saw her reflection, "with answering looks / Of sympathy and love" (4.464–65), she is interrupted by a voice that directs her to "follow me" (4.469). Christine Froula calls it an "archetypal scene of canonical instruction," and although it is not clear whose voice that is, whether God's or Adam's, it is more important that Eve is interrupted at all.²⁴ By distracting her—"there I had fixed / Mine eyes till now" (4.465–66)—and narrating her vision for her, this voice affects what she thinks of her own image, substituting its description for her experience. Specifically, Eve is told "What there thou seest fair creature is thyself" (4.468–69). It would be more accurate to say "that is an image of you," or "that is your image." As a consequence, not only does this voice purport to explain what Eve sees, it confuses her self with the image. By describing her as her image, that voice makes her other to her self. When the voice goes on to claim that it will bring Eve to "he / whose image thou art" (4.471–72), Eve's identity changes again. First she was the image in the lake; now, she is the image of a "he." In the process, Eve is doubly othered: not only has she been told that she is other to herself, now there is an other to whom she is other. When she does meet the other, Adam, she believes that he is "less fair, / Less winning soft, less amiably mild, / Than that smooth watery image" (4.478–79), meaning both that she prefers herself to Adam, and would prefer to be by herself: "Back I turned" (4.480), Eve says. In other words, she sees Adam as an other, in a Levinasian sense of the term.

Where Adam saw Eve as similar to himself, Eve sees him as different. But Adam tries to incorporate Eve into the similarity that he believes governs their relationship. When she relates the image of Adam "following" her (4.481), yelling "Return fair Eve, / Whom fly'st thou?" (4.481–82), it is clear that she did more than simply turn back and he did more than follow. Desperate for her return, Adam chases her, telling her that "part of my soul I seek thee" (4.487); this assimilating claim, even if Eve could comprehend it so soon after her own coming to consciousness, need not mean anything to her. How could she understand why this being is running after her saying that she came from him? According to Eve, Adam "cried'st aloud" with such references solely to his own understanding of her conditions (4.481). For Adam, Eve

matters because by arriving second she resolved the inadequacies he had experienced during his time as the first. But that need not mean anything to Eve.

Adam's assimilative treatment of others can be seen in his naming the animals: "I named them, as they passed, and understood / Their nature" (8.352–53). At least since Patrick Hume's 1695 claim that "wonderful was the knowledge God bestowed on Adam, nor that part of it least, which concerned the naming Things aright," there has been an argument that Adam's Edenic language was charged with extraordinary prelapsarian powers.²⁵ But it could be that Adam has simply *named* the animals, and that this naming is what passes for Adam's understanding of their natures. In "Violence and Metaphysics," his early reading of Levinas, Derrida claims that "predication is the first violence," and that "violence appears with articulation" (VM 147–48). That is, in the case of Adam naming the animals, by overlooking the difference between a name and the thing named, Adam may overlook what is unique about the named; therefore, predication can do violence. Adam may rightly see important differences between Eve and the animals, and he prefers Eve, but he does, in either case, understand them in the same way—in his own terms. Adam's naming, and thereby assuming that he understands, suggests that naming is what understanding means to Adam. Presumably Adam believes he can understand Eve the same way he understands everything else. But what we might call, following Thomas Docherty, Adam's "taxonomical generality" must neglect Eve's singularity (A 12). Adam might allege that "with such knowledge God endued / My sudden apprehension" (8.353–54), but the gap between the name and the object implicit in his discursive, nominalist impulses is part of the difficulty in the relationship between Adam and Eve, even according to Adam, who seems confused by Eve precisely because of the degree to which she is not such a nominalist.

Joan Bennett has argued that "Adam's axiomatic reasoning shows his quicker rational ability, closer to that of the angels" (G 399). But Raphael claims that verbal ability is more human than angelic. He contends that there are two types of reason, "discursive or intuitive" (5.488), and that "discourse / Is ofttest yours, the latter most is ours" (5.488–89). By relating naming and understanding, Adam relies on the discursive reason Raphael associates with humans, not with angels. By contrast, the narrator claims that Eve "went she not, as not with such discourse / Delighted, or not capable her ear of what was high" (8.48–49). This confusing triple negative means both that Eve can be delighted with discourse and that she was capable of hearing what is "high." At the same time, however, the narrator contends that Eve prefers to hear from Adam: "He, she knew would intermix / Grateful digressions, and solve

high dispute / With conjugal caresses" (8.54–56). Although this passage could represent further evidence of Eve's othering, showing that the narrator thinks of her solely as a sexual being, it could also be read as Eve's preference for another type of reason: tactile and experiential, the inductive counterpart to Adam's discursive, deductive, nominalist approach.

