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## **“Begin at the Beginning”: Milton, Handel, Haydn, and the Origins of *The Creation***

by John Rogers

### *Abstract*

“Begin at the Beginning” examines the nature of the relation between Franz Joseph Haydn’s oratorio *The Creation* and Handel’s great oratorio of some forty years earlier, *The Messiah*. The example of Handel’s *Messiah* is never far from Haydn’s mind. And it is in part as a means to negotiate his relation to the overwhelming reputation of Handel’s work that Haydn chooses for the libretto of his own oratorio a text based on Book Seven of John Milton’s seventeenth-century epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, a work obsessed in its own ways with the problems of cultural origins and artistic originality. In a close imitation of the rhetorical strategies by which Milton attempts to pre-empt or outdo the great early epics of Homer and Virgil, the Milton-soaked libretto of *The Creation* labors to sideline the religious importance of the Christian story at the heart of Handel’s *Messiah*. *The Creation*’s libretto reimagines Christian history by diminishing the import of the Fall and by rendering man’s redemption by a Messiah unnecessary or irrelevant.

### *I. Out-Handeling Handel?*

It was at London’s Westminster Abbey, in 1791, that Franz Joseph Haydn was present for a performance of the great oratorio, *Messiah*, composed some fifty years earlier by Georg Friedrich Handel, who had died in 1759. There is evidence suggesting that the impact of the *Messiah* performance on Haydn, already established as a great composer himself, could not have been more significant. According to one of Haydn’s early biographers, Giuseppe Carpani, who had likely met the composer in Vienna, the sixty-year-old Haydn “was struck as if he had been put back to the beginning of his studies and had known nothing up to that moment”; he “meditated on every note and drew

from those most learned scores the essence of true musical grandeur.”<sup>1</sup> In his return to the sensibility not of a master but a student, Haydn found himself so struck by the *Messiah* that he determined to write an oratorio of his own. According to Francois Barthelemon, a French violinist living in London, Haydn had soon begun to cast about for a subject for his own oratorio; and it was the violinist himself who introduced to Haydn the theme of God’s Creation. Barthelemon picked up a copy of the Bible, and told the composer, “There, take that; and begin at the beginning.”<sup>2</sup>

Though late in life as he set out to write *his* great oratorio, Haydn, it would seem, took the violinist’s advice, and began at the beginning. He took as his subject the origins of the universe as described in the first chapters of the Bible’s first book. And he took as the text of the libretto of his own oratorio a manuscript that he was told had originally been prepared for Handel himself, the composer who, from Haydn’s perspective, was nothing other than the very creator of the oratorio genre. The libretto given to Haydn in 1795 had been drawn from the magnificent Christian epic of an earlier century, the 1667 *Paradise Lost*, whose author, John Milton, had devoted himself to his own extraordinary retelling of the account in Genesis of God’s creation of the universe. The poetry of Milton was not entirely unfamiliar to Haydn, who would have considered Milton the earlier English poet most closely associated with the great oratorios of Handel. Just one year before composing *Messiah*, Handel had achieved considerable success setting Milton’s early poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” to music for orchestra and voice, and within a week of completing *Messiah*, Handel had already begun work on an oratorio based on Milton’s final poetic masterpiece, *Samson Agonistes*. Handel had presumably declined the opportunity to compose an oratorio on the topic of the creation. The reason for that refusal we will likely never know. But Handel’s demurral was Haydn’s opportunity. In possession of a hitherto unknown libretto that had been prepared for and offered to the great Handel himself, Haydn found himself in a position to create not just his own work of art, but a work of art he

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Temperley quotes Carpani in *Haydn: The Creation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Temperley, *Haydn*, 31.

could imagine standing in direct competition with the oratorio Handel might have created himself.

