

## MILTON GOES (PROGRESSIVE-POWER) METAL: SYMPHONY X AND MILTON'S PARADISE LOST (CRITIQUE AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS)

Krešimir Vunić  
Filozofski fakultet, Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli  
kresimir.vunic@unipu.hr

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is twofold: that Heavy Metal is a genre of popular music is simply a given, so the author begins by exploring some of the aporia should one attempt to research such a form of music in an academic context. Making the claim that popular music (and this includes heavy metal) involves multiple aspects that are outside the aesthetics of music, yet conceding that the genre of Heavy Metal (following Deena Weinstein) follows a 'code' which includes much which informs some of the more submerged facets of the self and the wider culture, the author has decided to explore how Symphony X has incorporated John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' for the purposes of their album of the same name. The author proposes that although Symphony X's album is an expression of the 'Dionysian' side of Heavy Metal, the band has incorporated those aspects which are most likely to attract the common reader and does not attempt an engagement with Milton's wider concerns.

Key words: aesthetics, heavy metal, common reader, Satan, John Milton

Selecting a topic for this article was not easy, and the reasons for this require an explanation. First of all, I have a strange relationship with the genre of rock music generally known as heavy metal, although there are certain heavy metal albums and artists I enjoy immensely: I have an affinity for much 'old school' thrash metal (an adolescent hangover), and had rediscovered the wonders of Dark Throne's *Infernal Trilogy* almost a decade ago (*Transylvanian Hunger* was one of the last metal albums I listened to as a teenager just before my interest in the genre began to wane). I must also add that, in my humble estimation, Black Sabbath's *Volume Four* ranks as one of the greatest rock albums I have ever heard and while researching for this paper I had spent hours walking through the city of Zadar (largely empty due to this horrid pandemic) listening to the early albums of Judas Priest for the first time on my mp3 player (*Sin After Sin* has become something of a favourite).

Yet still, much of what is regarded as heavy metal simply fails to move me: it is a genre of rock music I have frequently found stubborn and turgid, and am often lost when it seems that a heavy metal band's technical acumen or forced 'brutality' become points in themselves (I've never liked Cannibal Corpse for example). I do not want to be misunderstood here as I cannot really say what rock music should actually sound like and, truthfully, nobody can (the possibilities are literally boundless). My musical tastes are very diverse and occasionally a little haphazard, yet in heavy metal much to me seems somehow ready-made for its (primarily male) demographic (despite its diversity of subgenres); not only the sound of the music itself, but also much of its iconography (a particular subgenre of heavy metal almost always has the required album art to match, and this led me away from the genre in my early teens when my interests in non-commercial forms of rock music quite literally exploded).

After much careful consideration the question arose on the general aesthetics of music and whether such were at all applicable to what is essentially a popular form. Besides this, as my primary field of interest is English literature (with an emphasis on poetry), to find an album by a heavy metal band unknown to me inspired by a literary work. This, in itself, is nothing new: it is common knowledge among metal fans that Metallica's '*Ride the Lightning*' and '*Master of Puppets*' incorporated themes and motifs

from the work of H.P. Lovecraft. Furthermore, Iron Maiden had set Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* to music on their 1986 album *Powerslave*, and although the three albums cited here are all from the early to mid-1980's, literary works have still continued to form the thematic basis and inspiration for both albums and songs in the genre of heavy metal: two more relatively recent examples would be Mastodon's *Leviathan* from 2004 (somewhat obliquely inspired by Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*), and the track *They Rode On* on the Swedish black metal band Watain's 2013 album *The Wild Hunt* is inspired by Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (itself a work largely indebted to both Melville and William Faulkner).

Thus, the structure of this paper is essentially twofold and the methodologies in each part, although different at first glance, both serve a definite purpose: to differentiate a popular form of music from canonical forms (Classical and Jazz, traditions of Folk-Music), and to research how an example of a popular form has used a work of art from an entirely different domain (in this case literature), as a point of departure for the creation of a separate artefact. The first part of the paper considers an approach to the aesthetics of music and a definition of popular music, including the aporia when attempting to define such a wide-spread and diverse form, while in the second part, an analysis of an academic attempt to define heavy metal will be undertaken in order to select an album inspired by a literary work which is in accordance to the proposed characteristics of this genre, and then to compare the lyric content of a particular song with passages from the literary work with which it is related.

In his essay *What a Musical Work Is* Jerrold Levinson proposes a set of basic principles by which a musical work can be differentiated from other forms of art, as well as principles which may aid the evaluation of a musical work: "it must be capable of being created, must be individuated by context of composition and must be inclusive of means of performance" (Levinson, 2011, 78). This, on its own may seem applicable to what most would consider 'music' (and this would naturally include rock music and, by default, heavy metal), yet it is important to consider what Levinson states a little earlier in the same essay: "To regard performing means as essential to musical works is to maintain that the sound structure of a work cannot be divorced from the instruments and voices through which that structure is

fixed, and regarded as the work itself. The strongest reason why it cannot be so divorced is that the aesthetic content of a musical work is determined not only by its sound structure, and not only by its musicohistorical context, but also in part by the actual means of production chosen for making that structure audible.” (Levinson, 2001, 75-76). This is not so easy to apply to any genre of rock music as would at first appear.

