

AN UNSTABLE SUBLIME. MILTON'S PANDEMONIUM AND THE BALDACCHINO AT ST. PETER'S IN ROME

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Abstract

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674) has been associated with the sublime from the early eighteenth century onwards. This essay argues that *Paradise Lost* also references an early seventeenth-century, Roman Catholic notion of the sublime. Milton's conception of Pandemonium, the council hall of demons described at the close of Book 1, incorporates this notion and gives it new meaning. This essay focusses on shared features of Pandemonium and the Baldacchino (the bronze canopy over the high altar in St. Peter's basilica in Rome) that have received little critical attention but are closely related to the sublime. That what made the Baldacchino into a paradigm of a papal sublime, for Milton served to imagine a building that ultimately signifies the failure of Satan and his demons to mount a credible challenge to Heaven.

Key words: Paradise Lost - Baldacchino - sublime - metal - papacy - Satan

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) has long been associated with the sublime. As Leslie Moore has pointed out, '[no] other pairing [than 'the sublime' and 'Milton'] is used more frequently in early discussions of the poet and *Paradise Lost*.'² This pairing soon traveled from England to the Continent, when Jacob Bodmer's *Critische Abhandlung von dem Wunderbaren in den Poesie* (1740), translated and developed Joseph Addison's earlier comments on the poem's sublimity published in the *Spectator*.³

This essay argues that *Paradise Lost*, besides providing emerging theories of the sublime in the eighteenth century with a potent case study, also contains elements of an early seventeenth-century, Roman Catholic notion of the sublime.

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² I have used J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, S. Orgel and J. Goldberg, eds, intro. and notes, Oxford, 2004.

L. E. Moore, *Beautiful Sublime. The Making of Paradise Lost 1701–1734*, Stanford, 1990, p. 2.

³ On Addison's criticism of *Paradise Lost*, see J. Leonard, *Faithful Labourers. The Reception History of Paradise Lost 1667–1970*, vol. 2, Oxford, 2012, pp. 16–20.

An analysis of Milton's conception of Pandemonium, the council hall of demons described at the close of Book 1, will show how *Paradise Lost* incorporates this notion and gives it new meaning. Key features of Pandemonium can be traced back to one of its purported models, the Baldacchino or large, sculpted bronze canopy over the high altar in the basilica of St Peter's in Rome: the size and scale of the construction, its novelty, its composite nature, as well as its particular materiality. As I shall argue, these features combine to make the Baldacchino into a construction that is remarkable for its semantic and perceptual instability: a wonder beyond the grasp of the viewer. The earliest reception of the Baldacchino puts forward exactly these features as the sublime expression of the Roman Catholic papacy. Milton incorporates these same features into Pandemonium, and exploits the instability they evoke as attributes of a demonic architecture. That what made the Baldacchino into a paradigm of a Catholic, papal sublime now serves to imagine a building that ultimately signifies the failure of Satan and his demons.

1. The architecture of Pandemonium

Pandemonium is built after the demons who had been cast from heaven recovered sufficiently to muster their armies and start considering the next stage in their battle with the Almighty. Satan calls for a council to decide whether 'open' or 'understood' (concealed) war should be waged against Heaven (PL 1. 662). After the clamorous assent of the demons, Milton directs the attention of the reader to a nearby, fire-belching hill, whose 'glossy scurf' betrayed '[that] in his womb was hid metallic ore' (PL 1. 672–673). Three teams of demons go to work: the first led by Mammon dig up the ore, while a second diverts 'liquid fire' from the fiery lake in which the demons had been cast, to melt the ore into 'bullion dross', and a third crew 'formed within the ground / A various mould' (PL 1. 701–706). The demons work at lightning speed (PL 1. 696–699), and the molten metal fills the mould just like the single 'blast of wind' (PL 1. 708) of an organ reaches all the pipes at once. The image of 'Exhalation' proceeds to describe how 'Anon out of the earth a fabric huge / rose, with the sound / of dulcet symphonies and voices sweet' (PL 1. 710–712). The building is

Built like a temple, where pilasters round
 Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid
 With golden architrave; nor did there want
 Cornice or frieze, with bossy sculptures graven,
 The roof was fretted gold. (PL 1. 713–717)

After pointing out that the building far surpassed the magnificence and glory of the fabled architecture of Babylon and Egypt, Milton describes the amazement of the demons entering:

The ascending pile
 Stood fixed her stately height; and straight the doors
 Opening their brazen folds discover wide
 Within her ample spaces, o'er the smooth
 And level pavement: from the arched roof,
 Pendent by subtle magic many a row
 Of starry lamps and blazing cressets fed
 With naphtha and asphaltus yielded light
 As from a sky. The hasty multitude
 Admiring entered, and the work some praise,
 And some the Architect. (PL 1. 722–732)

Milton evokes the biography and qualities of the architect, Mulciber, the artisan of the gods, called Hephaistos in Greek, whose fall from grace is detailed in the *Illiad*. Only then the poet names the hall where council is called: 'At Pandae-monium, the high capital / Of Satan and his peers' (PL 1. 756–757). The gathering demons soon crowd the building like bees swarming into their hive, but at the sound of the signal the giant beings shrink so that they are 'at large, / Though without number still amidst the hall / Of that infernal court' (PL 1. 710–712). Only the greatest lords retain their actual size.

