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Faithful Likenesses:
Lists of Similes in Milton, Shelley, and Rossetti

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Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is full of lists, but these lists come in two distinct varieties. The first type, associated with the goblin men, is a list of objects: either of fruit ("Apples and quinces, / Lemons and oranges, / Plump unpecked cherries," and so on) or of the goblins themselves. The other type of list consists of similes: five times in the poem, either Lizzie or Laura or both together are described by a rapid string of similes ("Like two blossoms on one stem, / Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow, / Like two wands of ivory…").[1] Both devices are notable, but the latter is more striking, because a list or catalogue of similes is overtly self-defeating.

Any poetic list is to some extent self-defeating. The list of fruits that begins *Goblin Market* – sixteen fruits in ten lines (5-14), some with accompanying epithets – provides too much sensory information in quick succession for a reader to be able to picture clearly the individual species. After a certain number, each additional fruit adds to the impression of profusion, but does not actually conjure up a specific image: "Crab-apples, dewberries, / Pine-apples, blackberries, / Apricots, strawberries," coming at the end of the catalogue, are not only indistinct in themselves, but even begin to crowd out the apples and quinces with which the list began. Such a list, then, is asymptotic: the first elements suggest a visual image, but each additional element adds less and less, until at a certain point the list could be extended indefinitely without making any noticeable difference to the cumulative picture that has been painted.

The list or catalogue, after all, is typically thought of as the most unpoetic of all rhetorical forms; what more banal than a laundry list or a phone book?[2] In *A Defence of Poetry* Percy Shelley specifically distinguishes between poetry and its opposite, "a catalogue of detached facts."[3] Moreover, a list like the one that begins *Goblin Market* reveals one of the limitations of poetry: the difficulty of depicting simultaneity. Rossetti presents in temporal succession (since poetry unrolls in time) fruits that are meant to be pictured as coexisting. What would be simple for a still-life painter is almost impossible for a poet, and the poetic list, blurrily rapid but never instantaneous, necessarily reminds the reader of this disadvantage (Ulmer, "Sky-Lark," 250; Gass, 34). Yet if a list of *things* carries these limitations, a list of *similes* is still more paradoxical – not just asymptotic, but essentially self-destructive. A simile aims to illustrate, to provide an insight into one or both elements of which it consists; but the first set of similes in "Goblin Market" does not give us a clearer impression of Laura:

> Laura stretched her gleaming neck
> Like a rush-imbedded swan,
> Like a lily from the beck,
> Like a moonlit poplar branch,
> Like a vessel at the launch
> When its last restraint is gone.
>
> (81-6)

Some commentators have commended the clarity of these lists,[4] but I find it impossible to imagine someone who is simultaneously like a swan and a lily and a branch and a boat. (Although a simile does not necessarily require the reader to picture its elements distinctly, it does ask us to imagine their physical resemblance at some level.) The effect of this passage in context, where it is read rapidly – especially as it follows the earlier, material lists, which demand to be read trippingly – is self-defeating. The metaphors, as Katherine Mayberry writes, "serve, not as an enriching descriptive method, but as a desperate and hopeless means for defining an essence that is not known" (Mayberry, 99). Each new simile not only fails to add to the previous one, but drives it away, so that Laura, far from becoming clearer to the reader through this series of descriptions, is actually drowned in a surfeit of superimposed images. This failure is purposeful: Laura seems to be asserting her individuality at this moment by doing what her sister does not dare; but in fact she is on the brink of losing herself, of becoming indistinguishable from her desires.

A list of similes, then, is paradoxical: it yokes together the most unpoetic of tropes with the most poetic – since the language of poets, in Shelley's definition, "is vitally metaphorical" (*Defence*, SPP 512). This conjunction recurs throughout Rossetti's work – she lists similes not only in *Goblin Market* but in "A Birthday," briefly in "The Prince's Progress" (the title poem of her second collection), and again in half a dozen less well-known poems throughout her career. Rossetti has several forerunners in the use of this device, Petrarch being the one who comes most immediately to mind. It is no accident that the first girl in *Goblin Market* to be blazoned in a rush of metaphors and to be rendered powerless by the merchant-men is named "Laura." The compiling of similes is a feature of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition, a tradition with which Rossetti was particularly familiar – she even claimed descent from Petrarch's Laura (Marsh, 212). The name "Lizzie," too, though its significance is more debatable, seems to point toward the Petrarchan tradition: as Catherine Maxwell points out, Lizzie bears a notable resemblance to Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Maxwell, 79, 92). Like her namesake in Rossetti's poem, Barrett Browning in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* counters the masculine tradition by seeming to participate in it, thus helping to redeem "Laura" from her position of constraint. *Goblin Market* appears to be the first installment in Rossetti's long poetic conversation with Petrarch.

Yet Rossetti's lists of similes differ notably from Petrarch's. It is possible, without contradiction, to string together a list of comparisons in which tenor and vehicle both change. The *locus classicus* for such a list is the Song of Songs ("Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep, thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate"), which is then imitated in the blazons of Petrarchan sonneteers. Such a string of similes presents few complications. But the situation is entirely different when a single tenor is given a number of different vehicles. In the lines from *Goblin Market* describing Laura, the four diverse comparisons all apply to one subject. Here lies the great difference from the strings of similes in Petrarch: whereas the traditional sonnet-blazon suggests richness, each additional simile for Laura is impoverishing. The repeated attempts to fasten onto an appropriate vehicle, as Mayberry writes, "suggest uncertainty and incompletion" (99). The poet, rather than showing off the resources of her imagination, seems to be admitting her own incapacity to discover a single sufficient likeness.