The reason why this is difficult is the following: ‘sound structure’, according to Levinson, although expressed by ‘instruments’ and ‘voices’ is based on a ‘fixed structure’ and this fixed structure is either a musical score (expressed in some form of notation) or some other determinant which is entirely musical (a musical key for example). ‘Musicohistorical context’ and ‘means of production’ both require further explication: ‘musicohistorical context’ has a profound influence on the ‘sound structure’ of an individual musical work, meaning that if one were to find two original compositions, one from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and one from the mid-20<sup>th</sup>, and realised upon further analysis that both are in the same musical key, tempo and so on, both compositions would be markedly different as both are bound to the musical, cultural (and in certain cases, to the wider religious) conventions of their respective times. ‘Means of production’ indicates what is quite obvious: the variety of instruments available at a certain time, the type and size of the place of performance, the occasion which led to the commission or performance of a certain musical work and so on.

Rock music is still a relatively young musical genre and has seen an incredibly vast array of permutations and changes since its inception. Establishing the musicohistorical context for a particular form of rock music is not always an attempt to understand the importance of an epoch, as it is likely to be a ‘fan’s’ attempt to provide a certain legitimacy to his or her preferred form of popular music. Perhaps we have reached a point in time where rock music is no longer the dominant form of popular music appreciated by the young, and if it is the fate of rock music to be curated in the halls of academia, it is likely that the future of this genre is uncertain.

Furthermore, as Simon Reynolds has pointed out quite eloquently, rock music possesses a rather strange characteristic for such a young musical form as questions of its ‘authenticity’ have been constantly re-emerging for the last several decades: “There’s an inherent contradiction to

musical cults of authenticity: fixating on a style that is remote either in time or space (and sometimes both, with the UK trad-jazz revival) inevitably condemns the devotee to inauthenticity. Either he strives to be a faithful copyist, reproducing the music's surface features as closely as possible, risking hollowness and redundancy; or he can attempt to bring something expressive and personal to it, or to work in contemporary influences and local musical flavours, which then risks bastardising the style". (Reynolds, 2011, 211).

In the case of rock music, questions concerning its 'musicohistorical context', means of production, and thus, its authenticity, all point to the entirely obvious: forms of rock music (and one can quite openly state that heavy metal is a case in point) are expressions of particular *genres* and *subgenres*, and it is entirely debatable whether any particular genre or subgenre can be judged by aesthetic criteria alone. Roy Shuker sees rock music in the much wider background of popular music, claiming that the term 'popular music' "defies precise, straightforward definition" (Shuker, viii, 1998) and when seen along the wider background of culture 'all popular music consists of a hybrid of musical traditions, styles, and influences' (ibid).

At the same time, it is an "economic product which is invested with ideological significance by many of its consumers" (ibid). Popular music is an 'an economic product' and the consumers of a particular form of rock music find an 'ideological significance' in it. This points to the inextricable fact that an understanding of any particular form of rock music cannot be separated from the concept of 'subgenre'. When Shuker mentions that popular music is an 'economic product' this does not apply only to highly lucrative forms of popular music, bands and performers: almost all forms of popular music involve product which is not musical at all (and this despite the fact that tangible forms of sound storage media have been largely overtaken by digital formats); the word for this is 'merchandise' (the band t-shirt being the first thing that comes to mind), as well as the larger arena of music promotion, such as concert posters and other forms of advertising.

I will return to Shuker here. Beginning his entry on 'genre' in popular music with several enlightening points, he states the obvious that every genre of popular music is also defined by its 'musical characteristics'

although these “may vary in terms of their coherence and sustainability” (Shuker, 147, 1998). This means that what characterises a particular genre of popular music is a certain fluidity, as well as a dependence on much outside the very constituents of music itself. ‘Sustainability’ here means that a genre may exist independent of the inherent quality of the music itself. The ‘means of production’ (recalling Levinson) are of importance when considering the ‘sustainability’ of a particular form of rock music, as rock music is entirely dependent on the possibilities of the audio technology of a certain time (including both the recording process and sound reproduction media). Thus, maintaining the authenticity of a particular genre is extremely difficult, as developments in technology in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been incredibly rapid and the obsolescence of certain instruments of technology is inevitable. Technology is important when considering popular music as an ‘economic product’ as rapid advances have greatly influenced how music is disseminated and how merchandise forms a part of the marketplace. Shuker is also aware that besides the inherent musical qualities of a genre of rock music, and its associated paraphernalia, there are instances when there is a further underlying characteristic (the meaning of ‘coherence’ in Shuker’s definition), and Shuker cites the (quite often justifiably maligned) genre of ‘Christian rock’ as an example.

Despite the myriad subgenres of heavy metal, it is a genre of rock music that places the greatest emphasis on producing a sound structure that is forceful, powerful and aggressive. As Deena Weinstein notes the “essential sonic element in heavy metal is power, expressed as sheer volume. Loudness is meant to overwhelm, to sweep the listener into the sound, and then to lend the listener the sense of power that the sound provides. Injunctions such as ‘crank it up’, ‘turn it up’, and ‘blow your speakers’ fill the lyrics of heavy metal songs” (Weinstein, 2009, 23).

There are other genres of rock music that also rely on overwhelming the listener with sheer volume (such as punk, industrial and other forms of experimental rock music), yet more must be added in the case of heavy metal, as heavy metal is primarily a form based on the use of the electric guitar and almost always employs a vocalist. Deena Weinstein notes what is specific to the use of guitar and vocals in this particular genre: “Following the blues-rock tradition, heavy metal guitarists are required to

demonstrate technical proficiency. This emphasis on skill contrasts with the punk code, which emphasizes the simplicity of playing, the idea that 'hey, anybody can do this, I just learned it two weeks ago.' Punk stresses a levelling between fans and performers; heavy metal, with its guitar heroes, emphasizes distance" (Weinstein, 2005, 25). The same applies to the use of all other instruments in heavy metal (including vocals, be they sung, shrieked or growled): the emphasis is not only on volume or texture but also on the display of a technical mastery over a certain instrument, and heavy metal fans are known to appreciate this with an overwhelming sense of enthusiasm. Watching a professional heavy metal band play can be compared to watching a sporting event, during which one can share a sense of tension with others in the audience: this is often difficult music to play and it is a joy to behold a metal band pull off a performance smoothly.