In forwarding the argument that follows, in which I make a case for the competitive ambition with which Haydn came to approach the exemplary greatness of Handel's *Messiah*, I rely on the literary historical paradigm famously developed by the critic Harold Bloom. In *The Anxiety of Influence* and *The Map of Misreading*, Bloom proposed as an inescapable feature of literary history the often unconscious attempts of later writers to overgo, and transume, the anxiety-provoking greatness of their literary forbears.<sup>3</sup> Bloom's paradigmatic figure of the ambitious, "transumptive" poet is none other than Milton, whose overwhelming *Paradise Lost* is seen not only to cast as belated and dismissible the great writers of epic who preceded Milton, but also to function as that literary text most capable of provoking an "anxiety of influence" in the poets writing in the great epic's wake. It is a transumption of his musical forebear, much like Milton's seeming triumph over Homer and Virgil, that Haydn struggles to accomplish in his Miltonic oratorio *The Creation*. By what process of creative alchemy we will never know, Haydn managed in the three or four years after first hearing *Messiah* to transmute his studious emulation of Handel's masterpiece – the drive that led him to "meditate on every note" – into something like an ambition to *supplant* Handel, composing the music for the Miltonic work that Handel himself, some forty years before, could have written but failed to. If, as I am suggesting, it became one of Haydn's unstated goals to out-Handel Handel, he could not have chosen as the basis for the oratorio's libretto literary matter better suited to the task than Milton's great epic.

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973; printed by Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and *A Map of Misreading* (1975; printed by Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

## II. Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Re-defining "the Beginning."

Twenty-first century readers, many of them unwittingly shaped by C. S. Lewis's celebrated if misguided reading of the poem, most frequently approach Milton (surely before even opening *Paradise Lost*) with a sturdy sense of his reverence for tradition and of the generous piety of his deeply Christian poem.<sup>4</sup> But the common preconceptions about either Milton or his great epic bear little resemblance to the understanding of Milton that circulated in his own time and throughout the eighteenth century. To be sure, the greatness of his epic was never in question: *Paradise Lost* was widely acknowledged to be an undying literary masterpiece in England within a decade or two of Milton's death in 1674. And once translations of the epic began appearing in the first few decades of the next century, the magnitude of Milton's accomplishment was acknowledged throughout Europe. But eighteenth-century readers of Milton never labored under the illusion of the great poet's unthinking Christian piety. A propagandist for the Parliamentary side in the English Revolution, Milton actively advocated for the punishment, by execution, of the legitimate monarch, Charles I, whom Milton, and many of his parliamentarian colleagues, took to be a "tyrant." And it was with Milton's propagandistic help, and with Milton's blessing, that England's King Charles was beheaded in 1649, an event that brought to an end, at least for a decade, the nation's Stuart monarchy. Milton's contemporary reputation as one of seventeenth-century England's foremost revolutionaries continued well into the eighteenth century. In fact, some of Milton's political treatises had recently been translated into French, and put into the service of the anti-monarchist agenda of the French Revolution.

It was also in the eighteenth century that the real theological heterodoxy of *Paradise Lost* began fully to make itself felt.<sup>5</sup> Readers were increasingly struck by Milton's refusal in the poem to accord any faith in the doctrine of the Trinity. The Son of God, for Milton, was in no way part of the godhead itself: he was a *created* being, and one for

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<sup>4</sup> See C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Bauman details the eighteenth-century reception of Milton's antitrinitarianism in *Milton's Arianism* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1987).

whom Milton, shockingly, assigned an entirely new role in the drama of man's salvation. Milton's Christ was less a sacrificial Messiah, the Man-God whose death initiated the redemption of fallen man, than he was a virtuous example whose heroism of obedience was to be emulated. Milton was able implicitly to push the heretical case for the Son of God's role as a heroic exemplar, rather than a sacrificial savior, because, at least according to many of his readers in the eighteenth century, he withholds his support in *Paradise Lost* for a strong doctrine of original sin. Of course, Adam and Eve in Milton's poem do *fall*, and they are punished by God for that sin of eating the forbidden fruit. But Milton refuses to pedal the most common explanations or justifications for any corollary doctrine that would insist that subsequent human beings have, either *in* or *through* Adam, *all* sinned. This was the politically and theologically radical Milton who seduced Goethe on the Continent, as well as the English Romantic poets Blake and Wordsworth, who in the very decade in which Haydn heard Handel's *Messiah* and wrote his own *Creation* insistently exalted Milton as the literary forbear who inspired their own revolution in poetry.

German-speakers had had access to *Paradise Lost* since 1732, when the first of a few German language editions of the poem appeared. If Haydn had read *Johann Miltons Verlust des Paradieses*, he would likely already have had a sense of the seventeenth-century English poet's instinct for social, political, and cultural combat. He would have been shocked as well, no doubt, by the arrogance with which Milton treated, in verse, the line of epic poets, Homer and Virgil especially, who preceded him. It could not be said that Milton failed to admire these towering literary predecessors. In his youth, he was the most devoted of students of the epics of Homer and Virgil; and we could say of the young Milton, as he contemplated *his* literary elders, a version of what that early biographer had written of the Haydn so touched by Handel's great oratorio: "He meditated on every word and drew from those most learned poems the essence of true literary grandeur." The young Milton studied carefully his Homer and Virgil, but would come eventually to turn that earliest penchant for studious admiration into something much closer to aggressive competition.

