

**DEAD LEAVES: ILLUSTRATIONS OF
THE GENEALOGY OF THE EPIC POEM**

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Given the nature of my argument, it seems indispensable for me to acknowledge at least a few of my own literary debts. Anyone who has read the work of Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom will recognize how deeply and pervasively this lecture has been influenced by them.

All translations are my own.

Poems, like people, have parents--and grandparents--and a whole remote ancestry of other poems to which they owe their own begetting. Though poets may try to set themselves up as a second deity, creating from nothingness with perfect power and freedom, still the poems they make bear ancestral markings and acknowledge their indebtedness. Each spring growth of foliage seems to remake the whole world anew; but each leaf is of a kind--a larger family--and also has more particular origins. The leaves fall and die, but not before they transmit something of themselves to their offspring. So too the leaves of a book, pages traced vein-like with lines of verse, take part in this cycle of begetting. Poems, too, can die to the world, although not exactly as leaves or people do. Some poets claim to have made the most permanent of objects, more enduring than bronze or monuments of stone, exempt from the ravages of time. Such claims are typically written in dead languages; or in any case they must have for us a quaint, antique sound. We know better: Words are winged, and if in their flight they fall on barren soil, nothing dies as fast. Their only chance for survival, for immortality, lies in their power to propagate.

In the Homeric No-man's Land, the space between the two armies, ... the Achaian hero Diomedes son of Tydeus meets Glaukos of Lycia, a Trojan ally. Diomedes has just gotten away with assaulting two of the immortal gods, despite a rebuke from Apollo; but now he grows cautious. He is not willing to join battle with another divinity, he says, so he prudently inquires about Glaukos' identity and origins. Both the question and the caution that prompts it are surprising to us: Diomedes has been busily slaughtering scores of others for some time now without

any such scruple or ceremony. In his aristeia, his finest hour on the battlefield, he has shown a strength that transcends human limitations, and it is the desire to defeat those limitations that makes men fight at all--so that their glory may be a song for men to come. Yet now, oddly, Diomedes feels hemmed in by his mortality. His strange moment of pensiveness in the midst of the battle prompts his question to Glaukos, and the answer at first shows the same mood of quiescence:

“ Τυδείδη μεγάθυμε, τίη γενεὴν ἐρεῶναι;
οἷη περ φύλλων γενεή, τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν.
φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ’ ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ θ’ ὕλη
τηλεθώσα φύει, ἔαρος δ’ ἐπιγίγνεται ὥρη·
ὡς ἀνδρῶν γενεὴ ἢ μὲν φύει ἢ δ’ ἀπολήγει.
εἰ δ’ ἐθέλεις καὶ ταῦτα δαήμεναι, ὄφρ’ ἐὺ εἰδῆς
ἡμετέρην γενεήν, πολλοὶ δὲ μὴ ἄνδρες ἴσασιν

"Great son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation?
Like to the generation of leaves is that of men.
The leaves are dashed to the ground by the wind, but then the wood
Burgeoning brings forth others, and the time of spring returns.
So with the generations of men: One blossoms, another dies.
Yet if you wish even so to ask and learn the facts
About my family stock, it is known by many men..."

--Iliad VI.145-151

Glaukos too seems to be oddly conscious of human insignificance.

In his simile of the leaves, the chiasitic order of presentation suggests a difference of emphasis between the life story of the leaves and that of men. The leaves are first dashed to the ground, but then the wood brings forth more. New life here follows death; while in the one line devoted to human affairs the generations of men first bloom and then die. Syntactically the word ἀπολήγει gives the line a kind of abruptness, since it here lacks its more usual complementary genitive or participle. In sound, however, it drifts away into a kind of dying fall, with the repetition of the long ā sound in ἢ δ' ἀπολήγει . The tone is melancholy

and detached. We might even suspect Glaukos of being afraid of Diomedes and resigned to his own imminent death; certainly he has good reason to be, given what we have seen of Diomedes' prowess. But the sentiment conveyed by the similitude of the leaves goes beyond either bitterness or quiescence: It has a kind of noble, philosophic serenity that makes the passage seem detachable from its context. In a sixteenth-century edition of the poem there might be a little picture of a hand in the margin, with an index finger pointing out the portable sententia. There is a grandeur-in-misery here in being able to be aware of such things; like Pascal's thinking reed Glaukos seems to be finding his dignity in self-knowledge. So the shift is especially jarring to us when in the next line, Glaukos says in effect: "But if you really want to know, my family has a proud history." And then he is off into an exciting account of the noble feats of his grandfather Bellerophon.

In like manner, we the audience are emotionally whiplashed by the peculiar ending of the episode. Diomedes announces in tones of delight that he and Glaukos are ξένοι, guest-friends, by virtue of their forbears' friendly relationship, and he proposes a separate peace: He and Glaukos will each find other men to kill; with each other they will exchange armor in token of comradeship. The two men clasp hands, and we share in their gladness. Here in the midst of the welter of warlike, self-aggrandizing appetites is an island of sublime, heroic good will. Here past friendships mean more than present frenzy. But we are sadly jolted by the author's last words in recounting the episode:

But Zeus son of Kronos stole Glaukos' wits away,
for he exchanged with Diomedes his armor
of gold for bronze, for nine oxen's worth a hundred!

So much for the timeless claims of guest-friendship. Just like Glaukos when he proceeds to recite his genealogy, Diomedes returns abruptly to the self-assertive world of present needs and desires.

Perhaps we can better understand the back-and-forth movement of this episode by returning to the image of the leaves and asking the following odd question: Why does Homer choose to compare men in their generations to leaves specifically? One immediate answer is that he is putting in the mouth of Glaukos something very like a pun: τὸ φύλλον (with an acute accent and two lambdas) meaning "leaf" is very similar in sound to τὸ φύλον (with a circumflex accent and one lambda), meaning "tribe, race, stock, a group of people with a common origin." From this latter word comes our Latinate English "phylum," used in biological classification. The word for "leaf" seems to come from the ancient word φλέω, "to teem with abundance," while the word for "tribe" is descended from φύω, "to bring forth, produce, beget, generate." It is hard to doubt that the two roots are related, if not united, somewhere in their Indo-European past. So Glaukos seems to say jokingly, "Son of Tydeus, why do you ask me about my γενεή my family stock? The family stocks of men (φύλα) are dashed to the ground by the wind..." Only now, in listening, do we realize that the other word, φύλλα, was meant.

