

Disguise and Belief in Milton's *Paradise Regain'd*

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Abstract: What we see can confirm our preconceptions, act as proof for what is doubtful. Yet, belief is strongest when it does not require visual, tangible, or any kind of proof. Milton's later epic dramatises the threefold temptation of Christ in the wilderness, exploring the beliefs of Christ, the Tempter, and even the reader. In the spiritual battle of the two characters, the pictures that the words paint give much of the epic grandeur, as the poem investigates the reliability of the visual. In this process Satan's disguises try to capitalise on the cultural connotations of clothing, while Christ stands in naked honesty.

As the blind poet sings of the regained Paradise after the lost one, his epic creates a world of intellectual and spiritual debate, where the emphasis is on the power of words and not on the images they conjure up. The importance of words is highlighted, for example, in how they leave impressions of “much amazement” (*PR* 1.107) and in the idea that one should live by the “word / proceeding from the mouth of God” (*PR* 1.349–350). Visions and illusions light the way of Satanic temptation. Satan, the father of lies, is said to work with “strange Parallax or Optic skill / of vision multiplied through air” (*PR* 4.40–41); his words are colourful, they paint many pictures. The aspect of Satan's visual temptation that I would like to consider is a matter of clothes, particularly disguises, as they stand in contrast to how little is revealed about the appearance of Jesus. While Jesus offers the naked testimony of his body and soul, Satan brings two disguises for the temptation that reflect elaborate ways of life.

More than half a century ago, Jackson I. Cope passingly commented on the lack of Jesus' visual presentation, simply stating that “we never *see* Christ” (507, emphasis added). Cope noticed this peculiarity when discussing the difference

between the aesthetics of time and place in Milton's two epics about Paradise. The case of this visual difference has not yet been discussed in Milton criticism in the detail it deserves, which the present paper aims to amend. In terms of visuality, I concentrate on Satan's disguises and the presentation of Jesus. Disguises add a further layer of meaning to ordinary clothes, as they recontextualise the connotations that clothes already have. When it comes to how clothing produces meaning, I think along the lines of Chiara Battisti's idea where clothes themselves allow for a performance of identity that is negotiated between the individual and society as opposed to the interior covering of skin that stands for the "uniqueness of being" (102). Disguises hijack this mechanism and forcefully break the honesty of the discourse and its semiotic reliability while capitalising on its workings. This operation is further complicated by the fact that the reader is aware of the wearer's malicious intent. Pride as Satan's chief deadly sin fits here comfortably, as it centres on projected image and its perception by others. In general, Milton's approach to the characterising power of clothing agrees with the tendency of the seventeenth century when it comes to the symbolism of clothing in utopias and dystopias. As Peter Corrigan observes about the literature of the period, "clothing in imaginary communities is usually coded in such a way that all the social distinctions relevant to a particular society are clearly indicated through apparel" (18).

CLOTHING IN LITERARY AND MILTON CRITICISM TODAY

Focusing on clothing in literary criticism is a considerably new approach. Margaret D. Stetz specifically identifies the year 2006 as the turning point that brought "material analysis to literary studies, by means of attention to dress" within the academic community (63).¹ In today's Milton criticism, Stephen B. Dobranski advocates a similar approach, inspiring the exploration of how "Milton's animist materialism affects his depiction of material objects" (349). Dobranski argues that by "examining the cultural context of things in the poem, we may discover that they possess greater, more spiritual significance, than has been previously thought" (349).² Cultural context can be a considerably broad term: one could approach a text while finding

1 Somewhat earlier, in 2000, Elizabeth Currie already indicated that there is a lack in literary studies that place vestiture in their focus (158).

