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Many Autumn Leaves

In Book Six of the *Iliad* by Homer, Glaukos questions why Diomedes is concerned with Glaukos' heritage. Glaukos compares humanity to generations of leaves. He says, "As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. / The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber / burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning" (Lines 146-148). Homer considers the idea that as with humanity, leaves come in waves or generations. "Timber" is important because it supplies people with wood. In addition to that, the timber is also providing people with the image of the beautiful blossoming leaves. As soon as the leaves fall from the tree, they die and fall to the ground. The wind has to scatter them in different directions to make room on the ground for the new generation of leaves. This action allows people to focus on the leaves that bloom in the spring, instead of on the dead leaves on the ground. When the leaves are pushed out of sight, the timber is only left with the memories of the leaves. In the spring, the timber blooms or "burgeons" new leaves. The leaves flourish rapidly in large numbers and continue to grow. People completely forget about the leaves from the past season and focus on the leaves of this season. This image is similar to human aging; as one generation grows up, a new one is already being born. In this part of the simile, there is a sense that this old generation of leaves, the generation that has already been scattered by the wind, is not as important as the new generation because the old generation is dead and gone. The tree that

blossomed those leaves has already moved on to new leaves, forgetting all about the old generation. What Glaukos is trying to say is that the origin of humans and gods is not as important as the present generation. Their ancestors are long gone, and no benefits will come from dwelling on the past. Placing “returning” at the end of “spring” is interesting because it gives the reader the sense that the act of leaves blossoming is a cyclical one. Every single spring, new leaves are born, and this blossoming is a constant that always comes back around, similar to the circle of life. Even though many people die each day, many people are also born each day; life is taken away and life is given.

In Book Six of *The Aeneid*, Aeneas witnesses spirits who are trying to cross the river into the underworld. Virgil writes that these spirits are “thick as the leaves that with the early frost / of autumn drop and fall within the forest” (Lines 407-408). Virgil’s use of the word “thick” suggests that these leaves fell from a tree in a multitude, perhaps after a large gust of wind. This image is similar to the swarm of people trying to get into Charon’s boat and cross into the underworld. “Early frost” suggests that winter might be approaching more quickly than usual, almost unexpected. Comparing the spirits to leaves that experienced an early frost could be referencing that their deaths came too soon. Earlier in the poem, Virgil mentions that some of these spirits are children, and as for the older spirits, maybe they did not accomplish everything in their life that they wanted to. This idea applies especially to the mothers and heroes. The mothers would consider their deaths untimely because they might not have been able to see their children grow up. The heroes would most likely have wanted to live forever, receiving praise and recognition for all of their good deeds. Hence, mothers’ deaths and heroes’ deaths still came too early, reiterating the idea that death is unexpected and cannot be controlled. If the inferred tree in this simile is looked at as the tree of life, then as soon as the leaves depart or “drop” from their

branches, they have died. Normally, the image of falling leaves is a graceful one; leaves glide peacefully to the ground. These spirits are doing the opposite when they rush to Charon's boat. When leaves get pushed by a gust of wind, they fall much less gracefully. The spirits are being propelled by their own fear of not being able to rest in the underworld. Therefore, the leaves' journey to the ground signifies what these spirits are going through in this part of the poem: they are trying to gain entrance into the underworld. Only when they reach their final destination in the underworld will they reach the "ground" and be at peace. The "forest" represents the underworld, but it is interesting that Virgil writes that the leaves fall "within" that forest, rather than "on the ground." This word choice gives the forest depth, relating to the depth that the underworld has, adding even more physical aspects to his idea of the afterlife. "Within" could refer to the different parts of the underworld that spirits reside in, considering that not all parts of the underworld are reserved for torture and eternal pain.

In Canto Three of Dante's *Inferno*, the spirits are travelling with Charon into Hell. Dante compares these souls to autumn leaves by writing, "As, in the autumn, leaves detach themselves, / first one and then the other, till the bough / sees all its fallen garments on the ground" (Lines 112-114). By saying that the leaves "detach themselves" from the tree, Dante is suggesting that the leaves are falling from the tree of their own free will, that they are making the choice to leave the branch. What this image brings out about the souls entering Hell is that they made the decision to engage in bad behaviors during their lifetime. The reason that they are going to Hell is their own doing, not anyone else's. The "bough" can be looked at as pureness because it is the main branch of a tree that diverges into other branches. Similarly, the "bough" can also be looked at as God, and if this is the case, then those leaves dropped because they wanted to, not because the branch forced them to fall or because a gust of wind blew them down. "First one and

then the other” suggests that it only takes one leaf to fall before all the other leaves follow, similar to a domino effect. Dante is explaining that only one person has to sin before temptation becomes too much for everyone else, and they follow in sin after the first person. The word “garments” is interesting because it suggests that the leaves dressed the branch, and without them, the branch is barren and naked. When people depart from God to sin, then God is left completely alone. Once again, the bough can be looked at as a symbol for God. The bough is the main branch of a tree that other branches come from; we all come from God, the main source of life. When comparing the bough to God, then the simile suggests that God is dependent on God’s followers. God’s followers are supposed to spread God’s message, and they cannot do that if they are entrenched in sin. This idea leads into the final part of the simile in which the bough sees all of its leaves on the ground. The ground can be seen as Hell and that God is looking down upon all of those who chose to sin. What is interesting is that there is no gust of wind that brings the leaves back up to the branch, possibly suggesting that one cannot get back in good graces with God unless they choose to; God does not forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness.