Weinstein claims there are two major themes in heavy metal permeating both its imagery and lyric content. Anyone who grew up in the 1980's can recall the controversies and moral panic regarding heavy metal (much of it quite laughable now), and remember reading about the court trial involving Judas Priest and, if one were in early adolescence at that time, must have felt both frightened, yet also curious to find out more about this kind of music, and would then certainly take notice of a series of reoccurring motifs, images and themes: lightning, fire, the threat of violence, long hair, skulls and Satan and satanic imagery.

Returning to Weinstein again, she posits the following as central to what she refers to as the 'heavy metal code': 'Dionysian themes' and 'themes of chaos'. Regarding the first, such lyric content and visual imagery place carnal delight at the fore: "The romantic love SO dear to pop music and the more general sentiment of caring and sharing associated with the counterculture are absent in heavy metal lyrics. The few songs about relationships describe those that have gone sour long ago. But love in its earthy sense of lust and sex is a staple of the genre. Some groups, such as AC/DC and the Scorpions, have many songs celebrating lust - other bands, such as Black Sabbath, ignore the topic altogether" (Weinstein, 2009, 35-36) and further, that sex "in heavy metal's discourse, is sweaty, fun, and without commitments. It is generally not sadistic and is always exuberant" (Weinstein, 2009, 36).

This surely sounds like a lot of fun, but also explains why heavy metal appeals to a primarily white, male demographic as this ‘Dionysian’ aspect is expressed with little subtlety and in terms that are sometimes crass and very likely to offend, and alienate a certain portion of those who enjoy rock music, yet it is the second theme which is certainly the more interesting of the two. Regarding ‘themes of chaos’ Weinstein says that such are a “distinctive attribute of the genre. Chaos is used here to refer to the absence or destruction of relationships, which can run from confusion, through various forms of anomaly, conflict, and violence, to death. Respectable society tries to repress chaos. Heavy metal brings its images to the forefront, empowering them with its vitalizing sound. It stands against the pleasing illusions of normality, conjuring with the powers of the underworld and making them submit to the order of the music and nothing else” (Weinstein, 2009, 34). The theme of lust can be found expressed just as crudely in some forms of hip-hop (NWA and 2 Live Crew were both subject to much criticism for their lyric content, much that would still likely offend certain listeners today) and such ‘themes of chaos’ also inform much of the lyric content in punk rock, yet there are stark differences (we must recall the emphasis heavy metal places on instrumental prowess), as such content in heavy metal involves aspects of ‘themes of chaos’ that are certainly quite anathema to punk.

Although such ‘themes of chaos’ in heavy metal sometimes deal with real-world conflict (Metallica’s *Disposable Heroes* from their 1986 album *Master of Puppets* is one example, and *Holy Wars* from Megadeth’s 1990 album *Rust in Peace* was one of the few songs to crack the top 40 that actually dealt with the first Gulf War), such themes in heavy metal are commonly enshrouded in macabre, gothic and horror imagery, often invoking the darker aspects of Christianity and the history of Christianity, which ultimately brings us to one of the main reasons why heavy metal still remains such a misunderstood and maligned genre: the figure of Satan looms large in much lyric content and iconography: “The devil is frequently mentioned in heavy metal lyrics because he serves as shorthand for the forces of disorder. Hell, as both the home of the devil and the place of punishment for those who transgress, is used in heavy metal lyrics as a synonym for chaos itself” (Weinstein, 2009, 41).



Naturally, Satan and satanic imagery can be invoked in a variety of ways by any metal band, just as they have been in the history of the visual arts and literature (and in the modern age the incorporation of such imagery is almost entirely secular, with Satan predominantly used as metaphor, symbol or cipher). Wherein lies the appeal of this, both to bands and those who enjoy such content in heavy metal? Jeffrey Arnet, in a study involving nine heavy metal fans attempted to understand this strange allure: "These grim lyrical themes are reinforced by the music. The drums pound thunderously the bass guitar rumbles like the growl of an angry beast, the lead guitar races madly as it piles dozens of notes into each measure, the vocalist shouts, screams, and roars with rage and agony. The combination of these sounds gives the music an apocalyptic quality" (Arnet, 1995, 63).

This provides heavy metal with an aura of seriousness, as it displays an engagement with aspects of existence that are largely discounted from common discourse, and combined with a sound, played with great dedication and dexterity, can only encounter a response in kind. Yet, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I was entirely unsure of what the subject of my study was meant to be. After some rumination, as my primary interest is in English literature (and English poetry in particular), I went in search of heavy metal albums inspired by one of the greatest, most influential, yet most difficult poems in the English language: John Milton's *Paradise Lost* for the obvious reason that Satan is the central character of the poem, yet I am also aware that Milton's work has inspired (and has continued to inspire) an enormity of contradictory and conflicting readings: so much is attempted in it, and the author's ambition is displayed with such strength that very few works in the history of English literature have been able to match it (although there have been many detractors). Besides this, this is certainly a perfect complement to the 'theme of chaos' in heavy metal which Deena Weinstein so eloquently expressed. Naturally I turned to the internet for assistance, having decided that the British heavy metal band Paradise Lost would be too obvious a point of reference, and had also decided that I would closely listen to an album by a band whose sound I might not at all find appealing.