But apart from its wit, the connection is very apt. We need not ask of a man's individual lineage, for men are as multitudinous and as faceless as leaves on the trees. Yet Glaukos does go on, proudly, to give his genealogy; men, like leaves, may be many but they are not all the same: They come in kinds, preserving important distinctions. This opposition of multitude to orderly variation is shown in another Homeric use of the pun on φύλλα, in Book II of the Iliad. Nestor

publicly advises Agamemnon:

κρίν' ἀνδρας κατὰ φύλα, κατὰ φρήτρας, Ἀγάμεμνον,
ὡς φρήτρη φρήτρηφω ἀρήγη, φύλα δὲ φύλοις.
εἰ δέ κεν ὡς ἔρξης καὶ τοὶ πείθωνται Ἀχαιοί,
γνώσῃ ἔπειθ' ὅς θ' ἡγεμόνων κακὸς ὅς τέ νυ λαῶν
ἦδ' ὅς κ' ἐσθλὸς ἔησι· κατὰ σφέας γὰρ μαχέονται·

"Marshal your men by tribes [φύλα], by clans, Agamemnon,
so that clan may help clan, and tribe help tribe [φύλα δὲ φύλοις].
If you do this, and if the Achaians obey you,
you'll know then which of your leaders and men is a coward,
and which is worthy, each group fighting as a unit."

(II.362-6)

In this passage the word φύλα is used three times in the space of
two lines, giving it a memorable emphasis. Nestor's advice is taken,
and a bare hundred lines later we hear this:

ἔσταν δ' ἐν λειμῶνι Σκαμανδρίφ ἀνθεμόεντι
μυρίοι, ὄσσα τε φύλλα καὶ ἀνθεα γίγνεται ὥρη.

They stood in the flowering meadow of Scamander,
countless, as leaves and flowers blooming in season.

(II.467-8)

And later in the same book of the poem, the goddess Iris, disguised
as Priam's son Polites, has this to say to the Trojan assembly:

ἦ μὲν δὴ μάλα πολλὰ μάχας εἰσήλυθον ἀνδρῶν,
ἀλλ' οὐ πω τοιούδε τοσόνδε τε λαὸν ὄπωπα·
λίην γὰρ φύλλοισιν ἰοικότες ἢ ψαμάθοισιν
ἔρχονται πεδίοιο μαχησόμενοι προτὶ ἄστυ.

"Indeed, I have gone many times into manly battle,
but never yet saw such a host, so many.
For they look most like leaves, or the sands of the sea
as they come to the plain to fight against our city."

(II.798-801)

Thus in a short space we see these two near-homophonic words used to
balance off the faceless multitude of the Achaian forces, like leaves
of the forest, as seen from without, against the orderly distinction
in their arrangement by clans, as seen from within.

The simile of the leaves carries within it another pair of opposed, yet complementary qualities. Glaukos' speech to Diomedes seems to invoke the cyclical recurrence of the leaves from one spring season to the next. If we ignore distinctions among individual leaves or generations of them, it would seem that the generality of leaves is immortal, at least in Diotima's sense of immortality through successive begettings and substitutions (Symposium 208 a). Yet leaves as individuals are proverbially light and fragile, playthings of the wind, and nothing can be more final than their individual death, as Achilles reminds us:

ἀλλ' ἔκ τοι ἐρέω καὶ ἐπὶ μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμοῦμαι·
ναὶ μὰ τὸδε σκῆπτρον, τὸ μὲν οὐ ποτε φύλλα καὶ ὄζους
φύσει, ἐπεὶ δὴ πρῶτα τομῆν ἐν ὄρεσσι λέλοιπεν,
οὐδ' ἀναθλήσει· περὶ γὰρ ῥά ἐ χαλκὸς ἔλεψε
φύλλα τε καὶ φλοιόν· νῦν αὐτὲ μὴ νῆες Ἀχαιῶν
ἐν παλάμῃς φορέουσι δικασπόλοι, οἳ τε θέμιστας
πρὸς Διὸς εἰρύαται·

"But this I say, and swear a great oath to it:
By this staff, which will sprout no leaves or shoots
ever again, since it left its stump in the hills,
nor bloom anew, for the bronze blade has stripped it
of leaves and bark, and now the Achaians' sons
bear it in hand as judges while they uphold
the laws ordained by Zeus..."

(I.233-9)

When we look at the leaves from the outside, ignoring their several particularities, they seem to go on forever. In choosing to look from the outside, we gain a kind of god-like detachment, but we lose the urgent immediacy, the specialness of a particular set of leaves-- the cutting of the tree up in the mountains, the cruel stripping of the bronze blade. So too if we look at the lives of human beings in the largest spatial and temporal context, all single human destinies merge into the continuing story of the race. Thus we can seem to cheat our own mortality, but the eternal life we gain is a kind of living death;

in becoming part of an anonymous multitude we lose what is specifically valuable in human life. We become vegetables, machines for eating and begetting. So we must seem to the gods, as we learn from another of Homer's uses of the emblem of the leaves. In Book XXI of the Iliad, Apollo answers Poseidon's challenge thus:

“ ἐννοσίγαι’, οὐκ ἄν με σαόφρονα μυθήσαιο
ἔμμεναι, εἰ δὴ σοί γε βροτῶν ἔνεκα πτολεμίζω
δειλῶν, οἳ φύλλοισιν εὐκότες ἄλλοτε μὲν τε
ζαφλεγέες τελέθουσιν, ἀρούρης καρπὸν ἔδοντες,
ἄλλοτε δὲ φθινύθουσιν ἀκήριοι. ἀλλὰ τάχιστα
πανώμεσθα μάχης· οἳ δ’ αὐτοὶ δηριάσθων.”

"Earthshaker, you would say that I was senseless if I were to fight with you for the sake of mortals, those wretched ones, who now like leaves are full of blooming life, feeding upon earth's fruits, but then droop into death. So let us now quickly leave off our fight; let them decide it."

(XXI.462-7)

If on the other hand we emphasize a different aspect of the leaves, their individual fragility and the finality of their passing, we are led inward, into an autumnal landscape of pathos and regret. So too in the story of humanity, a focus on the particular identities and valuable uniqueness of single people goes along with an awareness of their inevitable doom. This is the view we call "tragic"-- and in daring to look in this way we assert our own dignity, our capacity for heroism and self-knowledge. As Glaukos returns to recount his own particular lineage, as Diomedes returns to the world of private appetites, war and thievery, so throughout the Iliad we return constantly to the pathos of the concrete. In this poem it is the death of the leaves that is finally the more important. Think in contrast of the Odyssey, with its emphasis on what endures and is reborn, with its great image of the bed rooted in the olive tree.

