

A MATTER OF ANGELS: ANGELIC CORPOREITY IN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

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ABSTRACT

Since the early criticism of Samuel Johnson, the interplay between John Milton's poetry and his philosophical and theological writings has been a point of contention among scholars. Specifically, Milton's position in debates between monism and dualism, as well as between materialism and spiritualism, has produced an uneven consensus in the critical community about whether or not angels are corporeal in Milton's cosmology. Far from being a trivial theological matter, angelic corporeity in Milton's work underscores the broader philosophical project of his poetry. My paper addresses this argument by situating *Paradise Lost* as a materialist-monist text, in keeping with both Milton's treatise *De Doctrina Christiana* and Renaissance traditions of scientific rationalism. In doing so, I read Milton's representation of angels in his epic as evidence of his materialist sympathies. Through his use of physical laws, his repeated co-option of medical terminologies and his recourse to scientific discourse, Milton portrays angels as embodied physical beings operating within a universe guided by the principles then being described by nascent scientific thinking. I also suggest that Milton's logical issues with angelic corporeity are not paradoxical; rather, they signify a complex rationalization of Milton's heterodox ontotheology, and thus *Paradise Lost* conforms to Milton's heterodoxy more closely than critics have heretofore supposed.

Much recent scholarly discourse has addressed Milton's supposed materialist monism, an argument that has long occupied Miltonists confronted by the seemingly incongruous ontotheologies¹ of his poetry and prose. Even since the publication of Stephen M. Fallon's comprehensive *Milton Among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England* (1991)—a work considered by many scholars to be the definitive treatment of Milton's "animist materialism"—the discussion about the extent of this monism has not abated. In particular, this critical and philosophical debate continues to center on the matter of Milton's angels in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's poetic universe, an extremely nuanced and complex constellation of worlds, poses a variety of questions about the physical behavior of angels. Despite their alleged incorporeal natures, the Miltonic angels operate suspiciously within physiological and physical parameters. In this article, I discuss Milton's materialist monism as it manifests in *Paradise Lost*, paying particular attention to his co-option of the discourses of Renaissance biology, physics, and medicine in order to situate his poetry within his broader philosophical framework.

Although arguments about the degree of angelic corporeity in the epic tend to align Milton with either Hobbesian materialism or Aristotelian essentialism, a host of textual evidence suggests that his angels possess a surprisingly high degree of physicality, almost to the point of excluding any spiritual component at all. Of specific interest for the present study are three pertinent scenes in the poem: Raphael's meal with Adam, the archangel's account of the Battle in Heaven and Satan's wound, and the fall of the angels. Curiously for allegedly immaterial beings, the Miltonic angels eat, mate, experience physical forces, and bleed, even in sections of the text not explicitly accommodated for Adam. In fact, I argue that accommodation has been largely misapplied by critics to disguise Milton's materialism. Furthermore, Milton's use of physiological terminology in reference to angelic attributes suggests that his angels are more corporeal than heretofore suggested by critics. Rather than a minute theological point, the question of angelic materiality is not spurious, but in fact lies at the core of Milton's ontotheology. If Milton's angels are in any way corporeal (let alone exclusively so, as I contend), then the accommodation so frequently addressed by Miltonists is not entirely sufficient to explain their behavior. As a physicalist adaptation of the great chain of being, Milton's ontotheology is strikingly contemporary, because he appropriated the scientific intellectual currents of the Renaissance and the sophisticated rationalist philosophies of his own time to depict his supernatural messengers of God as living bodies. As I hope to demonstrate through closer textual analysis, Milton's angels seem to be material rather than entirely incorporeal, though this assertion is not mutually exclusive of the spiritual substance of angels as described in the text.

