

John Milton

John Milton (1608 - 1674) stands firmly apart from the main flow of literary history. The scale of *Paradise Lost* and the other late works, as well as the difficulties involved in reading the prose works or the Latin poems, and the rather austere qualities of the earlier poems, all make his work challenging to read. At a time when political and feminist readings of older literature are so popular, it is ironic that Milton seems to have been too directly involved in political activities and the discussion of theoretical and ideological issues for his writings to offer intriguing subtexts. He always stands above his would-be commentators, undoubtedly one of the very greatest figures England ever produced, almost completely alone.

The tradition that produced Milton was the European Christian humanistic one; he has been called “the last Renaissance Man” although the 18th century Augustans also share renaissance ideals. Milton had an encyclopedic vision. From early childhood he read everything he could find in every discipline and in every language: he could read every modern European tongue, as well as Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He knew the Bible by heart and was a convinced but unconventional Protestant.

His father was also called John; he wrote legal documents, arranged sales of land, and composed music. He had accumulated a large enough fortune for his son not to have to worry about earning a living. The poet was born in London’s Cheapside, and after St Paul’s School he went to Christ’s College, Cambridge, where he gained his Master’s degree in 1632.

On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity

Milton’s first major poem, *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* (often called “The Nativity Ode”) was composed for Christmas 1629, when he had just turned twenty-one. For Milton, it seems to have marked his birth as a mature poet. In it the characteristic tone and turn of phrase that have come to be known as “Miltonic” are already very clearly present from the opening lines:

This is the month, and this the happy morn
Wherein the son of Heaven’s eternal King
Of wedded maid and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring...

The poem is in two parts, an introductory invocation of four seven-line stanzas, followed by twenty-seven eight-line stanzas in a more lyric metre, designated as “The Hymn” itself. In the invocation, Milton dramatically distances himself from the actual poem, in a way he later used at the start of *Paradise Lost*. The first two stanzas summarize the generally accepted Christian understanding of what happened at Christmas; in the first, the stress is on Christ’s Redemption of humanity, in the second it is on his Incarnation (God becoming man).

Many of Milton’s early poems are “occasional” works, either for some private occasion, such as the death of Henry King for “Lycidas”, or for a special date in the Christian year as here. In the third stanza, the speaking voice turns away from itself:

Say, heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,

To welcome him to his new abode?

Milton suggests that the poetic “present” he is looking for will not be his own composition but God’s own. In the night he “sees” the Three Wise Men setting out in quest of the new-born child (their arrival is celebrated on January 6) and insists;

O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
 And join thy voice unto the angel choir,
From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

“Prevent” here means “go before” and suggests a sense of urgency. This inspired lyric must reach Christ before any foreign voices can arrive. One major characteristic of Milton’s vision is his sense of a special vocation for England in God’s plan, and for himself as the one who must speak in England with a poetic voice given directly by God. The notion of poetry as an utterance “inspired” by a divine power or Muse is an ancient one, familiar in Greece; for Milton, however, as for the Protestant writers of the 16th century such as Sidney or Spenser, the Christian poet’s inspiration came by the Holy Spirit who, as the Nicean Creed always reminded them, “spoke by the prophets”.

In this first major poem, then, Milton is already aware of the prophetic nature of the poetry he hopes to write. God will speak to England in this manner, through him. Milton’s view of the place of poetry in society is the highest possible one, just at a time when most of English society is turning its back on poetry altogether.

The Hymn itself is a remarkable work in many ways. Much critical comment has stressed the almost complete absence of attention to the Baby and Mother central to most accounts of Christmas. After several stanzas celebrating, in sometimes rather exalted conceits, the cosmic response to the birth of Christ, the poem introduces the song of the angels heard by the shepherds in St Luke’s Gospel. It seems that the poem serves as an echo now on earth to this heavenly song.