Consequently, in not preferring discourse, it is Eve, not Adam, who would be more like the angels. When he says that Eve "with obsequious majesty approved / My pleaded reason. To the nuptial bower / I led her blushing" (8.509–11), Adam understands sexuality discursively—"pleaded reason." But Eve is described as understanding sexuality in terms of touch: "caresses," "lip," and "not words alone" (8.56, 57). It could be part of Eve's otherness that she prefers "touch" to "discourse." But in terms of the differences between Adam's discursive and Eve's inductive reasoning (and Adam's related claim of Eve's perfection), some of the poem's most difficult lines, according to which the Fall is "Inductive mainly to the sin of Eve" (11.519), usually read as tracing the Fall to Eve, could mean instead that Eve's relation to the inductive—to experiment, experience, and the non-discursive—is part of the reason behind the Fall.

Adam's attitude toward understanding and his conception of it can be seen in Book 5 after Eve wakes up from the sleep in which Satan has been whispering in her ear. There, Adam describes the first of Book 5's two allegories of the soul: "in the soul / Are many lesser faculties that serve / Reason as chief" (5.100–02), including "fancy" (5.102), and "the five watchful senses" (5.104). According to Adam, the senses "represent" (5.104) "all external things" (5.103), from which fancy "forms imaginations" (5.105), which are then "frame[d]" (5.106) by reason. In and of itself, with "fancy," "imagination," "reason," and "representation," this description of the soul is a variation on classical understandings of psychology, and consequently, seems typical enough. But as it is a mystery how Adam might have acquired this information, one cannot help but suspect yet more nominalism from Adam, more presumption that he can name and know, in this case naming elements of human psychology. Moreover, Adam's allegory of the soul becomes particularly interesting when contrasted with Raphael's. For although Raphael, like Adam, also talks about "fancy" (5.486) and "reason" (5.487) in the "soul" (5.486), Raphael, unlike Adam, pairs "fancy" with "understanding" (5.486). Where Adam has only fancy, only "imaginings," Raphael has both fancy and understanding. That is, Adam's description of the soul literally lacks understanding.

Diana Benet has argued that "Adam and Eve's disagreement does not arise from hidden tensions in their relationship."²⁶ I would agree,

insofar as the tensions are not hidden. By turning Eve into an other with his repeated insistence that she is like him, but perfect, Adam does more than simply understand Eve in his own terms. He leaves Eve with few alternatives for showing him that she is not what he thinks she is. In order to break through this otherness Eve would need to show Adam that she is neither like him nor perfect. In Eden, where there is only one rule, there is but one way to break through the otherness to which her presumed "perfection" consigns her. And it is the same thing Adam has said he would not do. So, if Eve will eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge she will show that she is neither like Adam nor perfect. But, contrary to the traditional reading, this means that it is Adam's othering which causes the event known as the Fall. Also, in this sense, then, Eve's choice to separate and eat the fruit represents not "sin," but her rejection of the otherness of perfection, her rejection of the pedestal.

In this sense, when Adam and Eve separate prior to eating the fruit, their separation could be said to have been precipitated by Eve's request for a new relationship. Diana Benet reads Eve's suggestion—"Let us divide our labours" (9.214)—straightforwardly, as an indication "of her concern for the work that literally grows overnight" (AS 130). However, not only will Eve's suggestion change Adam and Eve's relationship, Eve says she is making the suggestion precisely so as to change the relationship. According to Eve, working so closely together Adam and Eve become distracted and do not finish enough work: "While so near each other thus all day . . . / Looks intervene and . . . / . . . supper comes unearned" (9.220, 222, 225). If she is, as Benet believes, concerned about their work, Eve nonetheless argues that getting it done will require changing their relationship. When Adam responds that "to prune . . . / . . . were it toilsome, yet with thee were sweet" (4.439–40), he again overlooks the particularities of Eve's situation, as is consistent with his treatment of her as the same. Eve has never needed to prune before; consequently, what Adam sees as a fifty percent reduction in his work load represents a one hundred percent increase for her, made no sweeter for Eve by her being herself. When Adam thus overlooks the difference between his own and Eve's histories, readers can thereby see that Adam fails to see from the vantage point of Eve. Joseph Wittreich has argued that "*Paradise Lost* emboldens its readership to look at both Milton and his age anew: *from the vantage point of women*."²⁷ In addition, though, Eve's otherness in *Paradise Lost* can embolden its readers to look at Adam from what Wittreich calls the vantage point of women as well.

