

# The Body of Christ as the Instrument of Timing in John Milton's *Paradise Regained*

Timothy Watt, *University of Massachusetts, USA*

In *Paradise Regained*, John Milton dramatizes in brief epic the temptation of the Son of God in the wilderness, and the Son's resistance to temptation by dint of his perfect obedience. What makes the Son's obedience perfect, and therefore capable of withstanding Satan's temptations, is the Son's *sense* of right timing. It is for this reason that Milton's opening portrayal of the Son is that of a man waiting. The Son is waiting for the time to come to begin his work. How will he know when the time has come? The answer to this question appears in the Son's opening speech, made in solitude. The Son begins, "O what a multitude of thoughts at once / Awakened in me swarm, while I consider / What from within I feel myself, and hear / What from without comes often to my ears" (*PR* 1.196-199). At the end of his speech, all that he feels within and hears without resolves into a singular and wordless impetus: "And now by some strong motion I am led / into this wilderness, to what intent, / I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know. / For what concerns my knowledge God reveals" (*PR* 290-293).

Hereafter, both the narrative and thematic arc of the poem are straightforward. The Son's resistance—that is the performance of his obedience—is made as a man. The perfection of his resistance is the fulfillment of his divine destiny.<sup>1</sup> To attempt an analogy: when the Son lifts his foot to step, he does so as human; when he brings that foot down, most

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1. In *Christian Doctrine* Milton writes, "His Nature is double, divine and human" and "the entire fulfillment of the Father's promise resides in, but is not *hypostatically* united with Christ as a man." In other words, Milton accepts the dual nature of the Son, but does not accept the orthodox doctrine of the trinity. *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols. in 10, ed. Don M. Wolfe, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 6:418–419, emphasis added. All citations to Milton's prose works are from this edition, hereafter cited in the text as Yale.

especially on the pinnacle, he does so as God. In *Paradise Regained*, it is his obedience that makes the Son step and it his sense of timing that makes him step when he does. As the poem dramatizes, Milton's concept of obedience is made efficacious by this "sense of timing," which functions as obedience's necessary mode, its way and method of being performed in-the-world.

### Waiting, Hearing, Stepping

What I mean by timing is roughly Milton's sense of the classical concept of *kairos* as it is refracted in the Miltonic motifs of waiting, hearing, and stepping.<sup>2</sup> The conceptual heritage of *kairos* is complex, with antecedents in Homer's epics and also Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c.750–650 BCE).<sup>3</sup> The term becomes a concept as such around the fifth century BCE.

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2. Laurie Zwicky established the importance of *kairos* in "Kairos in Paradise Regained: The Divine Plan," *ELH* 31.3 (September, 1964). Northrop Frye pointed the way to a discussion of Milton and *kairos* generally in *The Return to Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965). Edward Taylor's *Milton's Poetry: Its Development in Time* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979) remains an indispensable guide to the development of Milton's idea of time and concept of timing, from the "Nativity Ode" to *Samson Agonistes*. Perhaps most influentially, Taylor argued that the distinction between *kairos* and *chronos* is at the heart of Milton's thinking on time (27–149). Following Taylor, Michael Schoenfeldt argues for the importance of the distinction between *kairos* and *chronos* in Milton's work. Schoenfeldt identifies *kairos* as the prelapsarian temporal situation and *chronos* as the postlapsarian temporal situation, or more simply put, what we call time. Schoenfeldt cautions against an overestimation of the distinction, however, because of its neat reductiveness. In other words, the distinction is accurate, if a bit of a simplification. See Schoenfeldt, "Obedience and Autonomy in Paradise Lost," in *A Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 363–376. For the importance of *kairos* in *Paradise Regained*, see especially, Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Milton's Epics and the Book of Psalms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 62–69; Gordon Teskey, *Delirious Milton: The Fate of the Poet in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 164–176; and Zwicky, 271–277. Ken Hiltner argues that the temptations of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* cannot be understood without continual reference to *kairos* (I agree): see Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 113–124.

3. Hesiod's use of *kairos* appears in *Works and Days*, 694. See Hesiod, *The Works and Days; Theogony; The Shield of Herakles*, trans. Richard Lattimore (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

Pindar (522–443 BCE) and the Greek tragedians adopt the term as a literary motif, the itinerant Sophists as a term of rhetoric, as does Isocrates (436–383 BCE), who nonetheless defined himself against the Sophists; Plato (428–348 BCE), perhaps borrowing the term from the Sophists, deploys it as a term denoting political expertise, along the lines of “correct timing.”<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, the word appears in the Gospel of John (7.6), and then is established by Paul as a fundamental if somewhat elusive aspect of Christian theology.<sup>5</sup>

In English, the word has been translated variously as: due measure, fitness, opportunity, mark, target, opening, improvisatory readiness, and in the definition that most fully accords with Milton’s usage, “the moment of opening rightness,” as Gordon Teskey calls it.<sup>6</sup> For his concept of timing, and its motifs, Milton draws on nearly all of these connotations of the term.