A long strain in the criticism of *Paradise Lost* has concerned itself with identifying the literary and architectural prototypes of Pandemonium.⁴ In an article of 1931 Rebecca Smith attempted to prove that Milton based his conception of Pandemonium on his experience of St Peter's in Rome during his Italian journey of 1638–39.⁵ Smith pointed out that the vastness characterizing all aspects of Milton's Hell could only find observable counterparts in the 'palaces and temples of Imperial Rome' and, amongst contemporary buildings, at St Peter's.⁶ The bronze and marble used profusely at St Peter's, too, she recognized in Pandemonium. Smith also hinted at the analogous functions of Pandemonium and the

⁴ This literature is listed in J.S. Theis, 'Milton's Principles of Architecture', *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 35:1, 2005, pp. 102–122. Some additional studies will be quoted here. See also R. Martin, 'The Colonization of Paradise. Milton's Pandemonium and Montezuma's Tenochtitlan', *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 35:4, 1998, pp. 321–355.

⁵ On Milton's sojourn in Rome, see A. Beer, *Milton. Poet, Pamphleteer, & Patriot*, London, 2008, pp. 91–103.

⁶ R.W. Smith, 'The Source of Milton's Pandemonium', *Modern Philology*, vol. 29, 1931, pp. 187–198 (187–188, 192).

Vatican complex, as sites of council where the supreme ruler sits enthroned amidst his followers. Finally, she linked Milton's comparison of the demons with swarming bees (PL 1, 767–776), an emulation Homer and Vergil (Aeneid 1.430; Illiad 2.87–96), to the coat of arms of pope Urban VIII (r. 1623–1644), the patron of the Baldacchino, whose heraldic bees are represented all over the construction.

Smith's analysis has been developed and challenged repeatedly, most thoroughly in Roland Mushat Frye's *The imagery of Milton and the visual arts* (1978). Frye cast doubt on Smith's proposal on the grounds that many features of Pandemonium simply do not correspond with St Peter's or the Baldacchino. He points instead to long-standing visual traditions of representing Hell as a tower or a city. He also references the similarity, already noted in the early nineteenth century, between the descriptions of Pandemonium and the Palace of Fame in the masque *Britannia Triumphans*, performed during the King's Twelfth Night Masque in 1637: Inigo Jones and William Davenant conceived the latter as 'a richly adorn'd Palace, seeming all of Gold smiths worke' that rose from the earth.⁷ Frye also makes the more general point that the 'visual language' of Pandemonium is one of 'devilish bad taste', where errors against the classical rules of architecture – such as combining the doric column with a cornice and frieze – vie with excessive ornament and material splendour to create 'a promiscuous architectural monstrosity' appropriate for its ultimately ridiculous builders and users.⁸

In a postscript to W. Chandler Kirwin's *Powers Matchless* (1997, the title references PL 1, 623–624), an exhaustive study of the Baldacchino in St Peter's, the art historian Philipp Fehl revisits both Smith's and Frye's arguments to argue for a fundamental analogy between the Baldacchino and Pandemonium. This analogy is not based on formal similarities between the two buildings nor on the historical political and religious associations they evoke – as the seat of the pope or Satan – but as exponents of 'the sublime the wrong way around' and as signs of a 'dreadful sovereignty'.⁹ To substantiate his point, Fehl cites from the *Ara maxima vaticana* [*The Great Vatican Altar*, henceforth AMV], a long poem published by the courtier Lelio Guidiccioni in celebration of the dedication of the Baldacchino on

⁷ R. M. Frye, *The Imagery of Milton and the Visual Arts: Iconographic Tradition in the Epic Poems*, Princeton, NJ, 1978, pp. 135–136, n. 27, with reference to a.o. J.G. Demaray, 'The Thrones of Satan and God: Backgrounds to Divine Opposition in *Paradise Lost*', *Huntington Library Quarterly* (Milton Tercentenary Issue), vol. 31, 1, 1967, pp. 19–33 (27–28), who refers to Henry Todd's edition of Milton's poetry of 1809.

⁸ Frye, *The Imagery of Milton* (as in n. 7), pp. 133–138 (135).

⁹ P.P. Fehl, 'Epilogue', in: W.C. Kirwin, *Powers Matchless. The Pontificate of Urban VIII, the Baldachin, and Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, Frankfurt and New York, 1997, pp. 236–252 (247).

