Paradise Lost and the Poetics of Delay: Virgil, Vida, Milton

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In the final speech assigned to any character in Paradise Lost, Eve awakens from an inspired dream and expresses to Adam a renewed confidence: “but now lead on; / In me is no delay; with thee to go, / Is to stay here; without thee here to stay, / Is to go hence unwilling” (12.614-17).

Milton’s Eve echoes Virgil’s Anchises. In Book 2 of the Aeneid, Anchises wishes to die in Troy until he is taught otherwise by divine omens. He then declares to his son, “Now, now [iam iam] there is no delay; I follow, and where you lead, there I am” (2.701).

Aeneas carries Anchises on his shoulders while guiding his son Ascanius by the hand. Aeneas’s wife Creusa, however, trails behind only to be lost. As David Quint observes, Milton effects a meaningful alteration through his echo. Milton “puts Eve, wife and partner, [and] the future of humanity in place of the Virgilian father and son: she is no Creusa to be left behind” (222). For Milton, conjugal love should be subordinated neither to filial piety nor to dynastic continuity. This essay argues that Milton’s variations on epic delay take part in a long poetic conversation not only with Virgil but also with Marco Girolamo Vida. Before Paradise Lost, Vida’s neo-Latin epic the Christiad had adapted the same lines uttered by Anchises in Book 2 of the Aeneid. Rather than affirming conjugal love, Vida’s epic restores the intergenerational order of undelaying obedience. The Son follows the will of the Father even to the point of death. “In me is no delay,” Christ declares to God; later, he prays, “I do not delay; here I am” (1.689, 845).

Vida, the so-called Christian Virgil, incorporates the triumph over delay into Christ’s self-sacrificing heroism. Milton subsequently relocates Christian heroism within the love between husband and wife.

Both Vida and Milton adapt a Virgilian vocabulary of delay as it governs interrelated tensions: between knowledge and uncertainty, between unhesitating obedience and recalcitrance, and between the status of a subject and that of an object. The ensuing analysis of Paradise Lost pairs Eve’s final declaration in the poem against her initial experience as a sinless but recalcitrant narcissist. Milton’s rewriting of the Narcissus story sets the terms—epistemological, volitional, and interpersonal—under which Eve must overcome delay. Eve’s undelaying love finally secures the possibility of unanimity with Adam even in a fallen world. Milton’s deployment of the language of delay, I argue, retrospectively illuminates Christ’s heroism in Vida’s epic. Vida adapts a Virgilian pattern of delay so that his epic builds toward the climactic achievement of the Crucifixion. In contrast to Aeneas’s killing of Turnus, Christ’s acceptance of death is a quiescent form of heroism. After his resurrection, Vida’s Christ returns to remove from the minds of his disciples the delay of doubt—a form of delay that may parallel Narcissus’s error. Yet this is only a latent possibility that becomes much more visible after Milton’s overt pairing of Narcissus and Virgilian delay.

This point of contact between the two Christian poets opens onto a fuller pattern of convergence and divergence. Whereas the unfinished ending of the Aeneid looks ahead to a dynastic future initiated by a strategic marriage, the
triumph of Vida’s Christ does not underwrite conjugal love for his followers. For Vida, overcoming delay allows for unhesitating certainty in Christ’s heroic work. Although the Son of God remains the hero of *Paradise Lost*, Milton shifts emphasis away from his sacrificial death as a *fait accompli* so that he can affirm a life of forward-looking belief. By doing so, *Paradise Lost* upholds married life as a binding form of closure even though more deferrals lie ahead. Milton transforms delay so that the millennia stretching between the first couple and the prophesied birth of the Son can be meaningful rather than a mere postponement.

By announcing that she will not delay, Eve takes part in the revised Christian heroism of *Paradise Lost*. Yet no simple alignment obtains between Milton’s understanding of the *Aeneid* and his gender politics. Marriage continues to serve an instrumental function in advancing an empire—in the case of *Paradise Lost*, God’s universal kingdom. Milton works to privilege conjugal love over the regulation of legitimate reproduction, yet Eve’s echo of Anchises reveals how Milton does not fully abandon the importance of dynastic procreation. Despite the optimistic conclusion of *Paradise Lost*, the viability of truly undelaying love remains uncertain. Milton implicitly relies on the certainty of Adam and Eve’s eventual reproduction to substantiate a belief that Eve can lovingly (even heroically) follow Adam without delay. Reading Virgil, Vida, and Milton together reveals to a present-day perspective the liberatory and atavistic impulses at play in coupling conjugal love with undelaying epic heroism.

Delay in the *Aeneid*, from “*iam iam*” to “*iam nunc*”

The general topic of epic delay is a very familiar one. Delay confers upon epic its duration even if the conclusion is foreknown. Juno’s machinations provide Virgil with a rationale for dilatation, one that inverts the sequence established by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Aeneas is tested by perilous travels first and then achieves a deferred military victory. As Tobias Gregory details, Christian poets would labor to create narrative tension despite writing of a single, omnipotent deity. These poets reimagine polytheistic paradigms in which gods besides Jove “can delay destiny and/or make its fulfillment as painful and difficult as possible” (Gregory 16-17). A comprehensive treatment of epic delay is neither possible nor necessary here. Rather, a selective overview of Virgilian delay will provide the coordinates for the ensuing readings of Milton and Vida.

The declarations of Anchises, Christ, and Eve provide a useful starting place: all three reveal that articulating that one does not delay actually takes up valuable time. When Anchises declares that “now, now [*iam iam*]” there is no delay, this particular instance of gemination turns repetition into a sign of more intense immediacy. Anchises’s words, in turn, have significant effects on Virgilian narration. Only after Anchises rejects delay does the Virgilian speaker begin invoking the formulae *nec mora* and *haud mora*. The potential irony of a poet repeating himself to excise delay from his narrative is never fully banished. This poem can be epic in scale only by deferring the conclusion it ostensibly celebrates. Yet after Anchises offers a model of being repetitive while denying delay, such irony does not obtain in a straightforward manner within the poetic narration. The poet often makes it explicit, for example, that a character who has been speaking has,
simul (at the same time), been acting. In such cases, speech does not delay a character after all, and it is merely the reader’s unfolding comprehension that lags behind the synchrony in question.

Central Virgilian themes converge upon poetic delay. One such theme is the gap between authority and volition. Refrains such as *haud mora* often describe unflinching obedience. Because even obedient subjects can go astray, however, commands to cease delaying must recur. Love occasions the most memorable test of Aeneas’s obedience. As J. D. Reed reminds us, *mora* is conveniently an anagram of *amor* as well as of *Roma* (109). Aeneas’s love for Dido delays his imperial destiny until he is rebuked. As Aeneas tries to excuse his departure, he professes that he does not lead his life of his own volition—if he had, he would never have sailed to Carthage from Troy. This much is true. Yet Aeneas ends his speech with the claim, “I do not seek Italy willingly” (4.361). This is true insofar as Aeneas must piously fulfill his destiny. Yet the partial untruth of Aeneas’s excuse is soon exposed. Even after being warned to leave Carthage, Aeneas dithers until he is visited by a dream-vision of Mercury declaring, “*Rumpe moras*; [break off delays]!” (4.569). The question of Aeneas’s volition persists throughout the epic. In Book 10, an exasperated Juno asks if any man or god has driven Aeneas to wage war against Latinus. She answers herself by remarking that Aeneas seeks Italy under the authority of the Fates. Juno then undercuts this answer sarcastically: even if Aeneas had been following the Fates, he was personally motivated by Cassandra’s ravings (10.67-68).

