



## John Milton - Paradise Lost: Book 9

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## John Milton Paradise Lost: Book 9

### Paradise Lost: The English Epic?

*Paradise Lost* is an Epic Poem in twelve Books. C.S. Lewis argues it is secondary Epic, the sort of verse a sophisticated society produces when it wishes to recapture the energy of the heroic tradition, which he calls primary Epic. Good examples of the latter, reflecting a more primitive culture and an oral tradition, might be Homer's *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*. An early example of secondary epic is Virgil's *Aeneid*, written to reflect and celebrate the magisterial culture Augustus Caesar had produced. But Milton's poem is more ambitious than Virgil's. It incorporates more than two thousand years of Christian thought and worship; its avowed aim is to justify the ways of God to man; and whether it celebrates or ignores the Civil War culture that produced it remains an open question after more than three hundred years.

Milton toyed with the idea of an Arthurian Epic, befitting an English patriot. But Romance, which attracted him in youth, would lock the Epic Poet into the turbulence of war and the 'artifice' of endless descriptions of armour. As he says in the invocation to Book 9 he wants to explore 'the better fortitude of patience' (ll. 31/32), not follow early favourites such as Ariosto and Spenser 'to dissect/With long and tedious havoc fabled knights/In battles feigned' (9, 29-31). If Milton did battles they would be clashes in the heart of man, struggling for freedom to obey his God; or else between courteous ranks of fallen and unfallen angels, dwarfing and burlesquing all human conflict that was ever fought.

Classical Epic had come to be thought of as the grandest of all forms of poetic composition, and, as his theme expanded, it was to this form that Milton graduated, though his first thought was to write a sacred drama. Virgil's *Aeneid* is his immediate model, with Homer more especially underpinning scenes of combat. Yet, as with his great pastoral elegy *Lycidas*, Milton adopts Classical models only to transform them. Where the theology of classical epic mixed gods with men in unpredictable episodes, Milton systematically expounds the key debates that underpin Christian understanding of the universe. He means to make use of classical models: boasts before battle, roll-call of adversaries, the 'wrath of Achilles', invocation of his Muse. Yet this Muse is not just one numbered among the Sacred Nine, but no less than the Holy Spirit of the Christian Godhead. With her aid he means to soar 'above th'Aonian mount' of Helicon, sacred to pagan poets, not just to draw upon the classical tradition, but to exceed it too.

General Studies of Milton include: Dennis Danielson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (1999); Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* (2009); and, especially recommended at A2, Margaret Kean, *John Milton's Paradise Lost: A Sourcebook* (2005).

AO2 Literary context

## Paradise Lost Summarised

The first six books of *Paradise Lost* are unexpectedly and teasingly symmetrical. The first begins with the fallen angels rising from a lake of penal fire, testing the length and weight of their chains, and meditating revenge on 'th'Omnipotent' who has defeated them. Satan (literally, 'th' Adversary') volunteers for a singlehanded commando raid on God's newly created human favourites, Adam and Eve. He penetrates Eden, perches like a cormorant on the tree of life (4, 196) and squats like a toad in Eve's ear (4,800), before a posse of loyal angels intercepts him. Up to this point, the end of Book 4, the action is sequential. Books 5 and 6 depend (another characteristic of Epic) on flashback. In them the Archangel Raphael (the 'sociable spirit') turns up at a delicious uncooked meal - fire cannot be used before the Fall - which Eve serves naked. Between mouthfuls Raphael recounts the rousing backstory of the war in heaven, where the 'horrid shock' of arms and the roar of Satan's cannon magnify (or simulate, or even parody) the martial exploits customary in Epic. None of the angels on either side bears other than mental scars, for the wounds inflicted heal quickly.

Thus by the beginning of Book 7 the narrative has circled back to its starting point. In Books 7 and 8 Raphael takes questions on the nature of the universe from Adam and Eve. This permits Milton to present cutting edge seventeenth century knowledge on theology, cosmology and the nature and purpose of creation, though no firm choice is made between the Classical (Ptolemaic) and Modern (Copernican) model of the cosmos for the good reason that Milton himself had not made up his mind which was more likely. Book 8 ends with intriguing details about the digestive and excretory processes and even the sex life of angels. The crisis of the poem, the fall of humankind at the instigation of the devil, abruptly follows this retrospective and discursive sequence and, as befits its central significance, Book 9 is the longest in the poem.