In this sense, Rossetti's lists are closer to Percy Shelley's than to Petrarch's. Shelley, like Rossetti, repeatedly listed similes, most notably in *Epipsychidion* and "To a Sky-Lark," but also in numerous other works, including "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," *The Witch of Atlas*, and *Swellfoot the Tyrant*. Behind Shelley lies the example of Milton. Lists and similes are both archetypal epic devices; Milton not only was the epic poet closest to Shelley and Rossetti, but he also combined the two devices in a way his classical precursors did not. In what follows, I begin by considering lists of similes in general, arguing that their tendency is to test or strain the reader's faith. I then examine the very different effects of this tendency in Milton and Shelley before returning to Rossetti, for whom the trope represents in some ways a matter of life and death.

Much has been written about simile, and its parent trope, metaphor.[5] The aspect of metaphor most relevant to the present discussion, because it comes out most strongly when metaphors or similes are strung together, is the one succinctly described by Coleridge: "No simile runs on all four legs" (Coleridge, 86). In other words, any metaphor implies both similitude and difference: a perfectly four-legged simile would be a tautology. (On the other hand, a metaphor without a leg to stand on, in which there is no obvious similarity between the two elements, is more accurately called metonymy.) A simile is necessarily imperfect and requires, to use another Coleridgean tag, a suspension of disbelief. It would be perfectly rational, to any poetic assertion that "A is like B," for the reader to respond, "No, they are different." A poetic simile, then, implies an act of faith: the reader puts his or her faith in the poet by willingly suspending disbelief, on the assumption that the poet is constructing the simile in good faith. This relationship is analogous to the simile that gave rise to it, in which A and B are wedded to each other, temporarily agreeing to ignore their differences.

A list, by contrast, is an act of non-faith. I make a shopping list because I do not trust myself to remember all of the things I need to buy. The poetic list likewise delegates minimal responsibility to the reader; the originary Catalogue of Ships in Book 2 of the *Iliad*, for instance, is both comprehensive and immediately comprehensible. The same cannot be said, it is true, of all subsequent poetic lists: those of Walt Whitman, the most inveterate lister in English poetry, are rarely exhaustive, and so demand some act of imagination from the reader. When Whitman names twenty persons, places, or things, he usually expects the reader to imagine the whole population of America, or the whole world; his lists, then, are synecdochic (Buell, 174; Goodblatt, 46). But even here, lists provide an easing into synecdoche: most of the work of imagining vastness is not entrusted to the reader, but performed by Whitman himself. A long list may test our patience, perhaps, but not our credulity, since everything is above-board.

When these two contradictory devices are combined, the result is to stretch the reader's faith to its bursting-point, as happens in *Goblin Market*. No firm rule exists for when such a catalogue of similes becomes self-defeating. Two in a row does not present too great a difficulty: one of the the first epic similes in Homer is actually a double simile (*Iliad* 2.144-9), and the practice remained standard in later epic poetry. Perhaps because the double simile is so established, however, we do not always realize just how challenging it is: when Homer compares the men at Agamemnon's assembly both to the ocean and to a wheat-field, the figure is as complex as the well-known trick drawing of the rabbit and the duck. Still, although it may not be possible to see both duck and rabbit simultaneously, the mind is capable of recognizing that they coexist in the same figure.[6] Three vehicles, on the other hand, already pushes the limit and calls the speaker's faith into question, as in *Hamlet*:

> Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?
> Polonius: By th' mass, and it's like a camel indeed.
> Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
> Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
> Hamlet: Or like a whale?
> Polonius: Very like a whale.[7]

Polonius's "very" is usually delivered, and I think ought to be, with obvious irony. Polonius may be a courtier and willing to take on faith much of what a prince tells him, but the whale is the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Yet even three successive similes are not always self-thwarting. It is possible to conceive of one person being like three people, and although this is a mystery, it is not necessarily a contradiction. In Christina Rossetti's "Martyr's Song" a shape appears "As a King … As a Priest … As the Lamb," without stretching the reader's faith in any extraordinary way (29-33). Likewise, since in the traditional litany of the Virgin, Mary is compared to a whole array of symbols (tower of ivory, house of gold), Rossetti is on safe ground listing likenesses in "Whereto shall we liken this Blessed Mary Virgin"; her list could go on and on without peril.[8] But in this case the similes (lily, rose, flower of women) already border on metonyms or symbols; the same is true of comparable lists in other religious poems, such as George Herbert's "Prayer (I)." In a secular setting, on the other hand, and when the reader is actually required to discover the points of similarity, three or four consecutive comparisons for a single tenor suffice to test our credulity.

Homer's catalogue of ships, from which subsequent epic catalogues derive, really is what it purports to be. It straightforwardly lists real places, if not real people, so that "in post-Homeric Greece … appeals to it were made over disputed territories" (Bowra, 71), and it remains of interest to archaeologists as well as to literary critics (e.g. Simpson and Lazenby). Later lists are less straightforward: the next catalogue in Homer, which follows immediately, lists Trojan warriors, and this tradition of naming the enemy is taken up by Virgil in Book VII of the *Aeneid*, which catalogues the cohort of Turnus (Boyd, 214).[9] By the time of Milton the poetic list carries with it an air of suspicion. Spenser's catalogue of trees in Book I of the *Faerie Queene*, for instance, is clearly ominous, even before it concludes with the deceptive "Maple seeldom inward sound" (*FQ* I, i, 9). (Although Spenser's sylvan list derives from a different classical tradition [Barton, 178-81], it too is a precursor for Milton's epic catalogue, which names devils who are first presented to us as fallen leaves in a forest.) But ominous or not, all these pre-Miltonic catalogues, in common with lists from the phone book to Walt Whitman, promise or at least gesture towards full disclosure. The Latin troops around Turnus may be fighting against the foundation of Rome, but their names were familiar to Virgil's audience. There is no suggestion that they do not really exist, and the same holds true of Spenser's trees.

