Chapter 8

Eve, Identity, and Growing in Relationship

I

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

—1 Corinthians 13:11

In Paradise Lost, individuals exist in a temporary hierarchy of relationship in which each person—angel or human—is responsible for nurturing and educating another, who is less fully developed, less well-informed, but not lesser in value than himself, so that the two may grow into a relationship of full social equality. That Eve has no one to educate may be partly responsible for critics’ tendency to read her as inferior to Adam in a qualitative rather than social sense and to misread their conversations as reinforcing her subordination rather than increasing her autonomy and responsibility. In Milton’s Eve, Diane McColley argues persuasively for Eve’s spiritual agency and responsibility independent of Adam: as she points out, Milton’s Eve is “distinguished from all other Eves by the fact that she takes her work seriously” (110). That work includes serving God through tending the Garden with Adam and serving God through caring for Adam. In addition, the poem insists upon Eve’s future parental status, from the divine voice’s first mention of her title “Mother of human race” (4.475) to the narrator’s final naming of “our Mother Eve” (12.624), which culminates the poem’s sustained consideration in Books 10 through 12 of the protoevangelum. As we have seen, Adam has parental as well as spousal responsibilities toward Eve—to nurture and educate her in order to prepare her for parenting; as part of her apprenticeship, Eve cares for and nurtures Adam. This chapter will

M. O. Thickstun, Milton’s Paradise Lost
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look first at Eve’s developing sense of identity through her interactions with God and with Adam and her growing ability correctly to interpret the world and her role in it. It then will address Eve’s more mature efforts to respond to her multiple callings, to learn from her experiences, and to fulfill her responsibilities despite disastrous mistakes.

Chronologically, Eve is the “youngest” character in Paradise Lost, being born several hours after Adam. As with Adam, Milton presents Eve’s entire developmental history, from when she “first awak’t, and found [her] self repos’d / Under a shade of flours” (4.450–51) to her decision to ask Adam’s forgiveness after their sin. More significantly, she is the only character in the poem to have an infancy: Milton introduces the angelic host only after their adult roles are established; although Adam tells the story of his “birth,” he awakes to life blessed with the ability to understand accurately what he sees, to command language, and to reason, so in one sense intellectually fully grown. Eve, on the other hand, awakes “much wondring where / And what I was, whence thither brought, and how” (Book 4.451–52), and explores her environment “with unexperienc’t thought” (4.457). The story that she tells addresses her process of self-discovery: as Kristin Pruitt writes, “how she, like Adam, first discovers an independent identity and achieves a measure of self-knowledge” (McColgan 29). The story also reveals what she thinks, upon reflection, about these earliest experiences and how they help her to understand her relationship to Adam, the intended audience for her tale. As McColley points out, “Eve narrates the episode (4.440–91) with far greater depth and perspicacity than she was capable of when it occurred” (80). Any reading of this episode must attend to the double layer of interpretation it contains: Eve’s initial interpretation of the world around her and her more experienced interpretation of that earliest response.

In order to address and dismiss the inherited “problem” of female vanity, Milton boldly has Eve relate her encounter with a “mirror” in her very first speech in the poem. He has crafted her response to this “mirror,” however, in a manner that is highly resistant to tradition. Both Milton and Eve make it clear that her story opens before she reaches the stage of intellectual development at which a child becomes aware that the reflection she sees is “herself.” Eve reports that, lying before a lake that she could not yet even identify as water, let alone as a reflective surface, she saw a shape responding to her “with answering looks / Of sympathie and love” (4.464–65) and was delighted. Any parent will remember this moment, when the baby