This example suggests how delay also manifests a tension between ignorance and knowledge. Looking ahead to Milton’s English poetry, we can discern a shifting pattern linking temporal delay, spatial or geographical errancy, and cognitive error. Delay and wandering are linked in Virgil’s narration, with *error* across sea and land being either the cause or the effect of Aeneas’s delays. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton famously deploys the divergent senses of the word “error” (see Fish 92-94): the more modern English meaning of mistakenness resonates with postlapsarian deficiency, whereas the original Latin meaning describes innocent wandering. The English “error” etymologically ties cognitive lapses to physical digressions; in the *Aeneid*, such lapses are strongly linked to the temporal effects of *mora*. Obedient characters often delay due to uncertainty, and they stop delaying when the truth is revealed. Conversely, unhesitating but deluded obedience becomes a form of rashness. Delay is associated with phenomena—clouds, simulacra, and images—that temporarily sunder perception from certainty. Examples abound, but Book 5 offers an especially important instance of irony arising out of error, errant volition, and obedience. Commissioned by Juno, Iris disguises herself as Beroë and spurs the Trojan women to burn their ships. “Now is the time for these deeds to be done,” Iris declares; “such omens allow for no delay” (5.639). Yet the Trojan women do delay. Led by the royal nurse Pyrgo, they detect Iris’s disguise but then obey the goddess’s orders nonetheless because they fail to realize her true motives. When Ascanius arrives, he decries the women as suffering from a *novus furor* (5.670). This new madness resists easy definition, as the Trojan women have not succumbed to simple error. It is ultimately up to Jove to use his undelaying authority to redeem the dire results. Aeneas arrives at the scene belatedly, but Jove assents to his impassioned prayer: Aeneas scarcely finishes uttering his words when, without delay, Jove sends rains that save all but four of the ships (5.693-95).
At the center of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas begins to learn how to overcome belatedness more effectively. He must exhibit a new combination of volition, knowledge, and action. Book 6 begins with Aeneas surveying Daedalus’s elaborate artwork (and with the reader following an ekphrastic account of it), but the priestess-princess Deiphobe warns that this is not the time for spectating but for ritual sacrifice. Aeneas and his men do not delay in obeying her. Yet Aeneas learns that this sequence—of being taught to turn away from a compelling simulacrum and then obeying immediately—is insufficient. The Sibyl arrives accusing Aeneas of being slow in his vows and prayers. The Sibyl does not merely teach Aeneas to be swifter in mastering his fallible volition. Rather, she teaches him to become the vessel of supernatural volition expressed in the world. The golden bough must willingly give itself to Aeneas’s hands if he is fated to journey to the underworld and back. Otherwise, Aeneas will fail, no matter how much strength he exerts.

Once in the underworld, Aeneas experiences a further subject-object reversal. Charon is reluctant to transport a living being, but the Sibyl commands that if he is not moved by *tantae pietatis imago* (the image of such piety), he should nonetheless recognize the branch (6.405). The living Aeneas becomes for Charon an image of a general concept. The branch, by contrast, assumes primacy by moving Charon to immediate obedience. The full effects of this lesson become manifest at the end of the epic. Aeneas, as I go on to discuss, overcomes delay on the battlefield not only as a subject who acts as soon as his proper discernment allows, but also by acting rashly, before proper judgment can delay action. If the resulting violence is morally dubious, it nonetheless makes Aeneas an unhesitating instrument of destiny. Within the *descensus* episode, Aeneas learns of his dual role as heroic subject and as mere vehicle by becoming an image in Charon’s perception. In the oscillation between self and image—between the hero’s sense of self as subject and a realization of himself as an object for another’s perception—delayed understanding and spatial separation contract into a very close encounter. This distillation later allows both Vida and Milton to deploy the self/image relationship in different ways to rethink the terms of epic heroism.

In Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, temporarily occupying the status of an imago prepares Aeneas to learn from the *imaginæ* of the underworld—culminating in the shade of Anchises. After having experienced being a mere imago for another, Aeneas can accept the lessons of those who lack substantive reality. Aeneas vainly tries to embrace his father’s shade just as he had earlier tried to embrace the apparition of his lost wife. What Anchises’s imago lacks, it makes up for in a prophetic ability to conjoin the past, present, and future. Anchises foresees the reign of Augustus and describes how even now the Caspian realms and the Maeotian land tremble: the proleptic *iam nunc* replaces the deferred immediacy of *iam iam* (*Aeneid* 6.798). Aeneas’s underworld lessons have already relegated *iam iam* to describing an action that seems imminent but is perpetually deferred: a rock hangs over Tantalus as if ready to fall upon him (1.574). In the prophetic *iam nunc*, by contrast, there is no delay between the present knowledge of the reader and the past knowledge of the characters. Yet some of the most vexing questions arising out of the *Aeneid* concern Aeneas’s *descensus*—whether the episode constitutes a poetic fiction, a dream, or even a veiled account of necromancy (see Wilson-Okamura 149–90). Within the narrative of the *Aeneid* (whatever the exact clues Virgil provides concerning the fictive status of the *descensus*), Aeneas’s mission will
be to begin perfecting the destiny that Anchises’s imago describes. In the meantime, prophetic knowledge occupies the status of a false dream—a status that readers and commentators would grapple with for centuries to come.

2

“In me is no delay”

“In me is no delay” Raphael proclaims in Paradise Lost, “more swift / Than time or motion” (7.176-77). Yet as the angel realizes, mediation between God and his earthly creation requires time-bound processes including linguistic communication and natural gestation. Throughout the epic, delay locates human subjects within shifting configurations of obedience and freedom, of ignorance and knowledge. The first mention of delay occurs in the Leviathan simile of Book 1. The pilot of “some small night-foundered skiff” unwittingly anchors off the side of Leviathan “while night / Invests the sea, and wishèd morn delays” (204-08). Delay is the duration of irony; morning will bring about an unwelcome discovery. Satan undermines human feeling and perception even in recumbent defeat. Yet the devils do not remain passive for long. In Book 2, Moloch advocates renewed war against God and urges the rebels not to accept hell, the “prison of his tyranny who reigns / By our delay” (59-60). Moloch argues for divine agency as being contingent on devilish inaction. The devils do not heed Moloch’s advice but choose to attack God through his latest creation.

In the meantime, Adam seeks to use innocent delay for the sake of instruction. After hearing of the War in Heaven, Adam longs for additional knowledge that pertains to this world. He entices Raphael to speak further by appealing rhetorically to delay: the sun “longer will delay to hear thee tell / His generation” (7.101-02). Adam’s experience is the inverse of the night-foundered pilot’s; the protracted daytime promises to sharpen Adam’s knowledge. Raphael eventually teaches Adam that “leviathan / Hugest of living creatures” is a part of God’s good creation rather than a deceptive signifier (412-13). Yet eventually, Satan does corrupt human understanding and effects the irony that the reader has already registered. In the later books, delay governs Adam’s failure to understand divine goodness. A suicidal Adam despairs of God, “Why delays / His hand to execute what his decree / Fixed on this day? Why do I overlive?” (10.771-73). Life itself has come to seem like a pointless deferral. Adam’s question is wrongheaded, but Milton intensifies its force by having described how the Son, in the capacity of judge, “without delay / To judgment ... proceeded on the accused / Serpent though brute” (10.163-65). Although described as immediate, this judgment operates under “mysterious terms”: the punishment on the unwitting serpent must be perfected by the punishment of the true agent, “Satan first in sin” (10.172-73). This process will be completed at the end of the world; divine justice spans from Genesis to Revelation. Milton warns that this paradoxically underlaying but very slow judgment is beyond human comprehension.