Milton's catalogue of devils in Book I of *Paradise Lost* (376-521), however, is not merely more suspicious but essentially different from its precursors. All other epic catalogues give a list of proper names; Milton gives a list of improper names. "Say, Muse, thir Names" is an ironic invocation, since we have just been informed that their real names in heaven are "blotted out and ras'd," that they have not "yet … Got them new Names" of pagan deities, and that even when they do they will assume "various Names" (376; 362; 364-5; 374).[10] Each name on the list is no more than an approximation; if this were a phone book, it would be an infinitely frustrating one. "Next *Chemos*," we are told with apparent precision, only to learn his alias's alias: "*Peor* his other Name" (407, 413). The good faith disclosure that characterizes Homer's list is absent here, not because the items listed are evil, but because they cannot be accurately itemized and so demand an act of readerly faith.

The devils are of unspecifiable shape as well as name: some have merely "general Names / Of *Baalim* and *Ashtaroth*, those male, / These Feminine. For Spirits when they please / Can either Sex assume, or both" (421-4). Others are not bi-gendered but bi-formed, partly zoomorphic, "[l]ike Comus's crew" (Rosenblatt, 560).[11] Since "when they please" – or, to use a more common Miltonic phrase, when they list – spirits can assume different forms and names, the catalogue is no more than a list of assumptions. Or rather, a list of metaphors – partial likenesses, names and shapes forcibly yoked together. Anne Ferry comments on the language shared by Milton's catalogue and his similes: the list of demonic names is "sensuous, allusive, and particular," and "By these allusions the catalogue repeats the language of the narrator's similes and becomes itself a kind of super-extended simile contrasting our fragmented mortal world with the world of prehistory" (Ferry, 82, 84). Barbara Everett also remarks on the allusive language shared by the catalogue and the similes, but she disagrees about the "particularity" of the

Miltonic list. "A name's virtue is its specificity," but "Milton's use of names continually converts the denotative into the connotative" (Everett, 262-3). Everett refers here not just to the demonic list, with its "general Names / Of *Baalim* and *Ashtaroth*," but to the subsequent roll-calls of great names as well. All the lists in *Paradise Lost* are devalued or called into doubt by the failure of this original list to name anything precisely.

If Milton's imprecise lists make demands upon the reader we would usually associate with simile, it is even more noticeable that his similes take the form of lists. The classical epic simile develops a single comparison with extreme detail, and *Paradise Lost* provides examples of this type too: the bee simile that concludes Book I, for instance (768-775). But more commonly Milton will rattle off alternatives for comparisons he draws, beginning with the first simile in the poem: "as huge / As whom the Fables name of monstrous size, / *Titanian*, or *Earth-born*, that warr'd on *Jove*, / *Briareos* or *Typhon*, … or that Sea-beast / *Leviathan*" (1.196-201). The comparison of Satan to Leviathan, the whale who can be mistaken for an island, has been held to prepare the reader for the deceptiveness both of Satan and of the poet's method (Fish, 36). But before we reach Leviathan, the final and most fully elaborated vehicle, we are offered several other possibilities, so that this simile appears less deceptive than simply uncertain. The different italicized words could be synonyms or alternatives; it is not clear whether each new one is meant to be more exact than the last, or merely equivalent. This listing of possible vehicles continues in later similes, becoming practically a rhetorical tic. In contrast to the fully-developed double similes of Homer and Virgil (soldiers like ocean-waves and also like wheat), Milton produces a stutter of alternatives, as if in self-correction. Satan looks like the sun shining either from behind clouds "or from behind the Moon" (1.596); the devils resemble either "Forrest Oaks, or Mountain Pines" (1.613); they work like pioneers going "to trench a Field, / Or cast a Rampart" (1.677-8).

The examples could go on. The characteristic specificity of the epic simile turns out to be specious, since another specification will do as well: the landscape of hell looks like "*Pelorus*, or … *Aetna*" (1.232-3). Often there are more than just two alternatives: especially in the Satanic books of the poem, most comparisons trigger, not quite an epic catalogue, but an epi-catalogue. This holds true even when the comparison does not take the form of an explicit simile. Satan's legions, for instance, call to mind a list of all those that could *not* compare with them – Giants, Thebans, knights of the Round Table, and so on (1.576-84); like the catalogue of devils immediately preceding it, this is a list of partial likenesses, failed metaphors. The same impulse continues with the implied comparison that begins Book II, which forms another mini-catalogue:

> High on a Throne of Royal State, which far
> Outshon the wealth of *Ormus* and of *Ind*,
> Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
> Showrs on her Kings *Barbaric* Pearl and Gold….
> (2.1-4)

Milton here repeats the aural effect he deployed in the invocation to Book I, the reiteration of the syllable "or" (*Ormus*, gorgeous), while he ticks off alternative comparisons for Satan's state.[12] He uses the same phonetic reinforcement later in the same book, when Satan is working his way through Chaos.

