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Milton's God: Democrat or Tyrant?

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ABSTRACT

Politeness is a universal phenomenon that is present in every human interaction. Many theorists have attempted to theorize politeness the most important of whom are Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson. The application of their theory has been extended to include literary works which are conversational in nature like drama or works whose building blocks consist of dialogues. This study tries to apply Politeness Theory to Milton's Paradise Lost in order to solve the age-old dispute over Milton's God to whom contradictory characteristics of democracy and tyranny are ascribed. It will be shown that in the conversation that takes place between God and residents of Heaven, God is more careful about politeness strategies despite his supremacy and it seems to be at odds with tyrannical features attributed to him.

Keywords: Milton; Paradise Lost; Politeness Theory; Tyranny

1. INTRODUCTION

Paradise Lost has attracted critics' attention over centuries through depiction of characters such as God, Satan, Adam and Eve. This study focuses on God since, in Michael Bryson's word, "none of Milton's characters, not even his grandiloquent and bellicose Satan, has proven disturbing for readers than the Father" (2004: 112) The disturbance over the Father's character is manifest in the opposing views of various critics about him which stem from the contradictory aspects of God's speeches. Christopher, for instance, reckons that the Father's first speech in Book 3 is "harsh and mean-spirited" and that it's the most sustained problem in the poem (1982: 114). Johnson claims that nobody, even the "rebellious spirits," has any alternative but acknowledging mastery of the deity (2009: 106). The harshest criticisms directed toward God are probably stated by Empson and Herman. In *Milton's God*, Empson likens God to Stalin on the grounds that they share "the same patience under an appearance of roughness, the same fleshes of joviality, the same thorough *unscrupulousness*, the same *real bad temper*" (1965: 106, my emphasis) and according to Peter C. Herman's observation the reader's expectation of finding a merciful and just God in *Paradise Lost* is shattered when they find themselves facing a God who is "querulous at best, tyrannical at worst." (2005: 107)

There's another side to this argument and God whose significant characteristics, namely, omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, allow him to exercise full power and to be a tyrant is defensible in the eyes of David Norbrook since he does not treat his subjects as "mere puppets" or "instruments" (2000: 479). To Norbrook, Milton's God is neither a despot nor a modern democrat (ibid. 480).

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Whether Milton's God is a tyrant who is "unscrupulous" and "bad-tempered" or a democrat, his behavior and speeches and the tyrannical characteristics attributed to them have to be conveyed through the discourse employed by him. The third book of *Paradise Lost* provides a fertile ground for such an analysis since God, the highest in rank in Milton's theological hierarchy, the Son, next-to-him in rank, and angels who come after the Son assemble to hold a council about an important issue which affects humanity's fate. Flannagan's claim that God's speech is "*plain*, *clear*, *unequivocal*, dignified and authoritative" in contrast to "deceptive speeches" of Satan and his comrades (2002:91, my emphasis) and all the pronouncements concerning God's dictatorship will be challenged using Browne and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Politeness Theory will be used to show that despite the fact that God is the "Almighty Father" and consequently second to none in power, he uses strategies that involve the least amount of weightiness of Face Threating Acts (FTA), hence dissimilar to a tyrant.

2. POLITENESS THEORY

The most conspicuous, influential and frequently debated model of linguistic politeness belongs to Brown and Levinson. Browne and Levinson built their model around the concept of "face," a term that they borrowed from Erving Goffman. Goffman defines "face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (5) or to put it simply it is the image that a person has as a member of the society. Central to their approach is a model person (MP) whose command of language is satisfactory and who is rational enough to find the best means for obtaining his/her goals. An MP has two "face wants" that are at odds with one another. The first one is "positive face" which is the desire to be liked and respected by others and to have one's aspirations approved of. The second one is "negative face" by which Brown and Levinson mean the desire to pursue one's goals unrestrictedly without any impediments and to be free from any kinds of impositions and impingements (62).