Eve's decision to eat the fruit is like the "crazy," but successful, choice described by Žižek: it "changes the coordinates of the situation in which the subject finds [her]self" (FA 150). It prompts Adam to begin to

articulate what it is specifically that he loves about Eve, as an individual—her singularity, whatever makes her unique or different, without being perfect or other. He says that even if God were to create “another Eve” (9.911), “loss of thee / Would never from my heart” (9.912–13). At this all-important moment, Adam focuses on what he would miss about Eve, as Eve. It is not simply that Adam wants someone else there to make him feel better; there is instead something about this particular person that he likes, even if it is “only” their history together. This moment has provoked a range of responses: Dennis Burden has argued that at this point Adam “should leave her. He would have good grounds for divorce.”²⁸ Dennis Danielson has argued that Adam should have been more “heroic”: Adam could have done “what the second Adam ultimately did do: take the punishment of fallen humanity upon himself.”²⁹ While it is true that Adam does not elect to divorce Eve or sacrifice himself, it is just as important that he chooses to be with Eve because there is something unique about her that could not be replaced. It means he is starting to recognize her uniqueness, or the uniqueness of his relationship with her. When he realizes that a second Eve would be different from this Eve, he chooses, in other words, to try to stop seeing her solely as the other. In that moment, Adam realizes that there is something about Eve that could not be replaced; she is no longer simply the only other other, the “Sole Eve, associate sole” (9.227). Although it does not fit the typology of a male hero going it alone, valuing a unique memory is requisite for Adam’s beginning to see Eve on something like her own terms.

In reading Eve’s decision to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge as in part a response to the condition of otherness in which Adam placed her, I do not think that there is “A Fall.”³⁰ There is, however, a change, in both Adam and Eve, after they eat the fruit. But rather than the shame and guilt usually associated with the Fall, by Book 12 *Paradise Lost* instead represents eating the fruit as prompting a renegotiation of the relationship between Adam and Eve. In short, by the end Eve says more, and Adam listens more. It becomes clear that, as Diana Benet puts it, “Eve proves to be the better (though still imperfect) interpreter” (AS 130). In Book 12, for example, when God tells Michael to report to Adam and Eve their “perpetual banishment,” “yet lest they faint” (11.108), he asks him to “all terror hide” (11.111). What Michael says leaves Adam “Heart-struck with chilling gripe of sorrow stood, / . . . all his senses bound” (11.264–65), speechless, and unable to move, he is so overcome with the news. Despite her actual exclusion in this scene, it is Eve, who, “unseen / Yet all had heard” (265–66), makes it clear that not only has she fully understood Michael’s import, but that she is fully able to articulate

verbally what she believes to be the consequence of the announcement: "Must I thus leave thee Paradise? thus leave / Thee native soil" (11.268–70). It is Eve who is able to talk about the implications of exile, so much so that Michael elects to "interrupt" her (11.286). Given her prior exclusion, it cannot be known whether Eve's capacity for understanding has been increased by her decision or whether an unchanged capacity has been freed by the decision. But in either case, after the Fall, Eve's previously underestimated intellectual capacity can be seen in the poem.