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4. Pindar, Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, and Paul, all of whom Milton read extensively, each contributed substantively to the conceptual development of *kairos*. For Isocrates’ use of *kairos*, see *Panathanaicus and Against the Sophists*, in volume 2 of *Isocrates*, trans. George Norlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929). For a gloss of Isocratic *kairos*, see Michael Cahn, “Reading Rhetoric Rhetorically,” *Rhetorica* 7.2 (Spring 1989), 133. For the development of *kairos* in Ancient Greece and Rome, I am indebted to Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought: about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), especially 343–351.

5. Cf. 1 Timothy 6.14–15.

6. Teskey, 169. In the last forty years there has been a good deal of work done on *kairos*, most notably by rhetoric and composition scholars. Their interest in *kairos* dates to James Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse* (1972; rpt. New York: W.W. Norton, 1983). For a good recent study, see Christopher J. Keller and Christian Weiser, eds., *The Locations of Composition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). In *The Locations of Composition* see especially Thomas Rickert, “Inventions in the Wild: On Locating Kairos in Space-Time,” 71–89. According to Rickert, “in most of the scholarship that has appeared since Kinneavy’s call, *kairos* is understood more or less in line with his original definition: *kairos* ‘is the right or opportune time to do something’” (Rickert, 71; Kinneavy, “Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric, 80). Although Kinneavy’s translation is apt along rhetorical lines, and among scholars of rhetoric and composition, because I am interested in the poetic, philosophical, and theological sense of the word, more precisely, in Miltonic *kairos*, I prefer Teskey’s formulation. Finally it should be noted that in William Race’s view, most translators and commentators have overemphasized the temporal sense of the word at the expense of its normative sense. As an example, Race translates *kairos* in its normative sense as “proper amount,” and offers several examples, drawn primarily from Aeschylus and Euripides. Most recently, however, Melissa Lane has argued against Race, noting that “even where, as sometimes happens, the explicit reference (to *kairos*) is not temporal, temporality provides a necessary context in almost all cases for the notion of the *kairos* to make sense”:

If we think of timing as the mode of Milton's concept of obedience, waiting, hearing, and stepping may be understood as modes of that larger mode. The waiting is a state of readiness, ready to hear the will of God, and thus confirmed by that hearing.<sup>7</sup> Hearing the will of God then becomes stepping (acting) in accordance with the will of God. So the waiting is a devout waiting, a waiting to discern the divine will. The hearing is the discernment of divine will. The stepping is the action which follows the hearing of the divine will.

Poetically, these three—waiting, hearing, and stepping—are the motifs Milton uses to organize *Paradise Regained*. Further, they serve as central motifs throughout the corpus of Milton's work, from the "Nativity Ode" (1629) onward. They work in concert, revolvingly, and are as much about Milton's very Pindaric sense of his own poetic destiny, as they are motifs of and in the poems themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Waiting appears in Milton's early work, and he returns to the idea with striking presence in the later poems. Hearing and stepping are the animating principles of this waiting, without which waiting is for Milton misguided, or outright meaningless. As Northrop Frye wrote more than forty-five years ago in *The Return of Eden*:

In the temptations of Adam and Samson the same theme recurs of an action not so much wrong in itself as wrong at that time, a hasty snatching of a chance before the real time has fulfilled itself. Christ is older than Milton was at twenty-three when he wrote his famous sonnet, and Satan is constantly urging him, from the first temptation on, to be his own providence, to release some of his own latent energies. *The discipline of waiting is not only more difficult and inglorious, but constantly subject to the danger of passing insensibly into procrastination.*<sup>9</sup>

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Lane, *Method and Politics in Plato's Statesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 132. See also 132–135, in which Lane considers each of Race's "normative" examples.

7. The formulation corresponds to Luke 8.8: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

8. Pindar distinguished the true poet by his inborn sense of *kairos*, and *kairos* as moments of ripeness preceded by long periods of waiting. When Milton famously remarks in *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642), "that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem" he has begun fully to imagine himself as the poet of perfect timing, both in his career, and in his poems (Yale 1:890).