But the power of the simile of the leaves is that it holds in unresolved counterpoise both views of human experience. Socrates claims

that the same man can write both tragedy and comedy; I claim that Homer is here, with a kind of perspectivism, writing both at the same time. In its generality, the simile seems to move above the level of the poem's battlefield narrative, making us cast our eyes forward and backward in a grand synoptic gesture of inclusion. But the inclusiveness would not be complete if we lost the particular diachronic context from which the simile arises. It is this inclusiveness that characterizes the poems we call "epics." Though the human stories epics tell are fixed at a particular point in history, no human story of any consequence can be complete unless it is located in the larger world of space and time that the gods inhabit. Spatially epics go up to heaven and down into the underworld; temporally they go forward and backward, even to the beginning and end of human history. Yet they retain a constant rootedness, a grounding in the singularity of the human actions they tell; hence the tradition that epics begin and even end in the "middle of things." Furthermore, they have sometimes been thought of as constituting an encyclopedia of all human wisdom, a compendium of all the lores and know-hows of different trades and callings, not to mention ethical teachings, cosmologies and religious revelation. (This view of the epic poem as a repository of all knowledge helps us to understand Plato's treatment of the poets in the Ion and the Republic.) In the most extreme case, a poem like the Aeneid could be used for divination-- the book opened blindly and a finger pointing to a randomly chosen passage. The text so chosen would foretell the future or give practical advice, as many believed in the Middle Ages. It is hardly possible to imagine such a practice applied to the texts of the great lyric or dramatic poems. The sheer size and scope of the epic itself, as well as that of the subjects it takes for its province, invites us to treat it as

an inspired utterance or sacred book-- perhaps even as a domain coterminous with Nature itself. So the writing of an epic is an act of enormous audacity, because such a poem aspires to swallow up all possible experience and hold it in the fixity of a human artifice. It is the binding of Proteus, or to vary the metaphor, it is a kind of rival Creation. And yet these leaves too must die.

A new generation of leaves, descended from these Homeric ancestors, springs forth in Book VI of the Aeneid. Aeneas and the Sibyl see the ghostly images of the dead, gathered at the shore of the infernal river:

huc omnis turba ad ripas effusa ruebat,
matres atque viri defunctaque corpora vita
magnanimum heroum, pueri innuptaeque puellae,
impositique rogis iuvenes ante ora parentum:
quam multa in silvis autumnii frigore primo
lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto
quam multae glomerantur aves, ubi frigidus annus
trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis.
stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum,
tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.

Here a whole crowd came streaming to the banks,
mothers and men, the forms with life all spent
of great-souled heroes, boys and girls unmarried,
Youths put on pyres before their parents' eyes:
As many as in the woods, in fall's first cold
leaves drop, or landward from the raging deep
as many birds gather, when the season's frost
drives them across the sea to sunny lands.
They all stood praying to be first across,
and stretched out hands in love of the farther shore.

(VI.305-14)

The leaves occupy only a line and a half, and the movement of the verse dramatically whirls them away into the following companion simile of the birds. This is the effect of the striking elision of the last syllable of the Latin word for "leaves," folia, after two short syllables with light, voiceless consonants at the beginning of the word: Lapsa
cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto. Although the phrase ad

terram - "to the ground" or "toward land"-- belongs formally to the second simile, it serves metrically here as the destination of the leaves' swift motion. In this brief picture we feel powerfully the ephemeral lightness of the leaves, pathetically helpless against the driving wind of Virgil's hexameters.

The passage is impressive enough in itself, drawing as it does upon Virgil's pictorial use of rhythm. But I want to claim much more: The specific power of the passage comes from our consciousness of the allusion to its Homeric antecedent in Iliad VI. At this point, remembering the well-marked dualities in Homer's treatment of the leaves, we expect a second view of them, returning in the spring after the wind has dashed them to the ground. Of course we don't get it, and our expectations are powerfully frustrated. But our continued awareness of Homer's leaves leads us further, to meditate upon the reasons for this departure from the precedent. In the first place, Glaukos spoke as he stood in the upper world, on a field of men living or dying; the Virgilian leaves however are compared to the shades of humans already dead. By setting his adaptation of the leaf-simile in the underworld, Virgil reminds us of his own spirituality, a spooky otherworldliness in marked contrast with Homer's rootedness in the natural rhythms of this world. Secondly, we realize that the Homeric completion of the simile in the more upbeat view of the leaves' renewal does have its own surrogate here in Virgil's recension of it: The birds, in Virgil's second simile, are a sort of phantom stand-in for the returning leaves of spring.

Superficially the point of similarity seems to be only the multitude of fallen leaves or of birds gathering on the ground: We had not thought death had undone so many. Of course there is a pictorial similarity too: The birds are leaf-like in appearance, tossed and buffeted by

the wintry winds as they flutter to the ground. But these birds are also gathering for a new flight, a migration across the water into the sunny warmth of their winter home, probably in North Africa. In this respect they refer us back to the souls of the dead, waiting to cross the Styx. But the crucial point, distinguishing them from the leaves, is that these same birds will presumably return northward with the following spring-- not a new generation, as with Homer's leaves, but these birds themselves. It seems clear that we are being referred forward as well, to Anchises' Pythagorean account of the transmigration and reembodiment of souls, later in Aeneid VI. The sunny lands of the south recall the blessed, luminous groves of Elysium, where some fortunate souls are sent after they "hang suspended in the empty winds" or "purge their crimes in the vast flood of the sea" (VI.740-1, where gurgite vasto is a verbal echo of gurgite ab alto in line 310 of our passage). Virgil seems to be suggesting, in specific, self-conscious contradistinction to Homer, that a kind of personal immortality is possible, even if only for a few: not a derived "immortality" through the survival of one's offspring, but an enduring self, preserving one's identity and abiding in the land of the blest. This happy prospect might lighten our prevailing view of the human landscape of labor, mutability and death; but the few who are to enjoy it must meet very stringent (and very Roman) ethical standards. The melancholy longing felt by the others, the fallen leaves, is what Virgil returns to at the end of our passage, with the sound effects of the justly famous line:

tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.

So far I've been arguing that Virgil's revision of the leaf-simile works in a kind of counterpoint with our memory of its Homeric source. There is even a reminiscence of Homer in Virgil's use of rhythm. I

have already described how the elision at the end of the word folia hurries us from the dying leaves to the second simile of the birds.

Let's look again at the movement of Homer's line:

— ˘ ˘ | — ˘ ˘ | — ˘ ˘ | — ˘ ˘ // — ˘ ˘ | — —

φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ' ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέεε, ἄλλα δὲ θ' ὕλη
 τηλεθώωσα φύεε.

The shortening of the diphthong, long by nature, at the end of the word χέεε is a metrical effect known as "epic correption." Here, atypically, the correption occurs at a bucolic diaeresis-- a pause after the fourth whole foot of the line. We would like to linger at such a marked break in this breathless-sounding, conspicuously dactylic line, but the shortening of χέεε snatches us up and hurries us along, with marked enjambment, into the next generation of the leaves. The rhythmic force of this device is exactly analogous to that of Virgil's elision; and it comes at the analogous moment in the development of the similitude. Our feeling both of the correspondence between the two passages, and of the differences, is thereby sharpened.