I was already aware of the web site 'Encyclopaedia Metallum: the Metal Archives' as I would sometimes read reviews of albums there on the more lunatic, arty and obscure fringe of black metal (heavy metal's darkest subgenre), and while searching found a link to a site on this page on a band called Symphony X, who released an album titled *Paradise Lost* in 2007, even though I knew nothing about the band beforehand. According to Encyclopaedia Metallum, the origins of the band date back to 1994 in New Jersey, releasing their first demo, *Dance Macabre*, and their first album, *Symphony X*, in 1994.<sup>[1]</sup> According to the band's official web site, the band, at present is a quintet, consisting of Michael Pinella (keyboards), Michael Romeo (guitar), Russel Allen (vocals), Michael LePond (bass) and Jason Rullo (drums).<sup>[2]</sup> For the needs of this paper, I did not consider it necessary to delve into their entire discography, yet considered it a good idea to find any interviews with the band regarding this particular album.

I found an interview with the band's frontman, Russel Allen, from the year of this album's release on the 'Blabbermouth' web site (dedicated not only to heavy metal music, but to the heavy metal subculture, as well as the occasional controversy). Before reading this interview, I had no idea if the band considered this album any more important than any of their others. The interview here is an abbreviated version of a longer interview from the 'FMBQ' web site (the link to which is unfortunately broken). Russel Allen's answers are not particularly enlightening: the interviewer asks Russel Allen: "Is there a lyrical concept or theme to the new album?". Russel Allen replies that there "is a theme to the lyrics. It's inspired by Milton's 'Paradise Lost'. It deals with good vs. evil and all of the elements of that struggle within ourselves. Betrayal, revenge, a lust for power, love and war are some of the general themes"<sup>[3]</sup>. During the course of this interview (actually, only an excerpt), little more is said on how the band read, interpreted and used Milton's work, yet Russel is in fact, correct when commenting the poem's content: all the themes which Russel enumerates are in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

An interview with the band (minus vocalist Russel Allen) on the 'Get Ready to Rock' website from the same year is also rather scanty. The

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[1] [http://www.metal-archives.com/bands/Symphony\\_X/172](http://www.metal-archives.com/bands/Symphony_X/172)

[2] <http://www.symphonyx.com/site/band/>

[3] <https://www.blabbermouth.net/news/symphony-x-frontman-talks-about-making-of-paradise-lost/>

band's guitarist, Michael Romeo, has much the same to say as the band's vocalist in the interview cited prior: "We decided on *Paradise Lost* as the theme for the CD - although it is not a concept CD, it does have an underlying theme going on. The lyrics are based on ideas and emotions portrayed in Milton's work - betrayal, revenge, lust, etc."<sup>[4]</sup> Romeo also elaborates the themes of individual songs: "Set the World on Fire and Domination and Serpent's Kiss - lyrically about betrayal, revenge and corruption with some reference to Milton's poem. The music, following the theme of the lyrics, is aggressive and dark."<sup>[5]</sup> The songs to which Romeo refers are the first three songs on the album. It is interesting that both Russel Allen and Michael Romeo were attracted to *Paradise Lost* for much of the same reasons, and most common readers today would not read *Paradise Lost* in order to unravel the ideas and the origins of Milton's (often quite heterodox) interpretations and reinterpretations of Christian doctrine and myth. In another interview with band's guitarist, he says the following on both the album and Milton's poem (although the information he provides is, again, scanty: "We wanted to do something on John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost* but not do a concept album and follow a certain story line but to be more personal."<sup>[6]</sup>

Milton's poem is also an intensely personal work, and this is one of the reasons why I have read and re-read it (yet still struggle with so much of it), besides the enormous influence the poem has had in the centuries since it was first published in 1667. C.S. Lewis, in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, seems to be among the last critics who proposed that it should be read along the lines of Christian orthodoxy, claiming that he does not understand why it has been subject to so many varying interpretations. *Paradise Lost* begins with Milton invoking Urania: 'Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit/Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste/Brought death into the world, and all our woe,/With loss of Eden, till one greater man/Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,/Sing heavenly muse...(Paradise Lost, 2004, I, ln. 1-6). The source and the meaning of these lines is entirely obvious to almost every reader with any knowledge of the major tenets of Christian belief, and C.S. Lewis says the following: "Has it not rather the desolating

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[4] [http://www.getreadytorock.com/10questions/symphony\\_x.htm](http://www.getreadytorock.com/10questions/symphony_x.htm)

[5] [http://www.getreadytorock.com/10questions/symphony\\_x.htm](http://www.getreadytorock.com/10questions/symphony_x.htm)

[6] [http://www.metaltemple.com/site/catalogues/entry/musicians/michael\\_romeo\\_symphony.htm](http://www.metaltemple.com/site/catalogues/entry/musicians/michael_romeo_symphony.htm)

clarity and concreteness of certain classic utterances we remember from the morning of our own lives; 'Bend over', 'Go to bed' - 'Write out *I must do as I am told* a hundred times' - 'Do not speak with your mouth full.' How are we to account for the fact that great modern scholars have missed what is so dazzlingly simple? I think we must suppose that the real nature of the Fall and the real moral of the poem involve an idea so interesting or so intensely disagreeable to them that they have been under a sort of psychological necessity of passing it over and hushing it up. Milton, they feel, must have meant something more than that!" (Lewis 1969, 71).