29th June 1633.¹⁰ As the translation and commentary of the *Ara* by John and Frances Sickney Newman made clear, the poem is suffused with notions of sublimity in which the greatness of pope Urban VIII, the mediator between Earth and Heaven, is associated with the marvel of the new construction. Regardless of whether witnessing the Baldacchino inspired Milton when he described the infernal council hall, Fehl contends that the Vatican construction and its immediate reception in papal circles provided a model for a sublime monument.

I intend to develop Fehl's point by looking at how the Baldacchino and its earliest reception history emphasize the importance of several related features that are key to Pandemonium as well: their metal work and its implied association with warfare, novelty, compositeness, and problematic proportionality, especially in relation to the vast surrounding space. These features combine to shape an artefact that defies unequivocal characterisation, and instigate a complicated and unstable relationship between the artefact and its viewer. As such, the Baldacchino offered Milton a template for a similarly sublime building, now erected in the pit of hell.

2. An Artefact without Model

The Baldacchino in St Peter's was designed and built between 1626 and 1633 by Gianlorenzo Bernini and Francesco Borromini at the instigation of Urban VIII. The construction consists of four giant twisted bronze columns of the Corinthian order, modelled on similar but far smaller stone columns that were believed to stem from the Temple of Solomon. The bronze columns were erected in 1626, and crowned with a provisional open dome from which a baldachin roof was suspended. This dome was subsequently replaced by the crown as we know it today, four S-shaped ribs converging to support a dome and cross, and the baldachin roof suspended between four concave architraves connecting the capitals of the columns.¹¹

From the first stages of its erection, the Baldacchino is celebrated as an artefact without model or precedent. Lelio Guidiccioni (whom we have already encountered as the author of the *Ara maxima vaticana*) elaborates the point at length in a fictional dialogue between himself and Bernini written around 1633.¹²

¹⁰ L. Guidiccioni, *Ara Maxima Vaticana, a summo pontifice Urbano VIII. magnificentissime instructa* (Rome: G. Gacciotti, 1633), J.K. Newman and F. Stickney Newman, eds and tr., Hildesheim, 1992.

¹¹ For an excellent succinct history of the Baldacchino, see M. Spagnolo, *Bernini. Il Baldacchino di San Pietro*, Modena, 2006.

¹² The dialogue is published in C. D'Onofrio, 'Un Dialogo-recita di Gian Lorenzo Bernini e Lelio Guidiccioni', *Palatino*, vol. 10, 1966, pp. 127–134.

Similarly, the earliest biographies of Gianlorenzo Bernini seize on the originality of the Baldacchino to demonstrate the artist's genius.¹³ In an elaborate passage in the biography of Bernini written by his youngest son Domenico, published in 1713 but based on seventeenth-century source material, Domenico has Bernini explain how the Baldacchino resulted from the same four-stage design process he adopted for all his architectural projects.¹⁴ The first stage is the selection of the material, and the biography credits Bernini with the idea to use bronze taken from the Pantheon. After the invention or design, the third stage concerned the arrangement and the proportion of the parts. Here Bernini was confronted with the exceptional problem of 'harmonizing' the 'various dimensions' 'with the rest of that temple in its entirety' to the extent that the solution forced him to 'depart from the rules of the profession.' He did so reluctantly, but 'he so well reconciled all these contrasting elements [the different components of the Baldacchino] that in deciding the proportions of the structure ... Bernini was able to depart from the rules without violating them.'¹⁵

As a complex yet harmonious composition of parts, the Baldacchino incorporates an aspect of the Longinian sublime: '[n]othing is of greater service in giving grandeur to what is said than the organization of the different members,' as can be seen in the human body.¹⁶ Longinus's emphasis on rhythm as a means of obtaining harmony establishes another link with the biography, as an additional anecdote told by Domenico implicitly compares the proportions of the Baldacchino to literary antithesis and its formal principle, rhythm.¹⁷ The biography evokes this analogy in order to emphasize how precarious the harmony Bernini obtained is. In the introduction to the description of the Baldacchino, Domenico announces Bernini's success by stressing 'that words alone could never succeed in adequately presenting [the Baldacchino] to the light of the intellect', and by comparing Bernini's lucky departure from the rules of proportion to the workings of chance.¹⁸ The proportions of the Baldacchino are fragile; they are only just right, and as such generate the dazzling visual complexity of the construction.

¹³ For a more extensive discussion, see M. Delbeke, *The Art of Religion. Sforza Pallavicino and Art Theory in Bernini's Rome*, Aldershot, 2012, pp. 135–138, 144–148.

¹⁴ On the earlier sources, see F. Audisio, 'Lettere e testi teatrali di Bernini: una postilla linguistica', in: M. Fagiolo dell'Arco and M.L. Madonna, eds, *Barocco romano e barocco italiano. Il teatro, l'effimero, l'allegoria*, Rome, 1985, pp. 26–45.

¹⁵ F. Mormando, ed. and tr., *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini by Domenico Bernini. A Translation and Critical Edition*, University Park, PA, 2011, p. 122.

¹⁶ Longinus (Pseudo-Longinus), *On the Sublime*, W.H. Fyfe, ed., Cambridge, 1927 and D. A. Russell, ed., Oxford, 1995, 40, p. 289.