Perhaps I should apologise for dwelling on such small details in these Greek and Latin texts. I wanted to illustrate the degree of intimate familiarity that Virgil must have had with Homer's poem, and that he also expects from the ideal reader of his own revisionist version. We all know about the large-scale structural ways in which the Aeneid subsumes both the Iliad and the Odyssey: There are the references to the first lines of both Homeric poems in Virgil's first line; there are the plot parallels with the Odyssey in Aeneid I-VI and with the Iliad in VII-XII; there are the close resemblances of certain characters (Turnus, for instance, to Achilles sometimes, and other times to Hector). But such detailed imitation, allusion and pointed variation as I have tried to show goes much further: It amounts to a constant pressure, or presence of the older author in the newer.

Virgil-- surely one of the most self-conscious poets who ever lived-- cannot help but acknowledge his indebtedness to his master; at the same time, by varying the allusion he shows his authenticity and independence. To be writing an epic at all means to be working in a certain tradition, to be a "son of Homer" and to admit it. In one sense this admission also grants Homer's implicit claim to have created a second world in the vastness of his artifice. Pope made this point memorably in writing of Virgil:

When first young Maro in his boundless Mind
A work t'outlast Immortal Rome design'd,
Perhaps he seem'd above the Critick's Law,
And but from Nature's Fountains scorn'd to draw:
But when t'examine ev'ry Part he came,
Nature and Homer were, he found, the same.

(Essay on Criticism, 130-5)

But if this should be the last word, then epic would be a Titan that devours its own children. How can Virgil or anyone else write a second epic with similar aspirations of inclusiveness? A truly successful epic would exhaust the conditions for the writing of another such poem. The very power of Homer's original epic forces Virgil at once to include it and to depart from it, to struggle against his own roots.

The particular qualities of epic poems make it especially hard to write in a tradition, and make unavoidable the rivalry between any single epic poet and his predecessors. I have already mentioned the cosmic inclusiveness of epic, its encyclopedic quality that seeks to leave no subject matter remaining for any successor. Though epic poems try to embody the whole of human experience and human history, each one does so from a particular point of view. For epics tend to be "national," to recast history in terms of the destiny of a particular nation or culture. So to acknowledge one's epic predecessor is to participate in a rivalry of cultures-- Rome versus Greece, say, or Christian versus Pagan. Even more problematically, the poet is not

a mere mouthpiece for one historical or nationalistic world-view. It is true that such a view speaks through him; he is a prophet, speaking for another as the word implies, and the "Muse" is an image of the cosmic providence that seeks, through epic poets, to make itself known to humanity. But the poet is also engaged in a heroic act of self-assertion, in daring to take up the task of writing such a work, and as a prophet of his own Muse he speaks for himself. So the family drama of poetic influence, the Oedipal conflict of the poet with his own forbears, is sharpened and magnified by the special demands of the epic tradition.

For Virgil, the solution to this predicament is to incorporate or subsume Homer into his own poetic universe. (It is thus that I can speak of the presence of Homer within the text of Virgil.) His allusion to Homer's leaf-simile, for example, summons up all the specific affect of the passage in Iliad VI, where the leaves are made into a powerfully ambiguous emblem both of the pathos of mortal finitude and of the ways in which the cyclical self-perpetuation of nature transcends that finitude. Virgil, I say, invokes all this; and then by subtly varying it, he goes beyond it, projecting this dual perspective on the natural world into a new dialectic with the realm of the supernatural. So his poem implicitly claims that it contains and supersedes the parent poem. Homer's epic inclusiveness aspired to the swallowing-up of the whole natural world. The Aeneid shares this aspiration but adds to it: In addition to swallowing the primary world of nature, Virgil claims to have swallowed up the secondary "world" of Homer's poem. Thus in the theogony of the epic poem, each newly-generated Titan swallows its parents.

I have said that by its nature epic locates present human actions in a larger historical context; this "epic present" is emphatically

the intersection of past and future. But the heroic act of writing an epic must itself be located in a similar temporal context, with poetic predecessors and successors arranged in a providential order that sets off the magnitude of the present poem. Virgil's poetic self-consciousness brings a second, self-referential story into his narrative: Behind the drama and great labor of the building of Rome there is the drama and the great labor of the building of the Aeneid. Each of these two great actions comes from a Greek precedent which it acknowledges, incorporates and seeks to transcend. Each action also seeks to project itself indefinitely into the future: The perpetual glory of the Roman imperium is to be accompanied by the everlasting fame of Virgil's poem.

But Virgil is sufficiently aware of the necessary mutability of human affairs to entertain a melancholy scepticism about the staying power, both of the empire and of the poem. He expresses his concern about his own poem's posterity by another use of the image of the leaves. In Book III, Helenus prophesies to his kinsman Aeneas about the arrival in Italy:

"Arrived there, when you reach the city of Cumae,
the sacred lakes and whispering woods of Avernus,
you'll find the frenzied seer in her deep cave
who sings the fates, and notes them down on leaves.
The songs the lady writes, she puts in order,
leaf upon leaf, and shuts them in the cavern.
There they remain untouched and in their places.
But when a gentle breeze blows in the door,
the hinges turn, the delicate leaves are scattered;
then as they flutter through the cave, she never
cares to replace them or remake her songs.
Unhelped by Sibyl, visitors hate her halls."

(III. 441-452)

For this reason, when Aeneas comes in Book VI to consult the Sibyl he begs her to sing her prophecies herself, rather than entrusting them to the leaves and making them whirling playthings of the swift winds. He promises to build a temple to Phoebus and Trivia, where

a shrine will be set apart to preserve the Sibyl's written prophecies, with priests as caretakers.

The possessed prophetess, the Sibyl, is here a stand-in for Virgil himself. Like her, he is divinely inspired; and he is our guide into the underworld just as she is for Aeneas. That there is a relationship between the Sibyl and the figure of the poet is also suggested by a verbal correspondence: In her prophecy the Sibyl says

bella, horrida bella,
et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno.

war, savage war
I see ahead, and Tiber foaming blood.

(VI. 86-7)

In Book VII, speaking in his own voice in the new invocation to the Muse, Virgil says

tu vatem, tu, diva, mone. dicam horrida bella,
dicam acies, actosque animis in funera reges.

Oh Goddess, guide your seer! I shall sing savage war
battle-lines, and kings by courage driven to death.