The reader is encouraged to consider instead God’s goodness. Fallen Adam does not realize at first that delayed punishment allows redemptive history to commence. Borrowing from Milton’s phrase, Emily Wilson has examined the history of tragic overliving. Wilson observes that Anchises is a precedent for Adam: both feel that they have outlived any usefulness. Anchises might have started with
the wish to die in Troy, but his shade offers Aeneas two reasons why overliving is not tragic: one is reincarnation, which “implies that time may be cyclical” and denies “the human experience of ‘too long’ and ‘too short’” (Wilson 15). The other reason is a linear history leading to Augustan Rome. Milton offers Christian counterparts to such rationales: not cyclical reincarnation but a typological history that culminates in Christ’s rather than Augustus’s reign. According to this redemptive history (or future), Adam must live on in order to reproduce. Adam and Eve repeatedly recall the protoevangelium, the lesson that the woman’s seed will bruise the serpent’s head. Yet learning to stay alive to reproduce is one thing; learning to stay alive for love is quite another. Milton describes how acute concern for progeny exacerbates Adam’s despair and misogyny (see 10.720-46, 888-908). Eve’s final willingness to follow Adam without delay is necessary because it restores the possibility of love within reproductive union.

Before arriving at this conclusion, Adam and Eve attempt to mimic heroic sacrifice. In Book 3, the Son had already volunteered to die on behalf of humanity: “Behold me then, me for him,” he declares to the Father, “life for life / I offer” (236-37). In Book 10, Eve wishes to invite punishment entirely upon herself: “On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe, / Me me only just object of his ire” (935-36). Eve’s more emphatic repetition of “me” echoes Virgil’s Nisus, who tries but fails to save his friend Euryalus from the wrath of Volcens: “me, me, here I am who committed the deed; against me turn your sword!” (Aeneid 9.427). Leah Whittington and Gregory Chaplin have both discussed the significance of Milton’s allusions to the Nisus and Euryalus episode. Whittington observes how Adam precedes Eve in echoing the Son (and thereby echoing Nisus): “On me, me only, as the source and spring / Of all corruption, all the blame lights due” (Paradise Lost 10.832-33). Whittington argues that Adam’s utterance marks him as “an antitype of the Son’s self sacrifice” because it “intensifies his despair rather than effecting a reconciliation with God or Eve” (603-04). Eve’s penitence may also be misguided, but it is more sincere. Chaplin notes that Eve “demonstrates the virtues of the Son more fully than Adam does” (366). Chaplin’s broader argument shows how Milton emphasizes individual agency above traditional notions of Atonement whereby Christ alone can satisfy divine justice. Although a self-sacrificial impulse allows Adam and then Eve to work toward being increasingly like the Son, this impulse must be abandoned so that they can foster a tenable form of mutual love.

In the context of my argument, the Nisus and Euryalus episode in Book 9 of the Aeneid depicts the results of an abortive attempt to overcome delay. In joining Nisus’s excursion, Euryalus must catch up with his older friend, both figuratively (in terms of knowledge and volition) and literally. Nisus encourages Euryalus to hurry together (acceleremus [9.221]). Euryalus’s eagerness eventually overtakes him, however, and Nisus vainly exhorts him to withdraw. This is in contrast to the way that Aeneas had joined the Sibyl: “Acceleremus,” she enjoins, and the two walk pariter (with equal steps [630-34]). Euryalus’s excessive zeal results in his death at the hands of Volcens. Scholars have debated the extent to which this episode celebrates the Trojan friends or criticizes their exploits. Sergio Casali details how the Virgilian text actively invites such divided views, especially by echoing the Homeric Doloneia (see especially 321-39). By offering Nisus and Euryalus rewards for their excursion, Ascanius threatens to repeat the error of Hector, whose promise of trophies had stirred the craven Dolon. When Ascanius
looks upon Euryalus as a *pietatis imago*, the latter seems to be aligned with Aeneas as an instrument of destiny (9.294). Virgil tells us that while (*simul*) Ascanius has been speaking to Euryalus, he has stripped off a gilded sword from his shoulder to give to him (303-04). Rather than affirming Euryalus’s heroism (as the golden bough had manifested Aeneas’s destiny), however, this golden object threatens to taint heroic motivations. In a cruel irony, Euryalus will soon succumb to an undelaying sword: Volcens charges Euryalus with his sword drawn even while (*simul*) he speaks (423). Euryalus becomes the victim rather than the master of simultaneity or immediate action. Nisus, in turn, will be powerless to save either his friend or himself.

In *Paradise Lost*, the Son is uniquely capable of perfecting such unredemptive sacrifices. By reflecting his Father perfectly but also freely, the Son balances being the heroic subject of Milton’s epic with being an expression of divine agency. In the aftermath of the Fall, the echoes of the Nisus and Euryalus episode suggest the limitations of Eve’s superior self-sacrificial attitude as a basis of undelaying love. Whatever her inner motives, Eve’s echo of Nisus suggests a kind of rhetorical table-turning: Adam is likened by implication to the younger friend who breaches undelaying partnership due to excessive zeal. This implication is illogical given Adam’s primacy, but it nonetheless manifests a genuine threat. As Adam confesses to Raphael, Eve seems “[a]s one intended first, not after made” (8.555). Eve’s promise to follow Adam acknowledges her secondary status but in a way that achieves dignity—even paternal authority reminiscent of Anchises’s. This delicate balance of primacy and subordination allows for the “hand in hand” of the poem’s conclusion (12.648).

Eve’s late-blossoming willingness may, however, still recall the most memorable delay in all of *Paradise Lost*: the “sweet reluctant amorous delay” that had characterized her at first—or, at least, that had seemed to characterize her in Satan’s eyes (4.311). Adam and Eve’s relationship must prove whether Eve’s reluctant delay will truly be sweet and amorous. In Book 4, the immediate answers draw upon an Ovidian vocabulary rather than a Virgilian one. Kilgour details how a younger Milton had learned alongside Ovid lessons concerning erotic delay. She refers to “*nec mora*” as an a “common Ovidian tick,” one that Milton deploys in his own poetic experiments (51). *Mora* offers a conceptual site around which Virgil’s seriousness and Ovid’s potentially lewd or subversive playfulness converge. The ramifications of a Virgilian versus Ovidian outlook bear broadly upon Milton’s religious and political thinking. Ovid offers a mode of privileging “growth, development, expansion,” and freedom—values compatible with Milton’s republicanism and his Arminian theology. After the Restoration, however, the “failure of political change” challenges Milton to consider more strenuously the pitfalls involved in transformation (Kilgour 166). Kilgour details how the conjugal narrative of *Paradise Lost* reaffirms human progress by leading the reader through different Ovidian possibilities, from the styming of love to rarefied fulfillment.

Milton’s version of the Narcissus story serves as a myth of the origins of erotic delay. Eve’s naive experience at the reflecting pool leads her not only to interact with her own image but also to behave as if she herself were an object of perception. Yet Eve and her reflection can communicate without delay. Their exchange of “answering looks / Of sympathy and love” operates at the speed of light and vision (4.464-65). Eve’s later attempt to narrate her encounter lags...
behind the experience of simultaneity: “I started back, / It started back, but pleased I soon returned, / Pleased it returned as soon” (4.462-64). Initially, delay is caused only by Eve’s hesitation; once she decides to return to her image, however, her image reciprocates immediately. “As soon” recalls this earlier immediacy, but the very utterance of the adverbial phrase manifests the lag-time of language. As a speaking subject, Eve has lost direct access to the simultaneity she once enjoyed. Nothing in Eve’s account suggests an innate need to or propensity for speech; the warning voice has shuttled her into language as well as marriage.