9. Frye, 136 (emphasis added).

The sonnet Frye refers to is Sonnet 7 (1633). It is a sonnet of remarkable transformation. It begins with belatedness; it ends with readiness. It is almost as if Milton is inscribing his destiny, or the next long step of it. The sonnet itself also has a destiny. It begins, “How soon hath Time the subtle thief of youth.” In the first eight lines or octave of the sonnet, this particular, personified version of Time corners the speaker (23-year-old Milton) with a blank appraisal: if you were really meant to be a great poet, you would have produced something great by now. But at the turn, or volta, to the sestet, Time personified is replaced by timing. In other words, Milton stops thinking about himself and his destiny in terms of time, and starts thinking about himself and his destiny in terms of timing, and the corner becomes a vista (at least for the moment) of an as yet undisclosed promise overseen by a rigorously attentive God. The destiny of the poem is also the poet’s destiny, made clear: “Apparent delay becomes appropriate preparation. Time the thief becomes Time the guide.”<sup>10</sup> And time as guide calls Milton to attention.

This kind of attention—steady, alert—Milton figured as angelic in his poetry written before Sonnet 7 (“Nativity Ode”), after it as chaste (*A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* 1645), and then as explicitly self-directed and potentially heroic in human terms (Sonnet 19). In the “Nativity Ode” (1629), Milton’s first great poem, waiting is the work of angels, and is vigilant: “the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright” (l.21). And the famous final line of the ode (l.244) distills the angelic waiting just quoted (line 21) to the will of God: “Bright-harnessed angels sit in order serviceable.” The angels are harnessed by the brightness of God. Their enormous angelic energy is equipped for divine service. They are ready to serve, alert and waiting to be so called.

In *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634) Milton associates waiting with the virtue of chastity. The elder brother’s confidence in the ability of his sister, the Lady, to spiritually withstand Comus’s proto-Satanic heat, rests squarely on his estimation of purity and on his belief in his sister’s purity.<sup>11</sup> For the Elder brother, “He that has light within his own clear breast

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10. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, eds., *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 134.

11. I say Comus’s “proto-Satanic” heat to emphasize *A Masque’s* relationship to *Paradise Regained* as the prototype for it, from the characters of the Lady (the Son) and Comus (Satan),

/ May sit i'th' center, and enjoy bright day" (ll.381-382).<sup>12</sup> The lines resonate with both line 20 and line 244 from the "Nativity Ode," particularly with its use of "bright," but also of "sit." Together the words suggest radiant poise, again, a steady alertness. This time, however, the alertness belongs not to the realm of angels, but to humankind (albeit humankind in the excessively virtuous figuration of the Lady).<sup>13</sup> And the use of "enjoy" and "bright" with "day" signals an important development in Milton's conceptual formulation of waiting. "Enjoy" implies a pleasing physically at-home calm, a receptivity to the day's offering ("and enjoy bright day"). For Milton the waiting is alert, but it is not anxious.

Finally, the troubling designation of virginity in the masque becomes less troublesome when it is aligned with Milton's conceptual priorities. If what makes the Lady a virgin is her chastity, what makes her chaste is her obedience (to the will of the divine). Her obedience is characterized by waiting, as much a physical disposition as it is a spiritual commitment. Her waiting, her ability to not-act, is a force which Comus feels and fears and cannot counter. Like Satan in *Paradise Regained* for whom he is the rehearsal, Comus in his temptation of the Lady meets with (the Lady's) imperviousness. What Comus wants is the Lady's consent. What he gets is her refusal, and then her disdain. Thus (again like Satan) he must amplify the rhetoric of his temptations. He must dislocate her from her virtue, from her ability in obedience to wait. So he presses on, mystified maybe, and ends his appeal with an almost coy, "Think what, and be advised, you are but young yet" (l.755).

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to the shared themes of temptation and resistance.

12. The Elder brother is in these lines referring to his sister. The lines correspond with Luke 11.34: "The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light."

13. Milton's first sustained formulation of purity—the Lady in *Masque*—a condition critical to his understanding of obedience, is in fact a misreading of chastity. The Lady's chastity is a "defensive virginity" dependent in large measure for its efficacy upon a separation of spirit and matter that Milton opposed in his mature poetry and prose. See J.M. Evans, "Lycidas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 35–50; Stephen Orgel, "The Case for Comus," *Representations* 81 (Winter, 2003), 31–45; Kimberly Reigle, "Defensive Virginity from Spenser to Milton," (PhD diss., University of North Carolina Greensboro, 2010 <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/listing.aspx?id=3698>); and Debora Shuger, "'Gums of Glutinous Heat' and the Stream of Consciousness: The Theology of Milton's Maske," *Representations* 60 (Autumn, 1997), 1–21.