At this point, a brief treatment of critical assessments of Milton's materialist and monist tendencies will be instructive for anyone not familiar with the debate. If, as I contend, Milton believes angels possess corporeity, that they are indeed bodies bound to the laws of physics, one must first address the metaphysics of Milton's universe. In his seminal treatment of Milton's philosophy, the eminent French Miltonist Denis Saurat suggested in *Le pensée de Milton* (1920; *Milton: Man and Thinker* [1925]) that Milton upheld a materialist metaphysics contrary to both Aristotle and Aquinas. More recently, John P. Rumrich has made a case for the materiality of Milton's heavenly beings, including God, stating that "[t]he alternatives for criticism seem to be either selective dismissal of Milton's heretical materialism in interpretation of his orthodox poetry, or construction of the contradiction as a culturally revealing instance of aporia" (128).

Both of these arguments rest primarily upon Milton's unorthodox account of Creation in *De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Doctrine)*, which is quite explicit about Milton's cosmogony. In that treatise, Milton rejects the traditional doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and instead reasons that "it appears impossible that God could have created this world out of nothing . . . All these things were made, not out of nothing, but out of matter" (*Prose Selections* 429). Here, as in *Paradise Lost*, one encounters "Milton's *ex Deo* account of creation" (Donnelly 80, emphasis mine), wherein all matter finds its source in God and is therefore of Him. This also suggests that Milton maintained a monist position because, according to his ontotheology, all material in the universe originates from a single source that is of a singular, physical nature.

Rooted in Milton's characteristically rigorous logic, the belief in the universe's genesis *ex Deo* leads ipso facto to the assertion that both spirit and body are fundamentally the same substance, in both degree and kind. As such, Milton essentially obfuscates the distinction between spiritual and corporeal substances; therefore, angelic or spiritual substance, by whatever metric, would share the same essential materiality as matter proper. In partial agreement with this ontology, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* defines *substance* as pertaining to "both animals and divine beings" (761), but divine substance for Aristotle requires a different category because "perhaps some have no matter or not matter of this sort" (817). Milton seems to contrast the latter point in Aristotle because, as Bentley Hart suggests, "in the purely material sense, Milton was a monist, who regarded all created being, whether 'physical' or 'spiritual', as subsisting in a single *materia prima*, and thought intellect merely a more refined manifestation . . . of creation's one underlying substance than flesh" (16). In this divergence from Aristotle, Milton aligns himself with the later Stoics, who defined spirit as "a divine and rational fire, at once the primordial unity from which all things have emerged, the spirit of which all individual spirits - all immanent *logoi* - are emanations" (17). Accordingly, Milton's universe consists of one matter, and "the distinction between corporeal and spiritual is a difference that does not entail a different 'matter' . . . both corporeal (sensible) and incorporeal substances are formed out of matter" (Donnelly 81). As these critics argue—and as the *Christian Doctrine* likewise implies—all creatures in Milton's universe are essentially material, including angels.

However, although the Miltonic universe is one material, that material is graded, not uniform. Although angelic spiritual material is *essentially* (in the Aristotelian sense) the same as corporeal matter, they are not necessarily of the same degree, a common tenet of the Neo-Platonist great chain of being with which Milton was familiar. As Hart notes, Milton believed that "if all creation consists in various grades of one prime matter, and if the properties of the lower grades are possessed more perfectly by the higher . . . Spirit and flesh are not different realities, but different manifestations of one reality" (23). In this sense, when Milton's angels obey physical laws or operate like physiological beings, they are merely functioning within the boundaries that govern material behavior.

