

## Prevenient Grace and Conversion in *Paradise Lost*

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### The Conversion Scene

According to Sir Walter Raleigh, the entire plot of *Paradise Lost* “radiates” from a single point: the moment when Eve plucks and eats the forbidden fruit.<sup>1</sup> Referring to this moment, Raleigh remarks that “there is not an incident, hardly a line of the poem, but leads backwards or forwards to those central lines in the Ninth Book” (81-82). In this influential reading, subsequently adopted by James Holly Hanford (213) and, initially, by E. M. W. Tillyard (*Milton* 245-49), the moment of the Fall tends to eclipse other significant themes in the epic, such as obedience, restoration, and grace. Accepting Raleigh’s claim that the epic action centers on the single episode of the Fall, A. J. A. Waldock argues that this episode ultimately fails (25-64). His devastating critique of the entire poem prompted substantial defection from Raleigh’s theory. In “The Crisis of *Paradise Lost*,” still one of the most important studies of the poem’s portrayal of conversion, Tillyard repudiates his earlier position in favor of an “adjustment of balance” (*Studies* 51) in which “the centre of importance should be shifted to [Adam’s and Eve’s] regenerate action after the Fall” (45). By thus raising the conversion scene to a place of eminence within the epic narrative, Tillyard also attempts to compensate for the comparative neglect of this part of the poem, and several scholars have followed him in recognizing the crucial significance of this scene in *Paradise Lost*. G. A. Wilkes, for example, identifies its importance within the context of the poem’s theodicy, arguing that the conversion of Adam and Eve exhibits “the operation of Providence in bringing forth good from evil” (35-36). C. A. Patrides suggests that the conversion of Adam and Eve is “one of the most important though least understood incidents in *Paradise Lost*” (210), and Robert Crosman speaks of the closing lines of Book 10, where Eve and Adam water the ground with penitent tears, as “perhaps the greatest moment of Milton’s poem” (204).

The theological significance of the conversion scene, however, remains often overlooked, especially by readers who view this scene as no more than a depiction of the reconciliation between two estranged

human beings. John Broadbent, for instance, argues that Eve and Adam simply “become plain wife and husband” in their penitence (266); and according to Michael Wilding, “[w]hat finally emerges at the end of Book 10” is simply “human dignity” (107). Similarly, Tillyard misses the theological meaning of conversion entirely when he describes the scene as an account of “two ordinary human beings [. . .] coming together in ordinary human decency” (*Studies* 43).

The stated aim of *Paradise Lost* is not, of course, to portray “ordinary human decency,” but to demonstrate the triumph of the goodness of God over evil. This demonstration of God’s providence rests in part on the fact that Adam and Eve are not left in their misery, but are restored by divine grace. The conversion scene can be fully understood only against the backdrop of the Fall, and, correspondingly, the Fall is seen in its proper light only when it is viewed in relation to the ensuing intervention of the grace of God. “Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidd’n Tree” (1.1-2) have subjected human nature to a radical corruption.<sup>2</sup> But the Fall and the power of sin occupy center stage in the poem only “till one greater Man / Restore us” (1.4-5; emphasis added). The gracious providence of God does not leave human nature in its fallen state, but brings forth good from evil by triumphing over the power of original sin and liberating the human will from its dark enthrallment. Roland Frye has rightly remarked that the whole of *Paradise Lost*, “as an assertion of eternal providence,” is “far less concerned with the commission of sin than with the triumph of grace” (70). Indeed, within the narrative of *Paradise Lost*, the destructive power of the Fall is subsumed under the overarching framework of the providence of God, which works to bring good from evil by showing grace and mercy to the fallen human race. The fall of Adam and Eve is not the final word, for “over wrauth Grace shall abound” (12.478), so that God’s “Mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (3.134).

The following discussion explores *Paradise Lost*’s portrayal of the conversion of Adam and Eve within the context of post-Reformation theological controversies concerning grace, conversion, and freedom. Focusing both on the narrative drama of conversion in Books 10 and 11 and on the theological articulation of conversion in Book 3 will highlight the distinctive theological contours of the poem’s account of the grace of conversion.