The song of the Christmas angels reminds Milton of the song they sung at the Creation. Passing from biblical to classical cosmology, Milton invokes the “music of the spheres”. This is not a matter of past record but of future anticipation:

Ring out, ye crystal spheres,
Once bless our human ears
 (If ye have power to touch our senses so)

Any music produced by the turning of the nine spheres will combine with the singing of the angels, nature and heaven in total harmony. This is for Milton an image that can only be realized at the end of the world. He continues to think into the future (stanza 14):

For if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
 Time will run back and fetch the age of gold;
And speckled Vanity
Will sicken and die,
 And leprous Sin will melt from earthly mold,
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

The power of natural and heavenly poetry and music combined is apocalyptic, it brings in the Kingdom of God. The first step is the defeat of sin, death, and hell; then will come the Victory (stanza 15):

Yea, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
 Th'enameled arras of the rainbow wearing,
And Mercy set between,
Throned in celestial sheen,
 With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering;
And Heaven, as at some festival,
Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall.

Milton seems never to have doubted that the Kingdom of God would happen on earth; in later writings he expressed "mortalist" ideas--he believed that the entire person dies at death and that on the last day God will bring those who are saved back to everlasting life here on earth. Here he already suggests that he hopes that his poetry will help bring about the visible reign of God. His later political and social writing (the main form of his activity) was driven by a strong expectation that with the abolition of the old false forms of society (kings, bishops, lords) in England God would reveal his Kingdom there in a miraculous way that would bring all the rest of the world to follow. The "age of gold" for Milton is not the old Greek idea but at least the original state of humanity before the Fall.

The poem returns from future hope to present reality: "But wisest Fate says no, / This must not yet be so" (lines 149-50). Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, the beginning of Christian history and not the end. Instead of a final song heralding the end of history, Milton introduces a silence, that of the pagan oracles that were said to have lost their power of speech when Jesus was born: "The oracles are dumb; / No voice or hideous hum / Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving" (lines 173-5). The following stanzas travel across the ancient world, with its many "false gods" now struck dumb by the birth of the Child in Bethlehem. Yet it would seem that at the same time as he is indicating the emptiness of the old pagan religions, Milton is also thinking of the emptiness he found in the traditional Catholic forms of worship still being followed by the Church of England.

The poem ends expectantly, still in the night, "And all about the courtly stable / Bright-harnessed angels sit in order serviceable" (lines 243-4). The coming of Christ does not mean the end of work; for Milton the great question of his life was always how he could best serve God. Like the angels, he was always ready for service.

L'Allegro and Il Penseroso

Milton probably wrote the parallel poems "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" while still at Cambridge, in 1631. Again, he is writing poetry about the possible ways in which poetry (or what we know as "literature") may be written and received in society. Each of the two poems begin with ten lines of intricately rhymed (*abbacddeec*) introduction in alternating six- and ten-syllable lines before settling into tetrameter couplets. Each begins with the dismissive word "Hence" banishing Melancholy and Mirth respectively, and end with an echo of Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd" and Raleigh's "Nymph's Reply" affirming the choice of the opposite quality: "These delights if thou canst give, / Mirth, with thee I mean to live" (*L'Allegro* lines 151-2) contrasting with "These pleasures, Melancholy, give, / And I with

thee will choose to live” (*Il Penseroso* lines 175-6). The qualities celebrated in both poems are alluring, the choice is a difficult one.

The contents of the two poems involve celebrations of two modes of living, writing, or responding to life. Both employ a highly positive tone, so that much critical debate has centred on whether Milton intends the reader to prefer one or the other and on whether he himself made the choice. In part, the debate is the old one between pleasure and instruction in poetry, but it goes far beyond the conventional duality. Both poems use imagery of day and night, the first stressing daytime activities rather more than the second, but a good part of the events reported in both hovers somewhere in twilight, as if to prevent too obvious a dualism.