¹⁷ Delbeke, *The Art of Religion* (as in n. 13), pp. 140–144.

¹⁸ Mormando, *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini* (as in n. 15), p. 121.

This point is again emphasized when Bernini's judicious transgression of the rules in the design of the Baldacchino is compared favorably to Borromini's architectural 'heresy', the abandonment of all architectural rules and decorum.¹⁹

The proportional complexity of the Baldacchino has to do with its size, the sheer scale of St Peter's as well as its combination of different parts: columns, architraves, hangings, baldachin roof and crown. This variety, together with its scale and its primary material, bronze, turn the Baldacchino into a typological hybrid. Its design references both the ephemeral wood-and-cloth canopies that are held above dignitaries or sacred objects during processions and metal micro-architecture such as the ciboria housing the Holy Sacrament.²⁰ The Baldacchino could thus be interpreted as a magnified shrine or a miniature church, as a precious container or an impressive bulwark, as an extension of the altar erected above the tombs of Peter and Paul or as its cover. In the opening lines of the dedication to Urban VIII of the *Ara Maxima Vaticana*, also quoted in Domenico's biography, Guidiccioni hints deliberately at these ambiguities. The author claims that Urban has 'raise[d] up an altar' or, in fact, 'the chambering canopy set up over the Altar, the sturdy adornment that lends glorious names to the whole enterprise.' But when listing these names, Guidiccioni expresses doubt 'whether to call it an Altar, or an untouched shrine of the Apostles, or a holy place of devotion, a treasury of heaven itself' (AMV 4–8, p. 111). It is, in fact, the merit of the pope to crown St Peter's with 'a work then, enhanced by so many praises, and so many names, ... in itself most deserving of our worship' (AMV 46–49, p. 113). And according to Guidiccioni, the instability of the name of the contraption is reflected in its unstable scale and proportion to the church. When characterizing it as the culminating point in the long building history of St Peter's, he compares it to referents of vastly different sizes: the sun in the sky, the heart in the body, and the jewel in the ring (AMV 37–38, p. 113).

Guidiccioni's feigned incapacity to name the Baldacchino or assign it a precise size mirrors Dominico Bernini's equally insincere inability to describe the parts and proportions of the Baldacchino. Both authors emphasize their stupefaction to the same end: of heaping praise on the sublime author, Bernini in Domenico's case and Urban VIII in Guidiccioni's. The biographical narrative frames the success of the Baldacchino as a function of Bernini's own sublimity: the artist has achieved a greatness in art that is comparable only to the sublime

¹⁹ See M. Delbeke, 'Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Bel Composto*. The Unification of Life and Work in Biography and Historiography', in: M. Delbeke, E. Levy and S. Ostrow, eds, *Bernini's Biographies. Critical Essays*, University Park, PA, 2006, pp. 251–274.

²⁰ I. Lavin, *Bernini and the Crossing of Saint Peter's*, New York, 1968.

spirits of his day and age: popes and kings.²¹ In Guidiccioni's view, it is the sublime mind of the papal demiurge that brought the artistic genius of Bernini into being (AMV 93–98, p. 115).

3. The Bronze of the Baldacchino

Both Domenico Bernini and Guidiccioni attach great importance to the bronze materiality of the Baldacchino. This fact is reiterated time and again at the time of its construction, all the more so because papal propaganda, like Domenico's biography, emphasized that the bronze was taken from the girders of the portico of the Pantheon. This claim is advertised in two monumental inscriptions that are still visible there. The first states that:

Pope Urban VIII used the ancient remnants of the bronze truss for the Vatican columns and for machines of war, that a useless and all but forgotten adornment might become in the Vatican temple an embellishment for the apostolic tomb and in the fortress of Hadrian the instruments of public defense. In the year of our Lord 1632, the ninth of his pontificate.²²

Louise Rice has shown that this claim is false: very little, if any, of the Pantheon bronze was used in the Baldacchino, but it was all directed towards the production of new artillery. With its attempts to rewrite history, the inscription illustrates the extent to which Urban VIII wanted to shape the reception about the provenance and meaning of the material of the Baldacchino, and to link the construction in St Peter's to the ancient Roman model. The second inscription suggests that Urban's intervention at the Pantheon amounted to an extensive restoration ('Pope Urban VIII embellished [The Pantheon] with twin bell towers and refurbished [it] with a new roof'). Since the first inscription describes the Baldacchino as an outcome of that same process, it is again cast as a progeny of the ancient construction.²³

At the same time, by attributing the same source to the material for the cannon and the Baldacchino, the inscriptions associated the Baldacchino with the project

²¹ Delbeke, *The Art of Religion* (as in n. 13), pp. 148–156; idem, 'Elevated Twins and the Vicious Sublime. Gianlorenzo Bernini and Louis XIV', in: S. Bussels, M. Delbeke, C. van Eck and J. Pieters, eds, *Translations of the Sublime. The Early Modern Reception and Dissemination of Longinus' Peri Hupsous in Rhetoric, the Visual Arts, Architecture and the Theatre (Intersections, vol. 25)*, Leiden, 2012, pp. 117–137.