The difficult situation of corporeal angels partially arises because Milton works out of a complex tradition. His angelology is, to use Harris Fletcher's term, "highly eclectic" (218). Consequently, Milton is not the first Christian writer to purport that angels are material. In fact, "Milton was hardly unique in imagining angels to be material; it was a prominent feature of much contemporary Protestant angelology" (Hart 22). Milton's synthesis of biblical, classical, and ecclesiastical sources for his angelology certainly contributed to the conundrum he faced while attempting to synthesize his philosophical work with his poetic orthodoxy. Milton was well aware of biblical precedents for the corporeity of angels, notably Jacob wrestling with the

angel (Genesis 32:22-31), an angel shutting the lions' mouths to save Daniel (Daniel 6:22), an angel destroying Jerusalem by force (1 Chronicles 21:15), and the descriptions of angels as bodies (Ezekiel 10:12-14), to name a few prominent examples. Such precedents in part serve as sources for Milton's materialist angelology. Scholars have similarly noted Milton's use of rabbinic literature, where one finds many passages that suggest angelic corporeity.²

Conversely, Church Fathers from Augustine to Aquinas asserted that angels are "pure intelligences not naturally united with bodies, though with a natural power to control the local motion of bodies and so to shape materials for apparition" (West 11). This follows Maimonides's widely followed interpretation of Aristotle in his twelfth-century work *دلالة الحائرين* (*The Guide for the Perplexed*), which argued that God and the angels affected the material world through a hierarchy of intermediates. Against this dualist position, Milton does not present his angels as pure intelligences in *Paradise Lost*. Instead, his angels exude definitive form, though they possess the ability to transform shape, and they also possess anatomical features analogous to humans. Despite ostensibly being spirits, they exhibit explicitly material, and indeed organic, tendencies. As West suggests, "Milton borrows from Psellus his widely-considered ideas about angelic substance as expandable, pan-organic" (114). As the syncretist par excellence, Milton does not fabricate a new organic angelology; rather, he operates within a tradition that was widely upheld during the seventeenth century.

In this Psellian tradition in which Milton wrote, "spiritual" is not mutually exclusive of "corporeal." Ascribing physicality to angels in such a way served several purposes. First, making angels physicals solidified their reality for Milton, himself a physico-organic human being wrestling with a dualism that defied both the purview of experience and the limits of reason. Second, "[Milton] felt an obligation to edify the reader not only as Tasso and Spenser did with the general moral lesson of his tale but by a convincing 'scientific' background" (West 114). For his catechism to be effective, Milton needed to establish credibility through the use of both scientific (read materialist) principles and theological argument. Belief in angels was widespread during the Renaissance (119), and Milton would have been aware that his audience, which consisted of the literate English upper class, was well-versed in both angelology and recent developments in natural philosophy. Although postmodern readers tend to construe Milton's universe as analogous to the worlds of high fantasy, seventeenth-century readers would have believed, quite literally, much of Milton's epic as fact. In order to anticipate such scrutiny, Milton had to couch his ontotheology in the hyperrational rhetoric of scientific discourse, itself perfectly commensurable, in a society predating relativity and quantum mechanics, with the everyday experience of the world as matter and force.

As Samuel Johnson noted in his *Lives of the Poets*, Milton "unhappily perplexed his poetry with his philosophy." Consequently, we must ask, how does Milton's poetry uphold or confound his philosophy? Is it even critically possible to treat these two poles of his oeuvre with the same vocabulary? To the first question, one might argue that no poet can ever divorce his verse from his philosophy; the former is an outgrowth of the latter. This, I believe, holds true for Milton also. To the second question, I would argue that Milton's poetry must be discussed in light of his philosophy, lest we as critics fall into the hermetic rabbit holes that plague New Critical methods of textual analysis. *Paradise Lost* is a text inextricably bound to Milton's philosophical work, and likewise it is inseparable from the scientific and cultural milieu in which it was produced. As such, only a close reading of the epic can help us excavate the details of Milton's angelology.

The evidence for angelic corporeity in *Paradise Lost* is legion, as Fallon, Rumrich, and other critics have noted. As Hart points out in his cogent reading, “The angels of *Paradise Lost* require time to traverse space, encounter physical opposition, [and] shape objects from elemental matter” (22). All of these interactions between allegedly incorporeal beings and material objects imply, quite overtly, that the angels are material. Yet, given the dubious status of angelic substance in Milton, some critics “have concentrated against what Milton gives (too freely, most think) on the ‘bodily’ nature of his angels” (West 108).