As I have argued above, Virgil’s Aeneas learns to overcome delay in part by occupying the role of an imago for another. Milton’s Eve initially has no need for such a lesson because she finds satisfaction in her relationship with her own imago. Delay must be foisted upon her so that she can overcome it by following her husband, in whose image she has been made. The warning voice proposes solutions to a problem that Eve has yet to register: “but follow me, / And I will bring thee where no shadow stays / Thy coming, and thy soft embraces, he / Whose image thou art” (4.469-72). As the voice declares Eve to be another’s image, it teaches her to think of belatedness as a spatial problem. The physical separation of “stay” should be overcome through a conjugal embrace. This message contains a key distinction from the lesson that Ovid’s Narcissus learns too late. The voice does not tell Eve that she is deluded, but rather, “What thou seest, / What there thou seest fair creature is thyself” (467-68). The Ovidian speaker, by contrast, declares that what Narcissus sees is an imaginis umbra that possesses nothing of its own (Metamorphoses 3.434-35). Eve’s innocence and immortality define her against Narcissus’s deadly error. Eve could not have been deluded, exactly, if her initial, seemingly non-linguistic intelligence did not require a subject/object hierarchy. Nor did Eve’s reflection fail to satisfy an existing longing for physical contact. Unlike Narcissus before his reflection—unlike Aeneas before his deceased wife’s imago or his father’s shade—Eve attempts neither to touch nor to speak to the image before her. She has no intrinsic reason to feel that her reflection lacks anything.

Milton’s reimagining of the Narcissus story makes use of the response to Virgilian values already embedded within Ovid’s poetry. When Ovid describes the novelty of Narcissus’s madness (novitasque furoris), he recalls Ascanius’s description of the Trojan women in Book 5 of the Aeneid (Metamorphoses 3.350). As Philip Hardie has argued influentially, the Theban episode in Books 3 and 4 of the Metamorphoses responds critically to the Virgilian narrative of Rome’s founding. Ovid offers the first “anti-Aeneid” by describing the imperfect, even tragic establishment of a civilization. In reshaping Virgil’s novus furor into a novitas furoris, Ovid has distilled the energy of imperial politics into an intensely personal form of error and desire that rejects social cohesion. At once like and unlike Narcissus, Milton’s Eve finds undelaying fulfillment outside of a hierarchy of real and reflected self. Eve’s initial actions delay a teleological narrative—in this case, God’s project to populate Eden and thereby to repopulate his empire. Eve must be taught that her desire is vain, but she cannot be accused of having succumbed to furor. Remarkably, Milton’s warning voice does not articulate the ultimate reason why Eve should leave her reflection: she should turn to the higher truth of her creator. Sinless Eve seems to have no innate motivation to know God, but any disturbing implications of this lack are channeled into the fact that Eve has no innate desire to marry Adam. Yet from Eve’s perspective, heterosexual marriage is
a solution in search of a problem; the possibility of error arises out of the production of this problem to be overcome. The warning voice reinforces a conflation of image for reality (“What thou seest is thyself”) in shepherding Eve toward her male source.

The solutions that the voice offers prove dubious to someone who has initially experienced undelayed satisfaction. Marriage reminds Eve of her secondary status as the image of another; reproduction is an imperfect way to overcome delay if only because conception and gestation take time. (Perpetually unreproductive self-love is, in and of itself, hardly a threat to immortal Eve.) In Book 9, Eve introduces the proposal to separate temporarily by describing the consequences of this delay: “till more hands / Aid us, the work under our labor grows” (207-08). When Eve reemerges from the separation, she asks, “Hast thou not wondered, Adam, at my stay?” (856). Fallen Eve adapts one of the words, “stay,” that drew her into marriage so that she can now entrap Adam into reuniting with her. Yet Milton adheres to the misogynistic lesson of the first epistle to Timothy, which teaches that Adam fell undeceived whereas Eve succumbed to deception (see 1 Tim. 2.14). Milton reserves for Adam a free choice, whereas Eve’s choice had been constrained even in their prelapsarian union. In Book 4, Eve describes how the voice had overwhelmed her volition: “What could I do / But follow strait?” (475-76). When she does regain some volition, she tries to reject Adam but he seizes her hand. Although Eve professes that she has come to accept her lesson, coercion proves incongruous in a poem that stakes its theodicy on choice. By following Adam without delay at the end of the poem, Eve rectifies a troubling imbalance of obedience and freedom. Interweaving Ovidian and Virgilian registers of delay, Milton locates heroic triumph within the asymmetrical frustrations of heterosexual love—Adam’s crippling longing for reciprocation and Eve’s desire to be her own subject. Yet the closure that Eve offers is merely a beginning: Eve ends the poem by echoing Anchises’s speech, which facilitates the start of Aeneas’s epic journey. Undelaying love initiates an open-ended journey that remains unnarrated even though the future has been foretold.

By contrast, heroic killing offers martial epic a form of closure that, even after much delay, swiftly dispatches with the lag time of volition and of knowledge. In the latter half of the Aeneid, temporal mora is transformed into a physical separation to be breached. In Book 9, Turnus mocks the Trojans for hiding behind their delaying trenches (fossarumque morae [143]). In Book 10, Mezentius’s son Lausus kills Abas, cutting through his moram (barrier) of battle (428). Soon thereafter, Turnus kills Evander’s son Pallas with a spear that penetrates the moras of his breastplate (485). Killing removes the delay between two subjects by turning one into a vanquished object. The pun between moror and morior is activated so that one term overtakes the other. Violent fury can also remove the delay between perception, knowledge, and action within an individual actor. At the end of Book 10, a surge of wrath impels Aeneas to kill Lausus even though the hero recognizes the young victim’s filial pietas (813-14). This wrath evokes the opening of the epic, which expresses wonder over the anger that Juno harbors toward Aeneas. As Michael C. J. Putnam remarks, Aeneas’s fury results in “an instant of supremacy never allotted even Juno at her counterbalancing moments of savagery” (252). After killing Lausus, Aeneas “groaned heavily in pity and stretched out his hand, and the imago of piety for his father entered his mind” (10.823-24). The phrase pietatis imago—which has suggested shifting
configurations of perception and agency between subjects—recurs for a final time (see Seider 47-49). Rage has spurred Aeneas to sidestep judgment. The instant results are regrettable, but unflinching action has made Aeneas a vehicle of destiny. In the last book, Venus must teach her son a more tenable form of mastery and control. As Aeneas, inspired by Venus, pursues Turnus, he is suddenly inflamed with an imago of greater war. He then calls out to his troops, “Let nothing delay my commands” (12.560). In this case, Aeneas orders others to actualize the inspired imago within him; his authority demands that these subjects overcome delay through obedience.