Book 10, making use of the preference of Epic for prophetic visions of the future, supplies a snapshot of every major character's attitude in the light of the coming of original sin, and describes the origins of weather in a newly fallen environment; while books 11 and 12 provide a summary by the Archangel Michael of highlights of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, with sensible omissions: 'the rest / Were long to tell.' Christ's appearance as second Adam, atoning for the sin of the first, forms the climax of Michael's prophetic vision. The structural symmetry of Epic is again maintained: this matches Messiah's role at the centre of the poem, where He judges the fallen angels. The theology of this last sequence of the poem is notably Protestant, complete with warnings about how the 'grievous wolves' of Rome will one day 'taint' the purity of scripture. Adam is delighted with all he is shown and told, even to the point of thanking God for his own opportunity to sin so creatively (the doctrine of *felix culpa* or the 'happy sin'). But though he may retrospectively delight in his fall, Book 12 ends with Adam and Eve unceremoniously punished for it, and Eden guarded and barred. They turn to a new world, our world, all before them, and they enter it with 'wandering steps and slow'.

While it is useful to have absorbed the structure of *Paradise Lost* at full length, the text prescribed for examination is Book 9 of the poem. The other books of the poem should be regarded as context, and detailed attention reserved for Book 9.

AO2 Structure of poem;  
AO4 Whole Poem as Context

## Structural Engineering

Throughout the Epic, as we have seen, Milton binds his material tautly together, not just matching up major sequences of action, but also symbolic details. A good example is the description of the tall trees of paradise in Book 4 ('insuperable highth of loftiest shade', 4, 138) which at that time bar Satan's entrance into the garden. These are the same soaring trees which in Book 9, 1088ff, overcome with dismay at his transgression, Adam begs to cover him 'with innumerable boughs', so he may never again view his naked body. As Douglas Bush writes, Milton achieved these effects of parallelism by sustained, meticulous revision. 'The more we read [the Epic] the more we see of its architectural design, not merely in the narrative as a whole but in innumerable links and contrasts in the smallest details.'

AO2 Structure of text

## John Milton: Poet and Politician

Milton was brought up in the noisy City of London, but migrated to quieter places, such as Cambridge, rural Middlesex and Buckinghamshire, as his sense of vocation as a poet grew upon him. His early years found him experimenting in all the shorter forms that have come down from antiquity: the Ode, the lyric and the pastoral elegy, as if fulfilling a pattern of tasks set by God, his great task master, or the expectations of classical critics. His father's income, which came from a mixture of solicitor's business and commercial speculation, sufficed the son, too. At this time the poet's political sympathies may have been vaguely royalist: in his twenties he wrote *Comus*, a courtly Masque (musical entertainment) designed to rehabilitate an influential family that had been touched by sexual scandal. But a trip to Italy with England on the brink of Civil War brought him back a confirmed Republican and an uncompromising critic of the Roman Catholic Church whose hierarchical and administrative structures he found too obviously preserved, despite the Reformation of the previous century, in the Church of England. For more than twenty years Milton abandoned the writing of major poetry, devoting his pen instead to purifying his church and expunging the royal tyranny he believed was mainly responsible for its corruptions. In the Civil War of 1642-45 he came out strongly on the Parliamentary side, and his writing became increasingly controversial: he attacked bishops; he argued in favour of divorce; he made himself useful to Oliver Cromwell's government, which, not two months after the execution of King Charles I (January 1649), recognised his value by making him 'Secretary for Foreign Tongues', in other words its official spokesman to the continent of Europe in the then international language of learning and controversy, Latin.

The most authoritative biography of Milton is by Barbara Lewalski (2000); more closely focussed and therefore likely to be more accessible at A2 are those by A.N. Wilson (1983) and Anna Beer (2008).