Such critics have focused on Milton’s most thorough discussion of the angelic substance, which occurs during Adam’s meal with Raphael in Book V. Those scholars who deny Milton’s belief in angelic corporeity cite the critical commonplace that Raphael has accommodated his language for Adam. Following this line of reasoning, one must read Raphael’s language as “a language of analogy” (Davis 114). Raphael’s well-known statement that forms the basis of accommodation in *Paradise Lost* implies that the angel can only communicate celestial events to Adam “by likening spiritual to corporal forms” (*PL* 5.573). However, that these two ostensibly incommensurable states are intelligible at all, if only through comparison, indicates a degree of commonality that a purely dualist position would not allow. There is no possibility that they could be described any other way, in part because there *is* no other way for Milton to describe them. He is, as it were, confined to know reality only as material, both through reason (ontotheologically) and through experience (cosmotheologically) à la Kant. Moreover, one must ask just how accommodating Raphael’s account really is for Adam. He is, after all, a newly created, naive being, one without any knowledge of the world. Despite this naivety, battle wounds, “rigid Spears, and Helmets throng’d, and Shields” (6.83) become the basis for Raphael’s narrative, aspects of reality which would have no significance for Adam, embodied or not. At this point in the narrative, Adam has no more understanding of war or armies than he does of celestial matters. In this sense, Raphael’s account conflicts with doctrinal truth about the nature of angelic substance, not because it equates the spiritual with the corporeal, but because it does not admit the possibility of another mode of discourse. That is to say, Raphael does not accommodate his narrative, because *mutatis mutandis* there is nothing to accommodate.

The critical disputes over this passage insinuate that Raphael’s statement is not nearly as lucid as he (and perforce Milton) might want us to believe. As readers, we are surprised not so much by sin but by *sign*, by Raphael’s manipulation of the facts in an unsuccessful attempt to mask Milton’s materialism behind orthodox discourse. For example, after explaining the need to accommodate his narrative, Raphael asks “what if Earth / Be but the shaddow of Heav’n, and things therein Each to other like, more then on earth is thought?” (*PL* 5.575-576). Through the angel’s question Milton entertains the possibility that Heaven is similar to earth, if not its mirror image. Although Raphael’s proposal seems hypothetical, I read it also as a rhetorical. If the question is rhetorical, then Milton asserts a not only a similarity between the metaphysics of earth and those of heaven, but also perhaps an identity between them. Again, there is the insinuation that celestial and terrestrial matter is identical in kind. Subsequently, Raphael states that corporal and spiritual substance are “Differing in degree, of kind the same” (*PL* 5.490), a patent admission that angelic substance possesses corporeal properties.

Nevertheless, Raphael expounds a metaphysical system that conforms to seventeenth-century thinking. Thus when Adam becomes interested in the metaphysics of angels, Raphael explains these concepts rather explicitly—one might even say too explicitly. In fact, Raphael’s metaphysical treatise is a recapitulation of the Renaissance Great Chain of Being. In Milton’s

cosmology, “All things proceed, and up to [God] return . . . one first matter all, / Indu’d with various forms various degrees / Of substance, and in things that live, of life; / But more refin’d, more spirituous, and pure” (PL 5.470-76). In the *Christian Doctrine*, Milton expounded this philosophical position in greater detail, affirming that “Matter, like the form and nature of the angels itself, proceeded incorruptible from God” (Prose 431). Substance exists in varying degrees for Milton, but it is essentially and necessarily “one first matter all” (PL 5.473).