But in any social interaction, fulfillment of MP's face is dependent on the desires, needs and actions of all the members involved in that interaction, therefore the concept of face is not unilateral. In our daily lives, there are many situations in which speaker and hearer's need might interfere therefore the speaker has to do a Face Threating Act (FTA). Since FTAs are inevitable occurrences in our daily interactions, the speaker has to use some strategies in order to minimize the impositions created by the FTAs. Brown and Levinson introduced five superstrategies (listed below) that are used as mitigating processes.

Strategy (1) Do the FTA on-record without redressive action, baldy

Strategy (2) Do the FTA on-record with redressive positive politeness action[i]

Strategy (3) Do the FTA on-record with redressive negative politeness action

Strategy (4) Do the FTA off-record

Strategy (5) Don't do the FTA

(ibid. 61)

Each of the abovementioned strategies has its own "payoffs" and "advantages." By being on record without redressive action (strategy 2), on one hand, S dodges the danger of misunderstanding and he/she will be honest and unambiguous, but one the other hand, S might look blunt and irrespective of H's face. But it has to be taken into account that certain conditions (like emergencies) necessitate the administration of this strategy. To satisfy H's positive and negative face, while S is on record, he can add positive politeness (strategy 2)

and negative politeness (strategy 3) to his/her speeches. For instance, instead of baldly demanding H "Lend me your bicycle." S can say "I wonder if I could borrow your bicycle, just for an hour?" (strategy 3) or "Hey guy! Lend me your bicycle" (strategy 2)

When S uses an off record strategy, although S need not shoulder the responsibility of an FTA and will not be considered as "coercive", they might take the risk of not attaining their goal since H may pretend not to have fathomed the request function.

Seriousness of FTAs is a crucial factor in selecting appropriate strategy. Brown and Levinson pinpoint three factors as universal determinants of level of politeness. These are the social distance (D) between H and S, relative power (P) of H over S and the ranked extremity (R) of an FTA which is culture-dependent (ibid 74). They proposed the following formula,

$$W_x = D(S,H) + P(S,H) + R_x$$

Distance is described as "a systematic social dimension of similarity/difference within which S and H stand for the purposes of this act" (ibid. 76) which usually depends on "frequency of interaction and the kinds of … goods exchanged between S and H" (ibid 77). *Power* variable is "the degree to which H can impose his plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's plans and self-evaluation" (ibid. 77) *R* is a yardstick for calculating the degree to which an act "interfere[s] with an agent's want of self-determination and or of approval (his negative- and positive-face wants" (ibid 77).

This model suggests that the greater the threat to face, the more the number of strategies employed. Therefore, if S is more powerful than H, he/she will probably use the first strategy, while the person who holds lower relative power is prone to use strategy (2). In a conversation in which interactants are not familiar with one another (low D), S is prone to deploy the highest level of politeness by using the strategy that commits the least amount of FTA. The same thing is true about R. When a man wants to propose to a young lady (in a country like Iran) he uses a more polite strategy than when he wants to ask that lady to give him a hand with furniture.

3. PARADISE LOST AS THE SUBJECT OF ANALYSIS

Whether or not Brown and Levinson's model is applicable to literary texts in which interactions of speakers and hearers are not similar to naturally occurring conversations among people has been discussed by many critics.[1] My basic premise regarding this problem is what Guy Gook states in the introduction to his *Discourse and Literature*: "there is nothing distinctive about either the language of literary discourse or its representation of the world; it is rather that some texts become literary when presented as such by institutions or when read in certain ways by readers, and that is all." (1994: 1)

The fact that conversational pieces of art like drama are considered as an appropriate topic for analysis of politeness in conjunction with Walter Raleigh's comment that "he [Milton] is an epic, not a dramatic poet; to find him at his best we must look at those passages of unsurpassed magnificence wherein he describes some noble or striking attitude, some

[1] See Pratt *Toward a speech act theory of literary discourse* and Burton, *Dialogue and Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Modern Drama Dialogue and Naturally Occurring Conversation*, 1980.

strong or majestic action in its outward physical aspect" (1967: 153) give rise to another problems: Can this model be applied to an epic?