In the opening invocation of *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton solicits the help of a “heavenly muse,” Milton makes clear his ambition to triumph over his great literary precursors:

I thence  
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,  
That with no middle flight intends to soar  
Above the Aonian mount while it pursues  
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (1.12-16)<sup>6</sup>

Milton’s poem will transcend the mountain sacred to the muse who inspired Homer to *create* the literary genre of epic. And bolder still, Milton tells us in these lines that *Paradise Lost* will “pursue things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.” The composition of Milton’s poem is inspired by a decidedly Christian, “heavenly” muse, and Milton implies that *his* epic will be greater, and more original, than Homer’s because his muse is greater (because real and substantial) than Homer’s mythical muse Calliope.

It is this Christian muse whom Milton directs in the poem’s first invocation to inspire the poem:

Sing Heav’nly Muse, that on the secret top  
Of Oreb, or of Sinai didst inspire  
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,  
In the Beginning how the Heav’ns and Earth  
Rose out of Chaos. (1.6-10)

Milton’s inspirational source, we learn here, is none other than that same Holy Spirit who inspired the shepherd Moses to write the book of Genesis, with its creation

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<sup>6</sup> Quotations from *Paradise Lost* are taken from *Paradise Lost*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005). Subsequent citations will be noted by book and line number parenthetically in the text.

narrative of how, “in the beginning . . . the heavens and earth / rose out of chaos.” Milton’s poem is making the bold claim here to be para-scriptural, existing alongside the Bible as a sacred text, no less divinely inspired than Moses’s Pentateuch. Or – and this is the even bolder claim that Milton may well also be making in his epic’s opening lines – Milton’s poem may actually be *super*-scriptural, not just matching but exceeding the Book of Genesis as authored by Moses. Suggesting the possibility that in *Paradise Lost* he will pursue things unattempted yet in *any* work of prose or rhyme, Milton has struck many readers as announcing a plan to outdo or overgo even Moses himself – since Moses’s Genesis falls squarely in the capacious category of literary works written either in prose or verse.

Moses, it is true, had from the reductive perspective of history the chronological advantage of writing his scriptural text first. But Milton suggests that *his own* epic song, inspired no less than Moses’s by the Heavenly Spirit who was there from the beginning, might actually manage to antedate, or pre-empt, Moses’s biblical composition. “Thou from the *first* wast present,” Milton reminds the muse at line 19, pushing his poetic line to accent the word *first*, a word that appears no fewer than six times in the first 33 lines of the poem. Homer had in actuality already written the *Iliad* and Moses had, from this same vulgar perspective of linear time, already written the Pentateuch. But, as Harold Bloom had so powerfully argued in *A Map of Misreading* and elsewhere, Milton will want throughout the poem to create the impossible sense that *his* poem came *first*. Milton sought in *Paradise Lost* to begin at the beginning.

Milton will ask us throughout the *Paradise Lost* to credit his repeated claim for the divine inspiration of his version of the first moments of Christian history. I suggest it is this Milton, the poet whose literary and spiritual presumptuousness was always skating the line both of literary and religious decorum, who would serve as posthumous co-author, perhaps even as muse, for Haydn’s venture into the genre of the oratorio. The example of Milton’s great poem supplied Haydn with the conceptual foundation for his bold attempt in his *Creation* to produce the illusion of anticipating, and maybe even pre-empting, the historically prior oratorio of the great Georg Friedrich Handel.