In *Paradise Lost*, the delay between Adam’s desire and Eve’s acceptance originates out of a subject/imago distinction that can then be spatialized. The solution lies not in a violent breach of this separation but rather in a conjugal union. Adam and Eve’s final, non-coercive clasp of hands is reminiscent of the exchange of *fides* that solemnizes a Roman alliance of *hospitium* or of *amicitia*, but it is more intimate than such a formal union. *Paradise Lost* conjoins a certain future with an open-ended love by reimagining marriage as a device of epic closure. In the latter half of the *Aeneid*, marriage to Lavinia is a hotly disputed term within the contractual form, the *foedus*, that advances history. As a violator of the sacred agreement between Latinus and Aeneas, Turnus—despite his emphatic declaration, “No delay in Turnus”—serves as the final delay for Aeneas to overcome (12.11). Yet the separation of personal love from marriage stretches out across the Virgilian epic. In Book 4, Aeneas exculpates himself before Dido by declaring that he had never initiated any nuptial *foedera* (339). Dido does not agree: as she prepares for self-immolation, she prays to any spirit who cares for lovers unequally contracted (“*non aequo foedere*” [520]). Cristoforo Landino, perhaps the most influential Virgilian commentator of the Italian Renaissance, suggests that Dido threatens Aeneas’s progress not merely with lust but also with lust for political life. A *libido imperandi* (desire to rule) encourages Dido and Aeneas to join in marriage, but a higher love—one that must lead to the highest good of the contemplative life—thwarts this enticement (185). This innovative gloss is perceptive insofar as marriage’s chief function is to advance political history. Venus herself suggests to Juno that Trojans and Tyrians could perhaps be *foedera iungi*; Juno should ask Jove for this happy outcome—she is his *coniunx*, after all (4.112-13). Yet Venus’s suggestion is disingenuous; the possibility of personal desire and political union converging within marriage is offered strategically as a mere distraction.

Marriage is the vehicle through which Juno receives a final concession from Jove: when the Latins join the Trojans in sacred *foedera*, they will participate jointly in a Roman future. Yet Jove explicitly assents to Juno not as his wife but as his sister. At the divine level, too, conjugal love is subordinated to familial bonds and to a structure of sacred agreement. At any rate, Jove’s smiling assent seems not only to signal his affection but also to hint wryly at how little he concedes to Juno (12.829). On the human plane of the narrative, Turnus becomes a victim of the diminution of love. In the final book, Turnus receives Amata’s tears and her words of concern; he also witnesses a hint of Lavinia’s affections in the form of a blush. Turnus feels a love that troubles him. Love transforms his declaration of action without delay at the beginning of the book into an admission of weakness: “nor does Turnus have the freedom to delay death” (12.74).

Milton retains marriage as a form of closure but affirms love as the necessary content. Eve is originally created out of a bargain between God and Adam; Adam
declares his satisfaction with the “amends” that God has made (8.491). By the end of the poem, marriage serves as an instrument for God to restore his kingdom through his Son. Yet Eve rejects delay for the spiritual satisfaction of conjugal love over and above the contractual satisfaction between God and man. Miltonic marriage does serve as something akin to the foedus. Whereas Roman foedera were solemnized by ritual sacrifice, Adam and Eve’s restored union looks ahead to the Son’s work of Atonement. Yet Milton emphasizes the mutual agency available within conjugal life. In doing so, he may register awareness of what the legal historian Christian Baldus describes as the surprisingly “antisystematic” nature of the Roman peace treaty (116). Despite being solemnized, the terms of the foedus remain negotiable in a way that aligns it with such concepts as amicitia or hospitium (116–22). In Adam and Eve’s union, what remains unfixed is the married life that they will share outside of Eden. Marriage continues to be a contractual form of asymmetrical consent and obedience—between God and rebellious human subjects, between a sinful husband and the wife who betrayed him. Yet the actual content of love proves just as if not more crucial than the formal structure that accommodates this closure, which is truly only a commencement.

The Undelaying Obedience of Vida’s Christ

Before Milton, Vida had claimed the overcoming of Virgilian delay for Christian heroism. In the Christiad, this heroism consists of Christ’s undelaying obedience to his Father. This is the heroism that Milton could not treat fully in his unfinished poem “The Passion.” Milton cites Vida as “Cremona’s trump,” foremost among those who have sung of the Crucifixion (Shorter Poems line 26). In Paradise Lost, Milton finds a way to go beyond his predecessor in the Christian epic by shifting emphasis away from Christ’s sacrifice and toward the conjugal love it facilitates. The basic reasons for such a shift are evident: Milton’s Protestant view of companionate marriage and his personal difficulties with sacrificial atonement diverge from Vida’s Roman Catholic celebration of the Incarnation and the Passion. Yet the language of delay reveals a complex conversation between the two poets concerning epic action.

Christ’s first words in the Christiad reveal a paradox. “I have arrived at the end,” he declares, repeating the words of Jove to Juno in the final book of the Aeneid (1.38; cf. Aeneid 12.804). This echo underscores the question of why this epic should only be beginning if Christ has reached the end. Vida’s opening invocation asks about the cause of Christ’s undeserved death; once Christ speaks, however, the question of why he takes so long to die competes with the question of why he must die. As in Paradise Lost, delay is associated in the Christiad with Satan. “Throw off delays,” Satan commands as he urges the devils to act against Christ (Christiad 1.222). Satan’s authority is binding. Not only do the devils obey immediately, Satan manipulates human agents—notably Judas Iscariot and the high priest Caiaphas—to act against Christ. “Break off delays!” a disguised Satan commands Judas; Satan’s minions work without delay or rest to infect the Jewish priests (2.109, 140). Yet Satan’s authority over delay makes him the victim of irony: by prompting Christ’s death, Satan unwittingly advances redemptive history.
Such irony, however, may entangle Christ as well. In Book 1, Christ demonstrates his own authority over delay. When he commands that the stone before Lazarus’s sepulcher be removed, his words are obeyed without delay. Yet human response takes time. Vida underscores the tension between the immediacy of divine authority and a temporal process of obedience by repeating the Virgilian formula *nec mora*: Lazarus rises from the dead without delay, but only after he has been called three times by Christ’s voice (1.286). The example of Lazarus is particularly relevant because his experience offers a preview of Christ’s own death and Resurrection. When it comes to dying, Christ exhibits a seeming contradiction between undelaying obedience and natural delay. This becomes apparent as Christ echoes Anchises. “In me is no delay,” Christ proclaims in the first book of the epic, in recognition of the debt owed to God’s wrath (688). Later, on the night of his Transfiguration, Christ prays, “I do not delay; here I am” (845). By splitting the reminiscence of Anchises’s utterance across many lines, Vida emphasizes that Christ does delay. In Book 2, Christ acknowledges delay in the very process of denying it. As he is being arrested by the authorities, he declares, “Nor does a further delay stand in the way now,” and then describes how “*iam iam* [soon, very soon] you will see me holding the right hand of my almighty father in the heavenly palace” (904-07). Although Vida’s Christ uses the same phrase, *iam iam*, as Virgil’s Anchises, he does so in a way that lacks the immediacy of Anchises’s declaration to Aeneas. Anchises’s statement declares unhesitating action in the present moment; Christ, by contrast, issues a prophecy that only the passage of time—however brief—will fulfill.

Vida’s poem has narrative duration because Christ delays his death, often quite actively. Delay threatens to express not just strategic timing (Christ declares in the Gospels that his time has not yet come) but also timidity. Vida explains that because Christ received from his mother a human body, he shares the fears of all mortals. Vida immediately adds, however, that Christ’s mind remains unmoved, his virtus unconquered (2.742-43). Christ conjoins human fearfulness with divine heroism; this achievement is articulated as an undelaying obedience that paradoxically does delay. When the Jewish authorities approach with armed forces to arrest Christ, he declares, “*Hominum nil demoror arma* [I do not linger for human arms]” (843). Christ proves himself a greater offspring of God than does Virgil’s Venus. In Book 10 of the *Aeneid*, Venus laments to Jove that, even as his daughter, she may be delayed by mortal arms (“*mortalia demoror arma*” [30])—as she had been previously by the arms of Diomedes. In refusing to take up arms so that he can eventually be wounded by them, Christ perfects a self-sacrificing method of overcoming delay through quiescence. Christ, like Venus, will eventually be wounded by human arms, but his wounding will be a triumph rather than a delay.