Young or not, the Lady is inside herself as bright-harnessed as an angel, thus a figure of force, contained. Just as Comus is a prototype for Satan in *Paradise Regained*, so the Lady is a prototype for the Son. And the debate (a mild word perhaps for such a moral showdown) between the Lady and Comus prefigures that between the Son and Satan in *Paradise Regained*. When the Lady replies to Comus with the full force of mockery at her disposal, she is prefiguring the Son's response to Satan in *Paradise Regained*.

Understood as such, the famously obscure "sage and serious doctrine of virginity" (l.787), which the Lady speaks to Comus, may now be understood to refer for its power not to mere virginity but to the rapt and focused condition of waiting, an embodied aptitude for devotion. The doctrine is serious because of its commitment to waiting; it is sage because of the visionary aspect of this waiting. The waiting is visionary because it is connected as if by an invisible, *unbreakable* thread—what the Lady calls the "sun-clad Power of Chastity" (l.782)—to what is not but what will be, to the fullness of time expressed as the sum of all the moments of right timing. It is connected by the activity at the center of waiting, that is, a rapt and quiet listening for, which becomes a hearing of.

If in Sonnet 7 Milton first admitted in a poem his fear of belatedness, of having missed his mark (a catastrophic possibility of disobedience), in Sonnet 19 (c. 1652), Milton returns to the theme, this time as a blind man in his early forties, a revolutionary, a regicide, a widower. The possibility is catastrophic because for Milton, missing his time would have meant failing to hear the will of God, thus failing to act in accordance with the will of God, thus being disobedient to the will of God.

Like Sonnet 7, Sonnet 19 begins in near despair, as Milton ponders again, with suspicion, his own belatedness: "When I consider how my light is spent, / Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide, / And that one talent which is death to hide, / Lodged with me useless" (ll.1-4).<sup>14</sup> What makes the openings of the two sonnets different is that the stakes of Sonnet 19 are so very much higher. The belatedness described in the first lines of Sonnet 7 is the belatedness of the young and mightily ambitious poet whose creative sap may be congealed, and whose dream of fame is vanishing

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14. In line 3 Milton is referring to the Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25.25–30.

(“My hasting days fly on with full career, / But my late spring no bud or blossom showeth”). For a fleeting moment, the speaker of the poem (young Milton) admits the terrible possibility that he has overestimated his poetic gift, and its resultant destiny. The moment registers as genuinely existential, but it registers as such in the limited and entirely self-referential realm of a young poet: I thought I was destined for singular poetic greatness; am I wrong? Sonnet 19, on the other hand, begins where Sonnet 7 ends: “All is, if I have grace to use it so, / As ever in my great *Taskmaster’s eye*” (emphasis added). The stakes now are nothing less than the judgment of God, bearing down on the poet who hid his God-given talent, rendering the talent useless by lodging it in the dimmest inner reaches of a blind and exasperated self (ll.3–4).

Just like Sonnet 7, however, Sonnet 19 turns at the octave/sestet division. Once Milton acknowledges the prospect of a “murmur” (the Puritan concept of complaint against God) he calls himself to right attention by reminding himself that “God doth not need / Either man’s work or his own gifts.” Necessarily, the reminder begs the question (well, what does God require then?) that the following two lines address, “Who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best” (ll.10–11).<sup>15</sup> The lines echo back to the “Nativity Ode” (“Bright-harnessed angels sit in order serviceable”) and forward to the triumphantly patient conclusion of Sonnet 19, “They also serve who only stand and wait” (l.14). With this line Milton has completed the transfer of waiting, from the angelic realm, through the excessively idealized human realm, to the merely human realm. If in “Nativity Ode” waiting is the disposition of angels, in Sonnet 19 it has become the disposition of men and women.

However, the line (“They also serve who only stand and wait”) begs a critical question: how is it that waiting serves? We know “they” serve because serve comes first in the sentence, unadorned to describe what “they” do. And we learn at the conclusion of the sentence that their service is performed by “waiting.” To know how they serve then depends upon the quality of the waiting, of what that waiting is comprised.