The answer to this problem can be traced in James Holly Hanford's discussion of the same topic. He articulates that dramatic aspects of Milton have been undermined due to several reasons, the most important of which are the "disparagement of modern drama" by Milton, "Miltonic self-consciousness" that resulted in considering his writing autobiographical rather than dramatic and Milton's stature as an "epic genius" which overshadows all the dramatic aspects of his writing.(1917: 178-179) In his paper, Hanford tries to establish the fact that, in *Paradise Lost,* epic and dramatic impulses "meet in equal strengths." (ibid. 180)

There is one more problem that has to be dealt with before examining the dialogues of the Council in Heaven: Is the conversation between Father, Son and the angels who are present at the scene but do not utter even a single word, like daily conversations? This problem arises from the presumption that every give-and-take between God and his Son is predetermined since God is all-knowing and omniscient and Son articulates what is already known to the Father (Belsey 1988: 69). Irene Samuel investigates this problem and comes to the conclusion that although the dialogue in heaven is concise and uses the familiar, "it has moved from its presumably fixed beginning to an unforeseen end" (1957:609) by which she means that the primary topic for discussion in heaven was "the redemption of man" but at the end a second theme "exaltation of the Son" outdoes the first topic in importance (ibid 608).

4. APPLICATION: COUNCIL IN HEAVEN

The third book of *Paradise Lost* begins with Milton's invocation to "holy Light" and after that Milton talks about his intention to fulfill a task: to impart "Of things invisible to mortal sight" (Milton 3.54). Then God is lounging on the empyrean and bending "down his eye" While angels ("sanctities of Heaven") and his only son ("the radiant image of his glory") are sitting next to him. God first looks at Adam and Eve who are enjoying a delightful life and then at Satan and where he is heading to. Therefore, Milton sets the stage for readers in this way and what ensues is the conversation between Father and Son.

God is the one who starts the first act of a five-act drama. He enunciates "Only begotten Son, Seest thou what rage Transports our adversary?" (ibid 3.50) Here God employs three politeness strategies: first he tries to attract Son's attention by addressing him "*Only begotten* Son" (my emphasis) which is in a way an admiration of a distinguished quality of Son; that is his uniqueness, then he uses an inclusive form (*our* adversary) to form a bond against Satan and the last one is what is conventionally known as being indirect which depends on the mismatch between discourse function and grammatical form. In this case, the Godhead could have used imperative form, for instance "Look at (our) adversary" whose main function is to give an order instead of the interrogative form employed in the text of the poem. The first two strategies belong to the second superstrategy and the third one is a means by which God maintains the Son's "negative face."

After that God explains Satan's plan: that he is heading toward "the new created word" where man is living with the sole purpose of misguiding him so that man might violate his fealty with God. Then once more God utters a statement that is an FTA to the Son's face. This time he utilizes strategy (4) by asking a rhetorical question ("Whose fault? Whose but his own?", ibid. 3.96-97). The use of rhetorical questions and consequently being off record does not stop as God keeps justifying what will befall man. God maintains that he "made him

just and right, Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (ibid. 3.98.99) God who wants to seek the Son's confirmation once more resorts to a series of rhetorical questions ("what proof could they have given sincere of true allegiance, constant faith, or love…? (ibid. 3.103-106); and "What praise could they receive, What pleasure, I, from such obedience paid" (ibid. 3.106.11)) By choosing strategy (4) which involves the least amount of FTA and at the same time does not preclude S from doing an FTA, God, in reality, practices and proves that he is true to his own declaration that he "formed them free, and free they must remain" (ibid. 3.124) In this part of the dialogue, he expects his Son to acknowledge that God is not responsible for man's plight and even his foreknowledge does not affect it but he doesn't force his Son to repeat and admit his claims, rather he prefers to be off record and as a result let the Son manipulate the conversation.