Christ’s obedience restores a fully cosmic imbalance between nature and divine authority. In Book 1, Christ deciphers the Genesis narrative inscribed on walls of the temple. Creation reveals the original separation between divine immediacy and natural temporality. The formula *nec mora* describes the response to God’s separation of the waters. Yet obedience takes time, as all things begin to assume their new forms little by little (607-08). God’s first creation, light, has the ability to travel virtually without delay. Yet the two primary vessels of light take time to illuminate the world even though they commence their work “*[n*e c mora*” (622-23). At first, a *foedus* mediates between God and his time-bound creation. The sun and moon alternate their light-giving duties through fixed agreement (“*certoque
suum dant foedere lumen” [625]). Vida mimics Virgil’s description of how Jove confers upon Aeolus authority over the winds, foedere certo (Aeneid 1.62). Yet the Fall sunders this perfect agreement. The poet wishes that man had kept the foedera intact; he recalls that Eve first broke the laws and the covenants with God (Christiad 1.648, 667). Vida relies on a pun to describe Eve breaking the foedus with God by eating the foetus (fruit) of the forbidden tree (657).

At the end of the epic, the angels celebrate the restored covenant between God and creation. They praise God’s ability to hold all the rerum elementa (elements of natural matter) together through aeterno foedere while remaining timeless himself. In God’s perspective, time is perpetually still in the eternal present (praesenssequae moratur [6.760-65]). For Vida, Christ affirms divine omnipotence in relation to the temporal, material world by restoring the foedus of creation. Christ’s heroic triumph over delay is completed on the cross; Vida revises the consummatum est of the Gospels into Christ’s declaration, “Behold, all things are completed!” (5.993).

Yet the resurrected Christ must return to remove the lag-time in human understanding of the truth; this is the final form of delay that Christ removes for the benefit of his present and future followers. In the final book, Christ transforms Thomas’s doubt by eliminating the gap between perception and certainty. Vida strategically conflates John 20 (the only gospel account of Thomas’s doubt) with Luke 24 (which describes Christ’s appearance to the disciples) to emphasize how Christ makes possible not only belief in God but also in language that communicates truth. Vida’s Thomas wonders if the other disciples—who have reported their encounter with the resurrected Christ—have been misled by simulacri umbra (the shadow of a simulacrum) or a false imago (6.461-62). Peter denies such possibilities and reports that the resurrected Christ had declared, “Ipse ego sum” (6.478). This tautology not only identifies Christ’s appearance with Christ himself but also affirms Christ as Yahweh.

By turning what is direct reportage in Luke 24 into Peter’s second-hand testimony, Vida makes narrated truth susceptible to Thomas’s skepticism. Christ himself must appear to convince Thomas. He appears in a flash of light while Thomas is in the midst of explaining his doubts: “Behold at the same time (simul) God unexpectedly appeared in a great flash” (6.565-66). Christ removes doubt quite literally at the speed of light. Whereas the Gospel of John does not specify whether Thomas did or did not touch the resurrected Christ before believing, Vida’s Thomas certainly has no time to do so. The appearance of Christ leads Thomas to repent confestim (immediately) and to confess, “Vera mihi facies, verus deus, omnia novi [You are to me the true face of God—the true God—I now know all these things]” (6.578). Vida’s Christ overcomes a form of delusion that resembles Narcissus’s condition. Christ conjoins appearance and truth in a way that removes the possibility of a simulacri umbra or of a fallax imago. Earlier in the poem, Vida compares the young Christ to a narcissus flower to describe his good looks in addition to his precocious understanding of the Law. Christ attracts both admiration and bitter enmity (3.965). Later, the poet encourages angels to bear narcissi and hyacinths to Jesus’s crucified body (5.75). Yet Vida’s exact intentions—whether he had Narcissus in mind while composing the Thomas episode—matter less than the linguistic resonances at play. The latent contrast between Christ’s truth and Narcissus’s delusion suggests how the divine self-identification “ipse ego sum” transcends Narcissus’s outburst of recognition, “iste ego sum” (Ovid,
Metamorphoses 3.463). Narcissus’s statement is usefully non-tautological, yet it suffer
from never being entirely true: an iste can never fully be an ego for oneself but rather an imago that deceives.

If Vida offers only fleeting echoes of the Narcissus story, he emphatically describes Christ as removing a Virgilian form of doubt. Thomas’s declaration of faith corrects Andromache’s wonder at seeing Aeneas again in Book 3 of the Aeneid: “verane te facies, verus mihi nuntius adfers? [Do you approach me as a real appearance, a true messenger?]” (310). Christ embodies a higher truth than does Aeneas—not only is Christ’s facies truly him, he is also the presence of God. Thomas’s certainty should engender faith in those who have never had this kind of direct encounter with Christ’s body. The episode affirms language’s ability to convey truth even at a seeming remove. Christ has always embodied the unity of perception, truth, and communication—he is simillima imago (most accurate image) of the Father and his Word (1.873). Vida reveals early on how Christ facilitates the transmission of verbal truth. In Book 1, Vida explains that the Genesis story appears on the walls of the temple not as visual art but rather as mysterious script that only Christ can decipher. As a result, “there were neither effigies of men nor simulacra of gods” (587). Christ models a process of reading—one that is free of visual deception and that precludes the slippage between a visual artwork and an ekphrastic description of it. The reader interprets Vida’s Genesis story alongside Christ, and (in contrast to Aeneas’s perusal of Daedalus’s artwork in Book 6 of the Aeneid) the temporal process of interpretation is affirmed rather than interrupted.

Yet this form of reading sunders the immediacy of visual apprehension from the time-bound process of verbal understanding. The resurrected Christ promises to suture facies and linguistic truth immediately. Before Christ does so, Vida uses the language of delay to describe the possibilities of deception—visual and linguistic—that must be banished. In Book 5, Judas Iscariot despairs of his earlier betrayal and wonders whether he should try to obtain forgiveness from God or to flee. “Why do I delay?” he asks, but he cannot help but pause out of his suicidal anguish and frenzy. Vida describes how an imago of the betrayed, captive Christ constantly hovers before Judas’s eyes. The poet then describes the pallor in his face and the trembling of his chill limbs as the signs of oncoming death (61–63). Yet it is entirely unclear whether this description applies to the mental image of Christ, who is soon to be crucified, or to the physical appearance of Judas on the brink of suicide. Vida’s visual description does not assist the delayed reader in distinguishing between imago and person, between hero and betrayer, and between cause and effect. Only the resurrected Christ can subsequently overcome the skepticism concerning appearance and language that Thomas articulates in the following book.

Crucial differences between Vida’s and Milton’s respective handlings of epic delay emerge here. Although both write of such familiar truths as the Genesis story, Milton strives to place the reader in the forward-looking perspective. Milton adapts the Narcissus story to suggest that Eve’s original state had precluded any delay in volition and knowledge. When Eve triumphs over delay, however, she does not remove the possibility of delusion in a return to prelapsarian innocence. She offers instead an ostensibly happier entry into fallen life. Unlike Vida, who reworks Virgilian patterns to declare certainty in divine truth, Milton accords special privilege to forward-looking faith, which necessarily harbors some uncertainty as it awaits fulfillment. Milton’s conclusion works to transform partially uncertain belief into the basis of conjugal love. The Son of God, heralded as the
“one greater man” from the outset (1.4), remains Milton’s hero, but it is Eve’s attitude toward his future arrival that proves conclusive.