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15. Cf. Matthew 11.29–30: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”



The answer to this question brings us to the second key motif in Milton's conception of obedience: hearing. It is listening that promotes waiting to the rank of service. Then it is hearing that makes of waiting, service. One serves by waiting to hear what is, in terms of service, to be heard: the will of God. The service is rendered legitimate, however, not by the hearing (the intended *outcome*) of the waiting, but by the quality of the waiting itself.<sup>16</sup> The quality of the waiting is comprised of a necessary condition and then, an intentional agency. The condition of the waiting must be one of embodied ease (as opposed to dis-ease). The agency of the waiting is a rapt listening, a vigil illustrative of the Great Commandment, as given in Matthew: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and all thy mind." In *Paradise Regained*, the Son cites the commandment to illuminate the force and reason of his waiting, and thus to refute Satan's temptation to rush:

But I endure the time, till which expired,  
 Thou hast permission on me. It is written  
 The first of all commandments, Thou shalt worship  
 The Lord thy God, and only him shalt serve.'  
 (PR 4.174–177)

Whenever Milton uses the motif of waiting, hearing is always, if sometimes silently, being used as well. In those cases, in which waiting is used without explicit reference to hearing, hearing is an implied motif. In those cases in which hearing is written, it is done so in reference to waiting. Further, hearing as a motif is given both by the word itself ("hearing") and by its associative emblem, "ear(s)."

In the "Nativity Ode" Milton asks prayerfully the "crystal spheres" to "once bless our human ears" (ll.125-126). Crystal spheres refers to the music of the spheres, the angelic harmony usually beyond the realm of human hearing.<sup>17</sup> So the disposition of the hearing is angelic in the Ode, just as the

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16. Cf. Acts 1.7: "And he [Christ] said unto them, it is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power."

17. As the editors of the Modern Library Milton point out, "Each of the planetary spheres was believed to produce a unique note of the overall 'music of the spheres' normally inaudible on the fallen Earth. Here Milton imagines that vast music joining in the higher harmony of the *angelic symphony*" (MLM 24, n. 125).

disposition of waiting was angelic. Further, the object of the hearing is itself angelic, belongs to and comes from that higher realm.

Like waiting, hearing oriented in this fashion—as a kind of prayerful longing to hear divine harmony, figured as external and far—appears throughout and is developed in Milton’s early poems: as for example, in “The Passion” (ll.1–2), *Arcades* (ll.62–64), “At a Solemn Music” (ll.17–24) and “Upon the Circumcision” (ll.1–3).<sup>18</sup> The speaker in all of these poems (versions of Milton as a young man) waits to hear the music of the spheres, and understands that “melodious noise” as external, far. The point bears repeating because it indicates that hearing, as waiting before it, is first formulated by Milton as an angelic disposition (a profound otherness, second only to the otherness of God). The speaker in these poems does not pray so much to be angelic, so to hear the harmonious sphere, as to be either visited by the spheres as by an angel, or momentarily possessed by the angelic spirit capable of hearing the harmonious sphere.

Having transferred his motif of waiting from the angelic to the human, as discussed above, Milton now does the same with hearing, beginning with the early prose tracts, the workshops for Milton’s mature concept of obedience. The transfer made is an inward turn, resonant with Milton’s prioritization of conscience, in terms of obedience. In *The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty* (1642), Milton addresses his fundamental reason for writing the tract, more generally for entering the dispute over prelacy (one might say, for stepping in):

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18. “Erewhile of music, and ethereal mirth, / Wherewith the stage of air and earth did ring” (“The Passion” ll.1–2); “then listen I / To the celestial sirens’ harmony, / That sit upon the nine enfolded spheres” (*Arcades* ll.62–64); “That we on earth with undiscording voice / May rightly answer that melodious noise; / As once we did, till disproportioned sin / Jarred against nature’s chime, and with harsh din / Broke the fair music that all creatures made / To their Great Lord, whose love their motion swayed / In perfect diapason, whilst the stood / In first obedience” (“At a Solemn Music” ll.17–24); “Ye flaming Powers, and winged warriors bright, / That erst with music, and triumphant song / First heard by happy watchful shepherds’ ear” (“Upon the Circumcision” ll.1–3).