²² The translation is taken from L. Rice, 'Bernini and the Pantheon Bronze', in: G. Satzinger and S. Schütze, eds, *Sankt Peter in Rom 1506–2006*, München, 2008, pp. 337–352 (337).

²³ The translation from Rice, 'Bernini and the Pantheon Bronze' (as in n. 22), p. 337.

to arm the Papal States and increase its ability to wage war. The Barberini propaganda invested heavily in this claim, and cast it as the beginning of a new crusade.²⁴ This theme, too, was exploited by Guidiccioni. In a later poem, of 1639, the author presents the Baldacchino as the model for the new Temple that would be erected once Jerusalem was conquered.²⁵

The association of the Baldacchino with artillery was not merely a symbolical matter. The production of cannon and the canopy relied on the same technology. In order to cast the exceptionally large sections of the columns, the founders used the techniques developed to make increasingly long cannon.²⁶ The production of both types of artifacts took place at the Vatican foundry, a spectacular and popular attraction for important visitors situated right next to St Peter's.²⁷ A manuscript description of the foundry written between 1635 and 1645 lists all the major works in bronze that can be found in Rome only to emphasize that 'the wonders in bronze that (today) Our Lord pitches in the Vatican exceed above all the others.' It spells out the message Urban intended to convey by building the Baldacchino in bronze:

Taken, then, from its place [the Pantheon] these bronzes became the clearest lights of the Vatican, the rarest splendours of this most august Temple, it changed into superb columns, in angels, in laurels. And because they no less embellish, than guard the most holy tomb of the Prince of the Apostles they see themselves transformed into instruments of war, becoming most felicitous, and fortunate in their ruin, in the artificial fire reborn religious and bellicose, inviting with their marvel to salute the most august tomb, and frightening those who with sacrilege wish to profane it, inimitable in the one, formidable in the other, part of the marvel [*stupore*] and prodigy of art.²⁸

As the quote illustrates, the Baldacchino is seen as an artifact issued from a process of at once violent and marvelous transformation, which yielded an unseen and multifaceted result; the medium of this transformation is bronze.

²⁴ S. Schütze, 'Urbano inalza Pietro, e Pietro Urbano. Beobachtungen zu Idee und Gestalt der Ausstattung von Neu-St. Peter unter Urban VIII', *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana*, vol. 29, 1994, pp. 213–287; M. Delbeke, 'Framing History: the Jubilee of 1625, the Dedication of New Saint Peter's and the Baldacchino', in: S. Bonnemaïson and C. Macy, eds, *Festival Architecture*, London, 2008, pp. 129–154.

²⁵ AMV, 264–65.

²⁶ Kirwin, *Powers Matchless* (as in n. 9), p. 105 and passim.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁸ Biblioteca Angelica (Rome), ms. 1593, f. 262r, published in M. Delbeke, 'An Unknown Description of Baroque Rome: Michelangelo Lualdi's *Galleria Sacra Architetata dalla Pietà Romana Dall'anno 1610 sino al 1645*', *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge à Rome*, vol. 74, 2004, pp. 61–271, Appendix 2, no. 183. A similar description is included in Lualdi's manuscript *Istoria Vaticana*, see *ibid.*

Like its size, proportion and composition, its materiality makes it difficult to define an exact model for the Baldacchino. Guidiccioni's poem first seeks to characterize the Baldacchino by means of architectural references. Besides the Pantheon, Guidiccioni turns to the opulent constructions of Babylon and Egypt, only to state that the new construction largely supersedes these models (AMV 815, p. 161). The author identifies a more satisfactory pedigree when he frames the Baldacchino in the history of bronze monuments, to emphasize again that the construction has no real precedent: 'If among the buildings of antiquity something of this kind had surfaced, it would be standing today ... some such buildings are mentioned (by ancient writers): no witness attests to their construction' (AMV 60-63, p. 113). He then enumerates the bronze monuments – not buildings – whose existence is somehow documented: the bronze statue of Hercules and the equestrian of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitol, Domitian on the Forum, 'the bronze ceilings of temples', and 'doorposts [made of bronze], like many statues of lesser repute.' Guidiccioni turns to Vergil, referencing the shield of Aeneas and the temple with bronze beams and doors at Carthage, but he questions whether such temple actually ever existed there or in Corinth. Ultimately, only 'Rome *sees* a mighty mass, or rather an assemblage of thirty huge masses, for so often were those metals cast to form as it were vast cliffs. So closely does it cohere, that it seems the child of the willing earth' (my emphasis, AMV 75-78, p. 115). This spectacle, so the poet, transforms 'a spectator of living bronze ... into marble' (AMV 98-99, p. 115). Guidiccioni concludes with an implicit comparison of Urban VIII with Hephaistos (or Mulciber), as one who is 'able to give life to metals.'²⁹ The opening lines of the Dedication cast this creative triumph as wake-up call issued from clashing gongs, recalling the birth of Jove: 'Truly now, the Vatican Temple, long in labour, has produced among the clash of metals a birth that can only be eternal. Shall I not be roused by such a sound to enjoy so great a sight?' (AMV 25-28, p. 111).