2 While in Dobranski's writing "the poem" refers to *Paradise Lost*, it is quite natural to extend his observation to *Paradise Regain'd* as well.

the relevant cultural context in an attempted reconstruction of the author's historical *milieu*, or by stating that, in case of objects that still surround us, we should understand their cultural context in terms of the reader's time. While Dobranski treats the "matter of hair," that is the arrangement and length of hairlocks as their seventeenth-century connotations inform and guide the world of *Paradise Lost*, his agenda also heralds the study of vestiture in Milton's works. In the cases of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regain'd*, there are very few studies that address this issue. Edward C. Jacobs looks at how various scenes of dressing and redressing in *Paradise Lost* create a "melancholic awareness" of the two expressions' "proleptic power" signalling the first pair's fall (43). In the 1970s, Michael Lieb explored how paying attention to the cultural context of mundane objects that appear in *Paradise Regain'd* can have a bearing on our understanding of Milton's works. While Lieb's work connects the language of materiality with theological bearings in the light of Milton's poetic texts, and thus exemplifies exactly the type of inquiry that is of use to Milton criticism today both in its findings and its spirit,³ the study seems to have been forgotten. Lieb's work (1970) is not referenced, for example, in Jacobs' essay (2017), and it also eluded my attention when I was writing my study of the symbolism of clothing and its semiotics of sin in *Paradise Lost*.⁴

THE WARDROBE OF THE REGAINED PARADISE

Satan is first disguised as "an aged man in Rural weeds" (1.314), but this costume fails the Tempter. Yet the failure fuels a second attempt as he returns in a more elegant attire: "Not rustic as before, but seemlier clad / As one in City, or Court, or Palace bred" (2.298–300). Apart from the two disguises, other articles of clothing appear in the epic, though these pale in comparison to the disguises in terms of narrative importance and their roles in the temptation. In a vision Satan creates, the "light armed Troops" of the Parthian Empire wear "coats of Mail and military pride" (3.311–312). As part of the last temptation, praetors and proconsuls hasten in "robes of State" (4.64), while emissaries from remote territories of the Roman empire travel the Appian Way in "various habits" (4.68).

The clothes of *Paradise Regain'd* are ahistorical as they describe attires that cannot be linked to a historically specific moment. Apart from the chainmail, they are

3 For the line of Milton criticism that I name above, see Dobranski, Abecassis, and Edwards.

4 See Bodó, "These Robes Were Made for Sin."

clothes that cannot be identified with specific garments of well-defined periods. For example, even today's judicial wear (especially in Anglo-Saxon cultures) could be described as robes of state. Yet, if the reader limits the chronological classification of these garments to fall, for example, between 100 B.C. and the seventeenth century of Milton's time, our understanding of the poem's visuality is not advanced. In fashion history, there is a significant difference between a first-century, seventeenth-century, and a twenty-first-century robe in terms of their material, tailoring, arrangement, typical use, and consequently of cultural and symbolic connotations. Milton's text does not offer anything specific about these items that could bring into motion specific historical connotations of apparel. Here no such characteristically seventeenth-century garments appear as for instance the vest did in *Paradise Lost* (11.241).⁵ Although Milton's *Paradise Regain'd* was written in the seventeenth century, it portrays events that are associated with the Biblical times of the first century, dressed in a language that reaches to esteemed sources of literature written in various cultures at various times. The historical diversity of the texts brought into the fold by Milton's allusions throughout the poem, together with the universality of the theme of his epic (Jesus' threefold temptation in the wilderness) within the Christian context both suggest that the epic aspires to timeless appreciation and understanding. In other words, the associations that one might have at any historical moment should be relevant for the analysis of the text.

In contrast with *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regain'd* calls more attention to the act of dressing than to the particularity of specific garments. For example, the poem recalls that Jesus at the age of twelve stood "[b]efore the Altar and the vested Priest" (1.257). In the beginning of book 2, Mary's troubled thoughts are metaphorically "clad" in sighs (2.65). Satan's second disguise also emphasises this, rather than the specificity of one garment (2.298–300). Also, as Satan tempts the fasting Jesus with a richly-laid table, in the background "[t]all stripling youths" are described, "richly clad, of fairer hew, / Then *Ganymed* or *Hylas*" (2.353–354). This emphasis on being dressed as opposed to the particularity of specific garments would suggest that the general idea of the representation of the self through clothes is closer to the central themes of the epic.