In the second act of the dialogue, the Son takes the turn and addresses the Godhead in a speech which is more concise and more to the point than that of God (Son's speech lasts only 27 lines while God speaks for 57 lines). He satisfies God's expectation partially by showing deference ("O Father"), seeking agreement in a safe topic ("that man should find grace," (ibid. 3.143)) and exaggerating his approval by flattering God ("both Heaven and Earth shall high extol Thy praises, with the' innumerable sound of hymns and sacred songs", (ibid. 3-146-148)); three statements which respectively belong to strategy (3), (2) and (2). But Son is no longer patient and wants to challenge God therefore he bombards God with a chain of questions. In the first question ("*should man finally be lost*, should man Thy creature late so loved, thy youngest son, Fall circumvented thus by fraud, though joined With his own folly" (ibid. 3.150.153, my emphasis) Son softens the committed FTA by mentioning reason (strategy 2): Son emphasizes the kinship ("thy youngest son") between God and man which is the reason why he does not expect God to leave man alone.

After that Son uses the first question, which is by itself an FTA, as a reason (strategy 2) which is used to mitigate the next FTA ("that be from thee far, That far be from thee," ibid. 3.153-154). It is interesting to note that the Son uses subjunctive instead of "is" in his speech to allay the force of his statement and to express an imagined situation. It is believed that there is a commonality among functions of subjunctives which is "the denotation of a mere conception" but in practice they fall under two headings: optative subjunctive signifying desire and will and potential subjunctive denoting plausibility or a mere thought (Curme 1929:397-398) Son's statement, here, belongs to the second group. Son employs subjunctive to say that it is even difficult and implausible to imagine God leaving man on his own. Son terminates his second question by attending to God's positive face ("Father, who are judge Of all things, and judgest only right," Milton 3.154-155).

In the two remaining questions posed by Son, he uses fewer strategies and tries to express himself more directly and this directness culminates in the last question "wilt thou thyself Abolish thy goodness…? without using any mitigating strategies.

After the Son, God takes his turn and begins his speech and attends to Son's negative face by expressing deference ("O Son") and to his positive face by complimenting Son ("Son of my bosom, Son who art alone My word, my wisdom, and effectual might" (ibid 3.169-170) and claiming common opinion and attitude ("All hast thou spoken as my thoughts are," ibid. 3.171). Nowhere in the dialogue between God and Son we can find the same number of positive face strategies deployed in such a compact manner and the use of paratactic clauses by God is notable in that it shows that all of the features attributed to Son are of equal status; therefore, God believes that his might, wisdom, word and Son are the same. There is a motive behind such compliments and elevation of Son to a status close to that of God. God does so because he is going to ask a big favor. To do so, God does not directly state the gist of what he has in mind. He explains that man is not going to be stranded and God will "place within

them a guide" so that they will "safe arrive" but there remains one more obstacle to man's deliverance which is the violation of the pact with God and defiance of him. But what is the solution to this problem? God himself provides the answer "unless for him Some other, *able and willing*, pay the rigid satisfaction" (ibid 3.210-212, my emphasis). This sentence is one of the key off record strategies that God employs combined with a hedge ("Some other"). He does not coerce Son into becoming a volunteer. He just drops a hint. Who is capable of redeeming mankind? God gives the answer: a person who is "able and willing." There remains another question: who is "able and willing"? God has already provided the answer to this question. Earlier in the third part of the dialogue god uses six politeness strategies and hails the Son as mighty and wise therefore it is inferred that the only intended "able" person to fulfill this daring task is the Son. But the puissant God prefers not to compel the Son to become a volunteer. Instead he grants the Son the opportunity to pretend not to be the addressee of this utterance while he does not divest the Son of grasping the chance of being a survivor and in this way determining the fate of himself and humanity.