(VII. 41-2)

Here the word vates, "seer" or "prophet," which has been repeatedly used to refer to the Sibyl, is applied to Virgil himself in his capacity of epic poet, and he puts into his own mouth an echo of her own phrase horrida bella, "savage wars." And as Virgil is in some sense the Sibyl, he wonders if his prophetic poem will in the end, like her writings, become a "plaything of the winds." The written word is treacherous, and perhaps any such attempt to arrest the flux of experience in the fixity of human artifice is doomed. Perhaps, as he himself has subsumed and superseded Homer, some new poet will come and swallow up Virgil's poem too. To be thus superseded is not annihilation, but it is a very ambiguous kind of poetic immortality.

It may be that the golden bough itself serves in part as an emblem for the contradictions in Virgil's view of his poetic posterity: The bough is artificial, yet a kind of second nature. It has the durability of metal; yet it can be plucked and then grows again of itself. To the person chosen to receive it, it serves as a ticket of admission to the realm that contains the past, the future, and the ultimate mysteries of human destiny. Yet we remember that it yielded itself only reluctantly even to the hand of Aeneas; and if it chooses to deny itself to you, no violence can harvest its riches. It flashes an eerie glint of gold in the shadowy woods, near the jaws of foul-smelling Avernus; and its metal leaves give off a tinny rattle against the wind.

The dictionary tells us that it was only in late antiquity that the Latin word folium, "leaf," was first used to refer to a sheet of paper or page of a book. As far as I know, the connection between the leaves of the forest and the human artifice of poetry is first made explicitly by the Roman poet Horace, a contemporary and friend of Virgil, in the critical treatise known as the Ars Poetica:

Ut silvae foliis pronos mutantur in annos,
prima cadunt, ita verborum vetus interit aetas,
et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque.
Debemur morti nos nostraque, sive receptus
terra Neptunus classes Aquilonibus arcet
regis opus, sterilisve diu palus aptaque remis
vicinas urbes alit et grave sentit aratrum;
seu cursum mutavit iniquum frugibus amnis,
doctus iter melius: mortalia facta peribunt,
nedum sermonum stet honos et gratia vivax.

When at the year's end forests change their leaves,
The oldest fall first; so with the generations of words:
The former die, the newer bloom like boys.
For we and all things ours are owed to death:
The harbors that we build (a royal task!);
The barren marshes, then a place for boats,
Now drained for plowing, feeding farms nearby;
The dams that bend the river's angry course

And save the crops-- These mortal works shall die,
Nor shall the grace and glory of discourse live.

(Ars Poetica 60-69)

But though this connection had been made, and though Virgil's Sibyl wrote her prophecies on leaves, the word itself probably did not have for Virgil the witty self-reference that its linguistic development, and the predominance of written culture, later made possible. For Dante, the closeness of the related Italian words foglia, "leaf of a tree" and foglio, "page in a book," makes explicit the doubleness of the drama of the leaves. In the primary world of nature, leaves die and others succeed them; in the second, rival nature that is the world of epic poems, what is said to happen out in the woods can also be referred to the successive generations of pages of verse. So Dante's use of the image of the leaves is even more explicitly self-referring, and Dante's poem is even more self-conscious than its predecessors about its context in literary history. It is appropriate, then, that the family drama of Dante's relation to his poetic father, Virgil, is internalized and made explicit within the poem's narrative: Both "Dante" and "Virgil" are characters in a poem written by the first man and pervasively influenced by the second. And their relationship as Dante depicts it certainly reflects the intense ambivalence he feels toward his great forerunner. Virgil is the powerful and beloved guide; but his guidance is fallible and limited in scope-- His pupil will go farther than Virgil can take him. And the most powerful indicator of all is that Virgil finally is a damned soul, one of those who have "lost the good of the intellect." As a denizen of Hell he is made to assist in an extended revisionist reworking of his own Book VI. Whenever a Virgilian passage lies allusively behind, or within Dante's text, the implied claim is that Virgil had an inkling, partial at best,

of the authoritative version we get from the younger poet. The movement is from shadowy types to truth: Virgil went forth into the night, holding a lamp behind him to aid his successors. Dante sees more and knows better, and so now does Virgil-- but too late.

It is in this emotionally charged atmosphere that we see, in the third canto of Inferno, a new generation of the leaves that first grew and died by the River Scamander, on the fields of Troy. Virgil the guide and Dante the pilgrim have come to the banks of the Acheron, where Charon, the steersman of the livid marsh, transports across the water the souls of the damned:

Come d'autunno si levan le foglie
l'una appresso dell'altra, fin che 'l ramo
vede alla terra tutte le sue spoglie,
similmente il mal seme d'Adamo
gittansi di quel lito ad una ad una,
per cenni come augel per suo richiamo.
Così sen vanno su per l'onda bruna
e avanti che sien di là discese,
anche di qua nuova schiera s'auna.

As in the fall the leaves are taken away
Each followed by the next, until the bough
Sees on the ground all its despoilments lie,
In that same way the evil seed of Adam
Hurl themselves from the shoreline, one by one
At signals, like a bird called by its lure.
Thus they embark over the dusky waves,
And even before they land on the other side,
Again on this side a new crowd is gathered.

(III. 112-120)

Dante leaves no doubt that he is alluding to the Virgilian passage we have just examined. The simile comes at the analogous point in the narrative-- an encounter with Charon, a passage over an infernal river into the underworld. Even the second simile of the birds is included: "At signals, like a bird called by its lure." But having drawn Virgil's text into his own poem, Dante proceeds to transform it by a skilful reallocation of emphasis. The extended treatment of

the leaves dwells on the consequence, the result of their fall: "The bough/ Sees on the ground all its despoilments lie." Our first thought is a kind of pity for the tree that has suffered the plundering of its spoils. Virgil gave us the pathos and vulnerability of the leaves themselves, but Dante is here speaking of their source, the tree which is now denuded. Still, the two passages both seem to be portraying passive victims of the force of another. So we are puzzled and disquieted at the way Dante's version continues:

In that same way the evil seed of Adam
Hurl themselves from the shoreline...

The violent contrast between si levan, "are taken away," and gittansi, "hurl themselves," heightened by the reflexive form of both, makes us doubt the aptness of the simile. Our perplexity is increased when we notice a hidden wit in the use of si levan: Levarsi can mean "to raise or lift oneself up" as well as "to be taken away." In anticipation of the moral significance of verticality in the poem, "lifting up" is set in polar opposition to "casting down." Dante is implying that leaf-like souls, unlike Virgil's passive victims, fall by their own choice in an act of deliberate violence.

It is thus fitting that our sympathy is diverted, in Dante's version, from the leaves themselves to the bough of the denuded tree. What is this tree? We probably think first of the forest of the suicides in Canto XIII of Inferno, where both Pier della Vigna and an anonymous Florentine suicide, now turned into a bush, fit the picture of the bereaved plant, deprived of its foliage, staring at the ground. There too the immediate reaction, both ours and the pilgrim's, is pity. But the word spoglie, "despoilments," is used in that canto to refer to the bodies the suicides have cast off by their own act. Along with the pilgrim we must learn the hard lesson that recurs throughout the

Inferno: The justice of God often does not easily accord with our immediate passions of pity and love. Our wills must be shaped anew. The suicides have offered violence to more than themselves, and we must look farther to find the tree from which the damned souls, the leaves, have torn themselves.