But this I foresee, that should the Church be brought under heavy oppression, and God have given me ability the while to reason against that man that should be the author of so foul a deed, or should she by blessing from above on the industry and courage of faithfull men change this her distracted estate into better daies without the least furtherance or contribution of those few talents which God at that present had lent me, *I foresee what stories I should heare within my selfe*.<sup>19</sup>  
(Yale 1:804)

In other words, in his disposition of bright attention—serving by waiting—Milton heard (the version is obviously Milton’s, thus strategic and maybe self-valorizing). What he heard as recounted in *Reason of Church Government*, is not however the clarion absolute of divine will, but some faint sound of it powered by visionary fear (“I foresee”) of disobedience, as threatening a potential fate for burying talent, as it is in Sonnet 19. So Milton’s timing—from waiting, to hearing, to stepping (in this case, stepping into the political and ecclesiological disputes of his age)—in part results from his now elusively but nonetheless *persuasive* fear of its absence, of missed timing. By extension, one might suggest that Milton’s visionary obedience develops out of his vision of disobedience.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note that hearing, as a motif developed by Milton, transpires in worlds of noise, from the clamour of *Masque* to the discordancy of England on the verge of civil war, and the momentous events following it—the “barbarous dissonance” of Restoration culture Milton implicitly invokes in the invocation to Book 7 of *Paradise Lost* (7.32). That is, the context for hearing (as motif of Milton’s concept of timing) is noise, the sheer din within which one must discern the beckoning of divine will. And since the motif of hearing becomes figured inwardly by Milton, the context of noise must also be figured inwardly. Otherwise, the hearing would be without its justifying context. This work—the internal realization of hearing as productive aspect of timing, and the interiorizing of noise as its necessary context—is the work of the Son in *Paradise Regained*. His body becomes the repository of all the world’s noise, and the bright ease which is his obedient

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19. Milton’s mention of “talents” hearkens back to his meditation on that subject in Sonnet 19.

20. The point then would seem to suggest that *Paradise Lost* (the epic of disobedience) necessarily came before *Paradise Regained* (the brief epic of obedience).

response to that noise. To risk the obvious: He embodies fully both divine and human. Hearing corresponds to his divine nature; noise to his human nature. The Son's timing develops out of his dual condition, or rather out of the condition (waiting), the act (hearing), and the context (noise). Moreover, it is in the Son's experience of his dual condition that his timing begins.<sup>21</sup>

## The Pinnacle

Milton's sense of *kairos* redacts the concept as it is used and developed, most especially by Pindar, by Plato, and then by Paul. The intended valences of the concept are those of the poetic (Pindar), the political (Plato), and the Christian (Paul). For Milton at least, the last designation of the concept (Christian) necessarily includes the first two (poetic and political). Pindar's "in-born" poet corresponds thematically to the idea of a begotten divinity. Plato's *Statesman*—his ideal ruler—could serve as a description of Christ on earth. Both correspond prototypically to Milton's characterization of the Son, and by extension, to his characterization of Christianity in its early and formative experience of the temptation. Finally, the poetic, political, and therefore Christian valences of *kairos* point to the three forces which shaped Milton, and which he in turn shaped. As we've seen, the motifs by which Milton represents *kairos* in his work are waiting, hearing, and stepping. The first two—waiting, hearing—correspond to the sense of due measure. They are the alert and elegant poise out of which *kairos* comes. However, neither is *legible*: Neither waiting nor hearing can be externally adjudicated as real. For example, the seemingly apt waiting Milton proclaims in Sonnet 19 either is or is not authentic *kairos*.<sup>22</sup> Only God knows (for Milton God knows). More to the point, since waiting is an internal disposition, it cannot be publicly verified in rational and/or discursive terms. Any description of it would be just that, a description mystical or poetical, and perhaps depending for its authenticity as much upon the disposition of the reader as the force of the mystical or poetical vision.

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21. Cf. *Paradise Regained* 1.196–199.

22. "They also serve who only stand and wait" (Sonnet 19 l.14).

With stepping—the third of Milton’s motifs of timing—*kairos* becomes potentially legible. It must be understood as *potential* because in the very moment of stepping the divine (in *Paradise Regained*, the Son) and the human (Adam and Eve, thereafter, Samson) experience of *kairos* differentiate precisely along the threshold that separates them. For the Son, his stepping is eternally and verifiably guaranteed by the Father, even though he makes the step as human. And his stepping produces the demonstrable effect of Satan’s falling—he *sees* it happen.