L’Allegro is especially marked by echoes from Shakespeare, especially earlier plays (twelve, including four from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for a total of fourteen echoes of Shakespeare); *Il Penseroso* has only five echoes from Shakespeare, three of them from *Romeo and Juliet*. There are many references to classical mythology in both, as well as to English folklore. At the start of *L’Allegro* Milton follows the example of Marlowe and invents a new myth for the origin of Mirth, making her the child of Zephyr (the west wind) and Aurora (the dawn), begotten in May “on beds of violets blue, / And fresh-blown roses washed in dew” (lines 21-2).

The atmosphere in the first poem is jovial and festive, full of the freshness of morning and springtime. After a journey through rural landscapes, *L’Allegro* turns to the fairy tales simple peasants tell around the fireside, passing from there into dreams of medieval romance, and the comedies of Jonson or Shakespeare. The poem ends with the witty aspiration to a music so refined that it can raise Orpheus from the dead and would have persuaded Pluto to let Eurydice go completely.

Early in *L’Allegro*, Milton adopts a wooing tone; Mirth come accompanied by Sport and Laughter:

And in thy right hand lead with thee
The mountain nymph, sweet Liberty;
And if I give thee honor due,
Mirth, admit me of thy crew
To live with her and live with thee
In unproved pleasures free...

(lines 35-40)

In these lines the mention of “unproved pleasures free” suggests a degree of libertinism that was already implied in Marlowe’s poem and is part of the permissive, flirtatious way of life permeating *L’Allegro*.

The contents of *Il Penseroso* are in clear contrast; again Milton invents a new myth for the birth of Melancholy. She becomes the daughter of Vesta (a virgin goddess!) and Saturn (who is associated with darkness and the “saturnine” temperament). She is called “pensive nun” (line 31), her companions are Peace, Quiet, and Fast, retired Leisure, Contemplation, and Silence.

Where the pleasures of Mirth are communal and popular, the activities associated with Melancholy are depicted as solitary and demanding a sophisticated sensibility. The central picture of the solitary night-time wanderer underlies all the poetry of “pre-Romantic” sensibility written in the 18th century, beginning with the striking silence of the nightingale:

I woo to hear thy evensong;
And missing thee, I walk unseen
On the dry smooth-shaven green,

To behold the wandering moon,
Riding near her highest noon,
Like one that had been led astray
Through the heaven's wide pathless way;
And oft as if her head she bowed,
Stooping through a fleecy cloud.
Oft on a plat of rising ground
I hear the far-off curfew sound
Over some wide-watered shore,
Swinging slow with sullen roar;

(lines 64-76)

Part of the power of this poem is Milton's almost prophetic realization that in the future, the poet would be considered a special kind of person, acutely sensitive to nature and selfhood, alienated from normal society, while in *L'Allegro* there is a picture of a society permeated with natural poetry to the point that it seems to need no special poets at all.

If all in *L'Allegro* is game, all in *Il Penseroso* is thought. After evoking the spirits of the great pagan masters of mystical insight, Hermes Trismegistus and Plato, the poem introduces Greek tragedy, Musaeus, and Orpheus who here has no need of a rewritten myth. A great leap in time brings us to a mention of Chaucer's incomplete "Squire's Tale" and Spenser's "Faerie Queene". This melancholy poet flees the brightness of day, hiding in forest shades, far from woodcutters, falling asleep and dreaming. The last section alone brings us into an aspect of society, with its evocation of the college chapels of Cambridge, perhaps King's College in particular:

There let the pealing organ blow
To the full-voiced choir below,
In service high and anthems clear,
As may with sweetness through mine ear
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before my eyes.

(lines 161-6)

The culminating moments (lines 167-74) are again set in solitude, using the Catholic imagery of a "peaceful hermitage / The hairy gown and mossy cell" as a life leading at last to some privileged insight: "Till old experience do attain / To something like prophetic strain."

In these two poems, Milton outlines without resolution the alternatives confronting poetry in his time and perhaps in his own life. Should the poet write what will please and entertain society or should he first seek another way of living and seeing, withdrawing from ordinary life into an *otium* similar to that praised by the Humanists?