In the thirty-second canto of Purgatorio, Dante and Statius are following the great pageant of revelation, including the triumphal car drawn by the Griffin, symbol of the incarnate Christ:

Si passeggiando l'alta selva vota,
colpa di quella ch'al serpente crese,
temprava i passi un' angelica nota.
Forse in tre voli tanto spazio prese
disfrenata saetta, quanto eramo
rimossi, quando Beatrice scese.
Io senti' mormorare a tutti "Adamo";
poi cerchiaro una pianta dispogliata
di foglie e d'altra fronda in ciascun ramo.
La coma sua, che tanto si dilata
piú quanto piú è sù, fora dall' Indi
ne' boschi lor per altezza ammirata.
"Beato se', grifon, che non discindi
col becco d'esto legno dolce al gusto,
poscia che mal si torce il ventre quindi."
Così dintorno a l'albero robusto
gridaron li altri; e l'animal binato:
"Si si conserva il seme d' ogni giusto."

So, passing through the lofty forest, bare
Through fault of her that trusted in the serpent,
The song of an angel kept our steps in time.
As far as in three shots, perhaps, an arrow
Loosed from the bow would fly, so far had we
Moved on our way, when Beatrice descended.
Then from them all I heard a murmur: 'Adam';
And they formed a ring around a tree, despoiled
Of leaves and other foliage in each branch.
Its living tresses widen all the more
As the tree goes higher; even by the Indians
In their great woods, its height would be admired.
"Blessed are you, Griffin, since with your beak
You pluck not from this tree so sweet to taste;
For later on the belly wrenches from it."
Thus circling around the might tree
The others shouted; and the animal twice-born
Cried: "So the seed of all just men is saved."

The Griffin goes on to renew the tree laid bare by the fault of Adam. We can see that the epithet il mal seme d'Adamo, "the evil seed of Adam," in our original passage, was not lightly chosen. These leaves are not generalized symbols of the condition of mortality; they are particular reminders of the human act that originated that condition. The emphasis on "seed" in Inferno III (Cf. III. 104-5), reinforced by sound effects-- similmente il mal seme d'Adamo-- here finds justification. Though the evil seeds ironically bear no fruit, cast on the barren ground of hell, the good seed of Adam is Christ, the first fruits and the seed of all righteousness, repairing the damage wrought by Adam's fall. By his act the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is transformed into the great tree that is an epithet for Heaven in Paradiso XVIII:

l'albero che vive della cima
e frutta sempre e mai non perde foglia.

the tree that lives from its top
and always bears fruit, never losing its leaves. (XVIII. 29-30)

It seems that we have accounted for Dante's adding to his Virgilian source the detail of the tree contemplating its own despoliation. In so doing he turns the falling of the leaves into a typological image of the fall of humanity, and of all nature. Through Christ's saving act, however, the leaves as well as the fruit are restored to the tree, and so the integrity of the restored tree is a kind of image of the Incarnation, the marriage of the human and the divine. These things are known to a Christian through the revelation of Holy Scripture; but Virgil as a Pagan has had no access to scripture, and thus he has departed by the time Dante and Statius see the tree's antitype in the pageant at the end of Purgatorio. Dante the poet's revision of the simile from Aeneid VI shows both the rhetorical power and the spiritual limitations of the older poem.

Another image of this transformation is Dante's use of Virgil's birds. We remember that in the Aeneid the birds seemed almost as passive as the leaves: "the season's frost/ Drives them across the sea." The difference was that the death of the leaves was utterly final and definitive, while the flight of the birds left open the possibility of a cyclical return. Dante takes Virgil's migrating birds and reduces them to one hunting bird, probably a falcon returning to the falconer's lure. Here is a conspicuous revision of Virgil, for whom the points of similarity between leaves and birds were multitude and helpless passivity. Dante's bird is only one, and its passage is a willed act of obedience to a command. Whose command? Virgil himself is made to tell us, in his capacity as guide, in Purgatory. Look up, he tells Dante the pilgrim,

"li occhi rivolgi al logoro che gira
lo rege eterno con le rote magne."
Quale il falcon, che prima a' piè si mira,
indi si volge al grido e si protende
per lo disio del pasto che là il tira;
tal mi fec' io.

"Turn your eyes to the falcon's lure, whirled round
By the Eternal King, with his mighty spheres."
Then like the falcon, who looks first below
Then turns to his master's call, straining ahead
From craving for the food that draws him thither,
Just so was I.

(Purgatorio XIX. 62-67;
Cf. Purg. XIV. 145-7)

When a soul ordained to bliss or to damnation proceeds to its eventual resting place, it resembles the falcon heeding the command of the falconer-- that is, God. But unlike the migratory birds of the Aeneid, this falcon is on a one-way journey, propelled by its own will either for good or for evil. The damned souls which hurl themselves from the shoreline are following their appetites into hell, just as the more blessed falcon of Dante's comparison in Purgatory strains ahead toward the Lord's

supper. Dante's version of the simile implicitly condemns the melancholy quietism of Virgil, who makes Anchises say quisque suos patimur manis, "Each of us endures his shadowy doom." Even the damned souls in the Commedia hurl themselves forward, instead of stretching out their arms in ineffectual longing.

As Virgil revised Homer, Dante revises Virgil. In each case filial piety toward a literary parent causes the imitation; but in each case the imitated model is subverted by implicit criticism. By subsuming the source into his own poem, assimilating it into even small details of the allusive passages in the text, the succeeding poet suggests the incompleteness of the original, now fleshed out by his own still more inclusive epic vision. Virgil's revisionism is sometimes ambivalent: He seems to feel a kind of nostalgia for the simpler, more naturalistic view of history that he finds in Homer's poems, but he knows he lives too late to indulge in it. There has been a tragic fall from naive archaic heroism into the necessity of a political art. The greater self-conscious artificiality of Virgil's poem is in part an implied celebration of purposive human artifice in the building of Rome, but also in part an expression of Virgil's regretful awareness of the human costs of the great enterprise. As we have seen, Virgil's ambivalence emerges in his prospective view of his own poem's posterity. In casting himself as the Sibyl, he appropriates to himself the authority and lasting power of divine inspiration; but in the image of the scattering of Sibyl's leaves he expresses his worry that the inclusiveness and integrity of his poem will be compromised with the passage of time. Virgil knows that when a poem is subjected to the kind of systematic and intimate textual revision that he himself performed upon Homer's work, it suffers a kind of diaspora, a tearing and scattering of the

unified imaginative vision of its creator-poet, wind in the Sibyl's cave. In this Virgil was a true prophet, as we recognize when we consider his treatment in the Commedia.