AO4 Biographical and historical contexts

## Profession: Arguer in Chief

Milton was brilliantly suited to the post of Cromwell's Latin Secretary. He was born and schooled in the lively heart of London, becoming used to contesting politicians, controversial clergymen and competing schoolmasters. Cambridge only seemed to harden his delight in debate. In his mature poetry he is never happier than when arguing a case: devising glozing rhetoric for a ruined archangel, so he can worm his way into our sympathies; imagining parliamentary debate in hell, complete with hidden agendas and scriptwriters (see *Paradise Lost*, Book 2); or following some timeless controversy (like the Fall of Man) back to first principles. Milton liked to be right; but liked even more to prove it. As Rose Macaulay wittily suggested, 'if Milton had been in the garden of Eden he would have eaten the apple, and then written a pamphlet to show how just and necessary his action was.' Proving a case in the seventeenth century involved disputants in witty, frequently bad-mannered exchanges, for even seasoned scholars delighted in personal abuse. When Milton attacks bishops he doesn't confine himself to their doctrines or lifestyle but moves on to their silly headgear and even their smelly feet. The most famous of Milton's adversaries, one Salmasius, is jeered at for allowing a sexual rival to copulate with his wife in an outhouse. In another pamphlet Charles I is insulted as he kneels in prayer before his execution. And in *Paradise Lost* God the Father argues 'like a school divine' (Pope), protesting on almost every appearance that He never interfered one iota with human free will: 'If I foreknew,/ Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault/ Which had no less proved certain unforeknown (lll 117-19)'. Throughout Book 9 Milton delights in the ramifications of arguing a case or cause: Satan flattering like a fawning courtier (524-31), or exploiting a pregnant pause like a Roman orator (670-76); Eve, just fallen, starting to 'label' God disparagingly ('Our great forbidder' (l.815)); and Adam, heroic in a bad cause, trying to find reasons to be loyal to his fallible wife.

## Milton the Freethinker

When the political tide turned against the Republic in the late 1650s Milton characteristically made little effort to dissociate himself from its increasingly discredited policies. He called the Restoration of 1660 'our expiring liberty', and refused to return to office when eventually invited under Charles II. 'I did not insult over fallen majesty', he explained his part in Regicide in *The Second Defence of the English People* (1654), '... I only preferred Queen Truth to King Charles.' The punishment, in November 1660, was a month's imprisonment. Some hard-line royalists thought he deserved hanging; others were content that God, apparently, had struck him blind (actually a few years before, in 1652). Thereafter Milton remained in political retirement, quite unrepentant, if anything more libertarian in his attitudes than he had been in the light of publicity. All timeworn opinions were dismissed as 'old vomit' unless he had proved them on his own spiritual pulse; he was convinced 'obedience to the Spirit of God [i.e. the dictates of private conscience], rather than to the fair seeming pretences of men, is the best and most dutiful order that a Christian can observe.'

AO4 Milton's Republican thinking

AO2 Fascination with argument  
AO4 political contexts

## The Theology of Paradise Lost

It followed that by the time, in the 1660s, that he wrote *Paradise Lost* Milton's beliefs on many core theological subjects were no longer compatible with Christian orthodoxy. We know this because, though he did not publish them, he did write them down in a theological treatise called *De Doctrina Christiana* ('Concerning Christian Doctrine'), which was discovered and published in 1823. *De Doctrina* confirms, among other views, that the poet did not believe the Son co-equal or co-eternal with God the Father; did not believe God the Father in all things omniscient; saw no reason why a man should not take more than one wife, possibly at the same time; saw no reason for a human priesthood, a Church to interpret or mediate Christian doctrine and little point in meeting for worship. Since the publication of *De Doctrina* critics have argued with some energy to what extent Milton's Epic Poem reflects these unorthodox thoughts. Some have argued that they find in it significant similarities. For example, the non-biblical doctrine of the Trinity is parodied in Book 2 as the 'unholy Trinity' of Sin, Death and Satan; then, in the scenes in heaven, God the Father seems to dominate all the discussions with his Son, who knows less than He does, and hasn't been around as long. Milton even argues once or twice in *Paradise Lost* that there are limits to the perfections of God the Father himself: at 8,406, for example, God touchingly confesses to Adam that he is lonely.

Some critics suspect that the author of *De Doctrina* may have gone even further than limiting Christ's power in the godhead (the so-called Arian heresy), or the omnipotence of God Himself. Perhaps he even secretly preferred the charismatic Satan to the stodgy Almighty? Perhaps a part of him even wanted the Dark Lord to win? What cannot be disputed is that by the time he wrote *Paradise Lost* as prophet, thinker and politician Milton had a long track record of bitter distaste for tyrants and the mechanisms of tyranny, and his disrelish for any who pretend to absolute power (the partisan King Charles I, the pompous Pope of Rome, the vain men who promulgated the silly doctrine of the Trinity) has convinced many, whether or not the poet was himself aware of it, that his poem is more sympathetic to the free-spirited rebellion of Satan than to the judgemental monarchy of God.