> [B]ehoves him now both Oare and Saile.
> As when a Gryfon through the Wilderness

> With winged course ore Hill or moarie Dale,
> Pursues the *Arimaspian* …
> … So eagerly the fiend
> Ore bog or steep, through strait, rough, dense, or rare,
> With head, hands, wings or feet pursues his way,
> And swims or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flyes.
> (2.942-50)

No simile goes on all four legs, but Milton's are striking in that they swim or sink or wade or creep or fly. He seems to be conspicuously groping for an appropriate vehicle to carry him through the boggy comparison he has entered. Rather than encourage the reader to perform an act of faith in accepting that A is like B, Milton discourages us, since A is like B *or* C – hill or moory dale, Olympia or Pythia (2.530), Ganges or Hydaspes (3.436), Teneriffe or Atlas (4.987). The alternatives rarely differ much, but they are all the more striking for being so apparently unnecessary. The habit of listing different possibilities dissuades the reader from wholeheartedly participating in the usual contract of metaphor.

The effect of the conflation of the two epic devices is to undermine them both. On these occasions, Milton does not merely ironize the classical use of simile, as some have suggested that he regularly does (Widmer, 122; Martindale, 9), but entirely uncouples the two halves of the comparison he is apparently drawing together. This occurs most explicitly in the series of metaphors in Book IX, when Eve leaves Adam.

> Thus saying, from her Husbands hand her hand
> Soft she withdrew, and like a Wood-Nymph light

> *Oread* or *Dryad*, or of *Delia's* Traine,
> Betook her to the Groves, but *Delia's* self
> In gate surpass'd and Goddess-like deport ….
> To *Pales*, or *Pomona* thus adornd
> Likest she seemd, *Pomona* when she fled
> *Vertumnus*, or to *Ceres* in her Prime,
> Yet Virgin of *Proserpina* from *Jove*.
>
> (9.385-396)

Again we find the multiple vehicles, and the multiple "ors" (Oread, deport, adornd). "Likest," which in some editions appears as "Likeliest," is one of the unlikeliest words for an epic simile, outside of Milton. Far from being an assertion of similarity, it confesses the insufficiency of the first four comparisons, and despite its superlative form, it is not the last but is followed (superseded?) by the comparison to Ceres in the following line. Each new vehicle does not seem to approach Eve, but softly to withdraw from her.

Milton yokes the two tropes of list and simile together with unprecedented regularity, and the effect is to turn every reader into Polonius. We must decide how far we are willing to put our faith in any given simile-list before "like a whale" breaks the contract. It could be argued that every metaphor in *Paradise Lost* is a deceptive whale, as in Stanley Fish's reading.[13] But in fact there seems to be nothing inherently evil about similes in Milton, even though most similes occur in proximity to Hell and Satan. Approximate likeness or similitude is the defining characteristic not just of Hell but of all creation: "Let us make now Man in our image, Man / In our similitude," declares God (7.519-20). Later God commends Adam for pursuing a desire for something similar to himself, creating Eve as "Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self, / Thy wish exactly to thy hearts desire" (8.450-51). The search for a likeness is inherently human and commendable, and although any simile *may* deceive the reader, the trope becomes necessarily suspicious only when it is associated with lists. And the inverse holds equally true: Milton's epic catalogue challenges the reader's faith not because it is associated with Satan, but because it is associated with similes.

Similitude remains innocent and worth pursuing if it is in the likeness of God. Eve is said to be a "likeness" of Adam, but he is God's "similitude," so that she too is vehicle of the divine image – unlike Adam's other companions, the beasts, in which he had vainly looked for a likeness, since God's "Image [is] not imparted to the Brute" (8.441). Similes become suspect, however, when they obscure the divine image. Godlikeness is difficult to efface, but not impossible. Adam in Book XI is shown the bodies of his fallen offspring ravaged by disease:

> Disfiguring not Gods likeness, but thir own,
> Or if his likeness, by themselves defac't
> While they pervert pure Natures healthful rules
> To loathsom sickness, worthily, since they
> Gods Image did not reverence in themselves.
>
> (11.521-25)

Not every sin or excess disfigures God's image, but according to Michael there comes a point where the divine tenor is indeed defaced in its likeness. The same is true of metaphor – not evil in itself (though fallible), it becomes perverted when it metastasizes, when it obscures its tenor rather than illuminating it, as happens in a list. Milton's conjunction of the tropes of catalogue and simile trains the reader *both* to extend his or her faith, and also, when necessary, to withdraw it.

Whereas in Milton the listing of metaphors is an exception, a test, in the writings of Percy Shelley it is absolutely central to poetic endeavor. Shelley employs the device in brief personal lyrics ("To Sophia," "Remembrance") and in political squibs ("Similes for two Political Characters of 1819"). It appears in his major odes, such as "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty":

> Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,…
> Like hues and harmonies of evening,—
>   Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—
>   Like memory of music fled,—
>   Like aught that for its grace may be
> Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.
>
> (5, 8-12)