In Book 12, when Michael suggests that he and Adam "go, waken Eve," pointing out that Adam and Eve "will be many days, / Both in one faith unanimous though sad," they return to Eve, and "found her waked" (12.594, 603). Moreover, it is "with words not sad she received" him (12.610). Neither asleep nor sad, after the Fall, Eve is not what had been expected. After the feminist critique of Eve's otherness, of course, this comes as no surprise: it is not clear that anyone in the poem has understood who Eve is. When they return, Eve says "I know" before Adam and Michael can say anything. In this remarkable moment, not only is Eve not what either Michael or Adam thought she would be, that is, neither sad nor unknowing (nor unconscious), but on another level, what she says makes clear that she is much more than they thought she would be. She knows. And implicitly, of course, they do not. They do not know that Eve knows, they do not know that she is neither asleep nor sad, and, ultimately, they do not know her. Consequently, her response, insofar as it is not what Adam was told to expect, represents a challenge to Adam's understanding of Eve as other. She is, again, not the same as he expected. It could in that sense also represent the beginning of a new relationship, one in which, for example, Eve knows. Now, Adam must be prepared to respond to her as different, and surprising. Moreover, the very terms of her challenge to her "otherness" in this case recapitulate the central terms of the narrative: she knows. She has eaten the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and now she says to Adam what she did not say before: "I know."

For Adam, this could have been the moment when, as Thomas Docherty says, "the subject of consciousness finds its position somewhat humiliated precisely by the reality of those Others or objects against which the subject defines itself" (A 33). However, instead, the narrator claims that "Adam heard / Well pleased, but answered not" (12.624–25). This important sentence implies several different, albeit related, readings. On the one hand, it means that Adam heard Eve, and was pleased, but did not answer her. Given how much he has tried over the course of the poem to control her responses (for example, chasing after her and seizing her hand in Book 4, or downplaying her Satan-inspired dreams

in Book 5), the fact that he does not answer her makes this (non-) response remarkable enough. On the other hand, the sentence can also mean that although Adam, well pleased, heard Eve, he was not answered—that is, she did not give him an answer. This would indicate that she has decided not to necessarily give Adam an answer, that she has learned her singularity need not be “otherness”: it could be privacy or interiority as well. At the same time, it could be that Adam was not answered, did not answer, and was still well pleased. If so, then by the end of the poem Adam has learned to listen. In his not responding, and being well pleased with what Eve says, Adam demonstrates what Levinas describes as “the supreme passivity of exposure to another” (*OB* 47). In being well pleased and in not being answered, Adam has learned how to enjoy what other people say, even if what they say does not give the answer that was expected, or even any answer at all.

In thus simply accepting what Eve has said, Adam adopts the position of careful attendance that Levinas associates with “proximity.” For Levinas, and for Eve insofar as Adam is now quietly listening, “proximity is communication, agreement, understanding, peace” (*OB* 166). But in claiming “with thee to go, / Is to stay here; without thee here to stay, / Is to go hence unwilling” (12.615–17), it is Eve who *proposes* proximity as the resolution of the poem. To go with Adam is the same as staying in Eden; staying in Eden without Adam is the same as forced exile. She prefers proximity to the other over being in any particular place. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, “there is nothing really spatial about proximity” (*PE* 86). By Book 12, Eden is Paradise no longer, if it ever were. So the place where she will stay if she goes with Adam may not be Paradise; it will be, like Eden after the Fall, compromised. But her claim that to go is to stay and to stay to go, that life in Paradise without Adam would be exile, implies that this new relationship makes possible what Michael calls “a paradise within thee, happier far” (12.586), a Paradise that did not exist in the Paradise of the outside, before eating the fruit. This non-spatial, interior Paradise is like proximity, which Bauman describes as “the state of permanent attention come what may” (*PE* 88).

Eve’s paradoxical claim—to go is to stay, and to stay is to go—provides the terms that make possible the concluding sentence of *Paradise Lost*: “They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way” (12.648–49). Hand in hand and solitary, by going together they stay, or, staying together, they go. Eden goes with them, because what proximity represents and makes possible does not require being in any one place. Where Joan Bennett argues that *Paradise Lost* tells the story of an Eve too “independent” and an Adam too “interdependent,” this ending suggests that they have achieved a balance of

independence and interdependence (G 398). In its combination of the “solitary” and the “hand in hand,” the conclusion indicates the new-found recognition of singularity that attends their relationship. As Diana Benet writes, “it means that even if they are together, each must depend solely on his or her own effort and strength” (AS 139). Their relationship will be a combination of two independent people, rather than, as it largely had been, one person telling the other what to do.