The most famous defence of *Paradise Lost* as an orthodox Christian poem is C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942); the most famous attack on its orthodoxy is William Empson, *Milton's God* (1961), in which the God of the poem is once or twice compared with Stalin.

AO4 Theological contexts;  
A03 contrasting readings of the  
poem's theology

## The Romantic Reading of Paradise Lost

Though writers on the poem in the eighteenth century routinely found Satan heroic, pre-eminent among those who relish the crypto-diabolist Milton are his Romantic commentators, especially Shelley and Blake. This isn't surprising: in some ways, Milton's art is that of a Romantic fantasist. As Dr Johnson observed, 'Milton's delight was to sport in the wide regions of possibility; reality was a scene too narrow for his mind.' The poet's art is never more arresting than when it endeavours to describe the indescribable, never more energetic than when it bursts through the doors of perception. So Blake, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, instinctively turns to Milton as seer of visions and dreamer of dreams, undermining the tyranny of God with the liberty of an untrammelled conscience, and therefore, like all true poets, 'secretly of the devil's party without knowing it.'

Blake went on to imagine himself communing with the spirit of Milton in *Milton*, an illustrated epic poem of vision and deliverance, from which the familiar apocalyptic hymn 'Jerusalem' is taken; Wordsworth was fond of speculating on the effect on European liberty if the arch-republican Milton had been living in the Age of Napoleon; Coleridge praised in Milton's Satan 'the very height of poetic sublimity'; while Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) eulogised Satan's persistence and resourcefulness and deplored the Almighty's vindictiveness: 'Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. . . . Milton's Devil as a moral being is . . . far superior to his God.'

AO3 Alternative reading of poem

## The Civil War and AO4

It is clear, then, that Milton's Epic must reflect his radical sympathies, but less clear how these are embodied in the poem. The solid critical geometry that identifies the tyranny of God with that of Charles I, and Satan's resilience with implacable Republican resolve, possibly with Oliver Cromwell himself, is too rigid, impossible to align with the continuing theme in the poem that the only true freedom is found in perfect obedience to God. As A.N. Wilson writes in *The Life of John Milton* (1983):

Satan, cast down to hell by a vindictive and smiling God, comes before us with all heroic magnificence, a conviction that 'Here at last/We shall be free' and 'better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven.' How obviously like this is – so goes the argument – to Milton's own predicament at the time of the Restoration. Milton could scarcely write about rebellion, it is thought, without secretly being on the side of the rebels.

There is an absurdity about this way of reading the epic which hints that Milton would have had no imaginative ability – let alone desire – to distinguish between the rightful deposition of a tyrant and a crazy rebellion against God.

It is also hard to credit that the pious republican John Milton could have equated in any straightforward way the implacable foe of humanity with any earthly conqueror, let alone one the poet favoured, such as his hero Cromwell. As John Carey has written, Satan's predicament is more complex and 'curious than any such parallel would allow.'

As Epic *Paradise Lost* possesses abundant radical energy: imaginative daring, theological flexibility and political insight, and many of these qualities might be inspired by Milton's experiences during and after the Civil War. But times had changed for the poet since then. In the autobiographical invocation at the beginning of Book 9, as in those of Books 3 and 7, he presents himself as a 'depressed' figure, not an energetic subversive, or political controversialist. He is old and blind, composing in the night-watches, in damp weather, and (ominous and suggestive phrase) in 'an age too late'. He had been forced into hiding not many years back; he lost his job; his books were burnt; nine regicides, his former companions, had been disembowelled, and a noose made ready for him. Two children, and two wives, had died. He remains true to the work, thought and beliefs of a lifetime, but as great man in exile, treading warily, 'on evil days fall'n, and evil tongues' (7, 26).

AO4 Biographical and political context  
AO3 Differing views of political context

## Royalist, Republican and Reader Response

What is beyond dispute is that Milton's republican sympathies in the Civil War have immeasurably affected criticism of his poem. Those whose sympathies cleave naturally to the royalist, conservative, or Anglican side in that Civil War (and, as T.S. Eliot reminds us, no 'serious civil war ever does end') are never very happy with Milton, his arguments and beliefs, however impressed aesthetically they may be with his poetry. Sometimes the criticism of such writers seems an attempt to carry on the Civil War by other means. Dr Johnson who, T.S. Eliot argued, was 'obstinately and passionately of another party' (as, indeed similarly was Eliot himself), famously conceded 'Milton brought out the worst in me'.