The three temptations of Christ in the wilderness are presented as a kind of preparation for Christ's final victory. The Father sends Christ to lay "down the rudiments [o]f his great warfare" to "o'ercome Satanic strength" by "Humiliation and strong

5 For more on the appearance of the vest in *Paradise Lost*, see Bodó (111–112).

Sufferance” before “conquer[ing] Sin and Death the two grand foes” for which he becomes human (*PR* 1.157, 158, 161, 160, 159). Christ’s assumption of human form or nature became a diverse theological question, mostly referred to as kenosis that tangentially connects to the presentation and representation of the self through clothing. Lieb explores how the language of the Church Fathers describes the kenotic experience, that is, the incarnation and self-emptying of Christ, in terms of dressing and clothing. He also shows that Milton used this language of the Church Fathers, for example, in his poem on circumcision, where Christ “emptied his glory, ev’n to nakedness” (Milton, *The Complete English Poetry* 20). Here, I wish to present a list of the most relevant examples. As the following quotations are often the result of citations within citations even reaching back to Latin originals through the works of several translators and scholars, I quote them for the purposes of this paper directly from Lieb’s study:

1. For Hilary of Poitiers, Christ’s becoming a man is achieved through changing “his bodily fashion.”
2. Origen approaches the topic saying that it was “veiling of the splendors and brilliancy of deity.”
3. For Cyril of Alexandria, kenosis was “the acceptance of a human vesture.”
4. For St. Augustine, Christ invests “himself with humanity as with a veil.”
5. J. B. Lightfoot writes that “the Son ‘emptied’ or ‘stripped’ himself in his kenosis.”
6. Even John Calvin writes in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that Christ is “clothed with our flesh” and that Christ allows “his divinity to be hidden by a ‘veil of flesh.’” (Lieb 55–59)

Vestiture can become a potent vehicle for the metaphoric language of incarnation, as it builds on the common experience of augmenting oneself with an artificial material to change one’s public appearance and image. The particulars of the experience of dressing do not necessarily conflict with the divine mystery but expose the anthropocentricity behind the human conception of such divine operations as kenosis. As a garment, human nature becomes secondary to the divine, it becomes attachable and detachable. It is something that does not change the entity to which it is applied, but it changes its perception. The metaphor of dressing reveals that, even though in Genesis, God creates man in his own image (*KJV* 1:26), divinity is as far from humanity as clothes are from having a soul. But Milton understood that clothing is also a channel for human interactions where social structures are realised. This is visible in how he described the vestiture of the archangel Michael in *Paradise*

Lost, saying that “th’Arch-Angel soon drew nigh, / Not in his shape Celestial, but as Man / Clad to meet Man” (11.238–240).

Clothing as a cultural product both in its materiality and its meanings operates historically and in the present at the same time. In today’s Western civilisation, as in Michel de Montaigne’s time, meanings of clothing emerge within the community of their users. In 1575, Montaigne in his short essay, the “Origins and Motives of the Custom of Wearing Clothes,” discusses the capacity of clothes to represent such societal relations as the perception and contextualisation of professions, thus abandoning the position that the only purpose of clothing would be protection from the unpleasantness of the elements (15–16). It is far from being certain that Montaigne was the first intellectual to diverge from a purely utilitarian concept for the wearing of clothes; yet, such collections of fashion theory as *Fashion Foundations—Early Writings on Fashion and Dress* start with Montaigne’s essay.

In the Christian context of *Paradise Regain’d*, clothes and the very act of dressing have also been long associated with the Fall of mankind. The first time vestiture appears in the King James Bible it results from shame felt upon breaking union with God.

... she [Eve] took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. (*KJV*, Gen 3:6–7)

Clothes are not only connected to sin for Adam and Eve but also to the all-seeing eye of God. As the pair notices that God is walking in the garden, they continue with the secretive behaviour that previously lead them to create clothes, and God reveals his knowledge of their transgression while commenting on this issue:

And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat? (*KJV*, Gen 3:9–11)

In seventeenth-century thought, clothing functioned as the reminder of Adamic guilt and shame: “Adam’s shame was never so great, declared John-Francis Seanult, ‘as when he forced to cloth himself, the skins he wore were the apparel of a penitent’” (Almond 199).