### Universal, Prevenient Grace

The close of Book 10 finds Adam and Eve confessing their sins, begging for divine pardon, and “with tears / Watering the ground” (10.1101-02). Patrides has drawn attention to the “unexpectedness and uncharacteristic nature of this incident” (210), and Joseph Summers sim-

ilarly notes that we know of “no reason, no set of natural circumstances whereby we could predict or expect that love could be rekindled after such abusive lust and such hatred, that life could again be welcomed after such despair” (108). The fact that Eve and Adam become penitent at all, after all that has taken place, bears witness to the intervention of the grace of God. And as Book 11 opens, the narrative voice explains that their repentance is because of the influence of that grace:

Thus they in lowliest plight repentant stood  
 Praying, for from the Mercie-seat above  
 Prevenient Grace descending had remov'd  
 The stonie from thir hearts, and made new flesh  
 Regenerat grow instead, that sighs now breath'd  
 Unutterable, which the Spirit of prayer  
 Inspir'd.

(11.1-7)

Here the narrative voice describes the conversion of Adam and Eve with richly allusive biblical and theological language. Reference to the theological concept of “Prevenient Grace” (*gratia praeveniens*) is especially important, as this concept is central to the theology of conversion in *Paradise Lost*, and was also an essential feature of the major post-Reformation controversies regarding grace and conversion.

Following Augustine, medieval theology distinguished between exciting, operating, and prevenient grace on the one hand, and assisting, cooperating, and subsequent grace on the other. For writers like Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas, prevenient grace was understood to be a divine work which, excluding any element of human cooperation, prepares human beings for the subsequent grace of justification. According to Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Gabriel Biel, on the other hand, fallen human beings retain the ability to prepare themselves for the subsequent bestowal of grace.<sup>3</sup> The former position was taken up by the Protestant reformers, who affirmed that the will remains entirely passive in its initial conversion by prevenient grace. Thus, Calvin writes that the fallen will is “converted solely by the power of God” through “prevenient grace” (128-29), and that the will itself possesses not even “the minutest ability” to cooperate with grace, until it has already been “wholly transformed and renovated” (127). Reacting against this Protestant position, the counter-Reformation Catholic theology of the *Canones et Decreta Concilii Tridentini* anathematized the idea “that man’s free will, when moved and excited by God, gives no cooperation by assenting to God’s exciting and calling,” and that the will cannot, in any way, “dispose and prepare itself” for salvation (Tanner 2: 679). In this counter-Reformation view, then, prevenient grace alone

does not prepare human beings for salvation, but it aids and enables them to prepare themselves.

In the seventeenth century, the concept of prevenient grace was at the heart of the divergence of Arminian theology from Reformed orthodoxy. A focal point of the controversy between the two theological traditions involved whether the mode of conversion is resistible or irresistible. This question was, according to Francis Turretin, “the principle hinge of the controversy” between Reformed orthodoxy and Arminianism (2: 546), and Arminius himself claimed that “the whole controversy” concerning grace “reduces itself to the solution of this question, ‘Is the grace of God a certain, irresistible force?’” (1: 664). On the one hand, the Reformed orthodox concept of irresistible grace (*gratia irresistibilis*) affirmed both the infallible efficacy of grace and the passivity of the human will in the first moment of conversion. The human will is rendered passive by its total depravity (*corruptio totalis*); therefore “those who attribute to unredeemed man either a free will or powers by which he might do good or prepare himself for conversion and God’s grace, are seeking a house in ashes” (Wollebius 70–71). Because human beings cannot prepare themselves for conversion, they remain passive and are simply “overpower[ed]” by the grace of God (Lightfoot 1: 1291). Indeed, “man is as passive in his Regeneration, as in his first generation” (Cotton, *New* 55). For Reformed orthodoxy, then, prevenient grace is the grace which irresistibly converts the elect without any human cooperation. In contrast to this Reformed view, the Arminian concept of resistible grace (*gratia resistibilis*) affirmed that the beginning of conversion is effected by a cooperation between divine grace and the human will. The influence of prevenient grace enables the fallen will to cooperate with grace, and so to be converted. This prevenient grace is thus universally bestowed, but it “does not [always] obtain its effect”; fallen human beings retain “freedom of will, and a capability of resisting the Holy Spirit, of rejecting the proffered grace of God” (Arminius 2: 721–22). In short, for Arminianism, the initial influence of prevenient grace is only a *necessary* condition for conversion; while for Reformed orthodoxy, the initial influence of grace is a *sufficient* condition for conversion.