In contrast, Dante shows greater confidence in his power to subsume his predecessor and to preempt any that might come after him. To some extent this confidence results from his own self-assertive personality; but it is also the confidence of the Christian humanist that his creed is the true, valuable and permanent interpretation of the partial truths of the ancients. In the measure that Heaven is the True City, "that Rome of which Christ is a Roman" (Purg. XXXII.102) which both includes, fulfills and transcends the Rome that Aeneas labored to build, so the journey chronicled by Dante is the true Aeneid. All human descents into the underworld are types of Christ's descent to harrow Hell. All human journeys to beatitude are types of his resurrection and ascension. Thus a literal truth-- the truest of all truths, for Dante-- is incarnated into the ostensible fiction of the narrative of the Commedia. Dante the pilgrim instantiates Christ by dying and rising with him, as the poem's chronological scheme makes clear. (Dante descends into Hell on Good Friday of the year 1300 and emerges on Easter Sunday. See Inf. I.36f., XXXIV.68, 112f. and especially Inf. XXI.112-4.) In the same way Dante the poet claims to provide a kind of incarnation in literary history analogous to Christ's incarnation in real human history. In the complete interpenetration of Dante's mythos and his subject, the word made flesh is made word again, as an organizing principle for experience; and then by the powerful immediacy with which it is made present for us, it is made flesh once again. Christ the Logos is here allegorically a ratio, a master relationship between the human soul and divinity that is replicated in a kind of continuing proportion

by Dante the pilgrim, by Dante the poet in his retelling, and by us, the readers. The unity and incorruptibility of Christ himself serve as a kind of guarantee of the integrity and incorruptibility of Dante's poem. We see this with extraordinary power at the end of the Commedia, where the unity of the creation is imaged as the cohesion of a book of pages bound together:

O abbondante grazia ond' io presunsi
ficcar lo viso per la luce eterna,
tanto che la veduta vi consunsi!
Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume
quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo
che ciò ch' i' dico è un semplice lume.
La forma universal di questo nodo
credo ch' i' vidi, perché più di largo,
dicendo questo, mi sento ch' i' godo.
Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo
che venticinque secoli all' impresa
che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo.

O grace abounding, from which I took heart
To fix my gaze upon the eternal light
So long that I spent all my seeing there!
Within its depth I saw that there was gathered
Bound up by love into a single volume
The scattered pages of the universe:
Substances, accidents and their relations,
As if together fused, in such a way
That what I tell of is a simple light.
The universal form of this complex
I think I saw, because now even more
In telling it, I feel my joy increase.
One instant is to me more Lethe-like
Than twenty-five centuries of oblivion
For Neptune, marvelling at the Argo's shadow.

(Paradiso XXXIII.82-96)

In the phrase "bound up by love into a single volume," the word volume is used wittily to mean both a book and anything turned-- like a sphere, for example. The word is used in this second sense repeatedly in Paradiso (XXIII.112, XXVI.119, XXVIII.14). But the most important preceding use of volume comes in Inferno I, where Dante also pairs

it with amore, "love."

"Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?"
rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.
"O delli altri poeti onore e lume,
vagliami 'l lungo studio e' l grande amore
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore;
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore..."

"Are you that Virgil, then, that famous spring
from which pours forth so great a stream of speech?"
I answered him with shame upon my face.
"O light and honor of all other bards,
Let the great zeal and love avail me now
That long have made me search throughout your volume.
You are my master, my original;
And you alone are he from whom I took
The style whose beauty brings me honor too."

(Inferno I.79-87)

The honorific word volume, applied first to Virgil's work, refers to the epic inclusiveness that allows him to involve and encompass so vast a world within his poem. But its last use in Dante's poem, framing the Commedia at the other end, as it were, shows how much larger a claim he makes for his own volume. The time-honored image of the "Book of the World" is here adapted to two purposes: It expresses the sense of integrity and oneness that Dante the pilgrim perceived in all of creation, with the power of the vision vouchsafed to him in the highest of the heavens; but it also self-referentially implies the power of Dante's poem to convey this same sense, though mediated by language, to his audience. The encyclopedic claims of epic are made literal.

But at the end of the passage there is a sudden reversal:

One instant is to me more Lethe-like
Than twenty-five centuries of oblivion
For Neptune, marvelling at the Argo's shadow.

The all-inclusive power of epic has also been internalized and made contingent on the visionary power and articulateness of the poet.

If his capacity for beatitude proves to be fleeting, as is the common case for living human beings, his volume will be in effect squadernato-- scattered in single pages throughout the universe. Remarkably, however, by locating himself and his own failure of vision within the narrative, Dante asserts the scope and lasting power of the vision that he admittedly fails to depict or even evoke in a lasting way. Unlike Virgil, whose survival and fame seemed to depend on the continuance of an earthly empire, Dante links his own poem to the eternal actuality and truth of God's empire. That he is not able to convey it directly somehow guarantees that it is there. This rhetorical strategy accounts for the great paradox of the last canto of the Commedia: that in the most successful evocation of divine presence in any work of literature, the inexpressible is expressed precisely through a failure to express it. Thus when Dante appropriates Virgil's image of the Sibylline leaves, it has a quietude and sweetness remote from Virgil's disturbing melancholy. Dante is here revising and subsuming not only Virgil's poem but his own:

Qual è colui che somniando vede
che dopo il sogno la passione impressa
rimane, e l'altro alla mente non riede,
cotal son io, ché quasi tutta cessa
mia visione, ed ancor mi distilla
nel cor il dolce che nacque da essa.
Così la neve al sol si disigilla;
così al vento nelle foglie levi
si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.

As is the man who, in his dreaming, sees
And then, the dream past, still its imprinted power
Remains, but all the rest from him is gone,
So too am I now: Almost all the vision
Falls off from me apace; yet there distills
Within my heart the sweetness born of it.
Thus in the sun the snow unseals itself;
Thus in the wind, among the delicate leaves,
The prophecies of Sibyl went astray.

(Paradiso XXXIII.58-66)

Skipping over three hundred fifty years and some notable episodes in this family history, we come to a new death of leaves, newly reborn, in Milton's Paradise Lost. Satan, cast into hell, rears himself up from the burning lake and struggles massively to the shore.

Nathless he so endur'd, till on the Beach
Of that inflamed Sea, he stood and call'd
His Legions, Angel Forms, who lay intranst
Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
In Vallombrosa, where th' Etrurian shades
High overarcht imbowr; or scatterd sedge
Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion arm'd
Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves orethrew
Busiris and his Memphian Chivalrie,
While with perfidious hatred they persu'd
The Sojourners of Goshen, who beheld
From the safe shore thir floating Carcasses
And Brok'n Chariot Wheels. So think bestrown
Abject and lost lay these, covering the Flood,
Under amazement of thir hideous change.