John Rumrich, *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (2006) explores the poem's many contentious moments and issues; while Stanley Fish's reader-response study, *Surprised by Sin* (1971), partly explains why people read the poem in such contrasting ways. Christopher Hill in *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (1984) considers how Republicans like Milton faced up to changed attitudes after the Restoration.

AO3 Different readings

## A Turkish Contempt for Females

It was on the subject of gender politics that Dr Johnson's contempt for Milton as 'acrimonious and surly republican' becomes little short of brutal. This is his cruellest paragraph:

It has been observed, that they who most loudly clamour for liberty do not most liberally grant it. What we know of Milton's character, in domestick relations, is, that he was severe and arbitrary. His family consisted of women; and there appears in his books something like a Turkish contempt of females, as subordinate and inferiour beings. That his own daughters might not break the ranks, he suffered them to be depressed by a mean and penurious education. He thought women made only for obedience, and man only for rebellion (*Lives of the Poets*).

The facts in the case are that Milton was married three times. His first wife was only half his age when they met, seventeen to his thirty-four, and she seems to have found the writer's erudition and self-discipline stifling. She quickly returned to her family, provoking Milton into writing a pamphlet on the advisability of divorce, but then was reconciled with him, bore him three daughters and a son (dead in infancy), and herself died at just twenty-seven. The second marriage was very brief, eliciting a toughly poignant memorial sonnet and a sense that this lady, who lived to be twenty-nine, was the great love of Milton's life. The third was a managerial young woman of twenty-four (Milton was fifty-five at their wedding), chiefly famous for keeping the poet's three feisty daughters at bay. As for these ladies, it is true that none was educated as thoroughly as Milton's nephews. The eldest, Anne, seems to have suffered from some kind of mental illness. The others thought their father fussy and patronising, and have left behind wounding stories that Milton was a selfish epicure about his food, who made them read to him in 'eight languages' that they did not understand. His explanation, apparently, was that 'one tongue was enough for a woman.'

AO4 Biographical and sociological context

## A Curséd Eve?

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Milton's domestic quarrels, it is not hard to find anti-feminist sentiments in his Epic. At 4, 299 we are told that Adam is closer to God than Eve: Adam is made 'for God only, she for God in him.' At 11,633 an angel declares that substandard male behaviour is owing to 'effeminate slackness.' At the end of Book 11 Adam reflects that Eve was made not just from a spare but a bent rib, 'a rib crooked by nature' (ll. 884-85). He compares her unfavourably with the angels, who are all masculine. He declares ruefully that female 'perverseness' is at the bottom of every threat to 'human life' and 'household peace'. Are Adam's observations, which include dark prophesies of the dangers of interfering in-laws, autobiographical reflections on Milton's part? Or should we assume Eve a composite portrait of an annoying wife, rather than a transcription of one or other of Milton's? 'For Dante's Beatrice, and Milton's Eve,' Byron writes in *Don Juan*, 'Were not drawn from their spouses, you conceive.' It should be pointed out that in the twentieth century feminist commentators tended to find Eve's hints of sturdy independence attractive, and also (sometimes) as recalling Milton's own tendency to question authority and rebel. 'In the separation colloquy' (Book 9) writes Diane K. McColley in a recent *Milton Companion*, 'principles very like Milton's own move Eve to decline to let Satan's threat interfere with their liberties and the pursuit of their callings.'

So Book 9 has its share of gender politics, too, if not the most blatant discourse of male supremacy in the poem. Modern readers will be surprised to hear Milton's narrator absolve Adam of some of the guilt for the Fall because he was 'fondly overcome with female charm'; another sexist moment comes at ll. 232-33, where Adam tells us 'nothing lovelier can be found / In woman than to study household good'. Otherwise Adam's attempts to blame Eve's catastrophe in 'evil hour' (ie after the Fall) are viewed by the narrator as what they are: logic-chopping efforts at self-justification by means of self-recrimination. Before the fall they would not have exposed one another 'to blame/By [their] complaint' (10, 130-31), as they do here. Adam has his reservations about Eve (his are the brains, hers the unthinking will, ll. 1179-86) but she reciprocates them in kind. These are the 'fruitless hours' (l. 1188) after the fatal fruit is eaten: a time not of mutual delight but of recrimination and self-justification, and of the lovers' 'vain contést appeared no end.'