For Milton, spiritual substance was thus a form of corporeal matter, albeit more “refin’d,” whatever we take that to mean. Regardless of this purported gradation, spirit possessed all the properties of the lower substances, including the body. In the *Christian Doctrine*, Milton writes against the belief that “body cannot emanate from spirit,” arguing instead that “spirit being the more excellent substance, virtually and essentially contains within itself the inferior one; as the spiritual and rational faculty contains the corporeal” (Prose 431). He echoes this principle in *Paradise Lost* when Raphael says angelic substances “contain / Within them every lower facultie / Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste, / Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate, / And corporeal to incorporeal turn” (5.411 -415). This transmutability would imply at least, if not necessarily, that spirit and body are more like different states of matter than like incompatible fields. In *Milton and Science*, Kester Svendsen notes that Milton’s explanation of the transmutability of body and spirit is “[o]ne of the infrequent appeals to natural science in *Christian Doctrine*” (180).

In addition to their interchangeability, spirit and body both require nutrition as well. This might seem trivial at first, but the alimentary needs of spiritual beings in *Paradise Lost* reinforce Milton’s monism. Again, Book V provides a pertinent example in the text. Here Raphael notes that “man in part / Spiritual, may of purest Spirits be found / No ingrateful food and food alike those pure / Intelligential substances require / As doth your Rational” (PL 5.406-410). This angelic necessity for sustenance demands closer inspection, if only because it seems to contradict any dualism. Aristotle’s question about the nature of imperishable substances is, I think, relevant here: “if they taste them to maintain their existence, how can gods who need food be eternal?” (726). This question is equally applicable to Milton’s angels. Certainly if the angels were entirely spiritual they would not require sustenance. As Raphael explains: “whatever was created, needs / To be sustained and fed” (PL 5.414-15). This is a blatantly organic characteristic, a material property. As Harinder S. Marjara notes, Milton’s angels “need food and love even in their unfallen state,” and it seems that, by and large, the “physical and physiological basis of their bodies is the same as that of human and other created bodies” (84). Indeed, the organicity of these bodies is repeatedly made manifest in the text.

Rather than accommodating the reader, Milton overtly states that Raphael does actually consume food. The angel sits at the meal “nor seemingly / The Angel, nor in mist, the common gloss / Of Theologians, but with keen dispatch / Of real hunger, and concoctive heate / To transubstantiate; what redounds, transpires / Through Spirits with ease” (PL 5.432-39), insinuating an almost alchemical transformation of matter into spirit. Raphael is authentically hungry, not to maintain illusion, but out of necessity. In addition, Milton depicts him digesting the food as if he were organic. Milton thoroughly describes the process in this passage, drawing attention to its actuality and hinting at a material essence of the angelic substance.

Indeed, Raphael explains to Adam that angels “convert, as you, / To proper substance” (PL 5.491-2, emphasis mine) the consumed material. Here Raphael equates the processes angelic and human digestion. Of course, this is a not a strict equation of one with the other, because

Milton's "as" denotes a simile, but the parallel is difficult to gloss as mere metaphor. In some sense, Raphael inadvertently reveals Milton's monist ontotheology, especially if we concede that "the digestion of spiritual beings reasserts the unity of matter" (Svendsen 187). Raphael further emphasizes the transmutability of spirit and body in his discussion of the potential of corporeal matter to become spirit. The Archangel implies that "from these corporal nutriments perhaps / [Adam and Eve's bodies] may at last turn all to Spirit, / Improv'd by tract of time, and wing'd ascend / Ethereal, as wee" (*PL* 5.496-99), suggesting that flesh can become spirit. Hypothetically, Adam will change into spirit, implying the mutability and non-exclusivity of body and spirit. In the scene, corporal matter is transmuted into spiritual matter and, seemingly, the reverse is also true. In effect, Milton's angels organically process physical matter because they too are in some sense just as material as Adam.

In addition to transubstantiating digestion, the organic systems of the angels in *Paradise Lost* include a type of immune system. If accommodation wholly explains these wounds, Milton's consistent references to them are suspiciously frequent and literal; the diction does not seem to imply that these events are metaphoric. In contrast to Walter Davis's suggestion that "[t]he real meaning of Satan's 'physical' wound . . . is that it tells him he can be wounded" (114), Milton is implying something about the nature of angelic substance. Indeed, any recourse to accommodation as an explanation for such wounds is questionable, because Adam is ignorant of both pain and bloodshed at this point in the narrative. Again, this point in Raphael's account of the war in Heaven would not function effectively as accommodation due to Adam's ignorance.