Here the device suggests an overflow of inspiration, yet it remains suspect even when used with the most apparent self-confidence. In "To a Sky-Lark," for instance, Shelley offers at least one comparison for the bird in each of stanzas 2 to 14, including a series of stanzas beginning with "Like" and each consisting of a single extended simile: like a poet, a maiden, a glow-worm, a rose. But in this anaphoric series (lines 36-55), "the similes finally and crucially do not fit. Rather they confirm [the speaker's] patent inability to discover appropriate analogues for the skylark in nature. His 'Like' remains futile and the lark elusive" (Ulmer, "Sky-Lark," 252). Shelley is clearly aware of the problematic nature of such a list, as he shows in his ironic use of the device in the satirical *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, where the wizard Purganax proposes turning the pig-queen into an angel:

> *Second Boar*. How glorious it will be to see her Majesty
> Flying above our heads, her petticoats
> Streaming like – like – like –
> *Third Boar*. Anything.
> *Purganax*. Oh no!
> But like a standard of an admiral's ship,
> Or like the banner of a conquering host,
> Or like a cloud dyed in the dying day,
> Unravelled on the blast from a white mountain;
> Or like a meteor, or a war-steed's mane,
> Or waterfall from a dizzy precipice
> Scattered upon the wind.
> *First Boar*. Or a cow's tail.
> *Second Boar*. Or *anything*, as the learned Boar observed.
>
> (2.1.95-105; Shelley, *Poetical Works*, 403)

The list here is like that in *Hamlet*: the more shapes one finds in the cloud, the less one trusts the likeness, or the speaker.

Yet while Shelley recognizes that to compile a list of similitudes is self-perplexing, he nevertheless considers such effort to be necessary. The vain and perpetual search for an ideal likeness is the common endeavor of love and of poetry. Hence it is nothing short of fundamental, as Shelley suggests in his essay “On Love,” with its reminiscence of Milton’s Adam: “We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness” (SPP 504). But a perfect “likeness” is unattainable; hence great souls will reach perpetually after an approximation. As Shelley says in “A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love,” “This object [of love] or its archetype forever exists in the mind which selects among those who resemble it that which most resembles it and instinctively fills up the interstices of the imperfect image in the same manner as the imagination moulds and completes the shapes in clouds, or in the fire, into the resemblance of whatever form, animal, building, &c., happens to be present to it” (Shelley, *Prose*, 220). Like Hamlet looking at the clouds, love is compelled to find not a true likeness, but a series of imperfect likenesses. As Shelley wrote to Gisborne, “I think one is always in love with something or other. The error … consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal” (qtd. in Sperry, 159).

Love is thus a necessity, and a necessary failure. No love will ever run on all four legs; the “longest journey,” marriage, which even under the best circumstances takes place with “a chained friend” (*Epipsychidion* 158-9), will always be a three-legged race. The same applies to poetry, which is never more than an approximation of its “original conception,” an inadequate simile, as Shelley explains via a simile in his *Defence of Poetry*: “[T]he mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness…. [W]hen composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet" (SPP 531). Accordingly, Shelley ends the *Defence* with a flurry of metaphors – poets are mirrors, words, trumpets – in a peroration that simultaneously displays the author's imagination and his failure to light upon a single, perfect image.

To compile a list of likenesses is the defining device of poetry, according to Shelley, even when it is not explicit. But in Shelley it often is explicit, and nowhere more than in the "obtrusive compiling of metaphor" at the beginning of *Epipsychidion*, where love and poetry are both put to the test (Ulmer, "Politics," 537).[14] Thrice the speaker attempts, like Satan, to put his conception into words, and thrice he falls short. The first time (lines 25-34) he addresses his beloved "Emily" with a Marian litany of names: "Thou Moon beyond the clouds! Thou living Form / Among the Dead! Thou Star above the Storm! / Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!" (27-9). But he soon realizes that these are all "dim words which obscure thee" (33). Yet he soon tries again, this time with a series of tentative metaphors (56-71) reminiscent of those in the Song of Songs: "Art thou not … / A well of sealed and secret happiness, / Whose waters like blithe light and music are, / Vanquishing dissonance and gloom? A Star / Which moves not in the moving Heavens, alone? / A smile amid dark frowns? a gentle tone / Amid rude voices? a beloved light? / A Solitude, a Refuge, a Delight?" (56-64). Yet here again he concedes his own inability to find a sufficient likeness: "I measure / The world of fancies, seeking one like thee, / And find – alas! mine own infirmity" (69-71).

Yet poetry is dependent upon the continued attempt to find the "one like thee," and the speaker tries once more, this time in a frank series of meta-metaphors (112-129). Emily is no longer Eternity, or a dream, or the Moon, but "An *image* of some bright Eternity; / A *shadow* of some golden dream," and "a tender / *Reflection* of the eternal

Moon of Love" (115-18, emphasis added). Finally, she is explicitly "A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning" (120). The metaphor of a metaphor is, like all metaphors, insufficient, and the speaker for the third time recognizes his own shortcomings, this time in a particularly Miltonic lament: "Ah, woe is me! / What have I dared? where am I lifted? how / Shall I descend, and perish not?" (123-5; cf. *PL* 7.12-20). But as Stuart Sperry suggests, this failure may "be seen as integral to the progress of the poem" (Sperry, 161).