The tactful God of *Paradise Lost* attends to nuances and consequences of his speech to a notable degree. Though he believes that the Son is the appropriate person for this task, he does not deprive angels from such an opportunity. God continues,

"Say, heav'nly powers, where shall we find such love?
Which of ye will be mortal to redeem
Man's mortal crime, and just th' unjust to save?
Dwells in all Heaven charity so dear?" (ibid. 213-216)

In this part, God does not address only Son but all "heavenly powers" which is an in-group identity marker (strategy 2). He also emphasizes inclusion with the pronoun "we" (strategy 2). Then, he poses the question that he had in mind since the beginning of the conversation. He asks if any of the angels or Son is willing to sacrifice himself for man. The way that God poses this question permits H to remain silent as "all the heavenly choir stood mute" (ibid 3.217) therefore "without redemption all mankind Must have been lost" (ibid 3.222-223) but this was the free will that was bestowed on residents of heaven. Again it should be noted that it takes 46 lines for God to finally claim that somebody has to die in order to save mankind and in doing so God entrusts the right to choose to angels and Son rather than commanding them to act accordingly.

God finishes his speech and Son once more expresses agreement by pointing to a common ground ("Father, thy word is passed, man shall find grace," (ibid. 3.227)) and then he asks a rhetorical question ("shall Grace not find means…?" (ibid 3.228)). Having prepared for submission to a politely demanded service by God, Son states his satisfaction for fulfillment of that mission. He addresses God while he is pervasively bald on record without using redressive actions,

"Behold me, then: me for him, life for life,
I offer; on me let thin anger fall;
Account me man: I for his sake will leave
Thy bosom, and this glory next to thee
Freely put off, and for him lastly die
Well-pleased; on me let Death wreak all his rage;" (ibid. 3.236-241)

One question arises here: how does Son dare talk to God in such a bold fashion? And does he disregard politeness strategies? I believe that two reasons may account for Son's baldness. According to the proposed formula by Brown and Levinson, the less the Distance between S and H, the fewer the number of politeness strategies employed by S. Another factor in the formula was Power of S over H based on which the least amount of FTAs are used when S is relatively more powerful than H. In the present situation, Son is quite aware

of his own rank and status in heaven ("I …will leave…this glory *next to thee*" [my emphasis]). "Next to thee" on one hand signals that the Son is aware that he has a respectable position in Milton's hierarchical heaven. To put it another way he holds a position similar to a vice president in democratic societies of the twenty first century. On the other hand, "next to thee" shows that the Son admits that he is second to Godhead regarding P factor. By using a double-edged phrase, "next to thee," the Son reminds God that he is almost God's equal while he escapes the blame for claiming himself as God's equal. Therefore, here, Son emphasizes a marginal difference between the power of God and that of himself. Regarding distance, we already know that the Son is not only God's son but also "the *only* begotten Son," therefore D and P are at their lowest level in this part of the dialogue and such a condition requires utterances with more directness and less attendance to God's face. Samuel's claim that "the dialogue of the council in Heaven has shown in dramatic process the son's growth to what Father himself calls virtual equality" (1957: 609) sounds true here.

The second justification which I suggest is based on the concept of "self-annihilation" in mysticism. In Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies, Roger Brown and Albert Gilman have proposed that in two conditions speakers are not concerned with politeness: when they are mad or outrageous (1989: 184-185). In such a case, they maintain "everything is wiped out. Everything goes, every last substrategy- in-group identity terms, common grounds, empathy, approval, reciprocity, indirection, hedging, deference apology- they vanish together" (ibid. 185) But the Son is neither mad nor outrageous and his baldness cannot be justified in such terms. Instead, I propose that the Son is dissolved into God. He sees no difference between himself and Godhead as he says "Thou hast given me to possess Life in myself forever; *by thee I live*; Though now to Death I yield" (Milton 3.243-245, my emphasis) and his purpose is to make God happy ("Thou at the sight Pleased, out of Heaven shalt look down and smile" (ibid 3.256-257); a happiness which encompasses the whole cosmos to its fullest degree ("in thy presence joy entire," (ibid, 3.265)). In such a condition, though Son and God seem to be two discrete persons in embodiment, they are one soul in two bodies. A person who is undergoing such an experience and who is talking to his second half will not use politeness strategies and his seeming impolite behavior is not considered impolite at all.