When the narrative voice in *Paradise Lost* speaks of “Prevenient Grace,” it thus evokes this complex history of theological controversy. The poem’s concept of prevenient grace is, in the first place, sharply discontinuous with the Roman Catholic view that the human heart is able to prepare (or “prevent”) itself for salvation. Addressing the Father in Book 3, the Son of God says:

[. . .] Man shall find Grace;  
And shall Grace not find means, that finds her way,  
The speediest of thy winged messengers,

To visit all thy creatures, and to all  
 Comes unprevented, unimplor'd, unsought,  
 Happie for Man, so coming; hee her aide  
 Can never seek, once dead in sins and lost.

(3.227-33)

The Son's theological emphasis here is both on the inability of the human will to turn to God, and, correspondingly, on the sheer initiative of God's turning to humanity in grace. The fallen human beings who, through the corruption of their wills, could not even "seek" the aid of grace, will now become the recipients of it. Grace is thus described as "unprevented"—literally, "not prepared for,"<sup>4</sup> signifying that fallen human beings who are "dead in sins" cannot in any way prepare themselves for salvation. In this respect *Paradise Lost* sides with the common Reformed orthodox polemic against the Roman Catholic doctrine of prevenient grace, as expressed by the Council of Trent.<sup>5</sup> Further, the poem's denial of a human preparation for conversion (*preparatio ad conversionem*) also contrasts with the form of preparationism that became prominent among many Puritans in England and New England.<sup>6</sup> According to Thomas Hooker, for example, "when the heart is fitted and prepared, the Lord Jesus comes immediately into it" (170); and John Cotton writes that "if we smooth the way for Him, then He will come into our hearts" (*Christ* 40-41). In affirming that preparation is solely a work of God, the theology of *Paradise Lost* is closer to the Reformed orthodox theology of Richard Sibbes, who insists that all "preparations themselves are of God" (6: 522), and of the Westminster Confession, which asserts that "naturall man, being [. . .] dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto" (19). In *Paradise Lost*, the beginning of conversion thus arises solely from the initiative of God's grace, and not from any self-preparation of the human heart. Grace, in other words, "Comes unprevented" precisely because it is itself prevenient.

The Son of God therefore points out that it is "Happie for Man" that grace comes unprevented, since "hee her aide / Can never seek, once dead in sins and lost" (3.232-33). Grace cannot be prepared for or even sought by human beings in their fallen state, so that even the seeking of grace must already be a response to grace. As Luther had said, "this very wishing and asking, seeking or knocking, is the gift of prevenient grace, not of our eliciting will" (29: 125). In contrast to any notion of self-preparation, the Son's affirmation that "Man shall find Grace" is thus a statement of the initiative of grace, in continuity with Reformation theology.

On the other hand, *Paradise Lost's* theology of prevenient grace departs from the Reformation and Reformed view of particular and

irresistible grace. According to Reformed orthodoxy, divine grace comes only to the particular number of elect individuals who have been chosen out of the corrupt mass (*corrupta massa*). But in *Paradise Lost*, the triumph of grace over sin is given expression in the universality of grace: grace comes “to all” (3.230), and God is “Merciful over all his works, with good / Still overcoming evil” (12.565–66).

The universality of grace was a particularly pronounced theme among Arminian and Amyraldian theologians in the seventeenth century. According to Amyraldian theology, the grace of salvation is “universal and common to all men,” but becomes effective only if human beings fulfill the condition of responding to Christ in faith (Amyraut 89–90)—and only the elect members of the human race can in fact fulfill this condition (Amyraut 163). In Amyraldian theology, then, the universalism of grace is no more than a hypothetical universalism (*l’universalisme hypothétique*). In principle, God is gracious to all, but in reality his grace is received only by those for whom it has been specially predestined. Arminianism, in contrast, affirmed God’s “serious intention to save all” (Episcopius 201): the gift of “Sufficient Grace” is “given to all Men” and “denied to none” (Gordon 33–35). According to *Paradise Lost*’s theology, too, the grace of God is in the fullest sense *universal* grace—it is, as in Arminianism, not merely for all “diverse sorts” of people in general,<sup>7</sup> but, in the words of the *Articuli Arminiani*, “for all men and every man” (Schaff 3: 546). It is the gift of God to all human beings who have been corrupted through the Fall.