The self-defeating lists of metaphors are integral not only to the poem, but to Shelley's self-definition. Shelley's admission that in seeking likenesses he finds only his "own infirmity" has a second meaning, though probably not one that he would admit. Its primary significance is that the speaker has discovered anew the impossibility of true representation. But it suggests another "infirmity" more specific to the speaker, his chronic infidelity. His soul "thirsts after its own likeness," and finds it embodied in woman after woman; it is appropriate that he compares Emily to a metaphor, since she will be as quickly replaced as the similes in the poem dedicated to her. Shelley, as I say, would not admit that such sexual meandering was an infirmity, since fidelity never held a high place in his pantheon of virtues. In *The Revolt of Islam* "Faith" is "an obscene worm," and finds itself in bad company – "Fear, Faith, and Slavery" (2168, 3125; *Poetical Works*, 90, 114). Atheism, according to the title of Shelley's early pamphlet, is a "necessity," whereas marital fidelity, according to *Epipsychidion*, is the perverse "doctrine" of a "sect": "Narrow / The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates, / The life that wears, the spirit that creates / One object, and one form" (149-50, 169-72). The refusal to bind oneself to “one object” or “one form” or one likeness lies at the heart of Shelley’s most dearly-held moral and poetical beliefs.

And yet Shelley’s compulsive search for the perfect simile or the perfect woman, in spite of his conviction that such a search is futile, constitutes an act of faith. “Faith” has two quite different senses, only one of which Shelley abjures. Faith can mean fidelity to what one has sworn or what one owes, as in marriage or citizenship. Alternately, faith can indicate belief in what cannot be demonstrated – “believing where we cannot prove.” This latter, religious sense is, ironically, a virtue that Shelley greatly admires. He attributes it, for instance, to Milton’s Satan, “who perseveres in [a] purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture” (*Defence,* SPP 526). Like a poet, Satan expresses his faith, in the sense of “constancy to an ideal object,” through his perpetual search for something closer to his own conception.

It is not necessary to hold a Shelleyan or Romantic view of Satan’s heroism in order to grant that Satan is a true exemplar of “faith” in the second sense of the word. Milton calls him the being “Who first broke … Faith, till then / Unbrok’n” (*PL* 2.690-1); but the faith that is demanded of Satan in Milton’s poem bears little resemblance to what we usually understand as religious faith. Satan is not required to believe in a God he cannot see or know for certain. He does need to accept some things on trust: his own creation by God, which he cannot remember; the justice of the exaltation of the Son, which is dependent upon a belief in God’s perfect love. But all of these things, as Abdiel shows, are logically deducible in the world of heaven and do not require an extraordinary or counter-intuitive leap of faith. Milton’s lists of similes differ from Shelley’s, because the two poets are testing different forms of “faith.” Atheism is not an option for Satan or

Adam, nor I think for Milton. Faith in *Paradise Lost* is a matter of standing firm, of not straying. It does not involve a quest for an ideal but admittedly unattainable object; the search after alternative likenesses is simply unnecessary. Satan's futile pursuit of a "purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture," and in spite of his knowledge that there is only one true excellence which he can never obtain again, is madness in the context of the poem. But if we introduce the possibility of atheism into the world, let alone its necessity, our perception of such a quest necessarily changes. The quest for an approximate ideal becomes admirable, and all the more so for Satan's repressed knowledge of its futility.

This same repression is evident in Shelley. He admits that a mortal will never find a lover who will truly embody the ideal he seeks, and that a poet will never be able to produce more than a fading image of his original conception. But faith, in the second sense, consists in the pursuit of these ideals nonetheless; if there were no such faith, there would be no love or poetry. There is something psychologically true and perfectly ingenuous in Shelley's shock of discovery of his own failure at the end of each list of similes: each time he recognizes the futility of trying to find a perfect likeness, and each time he immediately represses this knowledge and goes on in good faith. This also explains the objectionable objection Shelley voices when listing his many lovers: "And One was true – oh! why not true to me?" Hypocritical and perverse though this complaint might seem, given that the speaker has just derided monogamy in the most unconditional terms, it is true to life. Shelley is not a faithless polygamist, but a serial monogamist; each new woman or metaphor is chosen as "the one" until found to be insufficient. This is the underlying paradox of *Epipsychidion*, which asserts the impossibility of locating or representing perfection, and then proposes Emily as the sole embodiment of perfection (White, 2.268; Sperry, 176).

Lists of similes in *Paradise Lost* represent a movement away from perfect likeness – each new vehicle weakens similitude, until its fidelity is called into question. The same device in *Epipsychidion* represents the opposite movement, a faithful aspiration towards perfection, though always eventually futile. The device in each poem is a microcosm of the whole: in Milton, of paradise lost; in Shelley, of a paradise imagined (the Edenic island described in the final part) but never attained, as the prose "Advertisement" informs us. Both these paradigms inform *Goblin Market*. Rossetti's poem retells the story of a fall, and its lists of similes, as in *Paradise Lost*, mark a falling-off from the tautological neatness of an original state of unity. But if the girls' garden in *Goblin Market* resembles Eden, it also calls to mind the island of *Epipsychidion*, a self-sufficient space in which two beings can live as one, as Barbara Gelpi has demonstrated (Gelpi, 162). And Rossetti's lists crucially resemble Shelley's in their emphasis on the necessity of reaching after an ideal.

Milton as well as Shelley recognizes the appeal of perpetual questing in the face of impossible odds. Shelley invokes Satan as his model for this mode of sublimity; he might also have cited Eve, or Milton himself, who continued to produce pamphlets about the establishment of a free commonwealth when the Restoration was already an imminent certainty. Shelley's quixotic faith, his restless pursuit of the unattainable, should not be seen therefore in polar opposition to Milton's faith, but as a subset of it. But Christina Rossetti's poetry exemplifies even more starkly than Milton's the mixture of two different types of faith: an absolute faith in an absolute God, which renders all human effort vain at best, and at worst turns it into an obscuring of God's likeness; and on the other hand a faithful striving for perfection. Both aspects are summed up in her lists of similes.