DISGUISE AND BELIEF

Yet in Milton's writings, clothes can also stand for righteousness. Lieb argued that the "negative or positive overtones of investiture depend upon the essential relationship between form and attire. This relationship also comments on moral stature. When Milton is describing a virtuous character, for instance, form and attire correspond gloriously" (Lieb 354). As Lieb observes, this is the case in Milton's 23rd sonnet, beginning with the line "[m]ethought I saw my late espoused saint," in *A Mask*, and on occasion in *Paradise Lost*. But when it comes to disguises, "attire attempts to hide . . . form, with the result that investiture debases rather than glorifies" (354).

SATAN'S DISGUISES

Disguises are ever-present tools of Satanic temptation both in *Paradise Lost* and in *Paradise Regain'd*. They enrich the imagery of the epic by communicating Satan's deceptive nature. While *Paradise Regain'd* mainly takes place in the wilderness, the linguistic ornaments of the text present a vibrant visuality. As Satan approaches Christ for the first time with the intention of tempting him, he does not appear as a fallen celestial being, but as

. . . an aged man in Rural weeds,
Following, as seem'd, the quest of some stray Ewe,
Or wither'd sticks to gather; which might serve
Against a Winters day when winds blow keen,
To warm him wet return'd from field at Eve,
He saw approach, who first with curious eye
Perus'd him, then with words thus ut'red spake. (*PR* 1.314–320)

The narrator reads quite a lot into Satan's disguise, which is unsettling but not alien from the Miltonic treatment of clothes. In *Paradise Lost*, for example, it is most significantly in a vision given to Adam by the archangel Michael that clothes are directly interpreted. In *Paradise Regain'd*, Satan's first disguise is described as "[r]ural weeds." The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Milton's *Paradise Lost* in connection with the vestimentary meaning of "weeds," marking a word that denotes a "garment, or garb, distinctive of a person's sex, profession or life" (*OED*, s.v. weed, n.2.). While in *Paradise Lost* (3.479), "weeds" appeared with the meaning of clothes that are the characteristic garments of the Dominican order, here a similar function is visible, but instead of a particular profession or vocation, "weeds" point to the hardships

of rural life, maybe even a kind of humbleness associated with it. The weeds refer to something that a shepherd would wear. Clothes fulfil one of their functions that has perhaps not changed since their emergence. This function is to express, reflect, and embody social relations. The view that clothing is not (only) about a functional protection against the elements may be banal and obvious, but its academic contextualisation deserves mention. Alex Franklin, for instance, investigates this topic with a Heideggerian phenomenology in mind, arriving at the conclusion that we do not express “our individuality, our authentic selves through our clothing choices—as myriad ad campaigns would have us believe—[but] we are in actuality expressing our inauthentic ‘they-selves’” (85).⁶ Obviously, there is intentionality on Satan’s part in appearing in the rural weeds as an aged man, but this intentionality plays on a common understanding of clothes expressing social, political, and economic status. Still, clothes infer meaning according to two opposing dynamics: they can either give material presence to underlying instances that are there, or they modify these instances by being contradictory or different to them.⁷

As the narrator presents Satan’s first disguise, he gives little information concerning the actual shape that Satan assumes, instead he concentrates on interpreting it for the reader. We only learn that he is “an aged man in Rural weeds, / following” Christ. The amount of information that the narrator infers forms the motions of Satan, and his disguise is significantly more than what is expected. It goes beyond the ordinary reach of deductive reasoning. The elaborate interpretation of the “aged man disguise” suggests a position that accepts garments and gestures as capable conveyers of, essentially, an entire way of life. The struggles of life in the harsh winters of the wilderness are engraved in the clothes and movements assumed by Satan.

Satan’s disguise works also as a parody. The Biblical allusion to Christ as a shepherd puts Satan’s disguise into an ironic perspective as the Tempter chooses the same vocation to be associated with his disguise that his mark will assume for himself as the head of humankind. The narrator’s comment that this diabolic shepherd might be on a “quest of some stray Ewe,” resonates also with the image of Christ as the Lamb of God. While an ewe usually refers to a female sheep and Christ appears as masculine in the epic (and in the Christian tradition as well) the playfulness need not be lost

6 Franklin uses the term “they-selves” in a sense that emerges from her reading of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (85). Cf. Heidegger (167).