In Raphael's account of the battle, Michael wounds Satan, who suffers a sword injury "in half cut sheere . . . but th'Ethereal substance clos'd / Not long divisible, and from the gash / A stream of Nectareous humor issuing flow'd / Sanguin, such as Celestial Spirits may bleed" (*PL* 6.325-34). Celestial spirits again exhibit organic tendencies here in the text; Satan clearly suffers a wound and endures physical pain. The text also suggests that "Angelic substances may be ethereal and bleed nectarous humor only; but off-guard [the angels] describe themselves in human physiological terms" (Svendsen 178). As Svendsen notes, "metaphors of medicine have been ignored" (174) by Milton scholars, perhaps due to the overwhelming critical preoccupation with his ontotheology. Indeed, "Milton's personal preoccupation with medical matters certainly suggests the impulse to this kind of imagery" (174), and the materiality of the angels lends itself to such anatomical and physiological descriptions.

Beyond the physiological language applied to angels, the "Nectareous humor" is worth noting here. Milton's semi-corporeal angels, like nearly everything else in his epic, manifest his syncretistic tendencies. Milton repeatedly compares angels to gods, and Satan foregrounds this connection after the fallen angels' defeat in Heaven, calling his cohorts "Dieties of Heaven" (*PL* 2.11). Milton draws a connection here between his own conception of angels and the Greco-Roman gods, who also possessed physical bodies.³ The ichor that flowed in their veins bears striking similarities to the "Nectareous humor" that effuses from Satan's wound. Milton also invokes Renaissance medicine here, a system where "blood distributed humors and spirits throughout the body" and was created "through heat, too much of which upset the systemic economy and impaired judgment" (Svendsen 178). There emerges the tantalizing possibility that Satan's bleeding reflects this "impaired judgement" that in Renaissance medical discourse was intricately connected to blood.

Yet, despite imagery co-opted from medical discourse, these wounds are not identical to flesh wounds. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, angels demonstrate amazing recuperative abilities, and “soon [Satan] heal’d” (6.344), even though he was cleaved in half. Possessed of such supernatural immune systems, angelic beings are “not as frail man / In Entrails, Heart or Head, Liver or Reines” (6.345-6). The malleable nature of angelic substance and its healing ability is universally asserted in Milton’s text. Still, they share anatomical properties with human beings, as “All Heart they live, all Head, all Eye, all Ears, / All Intellect, all Sense,” denoting commonalities between angel and man. Indeed, Satan is not the exception, but the rule. During the battle, Moloch is “clov’n to the waste, with shattered Armes / And uncouth paine fled bellowing” (6.361-2). As in Satan’s case, physical wounds elicit pain in Moloch as if he were physico-organic.

As physical beings, the angels are susceptible to injury, thus in part explaining why armor features so prominently in Milton’s epic. Milton writes, “Thir armor help’d thir harm, crush’t in and bruise’d / Into thir substance pent, which wrought them pain . . . ere they could wind / Out of such prison, though Spirits of purest light” (6.656-661). Milton confines the angels to their armor, imposes a physical limitation upon them. But this raises a question: Why do the angels, constrained by their armor, not shape-shift? After all, they have the power to alter their size and shape, yet they are subjected to the physical limitations suffered by soldiers on the field. Similarly, in Book I the angels must alter their size in order to fit inside Pandaemonium, so the “incorporeal Spirits to smallest forms / Reduc’d thir shapes immense” (1.788-9). If the angels were spiritual substance lacking materiality, there would be no need for such metamorphosis since matter and space should not confine spirit unless it too were bound to physical laws.