This kind of verification is not available to humankind. Ideally, obedience to the will of God may produce stepping that is of right timing. But the verification of it, the rightness of the stepping will not be legible in discursive terms. When the Son steps, obedience is perfected by this perfect moment of timing. When humankind steps, obedience to the will of the divine may be fulfilled, or it may be transgressed. At the end of *Paradise Regained*, however, the reader may speak with absolute assurance of the Son’s stepping; and from the Son’s stepping, may retroactively read the Son’s waiting and hearing as authentic in terms of *kairos*. In *Samson Agonistes*, waiting and hearing cannot be retroactively made legible and verified from the position of a perfect step. This is the case because Samson’s “stepping”—introduced in the opening line as “a little onward lend thy guiding hand,” and completed by Samson’s destruction of the temple—may or may not be authentic in terms of *kairos*. If it is, then Samson is being obedient to the will of God. If it is not, he is at the very least being delusional, and is possibly being disobedient to the will of God. For Milton, Samson’s condition is the condition for all humankind, in terms of obedience and act. The sheer existential pressure Milton puts on “stepping” illustrates the importance of timing, and the magnitude of the situation of humankind in either obedient or disobedient relation to the divine. In Milton’s view (as for any Christian) what makes the pressure bearable, if not the yoke mild, is the example of the Son, most especially the example of the Son against Satan.

Not coincidentally, stepping is the last of Milton’s motifs of timing to develop. Further it does not appear in his writing to any noteworthy effect until Milton considers the fall; that is, until he comes to write *Paradise Lost*. I say not coincidentally, because stepping represents that part of Miltonic timing that most illuminates postlapsarian humankind. *Paradise Lost* ends with Adam and Eve, leaving Eden, “hand in hand, with wand’ring steps and slow” (12.648-649). Their steps begin as wandering, for wandering is

a condition of their exile. They cannot wait for the spirit to lead them, but must proceed. This condition of wandering sums up the very pain of their exile. To borrow from Samuel Beckett, they cannot go on (having no idea how to proceed), they must go on. In *Samson Agonistes*, the first half of the formulation (cannot go on) has been dropped. Samson goes on: “A little onward lend thy guiding hand / To these dark steps, a little further on” (SA 1–2). Apparently he is being led. By whom? One can’t precisely say. If he is talking to himself, he is either being led by himself, or perhaps by the spirit of God. If he is not talking to himself, it may be the Chorus leading him. The point: Samson may be in a condition of right proceeding. But of course, this condition is a condition of unknowing, his blindness its emblem.

Between Adam and Eve, and Samson, stands the Son, in *Paradise Regained*. When we first encounter him, we find him “Musing and much revolving in his breast, / How best the mighty work he might begin” (1.185–186). The mighty work in question is the salvation of humankind. The Son’s musing on how to begin this project is a waiting, in terms of *kairos*. He will wait—he will embody waiting—until he hears the prompting of the Father. He must begin in perfect accord with the will of the Father. To put it simply, he must get the timing of this beginning right (he must not rush it, or otherwise be distracted from hearing it when it comes). He must get the first step right because the first step is the designating precedent for all the steps in his experience of the temptation to come. If the first step is *kairos* his destiny aligns with resistance, rather than with temptation. Thus, bright, he waits. Then “One day forth [he] walked alone, the Spirit leading” (1.189).

Thereafter the Son’s thinking is step-like, and his steps are contemplative. The synchronization of step and thought, of the body and the word, indicates the incarnate nature of Christ: “Thought following thought, and step by step led on, / He entered now the bordering desert wild” (1.192–193). Further, the synchronization of step and thought indicates that for the Son, waiting, hearing and stepping are also now completely synchronized, revolving harmoniously. The hearing and the stepping happen at once. As he is hearing the will of the divine, he is stepping in accord with the will of the divine. And this stepping is also simultaneously a waiting for the will of the divine, in the greater terms of refuting Satan.

Once the Son has made his initial step into the wilderness, his temptation begins. And in this temptation he will, again and again, be tempted not to

wait, hear, step, but to rush, proprietarily, to take the world.<sup>23</sup> Satan tempts the Son. In response, the Son waits (to Satan it appears as a doing nothing). In response to the Son's waiting, to his seeming inaction, Satan progressively intensifies his temptations, from a banquet feast to worldly ambition. The amplification of his temptations reveals Satan's misapprehension. For to the Son, all the temptations are one temptation: the temptation to transgress the will of God, to be disobedient, in terms of *kairos*, to either rush or drag, either way to be out of step with the timing of the will of God. Thus, the Son waits, saying, "All things are best fulfilled in their due time, / And time there is for all things, truth hath said" (3.182–183). "Due time" Satan does not understand. Thus, he does not understand fulfillment as the expression of "due time," and therefore as a sign of truth, that which is and accords with the will of God, of *logos* ("truth hath said").<sup>24</sup>