In the passage already quoted (3.227–33), the Son highlights God’s readiness or “eagerness” (Fowler 153) to be gracious to his creatures, describing grace as the “speediest” of God’s angels. And this divine eagerness to save has as its object not merely the elect, but “all [God’s] creatures.” Grace is thus universal: it “visit[s]” and “Comes” to all those who, through the Fall, are “dead in sins and lost.” This universal grace is the direct antithesis of the universal corruption of original sin, and of Satan’s plan to “Draw after him the whole Race of mankind” (3.161). Through the work of redemption, God will “save [. . .] the whole Race lost” (3.279–80). The prevenient grace of God is for all. It is, as Arminius says, a grace that arises “from [God’s] general love towards all mankind” (2: 722).

Further, according to *Paradise Lost*, the effect of this prevenient grace is a universal liberation of humanity from the enslaving power of original sin. The liberty of indifference (*libertas indifferentiae*) that was lost in the Fall is restored to all people through prevenient grace. As God the Father says of fallen humanity:

[. . .] once more I will renew  
His lapsed powers, though forfeit and enthralld  
By sin to foul exorbitant desires;

Upheld by mee, yet once more he shall stand  
 On even ground against his mortal foe,  
 By mee upheld, that he may know how frail  
 His fall'n condition is, and to mee ow  
 All his deliv'rance, and to none but mee.

(3.175-82)

The “powers” of human nature have been lost and “enthralld” by sin. But by his grace, God “renew[s]” these “lapsed powers.”<sup>8</sup> He restores the freedom that human beings have forfeited, and liberates the will that has become “enthralld.” The act of God’s grace is, then, one of radical renewal, in which the destructive effects of the Fall are reversed and the lost freedom of human nature is restored.<sup>9</sup> Substantially the same position had been stated by Arminius, according to whom prevenient grace “raises up again those who are conquered and have fallen” and “establishes and supplies them with new strength” (2: 700). Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, too, places great emphasis on the universal liberation of fallen human beings through grace. According to the treatise, regenerating grace “restores man’s natural faculties of faultless understanding and of free will” (CPW 6: 461), so that the “lost freedom of will” (6: 187) is restored “to its former liberty” (6: 462). This is precisely the meaning of prevenient grace in *Paradise Lost*.

In the poem, the liberating act of God’s grace grants to all human beings the ability “once more” to “stand / On even ground.” The will’s liberty of indifference, in which it stands “In even scale” (10.47), has been lost in the Fall. Instead of standing poised between good and evil with an equal possibility of either choice, the will is now inclined to evil, governed not by right reason but by “foul exorbitant desires,” and as such it is incapable of choosing the good. But this sinful and enslaving inclination of the will is countered and conquered by the grace of God. “[O]nce more” the human will is set free for the possibility of the good and the right, and is placed on the scales of indifferent choice. The Arminian theologian John Goodwin similarly writes that the grace of God enables human beings to decide “whether they will or no,” giving them a possibility of willing salvation, but also “a possibility [. . .] of nilling” (8). And in the same way Arminius regards prevenient grace as bringing about a restoration of the liberty of indifference, in which the individual becomes capable both of “freely assent[ing]” to grace and of freely “withholding his assent” (2: 722). So too in *Paradise Lost*, prevenient grace places the human will’s power of choice back on the balanced scales, so that the alternative decision between good and evil becomes an authentic possibility.

This liberating work of grace is not described in *Paradise Lost* as a purification of human nature or a transformation of the sinful will, but