'Fair enough', anyone might say. That Milton was a devout Christian (although belonging to something of a Christian sect of one) is something that no one acquainted with Milton's poem will seriously doubt, but in this our (sometimes precariously) secular age (and this has been an ongoing process since the Enlightenment), the doctrinal content of the poem alone would certainly not save it from oblivion (and we must remember that this poem is also a theodicy), and its doctrinal content certainly does not explain why it has remained a work of such eminence.

Both the common reader and the specialist cannot escape the glaringly undeniable fact that Satan is the most memorable *character* in the poem (the word here is in italics as I desire to stress the purely literary qualities of the work, rather than its doctrine), and also that Satan undergoes a profound change during the course of the poem. Besides this, as Harold Bloom has observed, themes of regeneration and the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice leading to personal and universal salvation, do in fact guide the majority of the poem's content, and Bloom tells the future reader "to remember and know this as Milton's ideal is to be properly prepared to encounter the dangerous greatness of Satan in the early books of *Paradise Lost*" (Bloom, 2004, 2-3). Satan possesses a 'dangerous greatness' in the first two books of *Paradise lost* as Milton has portrayed him as a character of great depth, and the one who speaks the most memorable lines. It is thus that the both the common reader can most easily identify with him, yet many of the emotions Satan expresses, even when seen in a secular context, are ultimately destructive.

To return to Symphony X's *Paradise Lost*. The constraints of space do not allow me to provide an analysis of this album in its relation to

*Paradise Lost* in its entirety, so I have decided to select track three from this album, *Serpent's Kiss*, the first reason being that the band's guitarist, Michael Romeo, stated in the interview cited earlier that the song's lyrics are more greatly indebted to Milton's poem, and the second is that in the 'Blabbermouth' interview cited earlier, the interviewer asks the band's vocalist, Russel Allen, to provide further comment on this particular track: "The song 'Serpent's Kiss' is something a little different and experimental for SYMPHONY X. Tell me a little about that track."<sup>[7]</sup> Whoever the interviewer is, he or she certainly has heard more of the band's music than I have. Allen's reply is the following: "It was definitely a bit different for us. The song is very riff-oriented, as is the whole album. But this riff was very strong and we based the chorus on it. The song is about betrayal and plotting to take revenge on your enemies. Using the art of seduction to lure them in, it confirms one's self in evil by your actions."<sup>[8]</sup> As Romeo stated earlier, rather than creating a concept album, the band's endeavour was to use *Paradise Lost* as a thematic template. The song itself is not the longest on the album (its duration is 5.03 min, while the longest is track seven, *The Walls of Babylon*, clocking in at 8.16 min). I will present the lyrics to *Serpent's Kiss* from the album's lyric booklet in full:

Covenant of pure corruption  
sink my teeth deep into you  
Solemn oath of sheer destruction  
Nightmare, through and through

In that hour – I'll devour  
Hope is swallowed up in Pain  
taste the venom - feel the power  
coursing through my veins

I'm corruption  
I'm destruction, through and through

Trust in me... for I will set you free  
with a Serpent's Kiss  
with a Serpent's Kiss

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[7] <https://www.blabbermouth.net/news/symphony-x-frontman-talks-about-making-of-paradise-lost/>

[8] <https://www.blabbermouth.net/news/symphony-x-frontman-talks-about-making-of-paradise-lost/>

Be my lights and I won't stray - make me beg;  
make me pray  
Tell me when to laugh or cry - when to live  
and when to die

Forgotten and betrayed  
Rotting and decayed  
left to wither - without a voice  
left to slither - without a choice

Crucifier - spitting fire  
say your little empty prayers  
This empire - growing higher  
To this spite I swear

Sharp tongue severs - like a razor  
swimming in a sea of rage  
Vindicators - masqueraders  
all the world's my stage

I devour  
I empower - god of pain

Trust in me... for I will set you free  
with a Serpent's Kiss  
How could it come to this?  
with a Serpent's Kiss (Symphony X, Allen R, Romeo M, Serpent's  
Kiss, Paradise Lost 2007)

The song is in med-tempo, with the stanzas 'trust in me' forming the chorus. Some parts of the song are in 7/8, yet the beat does not fall on the first note, so the time signature would not be immediately recognisable to those who have only heard it in traditional Macedonian music (I must also add the Devo's *Jocko Homo* from their first album *Are We not Men? We Are Devo* (1978) is also an example of this time signature played in a way that bears little resemblance to its original source in traditional music). Lyrics and music are combined for dramatic effect: the lines 'Tell me when to laugh or cry - when to live/and when to die' are followed by a sudden drop in dynamics in which the synthesised sound of strings and a sampled choir are succeeded by a sudden increase in volume, followed by the only guitar solo in the song. Lyric, tempo and rhythm are perfectly aligned: the

song being in mid-tempo and the changes in time signature are an aural reflection of the central image in this song: 'serpent' (and we must note that 'slither' is repeated twice, and we also find 'course' used as a verb).