### III. *Paradise Lost and the Rhetorical Structure of The Creation.*

What exactly did the libretto for Haydn's *Creation* take from *Paradise Lost*? More than anything, *The Creation*, whose first two parts are founded on the interplay of scriptural recitative and poetic aria, owes its fundamental principle of organization to the seventeenth-century poet.<sup>7</sup> It is *Paradise Lost* that first and foremost bequeathed to Haydn's oratorio the practice of alternating verbatim transcriptions of the spare Genesis account of the six days of God's handiwork with a decidedly non-scriptural, far more literarily vivid treatment of those same creative acts. But the oratorio's libretto, as has long been known, has inherited more from Milton's epic than its basic rhetorical structure. It is indebted to Milton for innumerable specific, indeed shockingly idiosyncratic, formulations of the actual *process* of creation. Just consider the account in Milton's Book Seven of the fifth day of creation, when the God of Genesis creates fish and fowl. With admirable piety, our stern puritan poet Milton begins the account with a dutiful, humble transcription of some verses in Genesis. In some cases, in fact, the verse is actually a word-for-word transcription of the King James translation; and normally Milton will in such instances alter only a few words to make the familiar Authorized English translation of the Bible fit into the metrical schema of his blank verse:

And God said, Let the waters generate  
Reptile with spawn abundant, living soul:  
And let fowl fly above the earth, with wings  
Displayed on the open firmament of heaven.  
And God created the great whales. (7.387-91)

Milton continues in this vein for seven more lines, concluding this section with the scriptural statement, "And let the fowl be multiplied on the earth." We may well find ourselves agreeing with the pronouncements of literary history that the lines quoted above, or lines much like them elsewhere in Book Seven, are notable for their lack of

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<sup>7</sup> The definitive treatment of Milton's influence on *The Creation* is Noam Flinker's "Miltonic Voices in Haydn's *Creation*," *Milton Studies* 27 (1992), 139-64.

inspiration, heavenly or otherwise. Pious transcriptions of scripture make for terrible poetry, and these biblical lines from Milton's account of the creation have been cited since the early eighteenth century as constituting the flattest, least interesting verses in the entire poem.

It is this curiously bland, transcriptive feature of a good deal of Book Seven of *Paradise Lost* that troubled many of Milton's eighteenth-century readers. One of Milton's earliest editors, Dr. Richard Bentley, had actually argued, in 1732, that these particular lines were so bad they should just be deleted.<sup>8</sup> Hailed in his own time as England's foremost classical scholar, Bentley developed in his scholarly edition of Milton's English poem an extraordinary way of explaining the presence in the great work of what he took to be aberrant, unusual, or otherwise troubling lines. Like all of Milton's eighteenth-century readers, Bentley knew that Milton had been completely blind by the point in middle age at which he began to compose *Paradise Lost*. Milton was reliant on a small group of amanuenses who would make daily visits to the Milton house and commit to paper the poet's dictation of that day's installment of the epic poem. With this practice in mind, Dr. Bentley conjectured that some of the young men taking dictation surely made mistakes, either in the hearing, or in the writing down, of the blind poet's immortal words. This was a convenient conjecture for Bentley, because whenever he read a line or a passage in *Paradise Lost* he failed to understand or found unworthy of the poet, he likely argued that the true line as Milton dictated it must have been garbled in the transcription. And so Bentley, in his scholarly edition of the poem, was unusually liberal with his red pen, questioning the authenticity of passages he claimed Milton's secretaries must have invented. Milton's bald reproductions of the terse cadences of the King James translation of the Genesis account of Creation seemed deeply to puzzle Bentley, who asked this perfectly reasonable question: "Why should Raphael be so tied up to the Letter in Genesis, who makes this narrative thousands of years before Genesis was writ?" How can it be that the angel Raphael, talking to Adam in Eden and

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<sup>8</sup> See *Milton's Paradise Lost, A New Edition*, by Richard Bentley (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1732. Reprint New York: AMS Press, 1974). See, too, J. W. Mackail, *Bentley's Milton* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).

describing for him the six days of creation, sounds exactly like the Book of Genesis, which Moses won't even come to write until long after Adam is dead? If Milton's chronology of events requires us to believe that Raphael descended to Eden long before the birth of Moses, Bentley is asking, why does Raphael seem to be *quoting* the author of the Pentateuch?

Indeed it is difficult to deny Dr. Bentley his point. What might be the significance of Milton's seeming, as Bentley put it, "tied up to the Letter in Genesis"? Milton, as we have seen, begins his account of the fifth day of Creation by paying homage to his scriptural source for the creation. But that is not where he ends. After he has exhausted his uninspired versification of the King James translation of the Hebrew Scripture, he lets loose, at line 399, with an entirely new representation of creation:

Forthwith the sounds and seas, each creek and bay  
With fry innumerable swarm, and shoals  
Of fish that with their fins and shining scales  
Glide under the green wave, in schools that oft  
Bank the mid sea. (7.399-403)