In Canto Nine of Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*, the fallen angels make their way back to Hell after being reprimanded by one of God’s angels, Michael. Tasso compares the incredible number of fallen angels to fallen leaves by writing, “nor does that autumn ever see as many dry leaves fall / to the ground during the year’s first cold spells” (Stanza LXVI). Unlike the other similes considered, Tasso explores that idea that no natural phenomenon on earth has seen a sight similar to these fallen angels. Autumn leaves cannot compare to this image because the action of the fallen angels returning to Hell is God’s doing, through Michael. God is the most powerful, the most divine; therefore, God can perform tasks (i.e., sending the angels back to Hell in incredible) that autumn leaves cannot fathom. Tasso’s use of the word “dry” suggests that these

fallen angels are lacking substance or that they are withered and defeated. Although their large number makes the angels appear threatening, there is little beyond the surface. “Ground” represents Hell and “fall” represents the angels’ descent back to Hell from earth. Tasso is getting across that there are even more angels that have rebelled against God than leaves that fall in autumn. “First cold spells” could refer to God’s lack of affection for the fallen angels. After all, they rebelled against God and are now trying to defeat the Christians. God sends Michael to get the fallen angels back to Hell instead of directly intervening. God is putting distance between God and the fallen angels, conveying that they do not have a place in Heaven or on earth.

Book One of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* showcases Satan’s new dwelling place and all the other fallen angels that live there. These fallen angels are chained to a fiery lake, and Milton writes that they are “Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks / in Vallombrosa, where th’ Etrurian shades / High overarch’t imbow’r” (Lines 302-304). Milton specifies that the fallen angels are like “autumnal” leaves, suggesting that the angels’ fall from Heaven was timely. If he had compared them to summer leaves, then it would have seemed that they had fallen from Heaven prematurely, maybe without provocation. Instead, one can argue that the angels’ time in Heaven ran its course and that God had enough reason to throw them out. The fallen angels are scattered on the burning lake like leaves that are scattered on top of brooks. The angels cannot be positioned right next to each other because of their massive, outstretched wings. In this way, the angels look like leaves; the stem of the leaf is an angel’s actual body while the leafy part is their wings. Water is seen as pure and nourishing, but these angels are clogging up that pure source with their sin and uncouth ways. If enough leaves lie on top of a stream or brook, then it becomes hard to see the water underneath. Similarly, there are an incredible number of fallen angels on the lake in Hell, but instead of water, they are on a lake of fire. They are forced to look

at their damnation head-on. What was once looked at as a symbol of life and growth is now representative of the angels' eternal pain and suffering; they do not get the peace and serenity that comes with being on or near a lake. The "Etrurian shades" that Milton refers to can suggest Heaven because they are "high overarch't". Heaven, in relation to Hell, is much higher. These trees create shade, and Heaven is what creates the eternal darkness in Hell. Milton uses the word "imbow'r" to create the image that the trees create a kind of dome that surrounds Hell in darkness. The leaves that have fallen from the tree, or the angels who have fallen from Heaven, are shrouded in darkness that the trees create. These trees, similar to Heaven, are above the shade that they create and are therefore in the light. This idea of Milton's could be bringing out that God created Hell and created the darkness that the fallen angels are now in. Because Milton specifies that these leaves are autumn leaves, they are no longer on the tree, connected to branches. This image represents the angels that have all left Heaven and fallen down to Hell.

It is really interesting that the idea of comparing spirits or fallen angels to leaves has travelled through Virgil, Homer, Dante, Tasso, and Milton. Milton being the last writer sequentially out of the five means that he explicitly took details and ideas from each of the other four writers' similes in order to make his own. Readers of Milton who also are aware of any of the other four texts will recognize this simile and be able to connect it back to Virgil, Homer, Dante, or Tasso. Milton ties ideas together from each simile so that one does not have to have read all four other texts in order to make a connection. For example, the idea of comparing leaves specifically to fallen angels comes from Tasso's simile in *Jerusalem Delivered*. The word "thick" to describe the large number of angels comes from Virgil. Milton gets the idea of "autumn" leaves from Dante, Tasso, and Virgil. The leaves being scattered or strewn is an idea that Milton got from Homer's simile. Taking these little ideas and details from well-known

writers shows that Milton is well-read himself and that he has taken the time to read these authors in great detail.

Where do memories live
when they get evicted
from their own house?

Are there foster homes for them?
Places in the void reserved for
lost memories that had
no choice when the big bad
huffed and puffed their houses down.

Do memories die
when their owners
descend into infancy,
succumbing to disease?

Are we anything without memories?
Not quite existing, nearly lifeless,
a house holding onto threads
of a past life, slipping
closer to the deep dark,
close enough to feel its empty pull.

Do memories leave us
like leaves that float away
from their branches,
one at a time, until
the tree is barren,
bringing an eternal winter?

Did we once know the answers?
Is the big bad already knocking on our doors,
huffing and puffing
and taking and taking
and

and

and

What was I saying?

The five similes by Virgil, Dante, Milton, Homer, and Tasso were really helpful to reference when I was creating my own. They helped me to view all aspects of falling leaves from their appearance to the context surrounding them. It was also really interesting to see that although those five similes were comparing very similar parts and seemed incredibly similar in wording, they all had very distinct ideas that were brought out. I wanted to explore a different idea with falling leaves in my simile, instead of comparing leaves to spirits or fallen angels. I wanted to stretch my imagination a little more by comparing the falling leaves to fleeting memories and trying to imagine what that would look like.