These laws are not merely causal, however, because as material agents, the angels possess the ability to in turn manipulate physical reality, as “the least of whom could wield / These Elements” (*PL* 6.222-23). These elements conform to “the Empedoclean conception of the world being made of earth, air, fire, and water” (Levenback 11), but are physical rather than spiritual aspects of reality. Interestingly, according to Empedocles’s system the “‘quaternion’ . . . of fire, air, water, and earth exist in Heaven and on Earth” (12). In such a monist system, one that Milton certainly drew upon, Heaven itself is material. West frames the problem thus: “angels could control bodies; but . . . they could [not] do so unless they were themselves somehow united with matter” (11). To interact with matter in this metaphysical system, angels would have to be material.

A final example is Moloch’s argument in Book II as to the “proper motion” of angelic substance. Marjara convincingly argues that Moloch espouses an Aristotelian physics which Milton believed obsolete in light of new scientific advances. Moloch, in proposing a second war against heaven, states, “in our proper motion we ascend / Up to our native seat” (*PL* 2.74-75). According to Moloch, the angelic substance naturally moves upward. Moloch’s logic rests on the assumption that “the angels, including those that have been thrown into hell, composed as they are of some refined matter resembling spirit or light, may be supposed to possess an inherent tendency to move upward” (Marjara 82). This line of thinking is thoroughly Aristotelian, but contrary to Milton’s more modern understanding of physicality.

Yet, the fallen angels have difficulty rising, “not because they have fallen from grace but because they were made of a substance that is inherently heavy” (Marjara 85). The suggestion arises that their disobedience manifests itself in their form, namely that their sin imbues them with some notion of mass. However, the seeming corporeity of unfallen angels implies that the

fallen angels did not acquire mass; rather “[t]hey are heavy by the very nature of their substance” and so “they must possess weight in absolute terms” (85). Likewise, the fall itself illustrates these physical properties of angelic substance as itself subject to the same laws that guide material motion. Although one might argue that Milton’s universe obeys the laws of physics because it would be otherwise unintelligible (and therefore meaningless) to human readers, I find it difficult to separate Milton’s mimetic project from his monist philosophy, one where the laws of physics apply in Heaven and Earth. If, as one might guess, Milton’s project is a grand attempt to conceptually hold the universe together, then the laws of physics would have certainly contributed to this project.

As a Renaissance writer, Milton was aware of the sophisticated way in which scientific discourse was beginning to describe and explain the behavior of physical reality. Milton applies physical laws to all entities in his epic, and “the objects at all ontological levels in *Paradise Lost* obey the same principles of motion” (Marjara 86). Indeed, the “angels are supposed to be composed of the same kind of matter as the earthly objects, and they are subject to the same laws of motion” and thus the “rebellious angels fall through space like any other corporeal object” (86). Angels fall for the simple reason that matter imbued with mass falls when dropped.

Similarly, physical laws affect angelic substance during Satan’s flight through Chaos. He is initially unable to traverse the vacuum of Chaos that exists between Hell and Earth. Heat and geothermal forces propel him upward, and he relies on material means for travel. As Marjara asserts, “Satan’s fall through Chaos must therefore be viewed as a physical event besides being considered a metaphoric event” (84). Although on a metaphorical level Satan’s inability to fly of his own will signifies the futility of his enterprise, it nevertheless reinforces the assertion that angels possess a physical dimension. Accordingly, “What helps the reader to view this description of the fall of Satan as having a definite physical dimension is the use of scientific imagery” (83). Milton co-opts the laws of physics to satisfy “the need to make the danger of perpetual fall faced by Satan sufficiently real and credible” (84). In other words, physicality produces meaning, even credibility, for the reader.