AO2 Readings of the poem's  
gender politics  
AO3 Alternative readings

## Incarnate in a Brute

Dr Johnson thought Milton excelled in effects of 'gigantick loftiness', T.S. Eliot echoing this when he claimed 'imagery suggestive of vast size' suited him, 'limitless space, abysmal depth, and light and darkness.' At one point (5, 568-70) *Paradise Lost* is so fearlessly speculative as to anticipate the 'other worlds' of Science Fiction, populated with extra-terrestrials. If Beelzebub doesn't quite call humans 'puny earthlings' at 2, 367 he does call them 'puny inhabitants' of earth. Thus Milton is regularly praised for thinking and writing into the void, as it were, giving unexpectedly coherent, even dramatic form to the trains of abstract thought, to the soaring hopes and unbounded fears on which ancient and modern Western Civilisation is founded. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation is particularly suited to this mode of treatment. For example, Christ must have remained co-equal with God Almighty at the first Christmas, but all that power is apparently packed into the confines of a powerless new-born. Milton had handled this conceit brilliantly in his early poem, 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity', where the snuggling baby is backed by orders of threatening angels in glinting armour. In *Paradise Lost* Book 9 these ironies of incarnation are neatly inverted. This time it is not Christ's humility that must be made flesh, but the grumbling condescension of Satan.

The Arch-fiend must lodge himself not in the pliant body of a baby, but the surging, limbless confines of that 'narrow fellow' the serpent. Keats described the suffocating rhythms as Satan enters the reptile brilliantly: the entrapment, impotence, breathlessness (ll. 187-91):

*'Whose spirit does not ache at the smothering and confinement – the unwilling stillness—the 'waiting close'? Whose head is not dizzy at the possible speculations of Satan in the serpent prison? No passage of poetry ever can give a greater pain of suffocation.'*

Satan is incarnated and 'imbrute[d]' (l. 166) rather than humanized. His new shape, the 'surging maze', suits him, inwardly as well as outwardly: it looks threatening, but is also devious, hesitant, indirect. And it also suits the cause that has brought him to paradise. His revenge is a complex moil of emotion, that 'Bitter ere long back on itself recoils' (l. 172); just like the knotty uniformity of the coiled snake, 'In labyrinth of many a round self-rolled' (l. 183). Milton's art, like the Christian trope of incarnation, crams everything into nothing, and words themselves multiply their meaning under the pressure.

AO2 Use of Paradox;  
Milton as 'fantasist'

## Prelapsarian v. Postlapsarian

In his study *Milton's Grand Style* (1963), probably the finest work on the subject ever written, Christopher Ricks is particularly responsive to the way the poet allows 'fallen' and 'unfallen' meanings of a word to jostle together, immeasurably increasing the imaginative scope of particular scenes. For instance in Book 4 the four rivers of paradise are described as meandering with 'mazy error' (4, 239). But how do perfect rivers fall into error? A commentator explains: 'Here, before the Fall, the word error argues, from its original meaning, for the order in irregularity, for the rightness in wandering, before the concept of error is introduced into man's world.' So the river remains perfect; it is our knowledge, as fallen readers, of later events that disconcert us as its 'errant' course is described. When Milton's narrative moves on into Book 9 the semantic stakes are higher, so his drawing attention to fallen and unfallen meanings of the same word draws our attention to nothing less than the overarching plot and theme of the Epic poem we are reading. The effect is to find our imagination nudged from opposite directions simultaneously, as if we had done a double take. A few examples will have to suffice here. A simple one is the way Milton refuses to call the snake 'innocent' even before Satan enters him. Instead he chooses to stress the fallen root of the word, 'nocent' ['harmful'], of which the 'unfallen' counterpart, 'innocent', is merely a kind of frail denial. So the snake is not 'innocent', but, much more ominously, 'nor nocent yet' (l. 186). A second example is when, on Adam and Eve's first appearance at l. 205, we are told of the 'luxurious' and 'wanton' growth of the plants of paradise their unfallen labour strives to keep pace with by means of astute pruning. But because we know the story, and because we, too, are subject to 'the mortal sin /Original' (IX,1003-04) we cannot help but hear ominous pre-echoes behind both adjectives.

