

Epic similes in *Paradise Lost*

Speaking generally, Milton's epic similes, like other traditional epic similes, are elaborate similes, the purpose of which is not merely comparison, but decoration and illustration. After introducing the image for the sake of comparison the poet unfolds the beauty of the image itself. This sort of simile was peculiarly suited to Milton's genius. Milton wanted a large canvas on which to work. But this is not the main point about Milton's similes. Besides their appropriateness in particular cases, the similes are related to his commanding ideas and values. In Book I, the rich range of natural and mythical comparisons drawing most of their appropriateness to Satan, express the infernal, not just as an ornament, but in the deepest sense. The similes suggest a richly varied, multitudinous world of evil which, individually, is a place without ceasing to be an idea. This world is positive enough to win our imaginative assent as the scene of dramatic action, but impalpable enough to suggest, in symbol, that evil is negative—the absence of good. Thus the epic similes in *Paradise Lost* are not merely ornamental and external, they are symbolic of deep import. An analysis of some of the similes will make this point clear.

Milton's similes often suggest multiple relationships rather than single comparisons. The Satan-Leviathan simile not only suggests the apocalyptic sea-monster and his illusory promise but the confusion and negativism of the evil world in flux. The whale, owing to the identification with the mysterious Leviathan of the Old Testament, became a traditional emblem of Satan or evil. The simile stresses the ease with which evil can be mistaken for something safe and sheltering—like the island. The magnification of Satan in the following series of similes emphasizes the principle of evil as the very source of mutability which dominates all of its multitudinous forms, the other fallen angels, where Satan is compared to a sea-monster and his spear to a Norway pine that will be the mast of some "great ammiral", the other fiends are compared to the traditional epic "autumn leaves" "that strew the brooks" (instead of seas). By further diminution, the lesser fiends are compared to "scattered sedge" on the "Red Sea coast." The ornamental and decorative point is there. The rebel angels, as they lie floating over the surface of the burning lake, are compared to the numerous sea-weeds that float over the Red Sea. And the mention of the Red Sea suggests to the poet the whole history of the flight of the Israelites, their treacherous pursuit by the Pharaoh, and then the destruction of the Egyptian army

by the closing of the waters of the Red Sea. But the similes are also full of symbolic import, suggesting the negativism of evil. The fallen angels are like fallen leaves, cut off from the source of life. Later on, they are like great pines and oaks burnt out by lightning [611] or like the sun in eclipse [594], which “darkened so, yet shone.” The phrase is the very image of evil conceived as the loss of perversion of a good. Besides, The similes also express Milton’s deeply Christian spirit. In Milton’s usual movement from the classical to the Christian (the flaming lake of Hell as the Red Sea), we reach the biblical exodus from Egypt and then the comparison of the devils to Pharaoh’s drowned cavalry. The expansion in association from fallen leaves to fallen legions, from seasonal death to divine retribution, also suggests the transformation of the classical fatalistic simile into the biblical moral simile.

When the fallen angels heed Satan’s command and rise from the lake [337-343] for a new cycle of fortune they appear as ‘a pitchy cloud of locusts.’ Although this is a traditional epic simile, Milton declassicizes the comparison by relating it, yet again, to the biblical Red Sea story. The locusts therefore do not represent a natural calamity of the classical epic but a divine scourge that appears and disappears at the command of God’s chosen prophet and his ‘potent rod.’ Classical misfortune “is but the disguise of biblical chastisement in Milton’s technique of reversal.” From the hordes of insects, Milton’s comparisons move to the hordes of barbarians of ‘Rhene and Danaw,’ and then to the ‘godlike shapes’ of pagan deities. The progression in size still maintains the denigration of ravaging a land (locusts to barbarous false gods) and repeats the pattern of the preceding series (fallen leaves to fallen angels).

In the final verse paragraph of Book I, a rich compound of similes elaborates Milton’s view of evil. The ironies cannot be ignored. Here appears another of the classical insect similes comparing the rebel angels to bees. The replacement of the earlier ravaging locusts by hardworking bees has partly been prepared for by the labour of the ‘industrious crew’ building Pandemonium. However, the Miltonic casuistry separates the results from the actions: the hard work in Hell shows three kinds of corruption. The beehive, the golden ‘straw-built citadel’ shows the moral impermanence of the ‘precious bane’ from which Pandemonium has been built. Secondly, the end of the serial simile emphasizes the negative thickly swarming mass-insect

quality rather than the positive industry of the bees. And there is the satiric political touch of the insect engaged in 'state affairs.'

The bee simile also prepares the way for the fantastic reduction of the giant fiends to 'smallest dwarfs,' 'Pigmean race,' and 'Faery Elves.' A simile of crowds and bees was almost an expected feature in epic, but Milton here employs it to rationalize the transformation of the angels from the gigantic to Pygmean stature. Moreover, these similitudes partly reverse the heroic emphasis, thus maintaining the Miltonic dialectic about evil as both trivial and immense, and hence so pervasive.

Milton's epic similes introduce imagery that has a close, organic relation to the theme and plot. They illustrate and magnify the action. They foreshadow future events, and provide touchstones with which to evaluate character and episode.

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