In the end, it seems that Eve’s decision to eat the fruit finally addresses Adam’s question to God before Eve’s creation: “Among unequals what society / Can sort, what harmony or true delight?” (8.383). Adam decided to treat equality with Eve as if it were similarity, and to treat their differences (for example, his imperfection) as inequality. As a consequence, Eve can enjoy little harmony in her relationship with Adam. Adam seems to assume that “harmony,” or, as he also says, “proportion” (8.385) requires that the parts be similar. But it is the difference of the parts that makes their harmony possible. What is required then for harmony is for each of them to be aware of their similarities and differences, including which similarities are important to each of them. Over the course of Adam and Eve’s story, we can see what Deirdre Keenan McChrystal calls “Eve’s developing self-identity and subjectivity before and after the Fall,” despite the fact that Eve actually has fewer lines (220) after eating the fruit than before (240).³¹ In other words, in this play of similarity and difference what Adam and Eve—although I would argue especially Eve—develop is subjectivity. For Levinas, “subjectivity is the other in the same” (OB 25). In other words, subjectivity requires difference, not, as Adam had assumed, similarity.

V

By reading *Paradise Lost* for ethics in the light of the new ethical criticism, it is possible to see Eve’s otherness not only as her exclusion, but also as the condition for her response in Book 9. For after eating the fruit, at the end of the poem, hand in hand and solitary, the other in the same, Adam and Eve are more equal than they had been; now, Adam hears well pleased and answers not, and Eve knows. In itself, this is a role reversal, as it has previously been Adam who said he knew and Eve who was well pleased and answered not. But insofar as the poem also entails an ethics of reading, criticism’s task is Adam’s: to “acknowledge the singularity and specificity” (A 35). Gilbert argued that canonical assumptions do to texts what Adam does to Eve; I agree, but would add that texts do to canonical assumptions what Eve does to Adam. If Adam’s treating Eve as perfectly other represents Christine Froula’s “archetypal

scene of canonical instruction," so too should Eve's decision to separate also inform how we understand the text (WE 326). Docherty argues that readers should "Be unprepared!"³² What Adam and Eve do to overcome and undo Eve's initial otherness, the "unprepared" reader must also do. That is, readers must go ahead and decide for themselves, as Eve does; they must also be unprepared as Adam eventually begins to learn to be. In this sense, then, Eve's choice—a response to her otherness, and a decision to go her own way—does represent literature, although not in the way Gilbert argues. For rather than exclusion from the garden of poetry, Eve's decision to separate and eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge represents instead her inclusion in it, because of how she thereby resists what Andrew Benjamin calls the "determination in advance" that Adam worked out for her.³³

What Eve and Adam do to overcome and undo otherness, so may the text and its readers also do. Levinas calls the process "signification," and describes it as "the contradictory trope of the-one-for-the-other" (*OB* 100). Consider, for example, the narrator's description of Eve's tears when Adam supposedly "cheered he his fair spouse" (5.129) after she awoke from the sleep in which Satan had whispered in her ear: "Two other precious drops that ready stood, / Each in their crystal sluice, he ere they fell / Kissed" (5.132–34). According to one way of reading of "he ere they fell," Adam kissed Eve's tears before they dropped down her face. However, although the pronoun "they" could refer to the tears, the verb "fell" could just as well invoke the Fall, in which case the "they" could instead represent Adam and Eve. In this sense, Adam kissed Eve's tears before Adam and Eve fell. So far, "ere" has been taken to mean "before," but it also means "early" and "soon." If the "they" refers to Adam and Eve, and the "ere" is read as "early" or "soon," it now means not that he kissed the tears before Adam and Eve fell but, quite on the contrary, that he kissed them early or that soon they fell. In this sense, then, it could mean that they have fallen early, fallen before either of them has actually eaten the fruit. And, in fact, that possibility is bolstered by the elided open vowels of the two words "he" and "ere." Combined, they read phonetically as "here." Here they fell, not when they eat the fruit.

I am using this passage as but one example of what is possible in an "unprepared" reading: I am not arguing that the Fall occurred at that point in the poem. Instead, it is an example of a reading premised on a kind of openness to the other, or of signification from the-one-for-the-other. In Levinas's terms, such a reading is "a 'signifyingness dealt the other,'" in this case the other of the text (*OB* 48). The four words "he ere they fell" can mean each of the possibilities I have briefly mentioned, and probably even others as well. Because it means them all potentially,