As Son terminates his talk, the whole heaven applauds Son and God seals the conversation with his final talk. God again begins his speech with a compliment "my sole complacence" (strategy 2) God, in this part, wants to concede the sacrificial role to Son. He says that man and Son are so dear to him and for the sake of man's redemption finally he has to, in military terms, launch the operation. Therefore he proclaims "be thou in Adam's room" (ibid. 3.285). This is the only instance found in the conversation between God and Son that God directly orders Son to do something and even at this very moment God is careful to mitigate the force of his order by using the pronoun "thou". Linguistically speaking, in the English language when an imperative form is used, the object of the sentence is left out unless it precedes the verb. For example S may say "Open the door" or "You, open the door." The use of "thou" in God's decree after the verb is redundant unless we accept that God has used it deliberately as a mitigating element to allay the force of his speech.

The rest of what God says deals with what will happen in the future and he raises the Son from the lower position and thrones him "in highest bliss Equal to God" and finally orders angel to adore and honor the Son as himself.

5. CONCLUSION

The dialogue between God and the Son in heaven where a multitude of unnamed angels are both mute participants and witnesses to the conversation provides a good topic for the application of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Among assorted critics, William Empson, goes so far to proclaim that Milton's God in *Paradise Lost* is like Stalin. The first association that a reader may conceive from such an observation is that God is a dictator and naturally a dictator is assumed to be a person who just gives orders and is inattentive to other persons' wishes and desires. Therefore the last and main question of this article has to be answered: Is there any semblance between God and Stalin in *Paradise Lost*? The answer seems to be negative. God, as it was shown, is very polite and he continually tries to avoid FTAs consciously. He wants to make a request that requires somebody to become a volunteer to redeem mankind. Although he is the great Almighty and can force anybody to do anything he hankers for, he prefers to be indirect. The first time that he speaks, he employs mainly off record strategies and does not even refer to the main request. As the dialogue advances, he finally expresses it but even at that moment he does not seem coercive at all. The application of Politeness Theory helped us show that by being a rational and polite figure, God is eager to let anybody determine his/her own fate and although he might be authoritative, he is by no means authoritarian. Given the dictatorial and ruthless features attributed to God, readers expect to see, in *Paradise Lost,* a deity who is direct, offensive, and coercive and inattentive to the face of his subjects but what we saw was exactly the opposite.

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[i] Strategy (2), (3) and (4) consist of substrategies.

Strategy (2) includes

1. Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)
2. Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
3. Intensify interest to H
4. Use in-group identity markers
5. Seek agreement
6. Avoid disagreement
7. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
8. Joke
9. Offer, promise
10. Be optimistic
11. Include both S and H in the activity
12. Give or (ask for) reason
13. Assume or assert reciprocity
14. Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)

Strategy (3) includes

1. Be conventionally indirect
2. Question, hedge
3. Be pessimistic
4. Minimize the imposition
5. Give deference
6. Apologize
7. Impersonalize S and H
8. State the FTA as a general rule
9. Nominalize
10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H

Strategy (4) includes

1. Give hints
2. Give association clues
3. Presuppose
4. Understate
5. Overstate
6. Use tautologies
7. Use contradictions
8. Be ironic
9. Use metaphors
10. Use rhetorical questions
11. Be ambiguous
12. Be vague
13. Over-generalize
14. Displace H
15. Be incomplete, use ellipsis

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