7 Peter Corrigan offers similar hermeneutics of clothing in the conclusion of his book on the symbolism of clothing in English utopian and dystopian literature (155–156).

because of the lack of didactically precise equivalence. The capacity for parody in Satan's disguise does not end here.

Lieb observed that Satan's first disguise also parodies some conceptualisations of kenosis.

C. A. Patrides mentions the . . . view of such writers as Gregory of Nyssa, in whose *Oratorio chatechetica* we find the idea that Christ, through "a kind of deceit and trickery," disguised himself as man, so that he could catch Satan unawares (133–134). Although Milton does not expressly accord with that concept, he does reflect [on] . . . the patristic interpretation of Christ's *kenosis* as an *occultatio Dei* [the covering/hiding of true divine nature in the process of incarnation]. Thus, in "The Passion," he celebrates Christ's assuming man's form in these terms: "what a Mask was there, what a disguise!" (19). . . . Divinity takes human form (metaphorically disguises itself) in order to reveal itself to human understanding. Unlike Christ . . . , Satan . . . disguises in order to deceive, but . . . [he becomes] "undisguised" through the scrutiny of Christ. (353–354)

Lieb contrasts Satan's disguise with Christ's vestiture of a human form in a way that brings forth a semiotics of clothing that was very much present in *Paradise Lost* as well. The semiotics that Milton developed in his grand epic for the first attire that mankind wore was one of change. There, the presence of clothes signified a new-found absence of innocence, and consequently clothing revealed an ontological change in its wearers. While the nature of Christ's human form/body is not directly addressed in *Paradise Regain'd*, Lieb brings compelling evidence for its relevance in face of a disagreeing academic climate (342–354). Although Lieb considers it to be somewhat "grotesque" to conceptualise the human appearance of Christ as a mask, such an approach provides an illuminating perspective on how Christ sees through the Satanic disguise at the end of their first repartee:

He [Satan] ended, and the Son of God reply'd.
 Think'st thou such force in Bread? is it not written
 (For I discern thee other then thou seem'st)
 Man lives not by Bread only, but each Word
 Proceeding from the mouth of God . . . ? (*PR* 1.346–350)

The text does not reveal what gave Satan's disguise away—or what was particularly conspicuous in his language. As Miklós Péti's note concisely summarises in the new, 2018 Hungarian translation of *Paradise Regain'd*, the critical tradition does not agree

whether Satan and Christ recognise each other at this point (as the old enemies from the War in Heaven, as described in book 6 of *Paradise Lost*), or if they just deduce the other's identity. As Péti comments, the line, “[f]or I discern thee other than thou seem'st,” could also be interpreted as Christ's “bluff” to get Satan to confess his identity (48n102). Satan's alleged initial reason for approaching Christ, having seen his baptism, was exactly the same: to find out who Christ is. This symmetry in the will to recognise the other is at its height a few lines later, when Christ ends his argument concerning the patriarchal precedents of fasting with the lines, “[w]hy dost thou then suggest to me distrust, / Knowing who I am, as I know who thou art” (1.355–356). From the sinful perspective of Satan's pride, the Son's human form is not just a clothing of the flesh but a disguise. And the most deceiving one of those. This could be understood as Milton chiding literal believers of kenotic thought but could only be a way to show Satan's apostasy. If we take inspiration from Milton's other writings, like “The Nativity Ode,” it could also be that Christ's disguise of the human form, a benevolently conceptualised disguise that was assumed as the Son of God gave up his godhead to save mankind, gave him the ability recognise other, inferior disguises. What makes the choice between these interpretations challenging is the lack of textual evidence, the fact that the epic connects Biblical and fictional texts, assuming a familiarity with them, and that Milton's epics are also spiritual texts: readers have an understanding of the characters' identities and attach significance to them according to their beliefs and their views on the separation of fiction and theology.

After Satan's first disguise fails, he attempts to disguise himself for a second time:

When suddenly a man before him stood,
Not rustic as before, but seemlier clad,
As one in City, or Court, or Palace bred,
And with fair speech these words to him address'd. (*PR* 2.298–301)

The second disguise also builds on social connotations attached to clothing. The fact that Satan now assumes the guise of a wealthier social cluster does not alter the underlying methodology, nor does the disguise more successfully mislead Christ. Milton's word choice is revealing, as it also brings to surface the difference between truth and assumption. A disguise that is described as “seemly” can easily bring associations of seeming, especially with Milton, whose writings often use wordplay, even between languages (for example between Latin and English).