Rossetti's poetic career begins where Milton's leaves off. *Paradise Regained* depends upon the notion that all worldly things are vain, or at least "indifferent"; no one thing is needful, and anything can be turned into an idol and so efface the divine original. This applies even to poetry, which the Son explicitly rejects as unnecessary (*PR* 4.285-364), and Milton confirms this rejection by himself rejecting most of the ornaments and tropes of his earlier poetry. Rossetti's poetry from the first participates in the same paradox: it is art which contends that art is ultimately vain, which continually thwarts itself or cuts itself off.[15] A self-defeating trope such as a list of similes is therefore perfectly apt to Rossetti's purpose, and she deploys it in many of her poems about vanity. "Days of Vanity" (1872), for instance, relentlessly piles up images of "life that dieth." Life is compared to a dream, a bubble, a song, a breath, smoke, a flower, a fruit, a bird – in all, nineteen comparisons in the first twenty-four lines. In a section of her volume *Verses* (1893) significantly entitled "The World. Self-Destruction," she brings to the fore the self-destruction implicit in the listing of similes. The first poem in the section, "A Vain Shadow," runs as follows:

> The world,—what a world, ah me!
>   Mouldy, worm-eaten, grey:
> Vain as a leaf from a tree,
>   As a fading day,

As veriest vanity,
  As the froth and the spray
Of the hollow-billowed sea,
As what was and shall not be,
  As what is and passes away.

None of these similes is really memorable in itself; they begin as clichés, move quickly into tautology ("Vain … as veriest vanity"), and conclude with utter vagueness. But their collocation saps out even what force they might have had, and the poem stands as a mini-monument to the vanity of metaphor-making.

On the other hand, the poem still stands, and this is the paradox of Rossetti's verse. All earthly activity, including verse-making, may be "vanity," but it is also the only means to salvation; all earthly activity, including verse-making, is thus a matter of life and death. The effort of compiling self-cancelling metaphors may serve equally well as a sign of mortal vanity, or as a sign of devoted effort and so of the potential transcendence of mortality. This comes out most clearly in "Mirrors of Life and Death," a Shelleyan rhapsody in which nineteen of the twenty stanzas begin with "As."[16] But the tenor of each of these similes, stated in the first stanza, is dual: "The mystery of Life, the mystery / Of Death" (1-2). The same duality applies to the trope itself: a list of similes my be self-extinguishing, or it may, as in Shelley, be absolutely vital. Hence Rossetti returns to it not only in her poems on vanity (e.g. "As froth on the face of the deep"), but also in her paeans to saints ("Saints are like roses") and the Virgin Mary ("Herself a rose, who bore the Rose").

The final lists of similes in *Goblin Market* declare this duality outright. Laura sucks the juices from Lizzie's body, and the effect is at first ecstatic.

> Her locks streamed like the torch
> Borne by a racer at full speed,
> Or like the mane of horses in their flight,
> Or like an eagle when she stems the light
> Straight toward the sun,
> Or like a caged thing freed,
> Or like a flying flag when armies run.
>
> (500-506)

But almost immediately the fruit has the opposite effect, and from being exalted Laura falls into a state of abjection. Having begun to list, she soon topples completely:

> Sense failed in the mortal strife:
> Like the watch-tower of a town
> Which an earthquake shatters down,
> Like a lightning-stricken mast,
> Like a wind-uprooted tree
> Spun about,
> Like a foam-topped waterspout
> Cast down headlong in the sea,
> She fell at last;
> Pleasure past and anguish past,
> Is it death or is it life?

(513-523)

The answer is both, or as Rossetti puts it, "Life out of death" (524). Laura's fall is underscored by the use of successive similes, a fallen form of discourse. The similes intervene between "strife" and "life," so that the justifying rhyme of "life" is only barely audible. And yet life is reborn out of this fall; Lizzie strives to save her sister, subjecting herself in the process to a similar barrage of similes (409-421), and emerges with the *pharmakon*, the poison that also serves as antidote.[17] The trope is simultaneously Miltonic, a sign of degradation and false imitation, and Shelleyan, a sign of faith triumphant over apparent futility.

Rossetti read and admired Shelley's poetry – at least the lyrics, if not the "impious" longer poems (Gelpi, 151). One could therefore argue plausibly for the influence of such lyrics as "To a Sky-Lark" on the lists of similes in *Goblin Market*. But the parallel seems to me to be less likely a result of direct influence than of similar temperament, predilections which the two poets shared though usually expressed differently. Both Shelley and Rossetti displayed restless dissatisfaction with what this world offers and constantly longed for something greater. In Shelley this led to religious and political radicalism and a succession of love affairs; in Rossetti it led to devoted Anglo-Catholicism and a habitual aloofness from human contact (Marsh, 101). But their underlying similarity is revealed in the trope that they alone, of major nineteenth-century poets, share.[18]

The case of Milton is different. There is no question that Milton influenced Rossetti, and *Goblin Market* in particular. Yet Rossetti's letters and poems are almost entirely free of direct allusions to Milton, of the sort that are endemic to Romantic writing

(Vejvoda, 561). But if Milton is not directly alluded to in *Goblin Market*, neither is God – because no such allusion is necessary to establish the religious message of the poem. God is always a presence in Rossetti's poetry, as he is in Milton's: the similes in *Paradise Lost*, as I have said, always show a consciousness of God as the universal tenor, the unstated origin of all likeness. In *Goblin Market* Milton too is an undeclared presence, the original of which later poetry is a reflection.