Milton amplifies the austerity of Genesis with some of the lushest, most luxuriant verse in all of *Paradise Lost*. And this particular description of the fish and the fowl, one of the great rhetorical *tours de force* of the epic, continues for another forty lines. The *sounds* of which Milton speaks at line 399 here are, of course, the bodies of water that are suddenly filled with an enormous variety of aquatic life forms. But the sounds that emerge "forthwith" in this passage are also the aural sounds of this surprising burst of imaginative poetry. The verse here suddenly explodes with a sonic energy that had been entirely suppressed during Milton's lifeless adherence to the letter of scripture. With some stunningly beautiful descriptions, such as that of the "shoals / Of fish . . . with their fins and shining scales," Milton permits himself to swim in a sensual, alliterative verse that almost completely drowns out the bland King James English of the previous lines. And this demonstration of poetic strength coincides exactly with Milton's new

sense of the force behind creation. He takes the masculine image of God's verbal command – "and God said" – and replaces it with an alternative, feminine conception of creation that places the power of generation in nature herself.<sup>9</sup>

It is Milton's account of the sixth day of creation that would leave an especially deep mark on *The Creation's* libretto. Beginning as before, Milton follows scrupulously the scriptural text of Genesis 1:24, which tells us, "And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so." Milton reproduces the scriptural description nearly verbatim. But, as if to ask "how was it so?", he carefully omits that final clause from the sentence in Genesis. The Genesis account, which demands a faith in something like a magical fulfillment of the Father's divine command, withholds anything like a natural explanation of the process by which the creation of cattle and creeping thing came to be so. Turning not to another passage of scripture, but, somewhat shockingly, to a classical text that supplied its own, pagan explanation of creation, Milton fleshes out with narrative a speculative account of the process by which the origin of cattle and creeping thing came to be so:

The earth obeyed, and straight  
Op'ning her fertile womb teemed at a birth  
Innumerable living creatures, perfect forms,  
Limbed and full grown. (7.453-56)

Working in conjunction with the authority of the Bible's Father, the Ovidian mother earth opens her womb and produces what we have to assume is a perfectly "limbed and full grown" class of mammalia. From this explosion of terrestrial fertility, Milton moves

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<sup>9</sup> My analysis of Milton's alternation in Book Seven of scriptural transcription with vivid descriptive verse, and of Richard Bentley's interest in that striking pattern, is indebted to John Guillory, whose Yale lecture course on Milton, in 1984, performed this and many other memorable readings of *Paradise Lost*. Some of Guillory's insights are reproduced in John Guillory, "From the Superfluous to the Supernumerary: Reading Gender into Paradise Lost," in Elizabeth Harvey and Katharine Eiseman Maus, eds., *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 74-75. I discuss Milton's feminization of the energy behind creation in *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

beyond even Ovid, pushing himself to represent an instance of the seemingly unrepresentable birthing of these “innumerable living creatures”:

The grassy clods now calved; now half appeared  
The tawny lion, pawing to get free  
His hinder parts, then springs as broke from bonds,  
And rampant shakes his brinded main; the ounce,  
The leopard, and the tiger, as the mole  
Rising, the crumbled earth above them threw  
In hillocks; the swift stag from underground  
Bore up his branching head. (7.463-70)

When the tawny lion springs as broke from bonds, activating its own parturition from the earth, Milton, in these lines that Haydn’s libretto will carefully rework, inscribes within the poem itself an emblem of his own liberation from the confining bonds of a scriptural tradition.<sup>10</sup> From the vantage of such a magnificent act of poetic mythmaking, the terse prose of Genesis, at least in its English translation, can only sound belated: the paucity of its imaginative energy presses us to consider it less as an original account of the world’s beginnings than as a later, authoritative attempt to silence or clamp down on a prior, more realistic representation of creation. As Dr. Bentley had reminded the eighteenth-century readers of *Paradise Lost*, the text of Genesis does not present itself as a first-hand, eye-witness account of the drama of creation; Moses comes perhaps a thousand years later than either the creation itself or the story of creation as told to Milton’s Adam by the angel Raphael. But the logic of Bentley’s critique suggests a recognition that the verses uttered by Raphael that stray from the Bible – his vivid

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<sup>10</sup> Raphael’s accompanied recitative in *The Creation* offers this version of Milton’s story of mammalian creation:

Straight opening her fertile womb, the earth obey’d  
The word, and teem’d creatures numberless, in  
Perfect forms and fully grown . . . .  
Cheerful, roaring, stands the tawny lion. In sudden  
Leaps the flexible tiger appears. The nimble stag  
Bears up his branching head. With flying mane and  
Fiery look impatient neighs the sprightly steed.

description of the shoals of fish with their shining fins, for example, or the self-liberation of the tawny lion – assume the status of a mode of representation that is pre-Mosaic, pre-Biblical. With Raphael's wild bursts of poetry in the epic's Book Seven, Milton works literally to *represent* chaos and creation, making it *present* or immediate to our faculties of understanding, and managing thereby to produce in the reader the sense that *this* text's version of the story came first: it is Milton's *Raphael*, and not Moses, who truly began at the beginning.

#### *IV. From the Re-presentation of God's Creation to the Pre-emption of Handel's Messiah*

But what of Haydn and the libretto of the oratorio founded on the basis of Milton's *re*-presentation of creation in *Paradise Lost*? The oratorio, I want to suggest, works hard to achieve, within the specific medium of musical theater, a *version* of the complex temporal disjunctions Milton effects in the poem. We know that Haydn's work is committed to teasing out the relation of immediacy and presence to the art of *representation*. The work begins with Haydn's orchestral "Representation of Chaos," which does not attempt *discursively* to describe or characterize the motions of chaos *prior* to the ordering forces of creation; the "Representation of Chaos" can be seen rather as an attempt to *re-create* chaos itself, making it present once again, by means of the earlier, pre-literate art of music. Haydn's bold musical representation of chaos is one of the purely musical means by which *The Creation* works to conjure the illusion of an action not only playing out in the real time of the present moment but also occurring, or having occurred, *prior* to any action we have known of before. But the fully discursive, or verbal, libretto of *The Creation* also plays, as Milton's poem does, with the dramatic alternation between competing *rhetorical* means for representing a past action. We have looked at Milton's studious rehearsal of the verses from the first chapter of Genesis. But *The Creation's* eighteenth-century libretto goes even further than *Paradise Lost* in reproducing the authoritative voice of Moses in the recitatives sung by the angelic bass Raphael. Milton was of course obliged, for the sake both of euphony and of the scansion of his carefully wrought lines of iambic pentameter, to alter and revise at least *some* of the wording of the authorized English translation of Moses's

words in Genesis. But the libretto's Raphael doesn't merely convey the gist of the Biblical account; the angel's expository recitatives rehearse verbatim, down to the jot and tittle, the King James account of creation from the first chapter of Genesis. And like the King James translation, the libretto's recitatives are all set in a past tense that places the actions described fully in the past: "and God *said*," the libretto repeats, and "and God *saw*."

It is in sharp counterpoint to the narrative past of these scriptural citations that the *Creation* libretto presents its own take on Milton's acrobatic riffs on the restrained prose of Genesis. The text for the oratorio in fact does Milton one better: it allows its arias and its orchestrally accompanied recitatives to unfold in the *present* tense, as Haydn's Raphael, Gabriel, and Uriel share their vision of an act of creation that seems to be occurring right before their eyes. In *Paradise Lost*, it is Uriel alone among all of Milton's characters who claims actually to have witnessed the Creation; Raphael reports to Adam only what he has learned of the already completed process from God (the creation account in Book 7, then, is founded on the authority of hearsay; and Milton asks of us an act of faith in crediting Raphael's second-hand account). The libretto of *The Creation* works differently; there it is *all* of the singing angels — Uriel, Gabriel, and Raphael — who present themselves as eyewitnesses. In his elaborate account of the almost spontaneous generation of aquatic life, for example, Milton's Raphael describes the way in which "each creek and bay with fry innumerable swarm." But the libretto's Raphael pushes us harder than Milton's does to experience the event visually as an instance of present action: "*See*," he directs us, "*See* flashing thro' the wet in thronged swarms/ The fry on thousand ways around." *The Creation's* libretto conveys in these rhetorical adjustments to the Miltonic original a serious determination to present itself as an early work, a work that pretends at least to found itself on the authority of the eyewitness, an image of authority logically prior to its real sources of inspiration.