(Paradise Lost, I.299-313)

I have time only to sketch in the most compressed and cryptic way how Milton receives and transforms this legacy of the simile of the leaves. Like Homer he locates the passage generally in a context of huge, heroic battlefield conflict. Like Virgil he compares the leaves in their multitude to the number of the fallen. Like Dante he gives us the final sight of the leaves on the ground, in the fallenness of a Christian Hell. And there are numerous other particular points of allusion as well, to these authors and others, like the epic poet Tasso, the Biblical narrator of Exodus, and most especially the prophet Isaiah:

And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from a fig tree.

(Is.34:4)

The richness, the plenitude of this catalogue of allusion testifies to the inclusiveness of Milton's encyclopedic epic. Yet the sheer

range of the field surveyed, the number of sources invoked, is dizzying to us: The leaves of these preceding volumes lie as thick as those in Vallombrosa, and we surveying them are like the fallen angels, amazed at the wild declension of images and the change from one to another. The passage becomes a kind of labyrinth, as the pun on "amazement" suggests. What are the sources of our difficulties? Perhaps we can enumerate some.

First, the different sources alluded to are made to work against each other. Let me give two examples. Vallombrosa, a pretty rural convent outside of Florence, seems to provide a concrete, naturalistic, this-worldly location for the fallen leaves. That suggests that the simile will be faithful in spirit to Homer's practice of contrasting the violent scenes of his narrative with incongruously peaceful vignettes of country life. But the place Vallombrosa is chosen for the particular reason that its name is significant: It means "Shady Valley," the Valley of the Shadow of Death, an allegorical landscape like Dante's. Our satisfaction at recognizing this wordplay does not last long. At the end of the line, "Etrurian shades" adumbrates, if I may use that word, the presence of the Etruscan or pre-Roman ghosts of the Aeneid, in whose underworld there is also a valles umbrosa. The lineation gives us time to be confused; then the enjambed remnant of the clause makes us realize that the word "shades" refers not to ghosts, but metonymically to trees. We are back in the placid natural landscape again.

A second example: Our awareness of the presence of Virgil and Dante within and behind Milton's text conditions us to think of spirits waiting on the near side of a body of water, preparing to cross over. It is on the hither shore that both Aeneas and Dante the pilgrim stand, contemplating the numberless dead. But here the simile of Pharoah's

chariots ("Busiris and his Memphian Chivalrie") chasing the fleeing Israelites ("the Sojourners of Goshen") leaves us with no firm place to stand: At first we are with Pharoah, pursuing from the near shore; then, by the magic of a subordinate clause, our perspective shifts to the farther shore and we are with the Hebrews, looking back. But what we are looking at is the wreck of Pharoah's army, now not on either shore but scattered in or on the water, like the fallen angels. The shift from one invoked source to another enforces on us abrupt dislocations in space and time.

Another source of difficulty for us comes from the unique temporal setting of Milton's story. As his poem goes on to show, the fall of Satan and the rebel angels helps to cause the fall of humanity and of all of terrestrial nature. Such phenomena as the change of seasons, the coming of storms, the death of leaves or of any other living thing-- all these result from and instantiate the first coming of death that Milton depicts. It is thus incongruous for him to use these later, more familiar phenomena in similes: To do so is to compare a thing with itself, or a subset of itself, as if I were to say, "The earth's rotation on its axis is as regular as the alternation of night and day." As Wallace Stevens once remarked, identity is the vanishing point of resemblance. Milton's implicit claim is that the primary truths of human history, told in his poem, are more intelligible in themselves than any poetic comparison could make them. At worst, poetic comparison will mislead us, like the inappropriately tranquil scene of Vallombrosa. In trying to reduce the subject to the narrow limits of our fallen human comprehension, poetry causes us to make mortal errors again and again. The sheer difficulty, the deception and complexity of Milton's verse are often attempts to make us aware of this repeated

process. Even at best, any statement of likeness would be redundant, strictly speaking. The originating status of Milton's subject matter is so all-encompassing that no comparison can be found which is not absorbed into the thing compared to. Hence no epic simile in the ordinary sense is possible: If the normal action of the similes is to include other realms of experience in an epic narrative, here we find that all of those realms are already automatically included. And so are we, the beholders. The poem cannot offer us a god-like or privileged place to stand, from which we can contemplate in detachment the unity and comprehensiveness of creation. It is our very fallenness, our implication in the events narrated, that causes our difficulties in reading.

Milton's poem thus conspires rhetorically against itself, but only after disposing of its precursors. We saw Virgil rewriting Homer and Dante rewriting Virgil; but for Milton there is no single epic forerunner, no fatherly master-poet to whom he is irretrievably indebted and whose precedent he must overcome. In place of an intricate counterpointing of two texts, we get from Milton an all-out assault on what he portrays as a monolithic tradition of epic poetry. As he claims in the invocation at the start of Book IX, all conventional heroic narrative is intrinsically inferior to the story that he alone is trying to tell. But he too, of course, is fallen, dependent on the inspiration of a heavenly muse. His greatest source of information and also of difficulty is Holy Scripture itself. A revisionist treatment of Genesis can only dramatize its own futility, and that of all human poetic artifice. As I've claimed, other epics try to swallow up their predecessors and preempt their successors. Milton's more radical project is to chop down the whole family tree, and his own branch with it.

It is somewhat alarming to reflect that he may well have succeeded. Many literary historians consider Paradise Lost to be the last true epic poem in Western literature. I do not know whether this is true; if it is not, I am similarly puzzled by the question of who the legitimate heirs are, in the generations that follow. But the succession we have seen suggests at least a direction: inward, away from the narrative representation of physical experience. As the tradition goes on, more of the poem's essential content consists, not in its self-containedness as a text, but in its interaction with its own past and future. The burden of the successor poet is to inherit the tradition and make it new, to use an intimate familiarity with the work of another as the new material for a radically originating act. Perhaps this process can be a paradigm for you and me, not writers of epics but readers of them. We too must remake the poems we read, approaching them with qualified piety and then dismembering them, assimilating them into ourselves. They are the true and valid sources of our self-making, lenses through which we view the whole of things, tokens of admission not only into other worlds but into our deep selves, the underworld in which we learn our destiny. If we don't appropriate what we find in these pages, making them ours by wrenching them out of their own place and time, then they are dead leaves indeed. But if they find new life in us, if our re-vision of these received texts becomes a new mode of vision, ours and yet not ours alone-- then we too might be able to see the whole world as one place, bound up by love into a single volume, for as long as the vision lasts.