4. Metal architecture

If the literary celebrations of the Baldacchino, Urban VIII, Guidiccioni or Bernini had every interest in exaggerating the novelty, grandeur and sheer audacity of the bronze Baldacchino, from an historical point of view the panegyrics appear to be based in fact. With the possible exception of the altar in St John of the Lateran built for Clement VIII (which is not free-standing but mounted against a wall), there existed no bronze constructions of a comparable size in Rome or elsewhere in Europe. But this does not mean that the giant bronze or metal

²⁹ See Guidiccioni, *Ara Maxima Vaticana* (as in n. 10), 'Commentary', pp. 193-194.

buildings were absent from the architectural imagination. By the seventeenth century the European literature was rich with descriptions of metal buildings. As we have seen, in his search for antecedents Guidiccioni refers to Vergil's description of the temple of Carthage. In the classical tradition the most famous example was probably the Palace of the Sun built by Mulciber, as described by Ovid in Book II of the *Metamorphoses*: it 'towered up with raised columns, bright with glittering gold, and gleaming bronze like fire'. This mythological building was probably on Guidiccioni's mind when he hinted that in the Baldacchino, too, 'the work of art was finer than the material' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II 1–5; AMV 81–2, p. 115).

The body of literary buildings in metal is characterized by specific features. They emerge clearly from Achim Timmermann's reading of the long section describing the Temple of the Grail in Albert von Scharfenberg's *Die jüngere Titurel* of circa 1270–90, an important model for subsequent fictional metal architecture.³⁰ Timmerman points out that looking for real-world models in order to understand fictional architecture leads to misunderstandings, because the literary artefact aims at provoking exactly the kind of wonder that is beyond the purview of material buildings. The description of the Grail Temple illustrates this disjunction between literary and physical constructions, because it approaches the gigantic building as if it were a piece of goldsmith's work: small-scale artefacts where ornament takes precedence over structure, and where the symbolism of the materials rather than their structural qualities dictates their application. What renders the Grail Temple marvellous is the application of the goldsmith's art on a monumental scale, in ways that are literally unseen. Timmerman points out that the closest material equivalents of the Temple are reliquaries and some chapels that are in themselves, in Timmerman's words, 'inflated reliquaries.' The description actually employs to rhetorical effect the difference in size between the real objects available to a reader, such as reliquaries, and the vast building evoked in the text, by leading the reader into a 'space' that is 'unstructured, with no spatial coordinates and no sense of scale.'³¹ The Grail Temple emerges as a gigantic sum of decorative details.

The possibility to evoke, in text, buildings as unstructured accumulations of ornaments establishes a fundamental difference between such buildings and their material translation. This is illustrated by the Temple (or Palace) of Fame in the

³⁰ A. Timmermann, 'Architectural Vision in Albert von Scharfenberg's *Jüngerer Titurel*. A Vision of Architecture?', in: G. Clarke and P. Crossley, eds, *Architecture and Language. Constructing Identity in European Architecture c. 1000 – c. 1650*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 58–71.

³¹ Timmerman, 'Architectural Vision' (as in n. 30), p. 64.

masque *Brittanica Triumphans*, the description of which has been identified as a possible source for Milton's Pandemonium.³² The text of the masque evokes a metallic building rising from the earth:

... the earth open'd and there rose up a richly adorn'd palace, seeming all Goldsmiths work, with porticoes vaulted on pillasters running far in: the pillasters were silver of rustic work, their bases and capitols of gold. In the midst was the principal entrance, and a gate; the doors' leaves of bass-relief, with jambs, and frontispiece all of gold. Above these ran an architrave, freize, and cornice of the same; the freize enricht with jewels....

[this was changed into] a Peristillum of two orders, Doric and Ionic, with their several ornaments seeming of white marble, the bases and capitals of gold; this, joining with the former, having so many returns, openings, and windows, might well be known for the glorious Palace of Fame.³³

The set was designed by Inigo Jones, and there are several drawings in Jones's hand that give us an idea of its appearance and characteristics on the stage. In his detailed discussion of Jones' stage designs, John Peacock has drawn attention to the ways in which the architect, here and in other cases, assimilated and combined earlier models.³⁴ Jones invariably brings his models in line with the tenets of classical architecture. Peacock acknowledges that Jones renders 'the fabric [of the Temple] in an even more decorative vein than [Giulio] Parigi', Jones' model, in order to evoke the decoration with jewels mentioned in the text, but 'the fanciful qualities of the palace are put into perspective literally and metaphorically by the harmony of the classical colonnades.'³⁵ The colonnades framing the Palace proper derive from a prototype found in Hans Vredeman de Vries' *Perspective* of 1605, with Jones correcting the different errors against classical decorum that Vredeman committed; similarly, the Parigi design for the Palace is corrected 'to make it fit better with the classical peristyle.'³⁶

If the textual description of the Palace of Fame evokes a building with features comparable to the Grail Temple – as a giant piece of 'Goldsmiths work' – its material counterpart, Jones' stage set, works the other way around: as an architectural structure in the classical style, proportioned and well-composed, but decorated with gold, silver and jewels. The built stage set stabilizes the fictional metal architecture: the uncertainties about its structure, the lack of clarity of its

³² See above, n. 7.