Surely this is how we can best understand the conceptual boldness of Haydn's choice of subject matter for the oratorio he would write in response to Handel's *Messiah*. Handel's oratorio, as its title clearly announces, was in every sense a *Christian* work; it

took as its subject an event in religious history that inaugurates the Christian response to and completion of the ancient stories of the Hebrews as presented in the Old Testament. But Haydn's *Creation*, which of course covers material from Hebrew Scriptures that survives in the Christian Bible, cannot be identified in any theologically familiar sense as Christian. As has been noted for many years now, Haydn's oratorio is surely most shocking for the extent to which it erases the anxieties and pressures of that aspect of the first books of Genesis of greatest importance to the Christian tradition. Christianity located its conceptual foundation in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve from their seat of perfection in Paradise, a story crucial for all aspects of traditional Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic, because it is there that we have the basis not just for the Christian conception of sin, but the basis for what would become within a few centuries the Christian doctrine of *original sin*. In all orthodox Christian theologies, it is because we are all sinful, fallen creatures, unhappy heirs of Adam and Eve, that we require the redemption of sin that Christianity places in the hands of the redeemer, or Messiah, Christ. Haydn's thematically *pre-Christian Creation* concludes, famously, with the glorious praises of God by Adam and Eve, and the choir of angels singing before the Fall. The oratorio's Uriel, it has to be said, will at the eleventh hour offer Adam and Eve a (grammatically awkward) reading of their happiness as contingent on their continued obedience to God's will: "O happy pair, and always happy yet, / If not, misled by false conceit." But nowhere does the text suggest that the Fall is inevitable or fated, and nowhere does it suggest that the happy pair's act of disobedience will result in a curse on their descendants that will necessitate any action, generations later, of Christian redemption. From the theological perspective of Haydn's *Creation*, the redemption of man celebrated in by Handel's *Messiah* is entirely unnecessary.

Early modern Europe had been swept from the earliest years of the seventeenth century with compelling new heretical theologies that proposed a reading of the biblical record that argued against the doctrine of original sin. These heresies, all versions of an antitrinitarianism that was seen to infect Catholic no less than Protestant Europe, were able compellingly, if dangerously, to convey a radical critique of the Church, in any of its guises, since the theology of all the dominant churches unfolded as a series of logical



consequences of the fall of Adam and Eve, and the subsequent contamination of all men and women with the curse of original sin. Heretical antitrinitarianism, which would establish itself in England in the last decades of the eighteenth century as Unitarianism, became the heterodox Christian theology enthusiastically embraced by many Enlightenment thinkers, who re-read the Bible, especially the first chapters of Genesis, and argued that the doctrines of original sin forwarded by the early Church Fathers had no basis in scripture.<sup>11</sup> The story of Creation, and the story of Adam and Eve, it was argued, had to be approached from a radically originary point, from a reading of scripture whose perspective was prior to the onset of the corrupt forms of Christian doctrine that overcame the church in the first centuries of the Common Era.

It is a version of just this heretical, late eighteenth-century understanding of Christian doctrine that supplies the conceptual energy behind the libretto for Haydn's *Creation*, and its aggressive attempts to get at the story of creation from the perspective of the beginning, or, perhaps more accurate, from the perspective of the beginning of the beginning. It was the libretto's unspoken commitment to this enlightened and heretical vision that provided Haydn with the discursive strategies by which he might attempt the pre-emption of the great Georg Friedrich Handel. We need only consider *The Creation's* preeminent emblem of its composer's fantasized supererogation of Handel. *Messiah* featured at its center an image of enlightenment: echoing Isaiah, Handel's oratorio made its case for the role of the Christian redeemer by a turn to the imagery of light: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." Fallen in sin, we as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve require the light that is the Christian dispensation. When Haydn's oratorio performs its own turn on the image of light – hardly avoidable, of course, given the prominence of God's *Fiat lux* in Genesis – it evokes a light that burst forth thousands of years before the birth of the Messiah. Haydn casts the creation of light not as a redemption, but as a clearing away of any and all prior forms of darkness

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<sup>11</sup> The best history of Unitarianism in late eighteenth-century England is still that of Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945-52).

and corruption: "Now vanish before the holy beams, the gloomy dismal shades of dark." I will conclude by suggesting that the gloomy dismal shade of dark is not simply a representation of the historical accretion of doctrine that Haydn's oratorio sets out in part to sweep away (although it is that as well). The gloomy dismal shade might also be, from the ambitious Haydn's perspective, the musical achievement of Handel's *Messiah*, which, as a celebration of our redeemer from sin, depends on a narrative of the fall that Haydn's *Creation* attempts at once to pre-empt and to make irrelevant.

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