A caveat is necessary here. Ascribing physicality to Milton’s angels does not necessarily negate that “in the exegetical literature the fall of the angels is largely a symbolic event” (Marjara 83). On the contrary, the physicality of Milton’s angels adds another dimension to Milton’s fall. The angels leap out of Heaven, and their fall is “not caused by an external force but by the physical tendency inherent in the angels to fall downward as heavy objects” (83). A symbolic reading is equally valid here, but the effect of gravity on the angels also reinforces the proposition that Miltonic angels are material. The catechistic form of *Paradise Lost* tells us that Milton hoped that his verse would reflect theological truths; however, *Paradise Lost* is essentially a poem and, as such, primarily an aesthetic text rather than a theological one. Hence, some critics have alluded to Milton’s assertion of the primacy of poetry and theology over logic.

Indeed, the problem of Milton’s angels is, in some sense, a paradox. Of course, paradoxes are not uncommon in Milton, as J. C. Gray has effectively demonstrated. Thus, one must consider whether the corporeity of Milton’s angels is irreconcilable with his metaphysical theology at all. As Gray notes, “we must constantly keep in mind the important distinction between those paradoxes which initially seem contradictory but eventually prove through logical, semantically, or mystical manipulation to be resolvable at some different level of meaning and those paradoxes which remain stubbornly self-contradictory and cannot be resolved or transcended” (76). The paradox of Milton’s angels is of the former type. Since the matter at hand

defies the normal rules of logic, the corporeity of Milton's angels is not a paradox in the strict definition of the word. More interesting perhaps is Gray's suggestion that paradox is uniquely *postlapsarian*, such that "[s]tatements that are both true and yet simultaneously contradictory or statements that are true despite the fact that they are self-contradictory are at the heart of the human dilemma" (81). We as postlapsarian creatures cannot completely comprehend angelic substance in part because we are locked in the paradoxicality of human existence.

Thus, rigorous logical analysis of Milton's ontotheology is perhaps not entirely appropriate. In Milton's oeuvre, poetry and theology often supersede the boundaries of logic. As Hart notes, "Milton was an often awkward logician" (20). In some sense, Milton's angels are paradoxical to the postmodern reader because angelology itself is not a rational science, but rather "all angelology instantly impresses our commonsense as deficient, and . . . no angelology was put together with literary adaptation in mind" (West 115-16). In this sense, one might ask why Milton decided to engage such a slippery topic when he could have easily remained silent on the matter (pun intended). But Milton was not a poet or theologian who omitted anything. His theodicy had to address all issues pertinent to theology, no matter how logically troublesome. The matter of angels is one such puzzle that he engaged, likely aware of the logical pitfalls intrinsic to the topic.

In the end, the text itself suggests that Milton's angels do indeed possess materiality. They are thoroughly organic throughout *Paradise Lost* and frequently operate as material beings. Although angels are but one variable in the vast matrix of Milton's universe, angelic corporeity is a manifestation of his broader theological argument for creation *ex Deo* and the exclusive reality of a material universe. The corporeity of the angels and their behavior in accordance with laws of physics also indicate that Milton was an avant-garde thinker, invested in the scientific discourse that would come to dominate the subsequent Age of Enlightenment. His angels are believable to readers precisely because they are physical beings operating in a material world comprehensible to mere mortals. Reading Milton universe in such a way, however, does not discount or degrade the value of his moral project or limit the scope of his theodicy; rather, the ostensible materiality of Milton's angels adds yet another layer to this remarkably polysemous epic.

Notes

1. I am using “ontotheology” in the sense used by Kant, that is, as a metaphysical understanding rooted in reason, as opposed to one rooted in experience or revelation. Milton was an ardent logician, and his metaphysical system is one that testifies to his rigorous thinking. I am not using “ontotheology” as Heidegger used it, as a reference to the entirety of Western metaphysics.
2. See especially Werman’s treatment of Milton’s use of the Midrash.
3. The parallels between Milton’s angelology and the ontology of the Greco-Roman gods are prominent. See West (*passim*) for a detailed analysis of the various sources for Milton’s angelology.

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