this phrase—like every phrase in the poem conceivably—models the free-will theology that informs *Paradise Lost*'s justifying "the ways of God to men" (1.26). For if this phrase means all those things at once, readers are continually faced with a choice. In *Paradise Lost*, God contends that "if I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence" (3.117–18); there were a variety of possible choices that could have been made, and, for God they all existed, all at once, as do the various meanings of that four-word phrase. The analogy between God and the Author is of course familiar, and it is usually taken to indicate the omnipotent and logocentric relationship between the Author and the Text, "the 'message' of the Author-God," in Barthes' formulation.³⁴ But God's argument concerning free will in *Paradise Lost* suggests, on the contrary, that even if an author foreknows, foreknowledge has no influence on what readers decide to do. All the meanings of a word are there, for a reader to choose, but whether any reader will choose any particular meaning cannot be known. Like Adam at the beginning, readers can rest in what Milton elsewhere calls "the mere element of the text," or, like Eve, they can separate off and exercise their free will by deciding for themselves what they think the phrase(s) mean.³⁵

In the end, Eve does teach Adam; he learns, for example, to listen. But she does so not, as he had anticipated, by being the same, but by asserting her difference: by saying "I know." It might be objected that Eve emerges from this reading of the poem as an essentialist vision of woman. But in fact, Eve becomes what she is by *not* being what she was expected to be. She asserts her difference, paradoxically, as Adam sees that he is the same as her, albeit in a way different from what he had thought. That is, they both eat the fruit. They both break God's one rule. It is not that otherness is obliterated by Eve's decision or Adam's response. It is changed though, made more complicated, and thereby less reductive. Eve's otherness, at the end of the poem, is matched by Adam's: paradoxically, both of them are unique—solitary—even as they are together and solitary (with no other others). In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida argues that if everyone experiences Levinas's radical alterity then it is a similarity, not a difference. For Derrida, "the other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I" (VM 127). In other words, what Levinas considered radical alterity is for Derrida "due to the finitude of meaning," a radical similarity, even if that similarity is otherness, or difference. For Derrida, difference makes for similarity, and at the end Adam and Eve have achieved this recognition of shared otherness. What happens is that Eve's uniqueness to Adam, which, for a Levinasian argument, is an irreducible otherness, is made more visible, both in itself and in terms of their relationship with each other, one for each other. Being the-one-for-

the-other is being there, both "meaning" itself and waiting, listening for meaning. It does not remove the condition of otherness, but it does mean that the particular condition of the other's otherness—being one—might be more audible, or visible. If so, then this itself would be less othering, as I think it is for Eve at the very end of *Paradise Lost*.

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NOTES

1 Sandra M. Gilbert, "Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey," *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 370; hereafter cited in text as PP.

2 Samuel Johnson, "Milton," in *Lives of the English Poets* (New York, 1950), vol. 1, p. 93.

3 Karen Edwards, "Resisting Representation: All About Milton's Eve," *Exemplaria*, 9 (1997), 231. I use Edwards's distinctions only provisionally, as heuristic devices to organize my discussion of Eve's status in *Paradise Lost*. For some, Christine Froula's essay "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy" (see note 24 below) could represent a "prosecutorial" position, while Joseph Wittreich's *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca, 1987) could stand for the apologetic. Nonetheless, as heuristics, the categories of "prosecutorial" and "apologetic" cannot reflect the complete range and intricacy of the many arguments put forward in the wake of Gilbert's influential article.

4 Susanne Woods, "How Free are Milton's Women?" in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia M. Walker (Urbana, 1988), p. 15.

5 Edwards's terms may not suggest it, but others have articulated middle positions; where this essay differs is in its focus on Eve's otherness. As is the case in this essay, a middle position usually involves focusing on the relationship between Adam and Eve, for it is from their relationship that the conditions of Eve's otherness would seem to derive. Like Joan Bennett, and others, this essay asks, "why do Adam and Eve quarrel?" (see Bennett's essay, "'Go': Milton's Antinomianism and the Separation Scene in *Paradise Lost*, Book 9," *PMLA*, 98 [1983], 388; hereafter cited in text as G). In answering that question, I agree with Diana Treviño Benet's point that "Milton does not present Adam as the unerring guide," but that "some readers assume that Adam's higher status necessarily makes his views correct" ("No outward Aid Require': A Note on Eve in Separation," *ANQ*, 2 [1989], 90, 92).

