

On the Devil's Virtues

This year I've connected personally with Satan.

The Satan of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to be precise. I recognize that, for many believing people, among whom I count myself, the devil of the Christian canon is hardly fictional—and hardly the empathetic figure about which we'd like undergraduates to write aspirational personal essays. Yet, as many readers of *Paradise Lost* discover, Milton's Satan is complicated and compelling. I was startled by how much I was drawn to Satan, his robust and contradictory virtues. I identified with him in a way I didn't expect, and acquaintance with the virtues of Milton's Satan has prompted me to interrogate the narratives I hold about myself and others.

What are the devil's virtues? Milton's unlikely epic protagonist is, for one thing, ruggedly independent. He protests against God, who he (Satan) views as a tyrannical and vain despot thirsting only for worship from beings lower on the cosmic totem pole (*Paradise Lost*, Book 5, ll. 785-797). This independence, though, is founded in egoism and has disastrous consequences for Lucifer and his celestial comrades. Consequently, I found myself reflecting on whether my independent impulses stem from a genuine desire to fulfill a new and helpful role in civic, personal, and academic life—or if I merely resent the often-legitimate demands of unoriginal service to community, family, and academy.

Satan also worries over the welfare of fallen angels who have been thrust to hell because of their loyalty to their chief (Book 1, ll. 600-608). Again, the question interposes: is this true sympathy we see in Satan? Or is it only another tool he employs, even at the level of his

own psychology, to bind others' loyalty to him? In learning about this characteristic, I reflected on the times I might instrumentalize relationships to achieve selfish goals. I realized that, even instinctually, I sometimes seek connection with others to gratify personal insecurities instead of knowing them for themselves.

For all his duplicity and rancor, Milton's Satan is also at times painfully self-aware, as when he laments that, if he were to yield to return to heaven repentant, he would only fall into rebellion once more (Book IV, ll. 93-99). There's a fatalism to his outlook that struck me as both unhelpful and familiar. I could see, in Satan's own dismal ruminations, how I often doomed myself to limitation by believing a self-denigrating story. Satan—and I—make horrible mistakes, true enough. But I've learned from the devil that self-awareness is damning when it becomes self-definition.

These virtues of Milton's Satan forced me to read *Paradise Lost* more closely, to interrogate the narrative that I assumed about that figure. In turn, this close reading prompted me to look back at myself: what stories about my own rugged independence, my own relationality, my own basic nature, do I perpetuate? Are these reliable? And what assumptions do I hold about others? I'm still teasing out answers to these questions—but without Milton's Satan, I wouldn't be asking them at all.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*, edited by William Kerrigan et al., Random House, 2007.