I do not mean that Milton was Rossetti's God, or even her god of poetry, but simply that in her writing, as more generally in Victorian poetry, he was a benchmark, an unspoken standard. *Goblin Market*, as many critics have noted, is conscious of its belatedness, as is made particularly clear by the character of Jeanie (Laura's predecessor in tasting goblin fruit; not only is Laura's "sin" not Original, it is not even original). And yet this sense of coming later does not necessarily imply an agonistic relationship to the predecessor, as Kathleen Vejvoda has ably argued (concentrating on the inspiration Rossetti drew from *Comus*). Rossetti's poetic relationship to Milton is one that was unavailable to Percy Shelley. Shelley's invocations of Milton imply either a defiant transcendence or an anxious defeat, both represented by his lists of similes. Where Shelley seeks to override and over-write Milton, Milton simply underwrites Rossetti. This does not mean that her relationship to Milton is not tense, complex, sometimes even combative; but the Victorian poet accepts Milton's invisible and constant presence as a matter of faith.

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[1] Lines 5-7, 188-90, in Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Crump and Flowers; all quotations from Rossetti refer to this edition.

[2] For an excellent overview of lists in prose and verse, see Belknap, “The Literary List,” and for a comprehensive treatment of a great classical lister, see Carey, *Pliny’s Catalogue of Culture*.

[3] *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Reiman and Fraistat, p. 515. All further reference to Shelley’s work are to this edition (abbreviated SPP) unless otherwise indicated.

[4] Miriam Sagan, commenting on the string of similes describing Lizzie (ll. 408-21), claims that “All of the metaphors build on each other, there are daring visual leaps, but the sense is never lost” (Sagan, 72). Sean C. Grass likewise reads a list of similes (the one I have just quoted above) as if each image were perfectly distinct (Grass, 366), although elsewhere his article emphasizes the perils of profusion.

[5] Modern literary criticism of metaphor begins with I. A. Richards, who introduced the terms “tenor” and “vehicle” — which I retain, despite their inadequacies, for what Richards called their “immense convenience”; see *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, p. 96. Moreover, most of the

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difficulties with *tenor* and *vehicle* concern metaphor; their use in relation to simile, which is my main interest, is less problematic. For debate about the nature of metaphor, see Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor*; the special issues of *New Literary History* (Autumn, 1974) and *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn, 1978); and on the futility of further debate, Christopher Ricks, “The Pursuit of Metaphor.” On the epic simile in particular, see Stephen A. Nimis, *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition: The Simile*, which stretches from Homer to Milton.

[6] “True, we can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also ‘remember’ the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time” (Gombrich, 5). Again, although a simile does not require that we actually visualize its elements, nevertheless the act of imagining a crowd of warriors who resemble both water and wheat is a more complex piece of doublethink than we usually recognize.

[7] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.2.358-64.

[8] The list of similes in *Goblin Market* describing Lizzie (408-421) purposely recalls the Marian liturgy: Lizzie is

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"white and golden," "Like a lily" or "a royal virgin" (Grass, 367). She is also compared to "a blue-veined stone," which is reminiscent of the Madonna mentioned in Robert Browning's "The Bishop Orders his Tomb," line 44.

[9] The chief Virgilian precedent for Milton's catalogue of devils, however, is not this relatively brief instance in Book VII of the *Aeneid*, but rather Anchises's naming of Roman luminaries in Book VI, which takes place in the underworld and which is, like Milton's, proleptic: these are not yet their names.

[10] See Leonard, *Naming in Paradise*, 67-85, especially 67-9, 76. All quotations from Milton refer to *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan.

[11] Rosenblatt argues that the entire catalogue is one of sinful association, that the primary threat in the poem is less one of enmity than of "cursed union and contamination" (555); not difference, but false similitude.

[12] The opening sentence of Book I includes "mortal," "Restore," "Oreb," "more," "oracle," and "soar." On the conjunction "or" as the sign of choice, see Brisman, 12-25 and *passim*.

[13] Fish invokes the Leviathan simile as an analogue for the deceptive temptations of the poem as a whole, not just its metaphors (Fish, 36, 71). Elsewhere, however, he describes

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how "ambiguity and metaphor are the enemies because they are the basis of all distortion" (128; see also 122-3).

[14] Ulmer goes on to suggest that "all failures of desire present themselves as representational failures confessing to the limits of language" (541). Similarly, J. Hillis Miller points out that Shelley in this poem "expresses … the failure of poetry and the failure of love" (Miller, 243).

[15] I discuss the self-censoring of Milton and of Rossetti in the introduction and epilogue, respectively, of *The Poetry of Indifference*.

[16] For an excellent recent reading of this poem's dualities, see Armstrong, 34-9.

[17] Rossetti's figure serves as a particularly clear illustration of this term as it is presented in Derrida, *Dissemination*, 95-100.

[18] Or almost alone: Blake lists similes near the beginning of *The Book of Thel*, as does Byron in *Don Juan*, canto 1, stanza 55, and other local instances probably abound. More notably, the layering thick of epic similes is a salient feature of Swinburne's verse; on this topic see Tucker, especially pp. 76-82. Yet Shelley and Rossetti remain unusual in their habitual use of rapid, anaphoric lists of similes.