as an upholding of human freedom: the powers of human nature are “Upheld by mee [. . .] By mee upheld” (3.178–80). Human beings retain their “fall’n condition,” remaining sinfully “frail” (3.180–81). But in the midst of this frailty and fallenness they are “upheld” by the grace of God. The spatial metaphor here evokes the image of human creatures being suspended over the abyss by the hand of God. They are, in one sense, “fall’n,” and at each moment their natural tendency is to continue falling; but they are simultaneously upheld and preserved from falling. Reformed orthodox theologians commonly used this image to describe God’s providential conservation (*conservatio*) of created things. According to this Reformed view, the creation that came from nothing also possesses a natural tendency to return to nothingness; at each moment, it must therefore be upheld by divine providence, and prevented from sinking back into the abyss of non-being. As Thomas Boston writes, creaturely being “must be upheld by God as a ball in the air, or it would return to non-being as naturally as the ball falls to the ground (1: 188). And in the words of William Ames, “God *holds as it were in his hand* the creature, that it fall not back to [. . .] nothing” (*Substance* 69; original emphasis); for “[e]very Creature should returne to that nothing whereof it was made, if God should not uphold it” (Ames, *Marrow* 42). In *Paradise Lost* the providence of God does not serve this ontological function, for in the poem’s theology creaturely being is derived not from nothingness but from the primal matter of God’s own being, so that it is the divine being itself, not nothingness, from which “All things proceed” and to which they tend to “return” (5.469–70). The image of the upholding of creaturely being is thus appropriated in *Paradise Lost* in the context of human freedom, instead of the context of human ontology. It is the freedom of human nature that is “upheld” by the grace of God. Human freedom since the Fall has a natural tendency toward evil, and it would necessarily fall toward evil except for the upholding grace of God. This grace returns the will to its primitive state of indifference; it preserves the will from its tendency to collapse into self-enslavement, and enables it “once more” to “stand / On even ground” with the self-determining power to choose between good and evil. In the words of *De Doctrina Christiana*, God thus graciously “gives us the power to act freely, which we have not been able to do since the fall” (*CPW* 6: 457).

Universal prevenient grace, then, is not a grace that secures salvation, but only a grace that secures the *possibility* of salvation through the restoration of human freedom. As Dennis Danielson observes, “God’s grace explains how man’s repentance is possible [. . .] but does not finally account for the fact that it actually takes place” (*Milton’s* 88). Preserved from the enslaving power of original sin, the human will is upheld “on even ground,” able to choose or to reject the offer of salvation. Continuing his account of his gracious plan for fallen humanity, God thus says:

Some I have chosen of peculiar grace  
 Elect above the rest; so is my will:  
 The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warnd  
 Thir sinful state, and to appease betimes  
 Th' incensed Deitie, while offerd Grace  
 Invites; for I will cleer thir senses dark,  
 What may suffice, and soft'n stonie hearts  
 To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.  
 To prayer, repentance, and obedience due,  
 Though but endevord with sincere intent,  
 Mine eare shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.  
 (3.183-93)

Because of prevenient grace, salvation is a universal possibility. God's "peculiar grace" specially singles out some individuals, but all the "rest" of humanity receive the divine "call" to salvation. All are invited to respond to "offerd Grace." Even the conversion of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* is a picture not of any work of "peculiar grace," but of a universal human possibility, a possibility created for all by the liberating power of the prevenient grace of God.

While some Reformed orthodox writers denied that grace is universally offered,<sup>10</sup> most of them affirmed that all people are, in some sense, invited to partake of salvation. Johannes Wollebius, for instance, writes that even "the reprobate" are "called in earnest, and salvation is offered to them on condition of faith" (116). But the Reformed understanding of total depravity meant that the "condition" of such a universal offer of salvation could not be accepted by any except the elect, who are regenerated by the "absolutely irresistible" grace of God (Wollebius 159). In this Reformed view, then, the universal offer of salvation is reduced to a nominal offer which God himself knows cannot possibly be accepted except by the elect. In contrast, Arminian theology spoke of the same universal offer of salvation, but affirmed also that the operation of sufficient grace (*gratia sufficiens*) removes the effects of human sinfulness enough to enable all fallen individuals to accept this offer. As Simon Episcopius writes, God gives sinners grace "sufficient for their yielding Faith and Obedience, when he calleth them by the Gospel" (201); and, in the words of Arminius, all fallen human beings are "excited, impelled, drawn and assisted by grace," but their liberty of indifference means that "in the very moment in which they actually assent [to grace], they possess the capability of not assenting" (2: 722). This Arminian view of sufficient grace stands in continuity with God's reference in *Paradise Lost* to the invitation of "offerd Grace." Indeed, the theologically crucial term in God's speech is "suffice": God graciously reverses the effects of original sin to an extent that is sufficient for the salvation of all people.