Without recourse to the origins of the imagery in this song, the theme is not difficult to discern; themes of betrayal and hypocrisy can definitely be read from these lyrics, and it was obviously in the band's interest to express these in as wide a scope as possible: the first stanza presents this theme as something present in an interpersonal relationship (although the nature of this relationship remains unknown), yet when we reach the line which begins with 'crucifier', continuing to the end of the song, these themes of betrayal and deceit are given a larger backdrop: the reference to Christ's crucifixion need not be considered evidence of the band's religious faith (and judging from the interviews I have read, this is entirely irrelevant, perhaps non-existent), yet what is most important is that 'serpent' and 'Crucifier' are the only two words here that link this song to Milton's poem, and there are no direct citations from *Paradise Lost* in *Serpent's Kiss*. It is not entirely clear what guitarist Michael Romeo meant in the interview we had cited earlier when he mentioned a closer tie between this song's lyric and Milton's poem, as citation and intertext are not evident: what he must have meant was that beside the band having attempted to incorporate something of Milton's themes for the purposes of their album, that this lyric is reflective of a greater concentration on what was stated in the original text.

What is interesting though is that the source of the first stanza of *Serpent's Kiss* is to be found in Book IV of *Paradise Lost* (and I have already mentioned that this is the fourth song on the album), yet much of the song's lyric content also alludes to Book IX. In Book IV, Satan has completed his journey through Chaos. On Mount Niphates we find Satan alone, bewildered by the sight of what he had only heard before in Heaven, before his fall, of God's creation:

O thou that with surpassing glory crowned,  
Look'st from thy sole dominion like the god  
Of this new world; at whose sight all the stars  
Hide their diminished heads; to thee I call,  
But with no friendly voice, and add thy name

O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams  
That bring to my remembrance from what state  
I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;  
Till pride and worse ambition threw me down  
Warring in heaven against heaven's matchless king:  
Ah wherefore! he deserved no such return  
From me, whom he created what I was  
In that bright eminence, and with his good  
Upbraided none; nor was his service hard.  
What could be less than to afford him praise,  
The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks,  
How due! Yet all his good proved ill in me,  
And wrought but malice; lifted up so high  
I 'sdained subjection, and thought one step higher  
Would set me highest, and in a moment quit  
The debt immense of endless gratitude,  
So burdensome still paying, still to owe;  
Forgetful what from him I still received,  
And understood not that a grateful mind  
By owing owes not, but still pays, at once  
Indebted and discharged; what burden then?  
O had his powerful destiny ordained  
Me some inferior angel, I had stood  
Then happy; no unbounded hope had raised  
Ambition. Yet why not? Some other power  
As great might have aspired, and me though mean  
Drawn to his part; but other powers as great  
Fell not, but stand unshaken, from within  
Or from without, to all temptations armed.  
Hadst thou the same free will and power to stand?  
Thou hadst: whom hast thou then or what to accuse,  
But heaven's free love dealt equally to all?  
Be then his love accursed, since love or hate,  
To me alike, it deals eternal woe. (Paradise Lost Book, 2004, IV,  
85, ln. 31-71).

As stated earlier, Symphony X's lyric to *Serpent's kiss* makes no direct reference to the wider theological meaning of Milton's text, and as can be gathered from the interviews with Russel Allen and Michael Romeo, this was not what interested them when they had decided to take Milton's *Paradise Lost* as inspiration for their album. Reading this passage from Book IV of Milton's poem, it is impossible not to read and not understand



the emotions in Satan's words, and it is also evident that the character of Satan does not function merely as a symbol or cipher (although we must add that a literary symbol can possess a great depth and reach). On Mount Niphates, Satan's awareness of his fallen state is amplified upon viewing this newly created world, and this speech does not begin with a curse against God for creating it, but a curse against the sun: 'O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams/That bring to my remembrance from what state/I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere'. Due to the psychological perspicuity and depth which Milton displays, these words can be transferred to the wider realm of human existence: a creature with a sense of self, a consciousness (both of which Satan has made open to the reader), and an awareness of an experience of hell of which he is the perpetrator and the cause, curses what is the source of light and life, and he cannot accept that such can exist alongside the darkness to which he has fallen.

A transfer of this kind is also possible with the line 'heaven's matchless king' (obviously God), and if we are to leave the Judeo-Christian myth aside (as have Symphony X), Satan's 'pride and worse ambition' and 'malice' (all phrases and words we find in this passage) can be read as a revolt against existence itself. The final lines of this speech ('Be then his love accursed, since love or hate,/To me alike, it deals eternal woe.') are expressive of the most corrosive of emotions: resentment, and this is a resentment that derives from a despair that will never be overcome. Here we also find Satan transforming from the character encountered in the first two books, who had spoken one of the most memorable and oft-quoted lines in English poetry: "To reign is worth ambition though in hell:/Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven" (Paradise Lost, Book I, 2004, I, 11, lns. 263-264).

Neil Forsyth is also aware why this appeals so much to the secular reader: 'Hell, as we gradually become aware, like Paradise later in the poem, is both a place and a state of mind' (Forsyth, 2014, 18), and in the passage we have cited this 'Hell' for Satan is an existential state, despite the fact he is in 'Paradise', and on the passage from Book IV we have quoted here, Forsyth claims that Satan no longer sees his rejection of God as the 'strife of glory' (Paradise Lost, VI, 150, ln. 290): when Satan alights on Mount Niphates and sees the newly created physical world, the sun included ('How I hate

thy beams' 4-37), does his initial choice become the famous and paradoxical cry, 'Evil be thou my good'.