6 On ethical or other-centered criticism, see *Rereading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington, 1991); *The Provocation of Levinas: Re-thinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York, 1988); Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh, 1997); Christopher Norris, *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (New York, 1994); Brian Schroeder, *Altered Ground: Levinas, History and Violence* (New York, 1996); and Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca, 1988).

7 Thomas Docherty, *Alterities: Criticism, History, Representation* (New York, 1996), p. 1; hereafter cited in text as *A*.

8 Lawrence Buell, "Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics," *PMLA*, 114 (1999), 7–19. Buell's essay, hereafter cited in text as IPE, introduces the *PMLA* issue devoted to ethics and literary study.

9 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 82; hereafter cited in text as *PE*.

10 Georg Simmel, "Freedom and the Individual," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago, 1971), p. 223.

- 11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, tr. Michael B. Smith (New York, 1999), p. 103; hereafter cited in text as *AT*.
- 12 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, 1981), p. 171; hereafter cited in text as *OB*.
- 13 Jacques Derrida, in "Violence and Metaphysics," an influential meditation on Levinas's work, argues that if everyone experiences radical alterity then it is a similarity, not a difference. For Derrida, "the other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I" (*Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass [Chicago, 1978], p. 127; hereafter cited in text as *VM*). What Levinas described as radical alterity is for Derrida, "due to the finitude of meaning," a radical similarity, even if that similarity is otherness, or difference. It is beyond the scope of this essay to trace Derrida's influence on Levinas, but Derrida made these remarks *before* Levinas published *Otherwise than Being*.
- 14 Many have argued that such an ethics is impractical, or unpragmatic. Derrida, for one, has often claimed that Levinas develops a religion more than an ethics; for example, "The ethical relation is a religious relation. Not *a* religion, but *the* religion, the religiosity of the religious" ("Violence and Metaphysics," p. 96), but it is not clear that Derrida is criticizing Levinas over such a distinction.
- 15 See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, 1984), hereafter cited in text; Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986) and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, 1995).
- 16 Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, 1990), p. 5; hereafter cited in text.
- 17 J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York, 1987), p. 1.
- 18 Derek Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," *PMLA*, 114 (1999), 25; hereafter cited in text.
- 19 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *John Milton*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (New York, 1990), 12.648–49; hereafter cited in text by book and line number.
- 20 Thomas Docherty, "Theory and Difficulty," in *The State of Theory*, ed. Richard Bradford (New York, 1993), p. 24.
- 21 Millicent Bell, "The Fallacy of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*," *PMLA*, 48 (1953), 864.
- 22 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York, 2000), p. 88; hereafter cited in text as *FA*.
- 23 Millicent Bell, for example, reminds readers that Adam's "title to perfection is none too clear" ("The Fallacy of The Fall," 872).
- 24 Christine Froula, "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy," *Critical Inquiry*, 10 (1983), 332; hereafter cited in text as *WE*.
- 25 Patrick Hume, quoted in John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve* (Oxford, 1990), p. 1.
- 26 Diana Benet, "Abdiel and the Son in the Separation Scene," *Milton Studies*, 18 (1983), 129; hereafter cited in text as *AS*.
- 27 Joseph Wittreich, "'Inspir'd With Contradiction': Mapping Gender Discourse in *Paradise Lost*," in *Literary Milton: Text, Pretext, Context*, ed. Diana Treviño Benet and Michael Lieb (Pittsburgh, 1994), p. 158.
- 28 Dennis Burden, *The Logical Epic: A Study of the Argument of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 170.
- 29 Dennis Danielson, "Through the Telescope of Typology: What Adam Should Have Done," *Milton Quarterly*, 23 (1989), 124.
- 30 Others have made similar points about the question of whether there is a Fall in *Paradise Lost*. "There is," Millicent Bell argues, "possibly, no longer a Fall at all" ("Fallacy of

the Fall," 867). See also A. B. Chambers, "The Falls of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*," in *New Essays on Paradise Lost*, ed. Thomas Kranidas (Berkeley, 1969), pp. 118–30.

31 Deirdre Keenan McChrystal, "Redeeming Eve," *English Literary Renaissance*, 23 (1993), 497.

32 Thomas Docherty, *After Theory* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 10.

33 Andrew Benjamin, *The Plural Event: Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger* (New York, 1993), p. 25.

34 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), p. 146.

35 John Milton, *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, in *John Milton*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (New York, 1990), p. 183.