Milton’s emphasis on faith manifests itself in the slight uncertainty surrounding Eve’s dream, which emboldens her to follow Adam without delay. Michael explains that he has inspired this dream to placate Eve, who will thus be more submissive to Adam. Eve, however, seems to believe that God has communicated with her directly (see 12.594-97, 610-14). There must be no strict contradiction: the lesson of redemptive history is divine no matter its exact mediation. Yet Michael’s condescension jars with Eve’s confidence, and even the possibility of a slight delusion registers acutely in the poem’s broader context. Nobody has ever informed Eve that her earlier, transgressive dream had been inspired by Satan; throughout her penitence, Eve remains ignorant of this extenuating fact. Milton transforms partial doubt into the basis of love by insisting that the reader be satisfied by Eve’s faith in her second dream. Eve’s later dream functions something like Anchises’s prophecy—as knowledge that will have been confirmed but remains for now of dubious provenance.

In the meantime, an asymmetry of knowledge results: neither Adam nor the reader has any direct access to Eve’s experience. Yet this ending allows the reader to imagine that Adam and Eve’s marriage will be a true conversation. Their individual knowledge must converge on truth while remaining varied or even imperfect. *Paradise Lost* has already offered a memorable case in which Adam’s and Eve’s knowledge of past events conflicts: the two have articulated conspicuously different accounts of their initial union. This earlier pattern of repetition with a difference had suggested latent unhappiness, with Adam softening the force of Eve’s recalcitrance. By the end, however, Milton leads the reader to imagine that the differences in Adam’s and Eve’s knowledge will generate conversations that do not amount to repetition or disagreement but rather mutually enriching ideas about the redemption to come.

Vida’s and Milton’s divergent versions of triumph over delay relate differently to the *foedus* as a vehicle of closure. Whereas Virgil makes marriage a formal component of the agreement that promises closure, Vida further distinguishes the redemptive covenant from the marital context it temporarily occupies. In Book 3, Joseph testifies how reluctant he had been in marrying Mary; the feeling had been mutual. Their union is urged by Mary’s mother Anna, who is inspired by a furor that recalls that of the Cumaean Sibyl. When Anna seizes Joseph’s hand, Joseph seems to be the Aenean hero who learns to stop delaying the divine will (see 189-204). Yet during an awkward, sexless first night of marriage, a supernatural voice warns Joseph to preserve his wife’s virginity. Joseph proposes to Mary new terms: they should live as father and daughter and thus preserve the chains of sacred marriage (3.247). Yet Vida never refers to these *vincla* of marriage as a *foedus.* The Incarnation, by contrast, effects an internal restoration of the original covenant binding timelessness and temporality. Joseph describes how he first encountered Mary, sitting motionless amidst clouds emanating sunlight, after she had been impregnated by God. Mary explains how an illuminated cloud had descended on her and a whirlwind diffused omnipotent force throughout her body. Divine power and immediacy converge with natural process: the cloud of obscurity and the light of truth operate together. Christ’s conception thus confers upon him the future...
ability to dispel the shadows of untruth in the twinkling of an eye. To describe her contact with God, Mary invokes a simile: “as when secreto naturae foedere [by a secret covenant of nature] the earth conceives and covertly grows fertile with a varied foetus [birth]” (389-90). The pun on foetus and foedus recurs to suggest that through Mary, typologically the second Eve, God begins to undo the effects of sin.

Such secrecy suggests that the immediate truth requires an unfolding awareness; Joseph emerges as a figure for delayed human understanding of the truth. When Joseph first sees a beatific Mary, he thinks she resembles a simulacrum and is terrified by the marvelous image before him (268, 277). Even after hearing Mary’s narrative, Joseph remains skeptical; once he is fully convinced, Joseph trails behind his pregnant wife as an obedient venerator (3.516-18). Joseph does retain some patriarchal privileges. Speaking to Pilate, he echoes Anchises’s underworld prophecy: “Already now [iam tunc] the Caspian realms tremble at the responses of their prophets” (508). Yet Joseph’s iam tunc lacks the prophetic quality of Anchises’s message; the truth has already arrived in Christ. Whereas Anchises relates to the future Augustus as both patriarch and prophet, Joseph’s status as the head of his marriage is revealed by Augustus to be but a political and practical function. After Augustus calls for a census, Joseph literally catches up with his wife, as the two walk pariter (side by side) into the only lodging they can find in Bethlehem (554). Even such a limited heroism is short-lived; after his testimony to Pilate concludes in Book 3, Joseph is virtually absent from the narrative.

In Paradise Lost, Eve surmounts her narcissism by affirming her proto-Marian role: “Such favour I unworthy am vouchsafed, / By me the promised seed shall all restore” (12.622-23). Milton confers upon Eve a full dignity—she echoes the patriarch Anchises and will not be like the lost wife Creusa—only so that she can save Adam from uxoriousness of the sort that Vida’s Joseph exhibits. In the Christiad, Vida offers one other case in which the husband lags behind his wife’s mysterious knowledge. Pilate’s wife warns him not to have Christ executed. In Vida’s telling, Pilate’s wife narrates the contents of her portentous dream, which includes an explicit admonition from a divine voice. Pilate immediately accepts the dream as truth. Yet if this dream fosters unanimous agreement, it also reveals the husband’s powerlessness. When Pilate utters, “In me nulla mora est,” he concedes his inability to delay the Jewish authorities further; “let him die [moriat] condemned falsely of crimes,” Pilate adds (5.358). As Christ is sacrificed, Pilate becomes the victim of delay by being unable to follow the truth revealed to his wife. For Milton’s Adam and Eve, by contrast, unanimity is affirmed when Eve expresses her lack of delay. Eve’s dream remains unspoken but it can thereby engender loving conversation. Unlike Vida, Milton does not narrate a consummatum est that conclusively overcomes delay and underwrites certainty. Miltonic heroism does not occur in death or even in the Resurrection but rather within quotidian life.

Conclusion

Vida and Milton position themselves differently as Christian poets of epic delay. In Book 3 of the Christiad, the hospitable Simon emerges as a bard in the line of Homer’s Demodocus and Virgil’s Iopas. During the Passover feast, Simon sings the Exodus story. Following Homeric and Virgilian precedent, Vida does
not quote Simon’s song but rather describes it in the third person. A revealing ambiguity arises as Simon sings of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. “Nulla mora est,” Vida writes, and then describes the effects of Moses’s rod striking the earth again (2.620). It is unclear whether the lack of delay characterizes Moses’s action or Simon’s seamless narration of it. This ambiguity is meaningful within Vida’s Christian typology. As a Jewish poet-figure, Simon is identified or conflated with Moses; even if Simon occupies a privileged position, he must be relegated to an overshadowed past. Vida, by contrast, belongs to the Christian future. In the final book, in contrast to the description of Simon’s Exodus story, Vida directly quotes the angels’ hymn, which attributes the power to divide the sea to God himself and makes no mention of Moses. In the same book, the Father describes to the Son the new order of truth. This divine prophecy mentions not only the privilege of Italy within Christendom but more specifically the walls of Cremona, Vida’s birthplace (6.889).