Yet how does the beginning of the lyric to *Serpent's kiss* relate to this? The lyric opens with the lines 'Covenant of pure corruption', and the word 'covenant' in this lyric implies four things: firstly it hearkens back to the first two books of *Paradise Lost* with Satan entirely unwavering in his stance against God and the decision he makes in Pandemonium that he will hazard a flight through Chaos to seek the newly created Paradise: secondly it is expressive of the state in which we find Satan in Book IV: despite acknowledging that submission to the will of God in itself does not mean slavish subjection ('Indebted and discharged; what burden then?'), he openly acknowledges that he himself is an abyss, and that he himself is 'Hell', and that it is not only the region which he inhabits, yet the third implication does not play a part either in this song or in any of the lyrics of the entire album: as Satan is quite literally 'covenant of pure corruption', he cannot be redeemed through Christ (we must also bear in mind that this is also in Milton's *Paradise Lost*), but the third implication of this phrase can be taken as an expansion of the theme which Symphony X has attempted to explore: irredeemable evil, and fourthly (and this forms part of the final sections of Book II of Milton's *Paradise Lost*), Sin and Death are Satan's progeny, awaiting the moment when they will follow him through Chaos and enter Paradise.

As noted earlier, much of the lyric (especially in the choruses of this song where we find 'Trust in me...') evokes Book IX of *Paradise Lost* (which deal with the fall of Adam and Eve), yet there are no definite markers in the lyric which indicate that Eve is being addressed (and there is no mention of the forbidden fruit), only further stressing what Symphony X had intended with the lyrics of this album: to explore several underlying themes in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and to express them in a wider secular context, while also maintaining something of the poems basic metaphysical meaning. In this book IX Satan undergoes a further transformation:

thus the orb he roamed  
With narrow search; and with inspection deep  
Considered every creature, which of all  
Most opportune might serve his wiles, and found

The serpent subtlest beast of all the field.  
Him after long debate, irresolute  
Of thoughts revolved, his final sentence chose  
Fit vessel, fittest imp of fraud, in whom  
To enter, and his dark suggestions hide  
From sharpest sight: for in the wily snake,  
Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark,  
As from his wit and native subtlety  
Proceeding, which in other beasts observed  
Doubt might beget of diabolic power  
Active within beyond the sense of brute. (Paradise, Lost Book  
IX; 2004: 209, lns 82-96).

Several words and phrases in this passage inform the content of the lyrics to *Serpent's kiss* (such as 'masqueraders'): 'wiles', 'subtlest beast', 'fittest imp of fraud', 'wily', 'sleights none would suspicious mark'. Satan undergoes a further degradation (here a literal one), and it is most likely that Symphony X read this passage as an exploration of the existential nature of the fallen state, a state that can only and continually breed evil. Yet what is difficult to discern is what is lacking in the lyric when compared to its source: again, in Book IX, Eve eats the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, and in Milton's poem there is much on Adam and Eve in their prelapsarian state (though less on Satan's, but it is still there), and in 'Serpent's kiss', although we know that someone is being addressed in the choruses of this song, we do not know exactly who it is. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* the fact that it was Eve who was tempted plays a very large role. William Empson (in certainly one of the most influential books of 20<sup>th</sup> century Milton scholarship) says the following on why Eve was tempted: "Eve at least wants to get to Heaven, and this is the point which is exploited, but Adam is so free from temptation as to be almost impenetrable. Even so, when Satan first tempts Eve, whispering ill dreams disguised as a toad, she wakes up determined to resist" (Empson, 1965, 147).

Empson is here referring to the events in Book V and Book VI, and we must stress that what makes Empson's reading of *Paradise Lost* so memorable is that he approached both Milton's theology as well as Christian theology, theodicy and eschatology with an entirely secular mind, while remaining entirely sympathetic to Milton as poet and artist and not as a

promoter of Christian doctrine (it comes as no surprise that there is much criticism of C.S Lewis's *Preface* in Empson's book). Empson often relies on common sense to display what he considers to be the outright absurdities in some of the tenets of Christian ethics (and also reminds that much exegesis of the story of Man's fall has largely informed them), yet also makes claim in his book on what is comprehensible and what can be salvaged from such a system of ethics (and also what can be both comprehended and salvaged from Milton's poem). Yet, in order to grasp this, and to explore how this relates to *Serpent's kiss*, it is necessary to quote the following passage from Book IX of *Paradise Lost*:

O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,  
Mother of science, now I feel thy power  
Within me clear, not only to discern  
Things in their causes, but to trace the ways  
Of highest agents, deemed however wise.  
Queen of this universe, do not believe  
Those rigid threats of death; ye shall not die:  
How should ye? by the fruit? it gives you life  
To knowledge: by the threatener? look on me,  
Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live,  
And life more perfect have attained than fate  
Meant me, by venturing higher than my lot.  
Shall that be shut to man, which to the beast  
Is open? or will God incense his ire  
For such a petty trespass, and not praise  
Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain  
Of death denounced, whatever thing death be,  
Deterred not from achieving what might lead  
To happier life, knowledge of good and evil;  
Of good, how just? of evil, if what is evil  
Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?  
God therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just;  
Not just, not God; not feared then, nor obeyed:  
Your fear itself of death removes the fear.  
Why then was this forbid? Why but to awe,  
Why but to keep ye low and ignorant,  
His worshipper... (Paradise Lost, 2004, IX, 209, lns 679-705).

Satan speaks these words to Eve after leading her to the Tree of Knowledge. What Satan says of this fruit can only but tempt Eve. The Tree

of Knowledge is 'sacred', 'wise' and 'wisdom-giving', and 'wisdom' itself is an interesting word as wisdom is gained by experience, and experience is gained at the price of innocence, and Satan also tells Eve that the Tree of Knowledge is also the 'Mother of science', here used closer to its original meaning in the Latin word 'scientia', and further in this passage Satan tells Eve that God would actually appreciate her trespass as it would be a display of her 'virtue' yet the orthodox, doctrinal meaning of this passage (not only in Milton's *Paradise Lost* but for Christianity generally) is entirely absent in Symphony X's song.