As Ricks points out, 'before the fall 'luxurious' is a harmless horticultural word; but its fallen meaning jostles against it here.' Likewise, and more ominously, 'wanton', for in this case the unfallen meaning suggests an absence of discipline, the fallen meaning sexual promiscuity. Another example of this jostling of innocent with less innocent meaning comes when our first parents part at line 385. In the innocent world 'from her husband's hand her hand / Soft she withdrew' means that her hand was delicate and incapable of guile; but on the edge of the Fall the same line has a faint mixed suggestion of frailty and deceit, much as the adverb and adjective (the meaning is both 'soft' and 'softly') mingle in Milton's impressionistic grammar. Immediately Eve is compared with a 'wood-nymph light,/Oread or Dryad'. The unfallen sense is to celebrate the delicacy and charm of the Pastoral World. But think of Eve's 'soft' insidiousness for a moment and the fallen meaning is predominant, with the Oreads and Dryads reduced to available eye-candy, the pagan Pastoral they have strayed in from suddenly suspicious and our first mother a 'light woman' on the cusp of catastrophe. Finally, note how on opposite sides of the Fall the most familiar words, such as 'wound', complicate their meaning. In Book 8, before the Fall, 'wound' is a creative word, Adam the male mother rejoicing at how quickly his birth scars healed when Eve was brought forth from his side, though 'wide was the wound' (8,467). By the climax of Book 9, however, the 'wound' made by original sin is more terrible, more destructive, and more generally felt ('earth felt the wound'). This breach never heals for the rest of human history.

AO2 Close Reading

## 'The Last Reward of Consummated Scholarship': Oscar Wilde on Milton

All his life Milton had been more content in the virtual world of books and argument than in the outer world of human event, so much so that in his Epic, Johnson jibed, the 'want of human interest is always felt. . . The man and woman who act and suffer, are in a state which no other man or woman can ever know.' That is a typical Johnsonian misrepresentation: Book 9, as we have seen, offers an intimate novelistic drama of conjugal tension and attraction. But in a larger sense the blind poet had indeed turned away from human power-struggles, contemplating what Michael describes to Adam at the conclusion of the poem as 'The Paradise Within' (12, 587). More than ever he viewed first and last things as cosmic abstractions, not human experiences; more than ever he viewed human tribulation through what Dryden called 'the spectacles of books.'

It is often suggested that because Milton was blind he used words more intensely and evocatively than other writers, that he was less preoccupied with the look of words on the page, or even with their exact grammatical correspondences. Instead he focused on the evocative and impressionistic power of language, composing orally, in the watches of the night, depending on an amanuensis to write everything down, sometimes so crammed with the fluid of composition by morning that he begged to be 'milked'. This is not to say that his verbal effects are vague or emptily suggestive. Milton had accumulated a lifetime of scholarship, and could not help but think rigorously. But it does mean Milton's mature style in *Paradise Lost* takes huge risks.

AO2 Milton's style

## Milton's Style 1: Seeing Smells

Smells, more evocative to a blind man than sight, often become visible, or half-visible, in *Paradise Lost*, as with the 'flowering odours' of 5, 294. Dramatic irony functions on a cosmic scale, as when Eve delivers 'fear of death' to the winds (9, 989), only to find Death, whom Milton presents as a kind of carrion-beast, 'drawing the scent' of human mortality a few lines into the next book (10, 267-81) – in other words the image of Eve's careless boast goes straight down his nostrils. Henceforward humanity will be hunted routinely by 'fear of death', not to mention Death itself.

## Milton's Style 2: Punster not Funster

As we have seen already, in Book 9 the fallen meaning of a word frequently overshadows its innocent meaning, forming some of the creepiest puns in the language. Other, more conventional, puns are noteworthy too. At the beginning of the book Milton refers quietly to 'distaste' (l. 9) on the part of Heaven when Adam and Eve 'taste' the forbidden fruit. There is nothing humorous about the quibble; very few of Milton's puns are, or are intended to be, funny. But given that the word 'taste' is used thirty times in Book 9 or *Paradise Lost*, and that the 'mortal taste' of Original Sin is signalled as early as line 2 of Book 1, the pun gains what Christopher Ricks calls 'richly triumphant' thematic force. More intimate and personal is the use of the word 'answerable' in the invocation (l. 21).

Milton is soliciting his Muse, possibly the Holy Spirit, to dictate to him 'answerable' i.e. good enough copy; but he also is straining to hear his 'celestial patroness', and hopes she will 'answer' him. As the Book continues these dry, often grim puns multiply. Satan's 'voluble' flattery of Eve builds up (the word 'voluble' means both 'rolling' and 'talkative', a kind of physical eloquence very well suited to a snake), until Milton calls him the 'wily Adder', stressing the way professional courtiers add compliment to compliment.