Thus, while the human mind had been darkened by original sin, God now graciously “cleer[s]” the minds of all fallen human beings. And while the will had been enthralled by sin, the hearts of all fallen human beings are now “soft’n[ed]” by grace. These metaphors of the enlightening of the mind and the softening of the heart were frequently used by post-Reformation writers. Richard Baxter, for example, speaks of God’s “taking the hard heart out of us, and giving hearts of flesh” (8), while Johann Heinrich Heidegger writes that God “illuminates the reason to conviction of the truth” (qtd. in Heppe 520). In Reformed orthodox theology, such descriptions of the enlightening of the mind and softening of the heart could refer only to regeneration itself.<sup>11</sup> But in *Paradise Lost*, as in Arminianism, it is precisely the unregenerate heart that is softened by grace, so that it can respond to the offer of salvation. And this response is “To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.” When fallen human beings, liberated and enabled by grace, freely turn to God with such prayer, penitence, and obedience, they become not merely recipients of universal grace, but partakers of salvation.

Of course, the drama of the conversion scene in Books 10 and 11 depends on the fact that Eve and Adam are unaware of the secret intervention of prevenient grace. They act only as human agents who have taken responsibility for their own situation and have exercised their own wills in a new movement toward God. The prayer and penitence they bring are authentically human; only the reader is privy to the liberating initiative of prevenient grace. The fact that Eve and Adam are unaware of the primacy of grace dramatically highlights the sheer freedom with which they choose and experience their conversion. It is therefore a mistake to read the *narrative* of conversion (in which everything depends on human freedom) as an experiential contradiction of Book 3’s *theology* of conversion (in which everything depends on grace).<sup>12</sup> Rather, the dogma and drama of conversion should be taken together as the two sides of a single divine-human event. As Neil Forsyth observes, the “paradox of Grace and free will” in the poem consists in the fact that “the freedom of Adam and Eve to repent is itself the experience of Grace” (293-94). Enabled by prevenient grace, Adam and Eve are lifted to a position of genuine freedom, so that their decisive movement toward God becomes possible but not assured. Through prevenient grace, they may now “will” to be “sav’d” (3.173)—and, as God has said, this “will” itself rests on “Grace / Freely vouchsaf’t” (3.174-5).

### Continuing Conversion

In *Paradise Lost*, the conversion of human beings is, moreover, not simply a once-for-all event that confirms them in a regenerate state. On the contrary, the initial experience of conversion is only the first step in

a dynamic and lifelong process. As Georgia Christopher notes, “faith” in the poem is “not a steady state, but one of fluctuating growth in which ‘subsequent grace’ repeats with variations the paradigm of ‘prevenient grace’” (182). In Book 11, Michael tells Adam:

[. . .] thy Prayers are heard, and Death,  
Then due by sentence when thou didst transgress,  
Defeated of his seisure many dayes  
Giv’n thee of Grace, wherein thou mayst repent,  
And one bad act with many deeds well done  
Mayst cover.

(11.252-57)

Adam’s repentance is not a completed work. The “many dayes” of life that are granted him are days in which he must continue to “repent” of his sin, and to live out this repentance with “many deeds well done.” Reformed orthodox theologians, with their emphases on God’s eternal decree, the decisive event of justification, and the inability of believers to fall away from grace, tended to view conversion as a single event which fixed forever the spiritual state and destiny of the individual. In contrast, however, the Reformation theologians had viewed conversion as a process that continues throughout the Christian life. In the first of his *Ninety-Five Theses* Luther had declared that “[w]hen our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (31: 25); and Calvin similarly believed that repentance is not a single isolated event but a race in which believers must “run throughout the whole course of their lives,” so that regeneration is accomplished not “in a moment, a day, or a year,” but only by a long process (280–81). In this respect, Arminian theology remained close to Reformation thought by conceiving of conversion as a dynamic process; Episcopius, for instance, regards grace as “carry[ing] on [. . .] saving conversion gradually unto the end” (207). In Arminianism, the unstable nature of this dynamic process is highlighted most strikingly in the teaching that believers can fall away from grace: “so long as we are in this world, he that now standeth should feare least he fall” (Browne 51). So too, in *Paradise Lost* the human beings who have experienced conversion remain always subject to the possibility of falling again. Affirming the vital importance of the influence of grace, God the Father says of regenerate humanity:

He sorrows now, repents, and prays contrite,  
My motions in him: longer then they move,  
His heart I know, how variable and vain  
Self-left.