In response, Satan takes "the Son of God up to a mountain high" (3.252). The only strategy Satan has at his disposal is apparently greater and greater temptation. He just needs to tempt with more, is his thinking. Again, however, his thinking is without the critical understanding that the Son's obedience to God, his very being, depends on and is defined by timing. In other words, the temptations as distinct offerings are not the point with regard to the Son's ability to resist them. His timing is the point, and is that which Satan misses. They are on the mountaintop looking down. To the Son, Satan says,

All this fair sight; thy kingdom though foretold  
 By prophet or by angel, unless thou  
 Endeavor, as thy father David did,  
 Thou never shalt obtain; prediction still  
 In all things, and all men, supposes means;  
 Without means used, what it predicts revokes.  
 (3.351-356)

From one perspective, Satan's rhetoric is strong here, particularly in its allusion to David, and sophisticated in its suggestion that if the Son does not *take* the throne by striving, he will forfeit his destiny as the Son: If he

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23. As Zwicky notes, "Satan's constant effort is to get Christ to act before his time or *kairos*, and thus pervert God's plan": Zwicky, 276.

24. Cf. Ecclesiastes 3.

doesn't get to it, he'll find himself with nothing. But from the perspective of the Son's obedience to the will of the divine—functionally, his commitment to *kairos*—Satan's rhetoric here, as everywhere in the poem, distills to babble. It is noise, all of it, breaking against the will of God manifesting in the Son. The Son replies to Satan "My time I told thee (And that time for thee / Were better farthest off) is not yet come" (3.396–397). Satan amplifies his temptation again, this time offering up the Roman Empire. Again, the Son refuses. Satan bellows:

Since neither wealth, nor honor, arms nor arts,  
Kingdom nor empire pleases thee, nor aught  
By me proposed in life contemplative,  
Or active, tended on by glory, or fame,  
What dost thou in this world? The wilderness  
For thee is fittest place, I found thee there,  
And thither will return thee.  
(4.368–374)

The critical moment of this passage is at line 372: "What dost thou in the world?" What the Son does is embody the will of God. How he does it is by waiting to hear, neither of which are legible to Satan, neither of which can even appear as activities of any demonstrable worth in and to the "world" (in quotation marks here because Milton intends it to be understood as Satan's term). The Son is ruled by God. The means of Satan's misrule is the world. For Milton, the distance between them is the distance between good and evil, the pinnacle and the pit of hell. The Son's refusal of Empire exasperates Satan. "What dost thou in the world?" signals that exasperation.

So, what he cannot achieve by guile, Satan will approximate by force. Once he has the Son back in the wilderness, and the Son is alone, hungry, tired, and then asleep, a figure of human vulnerability, Satan resorts to all the terror at his disposal:



for at his head  
The tempter watched, and soon with ugly dreams  
Disturbed his sleep; and either tropic now  
'Gan thunder, and both ends of heav'n, the clouds  
From many a horrid rift abortive poured  
Fierce rain with lightning mixed, water with fire  
In ruin reconciled: nor slept the winds  
Within their stony caves, but rush'd abroad  
From the four hinges of the world, and fell.  
(PR 4.407–415)

But the Son sleeps on. His sleeping is the purest elegance of waiting. It refutes Satan's terror. Morning merely comes.

Out of devices, out of temptations, Satan brings the Son to the Holy City, to the pinnacle, and “added thus in scorn: / ‘There stand, if thou wilt stand’” (4.550–551). The Son does, in the precise and absolute fullness of time. For Milton as for any Christian, the pinnacle is the maximum moment and place of dialectical compression. The Son stands on the pinnacle simultaneously. He makes (is made) as Christ; he unmakes (is unmade) as merely human. He becomes the “True image of the Father whether throned / In the bosom of bliss, and light of light / Conceiving, or remote from Heav'n, enshrined / in fleshly tabernacle, and human form” (PR 4.596-99).

This moment of timing—of *kairos*—is the embodied perfection of the Son's obedience. From the broader perspective of Milton's corpus, it may also be seen as the moment in which Milton reconciles his dual heritage (something like Paul before him), Classical and Christian, by illuminating *kairos* (Classical) as the essential and necessary mode of obedience (Christian). In other words, Milton's concept of obedience is made efficacious by *kairos* and its aura of the heroic—of the classical age of heroes, gods, and philosophers, of both the pitiable vulnerability of human beings, and also, of their greatness. The traditions resolve in the body of the Son. And so while it is true that the Son rejects Classical learning, he rejects Classical learning presented as a *temptation*, and further, it is by dint of a Classical idea—*kairos*—that the Son resists the temptation, and stands.