³³ I. Jones and W. D'Avenant, *Britannia Triumphans*, 1637. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A04599.0001.001/1:2.2?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> (last viewed 31 May 2016)

³⁴ J. Peacock, 'Inigo Jones's Stage Architecture and its Sources', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 64, 1982, pp. 195–216.

³⁵ Peacock, 'Inigo Jones's Stage Architecture' (as in n. 34), 208.

³⁶ *ibid.*

overall composition, and the shifting scale of its elements, with the finest hand-work appearing on a massive scale. The awe-inspiring features of the fictional constructions in gold and silver are largely neutralized.

The commentaries on the Baldacchino discussed so far suggest that the opposite is true for the construction in St Peter's. The origin of its material, the process of its design and manufacture, and its eventual appearance under the dome figure as unseen features of art and patronage, facilitated by the peculiar characteristics of building a hybrid building in bronze on a large scale. The Baldacchino brings the characteristics of literary metal architecture into the real world; this is what makes it sublime.

4. Inversions of the sublime

In Milton's Pandemonium, the architecture of Satan displays similar characteristics to those associated with the Baldacchino. The same cluster of semantic and perceptual properties that, according to the commentaries discussed above, turned the Baldacchino into the sublime monument of the Barberini papacy, is now conferred onto the building erected by demons: unseen materiality, technical prowess and almost excessive ornament assembled into a precarious whole that is hard to define, but brimming with connotations of dominion, warfare and sacrality. This transfer implies an obvious inversion: the seat of the pope is now the hall of Satan. But it also involves a subtler operation that hinges on the sublime. David Quint has argued recently that Milton's description of the satanic legions and their council at Pandemonium amounts to a manipulation of epic models that turns Satan's endeavour into farce.³⁷ The same is true, on a smaller level, for Pandemonium. Milton adopts the instability that, in the eyes of Guidiccioni and Domenico, defines the sublimeness of the Baldacchino as the index of Satan's failure to succeed in his goals.

A first instance of this process is Milton's deft adoption of long-standing Christian suspicions about ostentation, ornament and expense. Guidiccioni's and, to a lesser extent, Domenico's texts illustrate how the Roman Catholic builders and viewers of the Baldacchino were not concerned with these suspicions, but embraced the sumptuousness of the construction. Like Pandemonium, the Baldacchino is compared to the religious architecture of the ancient Middle East.³⁸ According to a trope frequently used in the circles of Urban VIII, the Orient is

³⁷ See D. Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost. Reading the Designs of Milton's Epic*, Princeton, 2014, pp. 26–27.

³⁸ The same could be argued for the shared reference to the Pantheon, a model that the Baldacchino is said to supercede and Pandemonium to emulate.

identified as the origin of idolatry, and its gigantic and ornate temples signify the oriental penchant for idol worship.³⁹ Guidiccioni casts the Baldacchino as the Christian answer to these temples, not because the Baldacchino breaks with the magnificence of its antecedents, but because it applies the same riches in the context of righteous religion; as Sforza Pallavicino, a Jesuit initially close to the Barberini, would write in his *Istoria del Concilio di Trento* (1656): 'gold is nowhere better than in the church.'⁴⁰ In *Paradise Lost*, however, Pandemonium emerges as the ultimate perfection of that same idolatrous architecture.⁴¹ As James A. Freeman has written, in so doing Milton acts as if he were 'hiring mercenaries to fight against their own country'.⁴² any Christian admiring Pandemonium finds himself seduced by features that derive from illegitimate prototypes. By comparing Pandemonium with the same ancient Oriental architecture as the Baldacchino, *Paradise Lost* casts their shared sublime features implicitly as idolatrous and erroneous.⁴³ This amounts not only to an inversion of the values associated with ornament and sumptuousness, but also to the identification of a failure: just as Catholics, in Milton's view, have failed to liberate themselves from idolatry, so Satan fails to build a decorous building, a premonition of his entire enterprise.