(11.90-93)

Reformed orthodoxy and Arminianism alike attributed human conversion to such divine “motions.” According to Arminius, by the “motion of the regenerating Spirit” fallen human beings are brought “to confess their sins, to mourn on account of them, to desire deliverance, and to seek out the Deliverer” (2: 17); and the Reformed writer Joseph Alleine speaks of the Holy Spirit implanting in the human soul “good motions” which are “the offers, and essays, and calls, and strivings of the spirit” (92). But according to *Paradise Lost*, the “motions” of grace are involved not merely in the initial conversion of human beings, but in a sustained process of conversion. The frail will of the regenerate believer relies constantly on these “motions”—if the liberating influence of grace were to withdraw, the will would lapse back into enslavement. Even the converted will thus continues to be upheld by the grace of God; grace continues to grant the freedom that enables it to turn to God anew at each instant. Thus, not only the beginning but also the continuation of the regenerate life depends on the human will’s cooperation with, and response to, the liberating work of grace. Such a view of grace as the agent of dynamic, continuing conversion had been affirmed by Arminius when he described grace as “THE COMMENCEMENT, THE CONTINUANCE AND THE CONSUMMATION OF ALL GOOD” (1: 664).

In *Paradise Lost*’s third book, God the Father highlights the progressive nature of conversion while laying primary emphasis on the decisive role of the human will:

[. . .] I will place within them as a guide  
 My Umpire *Conscience*, whom if they will hear,  
 Light after light well us’d they shall attain,  
 And to the end persisting, safe arrive.

(3.194–97)

Even for those who have been converted by grace, the goal of salvation is by no means assured. Human beings do not yet possess the security of salvation; they are on the way to eternal life, but are not yet “safe,” and have not yet “arrive[d].” Persistence is therefore necessary—a persistent choice to follow the internal light of conscience, a persistent exercise of freedom in which the human agent turns away from sin and toward God. In short, a moment-by-moment conversion is necessary if the individual is finally to “arrive” safely at the bliss of eternal salvation.

Hence, the whole life of Adam and Eve, from the initial event of their conversion onward, is to be an expression of the possibilities of contingent freedom. It is to be a journey of freedom, growth, and development. For this reason, *Paradise Lost* ends with a vision of a future radically open to the possibilities of human freedom, a freedom that is

upheld and “guide[d]” by the gracious providence of God, and at the same time “solitarie” in its ability to choose and to actualize the future:

Som natural tears they dropd, but wip'd them soon;  
 The World was all before them, where to choose  
 Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:  
 They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,  
 Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way.

(12.645-49)

The self-enslaving narrowness of sin is left behind, as the first human beings turn freely to face a world of choice and possibility.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All citations of *Paradise Lost* are from Darbishire's edition. Citations of Milton's prose are from the *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, edited by Don Wolfe et al. They will appear parenthetically in the text as *CPW* followed by volume and page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent discussion of this issue, see Poole.

<sup>3</sup> On medieval views of prevenient grace, see Oberman 123-41.

<sup>4</sup> In his annotation, Bentley fails to realize that “prevented” is a theological term, so that he writes: “How *Unprevented* can stand here, does not appear; unless in this Meaning, *comes unimplor'd, if not prevented*. But that would diminish the gracious favour, set forth here” (86). On the contrary, the term “unprevented” highlights the gratuitousness of grace.

<sup>5</sup> For the Tridentine view in the *Canones et Decreta Concili Tridentini*, see Tanner 2: 672-73; For an example of the Reformed orthodox polemic against this position, see Bastingius 8.

<sup>6</sup> On the development of Puritan preparationism, see Kendall and Pettit.

<sup>7</sup> The standard Reform orthodox interpretation of the universality of grace was that God is gracious to all kinds of people, but not to each individual member of the human race. See, for example, Benfield, who argues that “all” refers to “all sorts of particulars, not each particular of all sorts” (4); and Abbot, who writes: “all intendeth many, or diverse of diverse sorts, not universally every one” (19).

<sup>8</sup> For a similar use of terminology, see the Westminster Confession 19–20: the grace of regeneration involves a “renewing” of the “wills” of the elect.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Danielson, “Fall” 156–57 and Evans 132.

<sup>10</sup> Prynne, for example, argues that the proclamation of grace is only for the sake of the elect, and is “intended unto them alone” (2–3).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the Westminster Confession 19–20 and Wollebius 159–60.

<sup>12</sup> Such a reading is offered by Falconer, who writes that the narrative of conversion “militates against [. . .] [Book 3’s] interpretation of grace, both dramatically and theologically” (163).

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