Chapter 1

GOD AS FATHER IN
PARADISE LOST

I

And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.

—Matthew 23:9

Milton works in the tradition of a Scripture that he believes his poem extends. He takes seriously the way that he represents the God whom he worships and whom he wishes to justify to other humans. Operating on these assumptions, I would like to read that God “authorially” as carefully as possible. To do so requires acknowledging the metaphor that Milton emphasizes: God the Father. Because Paradise Lost is a poem about education, about young people and their moral development, it is a poem about the parent who fathers them, nurtures them, educates and disciplines them.

Parenthood provides a more useful metaphor than kingship or military precedence for considering God’s role in Paradise Lost because it highlights issues of interiority and intimacy that the other two roles do not. First, the metaphor God as Father raises the question of creation itself that Milton places at the center of the poem—“what cause / Mov’d the Creator in his holy Rest / Through all Eternity so late to build [?]” (7.90–92)—and pushes that question backward from the creation of Earth and humans to the very beginning: why does God create in the first place? Then, it forces our consideration of the motives behind that choice—of God’s affective life—but directs that attention away from ontology toward relationships: it makes us ask not “what is the nature of God” or “what are the attributes of God,” but “what is the creaturely experience of God in this poem” and “how does Milton’s God want to be in relation to his creatures”?
These different questions will yield strikingly different answers. An infant learns of its caregiver's “nature” through interaction: this other is gentle, responsive, physically warm, and relieves the discomfort of wet diapers or a gnawing stomach. Learning that the human body is ninety-eight percent water and created by a genetic code that determines sex, hair color, and the likelihood of developing heart disease does not improve a young person's understanding of who her parents are. We know others through relationship, and that “knowledge” evolves over time. In order to develop his readers’ conception of God, Milton represents him in relationships.

A strong thread in Milton criticism still argues that in representing God as a possible being Milton risks, or creates, aesthetic and theological catastrophe. As Michael Lieb outlines in “Reading God: Milton and the Anthropopathic Tradition,” orthodox theologians, from Augustine to Calvin, have argued for the unknowability of the divine and dismissed representations of God expressing human feelings as theological pablum for the ignorant, the equivalent to the milk Paul offers his readers before they can digest the true meat of faith. Georgia Christopher, working in this tradition, argues that, in Paradise Lost, God the Father’s “words do not imply a familiar psychic life as do those of Satan and Adam. Milton is adamant that the human metaphors by which God presents himself in Scripture cannot be construed as a key to God's experience (CD, pp. 133–134)” (Christopher 112).

But Milton is also adamant in his prose writings that Scripture, not theological abstraction, is the only accurate source of information about God, and Milton works with a Scripture that insists on a God who experiences and expresses an intense emotional life. According to Lieb, Milton’s exegetical practice constituted a version of what I have been calling “authorial reading,” searching Scripture that he believed to have been “written” by God as he believed God intended his audience to read it: “reading the Scriptures becomes for Milton an exercise in the discovery of God's intentions, of forming a mental image of him corresponding to that which he, in bringing himself within the limits of our understanding, desires us to form” (“Reading God” 224). Milton reads Scripture as God’s self-revelation; what Scripture provides is not systematic theology, not a theological discourse on “the nature of God,” but a series of stories about God’s intervention in human history, about God’s interaction with human beings.

Although any representation of the divine must necessarily accommodate the truth of the divine life to human understanding,