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As the etymology of both words goes back to the Old Norse form of *soemr*, “fitting, becoming,” “seeming” strengthens a sense of a false underlying content, and the seeming of this fairer clothes also emphasises the falsehood of his fair speech.

CHRIST’S APPEARANCE

As opposed to the proposed descent from the Heavenly throne in *Paradise Lost*, in *Paradise Regain’d* the reader finds Christ already clothed in a human nature. As Christ appears in the epic, virtually nothing is told of his appearance:

... but him [Jesus] the Baptist soon
Descri’d, divinely warn’d, and witness bore
As to his worthier, and would have resign’d
To him his Heavenly Office, nor was long
His witness unconfirm’d: on him baptiz’d
Heaven open’d, and in likeness of a Dove
The Spirit descended, while the Fathers voice
From Heav’n pronounc’d him his beloved Son. (*PR* 1.25–32)

The perspective of the narration here places the reader as one of the gathering. We, as members of the flocking mass that gathers around John the Baptist, only see Heaven open and the Spirit in the shape of a dove but not the Son of Man himself (*PR* 1.18–32). The lack of visual detail, in comparison to the second description is striking, especially taking into consideration that the narrator here becomes Satan:

I saw The Prophet do him reverence, on him rising
Out of the water, Heav’n above the Clouds
Unfold her Crystal Dores, thence on his head
A perfect Dove descend, what e’re it meant,
And out of Heav’n the Sov’raign voice I heard,
This is my Son below’d, in him am pleas’d.
.....
Who this is we must learn, for man he seems
In all his lineaments, though in his face
The glimpses of his Fathers glory shine. (*PR* 1.79–85, 91–93)

At the second iteration, the reader sees with Satan’s eyes, with a gaze that pierces into the realms of the transcendental yet misses the accurate identification

of the object of its gaze with the Son whose “fierce thunder drove [the devilish crew] to the deep” (*PR* 1.90). Both iterations present a gathering: first the baptism, and later the council of the fallen angels listening to Satan’s most visual testimony. The first resembles the situation of someone in a line far removed from the main event being only told what is happening at the front. In contrast, Satan’s compelling rhetoric creates the illusion of experiencing the events directly. There is space even to contemplate the glow of a face. The difference between the two descriptions is clear, though the referential reliability of the second might be suspect, the narrator being the biblical “Father of lies” (*KJV*, John 8:44) for whom lying is sustenance and food (*PR* 1.429). While the rich visual details of Satan’s description tempt the reader to believe him, the failure of the Satanic reading of Christ to recognise the full power of divinity in the incarnate Christ should stand as a warning for the belief in the visual. In a Platonising vein, Satan distinguishes between Christ’s outward appearance, “his lineaments” and his real substance. The word *seems* brings to surface a duality, as it can denote a purely logical approach to a subject and also an understanding derived from visual experience. The first meaning of “seem” (denoting the logical relationship) had already been heavily ingrained in the English language by Milton’s time, but the fact that Satan continues his account with deductions based on an ocular observation suggests that his approach to meaning is visual. Satan thus places trust in two opposing approaches to meaning with one breath. On the one hand, he regards form as the necessary expression of content (the sight of the Father’s glory indicates its actual underlying presence); on the other hand, he also mistrusts the relationship between form and content (saying that the lineaments may be human, but that does not necessitate that he is).

The contrast is quite clear, while in *Paradise Lost* the symbolism of clothing was an intricate system that revealed moral character and ontological change, in *Paradise Regain’d* the visuality of clothing is never to be trusted, never to be believed: it is a tool of deception and show (mostly of status and social power). While Christ’s assumption of human nature was also described metaphorically as putting on clothes in theological sources available to Milton, he avoids this language in *Paradise Regain’d* together with any description of Christ’s physical appearance, making clothing chiefly into a matter of disguise. Ultimately, these disguises become the catalysts of recognition, as Christ’s divinity in his human nature unfolds in the face of Satanic temptation.

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