The same transfer occurs for other features of the sublime Baldacchino: the gilded bronze, the complexity and perceptual instability of its shape, and the problem of its scale. As concerns the gilded bronze, Freeman has shown, the 'roof of fretted gold' of Pandemonium is a prominent and striking feature, that adds to the depravity and insecurity of the devils. In classical Roman literature the gold panelled roof carries mostly condemnable connotations.⁴⁴ A sign of often excessive wealth, it is the cover of choice of morally suspect people. The ceiling plated with precious metal induces strife and unrest in those who linger underneath it. Freeman

³⁹ See D. Pastine, *La nascita dell'idolatria. L'oriente religioso di Athanasius Kircher*, Florence, 1978.

⁴⁰ Delbeke, *The Art of Religion* (as in n. 13), p. 122.

⁴¹ J. Lyle, 'Architecture and Idolatry in *Paradise Lost*', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, vol. 40:1, 2000, pp. 139–155.

⁴² J.A. Freeman, 'The roof was fretted gold', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 27:3, 1975, pp. 254–266 (265).

⁴³ Lyle, 'Architecture and Idolatry' (as in n. 41), pp. 146–147: Pandemonium as a debased version of heavenly architecture. See also S. Blakemore, 'Pandemonium and Babel: Architectural Hierarchy in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly*, vol. 20:4, 1986, pp. 142–145; W.A. McClung, 'The Architecture of Pandaemonium', *Milton Quarterly* 15:4, 1981, pp. 109–112. See also R.R. Cawley, *Milton and the Literature of Travel*, Princeton, NJ, 1952, p. 67, where the swift building of Pandemonium is associated with seventeenth-century conceptions of the labour necessary to build the pyramids.

⁴⁴ Freeman, 'The roof was fretted gold' (as in n. 42), p. 261.

quotes Horace, who uses the lack of 'ivory or gilded panel' [aureum ... lacunar] in a house as an emblem of virtue and righteousness.⁴⁵ Guidiccioni sees it different, and lists 'the ceiling tawny with bronze' [... fulvumque ex aere lacunar] as one of the startling features of the Baldacchino. Milton thus adopts this feature of the Baldacchino, but assigns it the meaning of perverted luxury that classical as well as Christian antecedents assigned to it, inverting Guidiccioni's value judgment.⁴⁶

The ceiling is listed in the culminating description of the Baldacchino in the *Ara Maxima Vaticana*. The translators of the poem note that 'the syntactical structure [of the description] deliberately baffles orderly, rational expectation.'⁴⁷ This structure expresses the different forms of instability that Guidiccioni and others commentators saw in the Baldacchino: its resistance to easy identification, its composition of a variety of parts, and its complicated proportional relationship with its huge surroundings. Pandemonium, too, resists classification: it can be understood as a single building or a conglomerate, a tower or a city, a hall or a fortress. This shifting identification belongs to the instability that is, according to Jeffrey Theis, characteristic of demonic architecture in *Paradise Lost*: structures that exist in a chaos the demons vainly seek to control and transcend. As Theis points out, 'the environment in which [the demons] will build Pandemonium is like the confusion of elements in chaos.'⁴⁸ In an attempt to master the chaos of their surroundings the demons erect an imposing building. But by trying to make this building sublime, they adopt the same features of perceptual and semantic instability we recognized in the Baldacchino, amplifying the chaos they set out to control.

This misunderstanding is illustrated dramatically when the demons shrink in size upon entering the hall of council.⁴⁹ By shrinking the demons Milton destabilizes the perceptual relationship between Pandemonium and its viewers. As mentioned earlier, the passage emulates Vergil: Aeneas first observes Carthage as a gigantic society of 'busy bees'. In her reading of the Vergilian passage, Elizabeth Young has argued that the miniaturisation evoked there should be read in terms of the sublime, understood as 'an aesthetic and affective structure that articulates an individual's confrontation with power through jarring shifts of scale.'⁵⁰ The abrupt shift between the moment when Aeneas first observes

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265, n. 32.

⁴⁷ Guidiccioni, *Ara Maxima Vaticana*, 'Commentary', p. 229.

⁴⁸ Theis, 'Milton's Principles' (as in n. 4), p. 109.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵⁰ E. Young, 'Homer in a Nutshell: Vergilian Miniaturization and the Sublime', *PMLA*, vol. 128:1, 2013, pp. 57–72 (58).

Carthage in miniature from above, and then from within, as a huge city surrounding him, brings home the immensity as well as the precariousness of Aeneas' destiny of founding Rome, the city that will supersede Carthage. As Freeman observes, 'the irony implicit in [Aeneas'] appreciation for Carthage is similar to that of readers who admire Pandemonium.'⁵¹ Milton adopts Vergil's sublime play with scale to cast the entrance of the demons as a moment of disjunction: the size of Pandemonium is at once emphasized to the point of reducing its viewers to insects, and rendered beyond their grasp because of their own shifting size. Only from a particular and external point of view, that of the reader, inaccessible to the lost demons themselves, is it possible to appreciate the construction – the demons are dwarfed creatures trapped *inside* the gigantic surroundings of the hall, deprived of the stability that affords to admire its sublime proportions.

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⁵¹ Freeman, 'The roof was fretted gold', p. 260.