From a secular viewpoint, understanding the implications of this episode in both a biblical context and in the context of Milton's *Paradise Lost* has proven difficult, as William Empson had noted: "if God is good, that is, if he is the kind of teacher who wants to produce an independent-minded student, then he will love her for eating the apple; her solution to the problem will be correct because she has understood his intention. But if he didn't mean that then he has behaved rather queerly, and then it doesn't appear that he deserves to be obeyed; for one thing, he hasn't even behaved as generously as the Serpent..." (Empson, 1965, 160).

Empson is measuring this passage according to the world we all inhabit, as if he were imagining how difficult it would be to explain the moral significance of this episode of the Bible to anyone intelligent but totally lacking knowledge of both Christianity and Christian culture (and we may also add here, the two other major monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam). Empson also sees something cruel at the heart of doctrine itself, and also in God as a character in *Paradise Lost*, asking the question as to why would an omnipotent being make a demand that is unclear, and that the transgression of this demand leads to punishment. Empson also claims that in the last part of this passage the serpent cannot be considered entirely negatively or as entirely evil, not only to Eve but to the contemporary, secular reader. A.D Nutall explored this problem in Milton's poem in much greater depth, and also questioned one of the ways in which Christian thought endeavoured to overcome the exasperatingly paradoxical nature of this biblical episode: "One way out remains: to argue (since one has failed to account for the existence of evil under an all-powerful God) that what we are looking at is not really evil at all. This is the ancient doctrine

of the *felix culpa*, or 'fortunate Fall'. Without the Fall there would have been no Redemption and without the Redemption we could never have got to heaven, a better place than Eden" (Nutall, 2004, 116-117). Yet as we mentioned a little earlier, this does not play a part in Symphony X's lyric, nor does it figure in any of the other lyrics on their album.

Symphony X have taken only part of the meaning of this passage in *Serpent's kiss* and have shifted it far from its original meaning. The speaker in *Serpent's kiss* says 'I will set you free' as Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* promises Eve. Yet the speaker is here represented as a an archetype of all 'masqueraders' and a 'crucifier' (the word is largely devoid of its meaning in a Christian context), and is obviously one who preys on innocence with the promise of something much greater.

We must also return here to the theme of Satan's transformation as Symphony X have also incorporated it in this lyric. From what we have seen, Milton had masterfully presented Satan experiencing a diminishment after setting upon the newly-created world: Satan is no longer the magnificently defiant character that the reader encounters in in Books I and II of *Paradise Lost* and in the passage from Book IV we had cited earlier, Hell becomes even more apparent as an existential state, guiding every aspect of what he sees, and when transforming into a serpent he is not one who will lead an army of devils against God, but will rely on cunning to lure Eve. In the fifth verse of 'Serpent's kiss', this is expressed in the following terms: 'Forgotten and betrayed/Rotting and decayed/left to wither - without a voice/left to slither - without a choice' (the prior verse beginning with 'Be my lights...' are the words of the victim), and the emotions here express a profound resentment and also self-pity acting as a sheath (perhaps, not entirely consciously) to disguise an irredeemable malevolence.

In conclusion, writing about any form of popular music in an academic context is far from an easy task for reasons stated at the beginning of this paper, as one needs to incorporate more than the theoretical reach of an aesthetics of music as popular music (despite either genre or subgenre), by its very nature, must lead the researcher towards the wider context of the form of popular music under investigation. As Deena Weinstein has concluded, heavy metal has a 'code' the precedent of which has an origin in some of the original archetypes of Western culture (it would be better to

add World culture here as heavy metal has become very much a universal genre) and art. Concerning Symphony X, their engagement with John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' can be understood in the wider context of rock (and thus heavy metal) to use a literary text as a source of inspiration and. Their track *Serpent's Kiss* was selected as an instance in which their engagement with Milton's *Paradise Lost* was particularly apparent as we had uncovered several passages from the original text which had been incorporated in this particular song. This obviously displays an understanding of the original text, yet our analysis has shown that for the purposes of their album, Symphony X has largely forgone the wider theological context of Milton's work, and placed emphasis on both the implicit and explicit existential themes in Milton's work.

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## **MILTON KAO (PROGRESIVNI-POWER) METALAC: SYMPHONY X I IZGUBLJENI RAJ**

### **SAŽETAK**

Namjera je ovoga rada dvostruka: da je *heavy metal* jedan žanr u popularnoj glazbi je neosporno, tako da će autor početi istraživanjem određenih teškoća kada se pristupa takvoj glazbi u akademskom kontekstu. Tvrdeći da se popularna glazba (što uključuje i *heavy metal*) sastoji od mnogih stvari koji izvan estetike glazbe, ali priznajući da *heavy metal* (po Deena Weinsteinu) slijedi svojevrzni 'kod' (u kojemu se mogu iščitavati određene zatomljene aspekte sebstva i šire kulture), autor je odlučio istraživati kako je *Symphony X* uklopio Miltonov 'Izgubljeni' u svoj album istoga imena. Autor tvrdi da iako je album *Symphony X* izraz 'teme kaosa' u *heavy metalu*, da je sastav uključio aspekte Miltonove pjesme koje su nešto privlačnije suvremenom čitatelju, time da je zanemario mnoge druge Miltonove slojeve.

Ključne riječi: estetika, *heavy metal*, suvremeni čitatelj, sotona, John Milton