## Milton's Style 3: Seeing Smells

If words are used in double senses in *Paradise Lost*, so, more surprisingly, are grammatical structures. Milton is particularly prone to fluid use of pronouns, as if he were so alert to correspondence and juxtaposition of characters he needs to get a double action into a single sentence. Take, for example, the moment when Eve, a fair 'unsupported flower' is described as far from Adam, her 'best prop' (ll. 432-33). In the next line 'nearer he drew' to Eve's exquisite fragility. For a heartrending second the loose pronoun 'he' seems to apply to Adam; then, obviously and devastatingly, we realise the primary referent is the fatal serpent.

## Milton's Style 4: Epic Simile

A more obvious stylistic effect is the Epic simile, used to impair or exalt issues and characters in unexpected ways. With Milton's eyesight, and therefore sense of the visual in imagery 'depressed', he concentrates on the intellectual impact of similitude. Note the way Satan's impure designs on Eve are highlighted by the innocent motives of the traveller with whom he is compared, turning from the 'populous city' to a Pastoral landscape (9, 445-57), or the way the triumphant description of his leading the traveller out of his way in the simile which begins at l. 935 falls flat when we realise he has taken the form of a noxious and chilly cloud of methane gas. The most dramatic effects of Milton's scholarship develop slowly, as different parts of the reader's mind and memory become engaged. He begins with a list of classical referents, at first glance showy and pedantic. Only by stages do deeper imaginative connections form. Take the list of classical maidens at 9, 503-10, all of whom turn out to have been undone by their supremely relevant bestial congress with Gods disguised as serpents.

Or the description in the invocation of 'stern Achilles' pursuing Hector thrice about Troy wall (l. 16), which just about lodges in the reader's imagination an idea of Satan (who is making his way to earth) pursuing mankind. The idea of pursuit, though, hardens in the splendid vision of Satan chasing the fringe of night for seven nights to remain in his native element, the dark (ll 62-66); and the sense of the chase ending and the quarry nigh emerges when he goes to earth 'in every bush and brake' (l. 160) looking for his serpent refuge. And backing all these suggestions of successful pursuit and capture are earlier Epic similes in which Satan took the role of pursuer, such as that splendid moment of mythology from Book 2: 'As when a Gryphon through the wilderness/ With wingéd course over hill and moory dale/ Pursues the Arimaspians' (2, 943-45).

In his study *Milton's Grand Style* (1963), probably the finest work on the subject ever written, Christopher Ricks is particularly responsive to the way the poet allows 'fal



## Free Will to Know Thyself: The Greatest of Freedoms

In *Areopagitica*, Milton's great defence of the concept of a free press, there is a long passage defending God from the charge that He put temptation (both Eve and apple) in the way of Adam. Milton argues that Adam was free to choose or reject an object that appealed to his sensuous desires. It was not up to God, like some celestial Puritan, to banish the object of temptation from His creatures' sight. The senses have their charms, and appeals to them are always with us: 'And who shall silence all the airs and madrigals that whisper softness in chambers?' Even Satan is left free to be enchanted by the naked beauty of Eve: for him it amounted to a kind of inverse temptation, leaving him for a moment 'stupidly good' (9, 465). If Satan was free to love God's creation and obey his decrees, however momentarily, it followed that Man had to be so too, free to follow or overturn the decrees God had enacted, to rebel or to obey.

And, as Adam belatedly concludes in Book 12, the whole point of the poem, in Eden and throughout subsequent human history, is to discern, not to be tormented into admitting, that 'to obey is best' (12, 561). Thus Eve, as C.S. Lewis demonstrates in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, fell, like Satan himself before her, of her own free will, through appeals to her personal pride. 'The serpent,' Lewis reminds us, 'tells her first that she is very beautiful (9, 532-41) . . . she ought to be adored and served by angels: she would be queen of heaven if all had their rights (9, 542-48).' The freedom of conscience to do one's duty with dignity and humility, avoiding an exaggerated or obsessive sense of self-worth, is possibly the great legacy of Milton's career as poet, patriot and politician, and the need for us to make free, inspired choices, as its poet does continually, is lodged at the heart of his masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*.

AO4 Intellectual context

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