Milton signals a different relationship to Moses and to the Old Testament. *Paradise Lost* invokes the same muse who inspired Moses, “[t]hat shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed, / In the beginning how the heavens and earth / Rose out of chaos” (1.8-10). Milton repeats Moses’s narrative, albeit with a fuller awareness of Christian truth; Milton thus identifies or competes with the first shepherd. Whereas Vida occupies the new regime of truth that Christ has established heroically, Milton arrogates for himself some of the labors involved in overcoming delay. In the invocation to Book 9, Milton describes himself as a conduit for the heavenly muse, who visits him “slumbering” to inspire his “un-premeditated verse.” Yet Milton also describes the delay he has endured in his own poetic biography: “Since first this subject for heroic song / Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late” (23-26). It is difficult not to feel, despite the literal meaning, that some of the heroism belonging to the poem is meant to accrue to the poet. Milton has already described himself as writing in the midst of “evil days,” “with dangers compassed round” (7.25-27). The existence of the poem bears witness to the poet’s victory over his belatedness.

Eve’s volition is an important vehicle by which Milton realizes his deferred poetic ambitions. The conjugal narrative of *Paradise Lost* fulfills the need—expressed by a younger Milton in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*—for a hermeneutics based on charity rather than “the meere element of the Text” (*CPW* 2: 236). Milton had argued that, read in the right way, Genesis describes marriage as instituted for mutual comfort rather than for reproduction. *Paradise Lost* details the tenuous but crucial possibility of such love; as Jason P. Rosenblatt demonstrates, Milton attempts a largely non-typological rewriting of Genesis to locate the viable grounds for love and growth within Edenic life (see especially 12-70). Eve’s dream emerges as the unnarrated counterpart of Milton’s epic. Eve’s understanding of her own reproductive future enables her to embrace marriage even in a fallen world. Such inspired self-understanding, however, requires an ineffable core of faith if not an outright male fantasy of female satisfaction.

This nested relationship between Milton’s and Eve’s overcoming of delay reveals additional facets of the famously complex gender politics of *Paradise Lost*. More specifically, uses of the rhetoric of delay reveal an oscillation between what is celebrated and what is denounced. In the *Aeneid*, the rhetoric of delay emerges at the intersection of gender politics and politics more broadly conceived. In Book 2, Aeneas recounts the persuasiveness of Simon after he is captured by the
Trojans. “But why do I repeat in vain these unwelcome things? / And why do I delay you?” Sinon asks to entice his captors to heed his lies about the Trojan horse (101-02). In Book 4, Dido adapts this very language. Despairing of Aeneas’s imminent departure, Dido exclaims, “Why do I delay?” (325). Dido’s rhetorical question serves as an emotional appeal or, at least, as an attempt to gain a bit more “empty time” with Aeneas (433). Later, Deiphobus’s shade in the underworld promises to restore integrity to the rhetoric of delay. “Why do I delay?” Deiphobus asks in the midst of his own version of Troy’s fall (6.528). In this case, Deiphobus truly has no intention of delaying Aeneas. When the Sibyl admonishes him for taking too much time, Deiphobus hastily steps away even as he speaks his apologetic farewell [“et in verbo vestigia torsit”] (546). Yet Deiphobus’s undelaying honesty is of a piece with his misogyny. He blames Helen for the fall of Troy and for his own demise, sarcastically referring to her as that “noted wife [egregia coniunx]” (5.523). Deiphobus contradicts the lesson that Aeneas relates in Book 2: Venus teaches that it is not Helen but rather the will of the gods that has brought about Troy’s downfall (594-623).

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton presents Eve as the original *egregia coniunx*—in both ironic and sincere senses, as she helps to bring about the Fall but becomes a conduit of grace. From the opening of the epic, Milton casts Satan—or, more accurately, the infernal serpent—as a source of causation that partially deflects blame from Eve. When Satan deceives Eve through the form of the serpent, he deploys a false rhetoric of delay. As the serpent prepares his final salvo in the temptation, he mimics a classical orator who “ere the tongue, / Sometimes in height began, as no delay / Of preface brooking through his zeal of right” (9.674-76). Eve does, of course, share culpability. In her fallen state, she deploys her version of the rhetoric of delay to entrap Adam (“Hast thou not wondered, Adam, at my stay?”). At the same time, however, this attempt at entrapment eventually leads to a necessary reconciliation. In the final books, as I have argued, Milton recuperates temporal delay, spatial wandering, as well as human error in such a way that Adam and Eve’s joint departure serves as an optimistic conclusion to the epic.

Yet this conclusion says nothing about the real content of Adam and Eve’s marriage after leaving Eden. Despite Eve’s final declaration, the reader can only expect (and hope) that she will at times disagree or clash with Adam in postlapsarian marriage. If the poem nonetheless achieves a successful narrative closure, it does so through a silent substitution of reproduction for love. *Paradise Lost* joins Milton’s divorce tracts in distinguishing reproduction from spiritually beneficial love, yet the poem ends by implicitly offering procreation as the evidence of a successful marriage. As readers, we only know that Adam and Eve’s postlapsarian marriage must have succeeded, in some sense, because they eventually reproduced. The conclusive proof lies not only in the birth of the Son of God, but also in our very existence: in Eve is no delay so that readers can believe (or fantasize) that they ultimately originate out of love rather than mere physical reproduction. When Eve echoes Anchises, she reveals how Miltonic love still retains a reproductive core even if that core is no longer as avowedly patriarchal. Milton can only secure a satisfying conclusion through a conjugal form of closure by refocusing the scale of epic teleology onto the individual subject. Milton’s conclusion invites the reader to overcome narcissistic satisfaction in his or her own existence through a different kind of narcissistic projection—of projecting conjugal love back through the channels of human reproduction to its very origin.

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Milton’s poetics of delay looks ahead as well as to the past, it does so to reveal how politically charged literary forms would have to develop (and must continue to develop) new ways to relate the past to the future, love to reproduction, and familial bonds to individual freedom.

Swarthmore College

NOTES

1 All quotations of *Paradise Lost* are from Fowler’s edition.

2 All quotations of the *Aeneid* are from Fairclough and Goold’s edition. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Latin are my own.

3 All quotations of the *Christiad* are from Gardner’s edition. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Latin are my own.

4 My argument concerning the distinction between love and reproduction in Milton’s poetry has been informed by Lee Edelman’s critique of reproductive futurism as a defining impulse in present-day political life (*No Future*). Edelman has also turned to *Hamlet* as revealing the tragic state of the child in discourses of reproductive futurity (“Against Survival”).

5 For instances of *haud mora*, see *Aeneid* 3.207, 548, 5.140,749, 6.177, 7.156, 10.153, 11.713, and 12.506. For instances of *nec mora*, see 5.368, 639, 6.40, 10.308, and 12.338. Virgil uses the full refrain “*nec mora, nec requies*” at 5.458 and 12.553. Uses of these phrases intensify around the funeral games for Anchises in Book 5, which feature simulacra of warfare, as well the battle scenes in the final books.

6 For more extensive readings of this famous episode, see DuRocher 85-93, Green 23-51, Kerrigan and Braden 191-218, Kilgour 165-228, and McColley 74-85.

7 In the Vulgate, Christ offers the self-identification as a reason why the disciples should see and touch his limbs (*quia ipse ego sum*). For Vida, this powerful tautology stands as a syntactically detached statement of the truth of Christ’s divinity.

8 Vida invokes the contractual term *commercia* to suggest the undesirability of sexual relations. Mary explains that she had long been inspired to preserve her virginity and to flee commerce with men (3.354). Vida uses this term only on one other occasion in the poem. On the night of his arrest, Christ speaks bitterly to Judas Iscariot: “This is, indeed, hardly the *commercia* I struck with you previously” (2.800). Mary’s later use of the word aligns sexual congress with this kind of lesser contract between two parties. The marriage between Joseph and Mary is sanctified only to the extent that it makes this kind of *commercia* unnecessary.

WORKS CITED


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