Comus

Milton's great problem was knowing what to do with his prodigious talents. He was convinced that God wanted him to be a poet; he in turn wanted to devote his life to God, but not in the structures of the national Church of England (Anglican Church) with its very authoritarian style of government by bishops appointed by the king. While he was waiting for his future course to become clear, he left Cambridge in 1632 and went to live at his father's

country house at Horton in Buckinghamshire. There he continued to read intensively for another six years.

In 1634 Milton's pastoral drama *Comus* was produced at Ludlow Castle; it was written at the request of his friend Henry Lawes for the celebrations marking the appointment of the earl of Bridgewater as Lord Lieutenant of Wales. Lawes wrote the music and the earl's three children, to whom Lawes was music teacher, played the roles of the Lady and her brothers. It was published anonymously in 1637, with the title "A Masque presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634". This musical entertainment has been mainly admired for the quality of some of its poetry, which is evidently much influenced by Shakespeare, as well as Spenser.

The Lady gets lost in a forest as night falls and falls into the hands of Comus, a mythical figure invented by Milton, the son of Bacchus and Circe, who has a magic potion that turns the faces of people who drink it into those of wild animals. The main conflict in the play involves the threat Comus poses to the Lady's chastity, and the power her virgin purity gives the Lady. Much of the text is a kind of debate between Comus and the Lady about the value of virginity. The Lady's brothers, led by the spirit Thyrsis, break in and Comus escapes, leaving the Lady imprisoned in a magic chair. Thyrsis invokes Sabrina, the spirit of the river Severn (that divides England and Wales) and she frees the Lady. The children are brought to Ludlow and restored to their (real) parents.

Part of the work's social message has to do with the power given to words by inner purity. Society is full of threats to honesty and innocence, something that Milton clearly thinks children should learn while still young. There is also a continuation of the debate between Mirth and Melancholy expressed by *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, Comus being the advocate for Mirth and carnal pleasure. Yet it is Comus who responds so sensitively to the Lady's song:

Can any mortal mixture of earth's mould
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
And with these raptures moves the vocal air
To testify his hidden residence;
How sweetly did they float upon the wings
Of silence, through the empty-vaulted night
At every fall smoothing the raven down
Of darkness till it smiled...

(lines 243-251)

Lycidas

In 1637 Milton wrote the elegy *Lycidas* in memory of Edward King who had also been a student at Cambridge and who died when the ship he was going to Ireland on struck a rock and sank. This poem was published in a collection of tributes to King in 1638. It is not sure that King and Milton were close friends; the poem mentions that King wrote poetry and was preparing to become a minister (pastor) in the church. Much of the poem seems to dwell on the possibility of combining poetry and service of God, which was Milton's great concern; there is nothing suggesting direct personal grief. Of considerable formal complexity and offering some much-debated difficulties, *Lycidas* is generally recognized as one of the "great English poems" although it has none of the charm of, say, Keats's Odes.

The poem is remarkable for its use of pastoral conventions, rooted as it is in Theocritus, Virgil, and Spenser, as well as the Italian pastoralists. The most immediate echo is probably Spenser's satirical eclogues in the *Shepherd's Calendar* where the pastoral

mode veils clear reference to the abuses of power among the church's current pastors. In the 1645 edition of Milton's poems, a phrase to this effect was added at the head of the poem: "And by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy then in their height".

Lycidas has three climaxes, in which a question is answered. The first question comes after the speaker has linked Lycidas's drowning to the death of Orpheus (line 60). Neither of them found any supernatural help from spirits or muses when they were in danger. What is the use, then, of being a poet?

Alas! What boots it with incessant care
To tend the homely lighted shepherd's trade,
And strictly meditate the thankless Muse?

(lines 64-6)

The poet tries to answer his own question: "Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise" (line 70) but objects that death comes just when fame seems near at last. Then comes a reply from Phoebus Apollo; Fame is not mortal reputation but the eternal judgement of Jove (God): "As he pronounces lastly on each deed, / Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed" (lines 83-4). This transforms the reasons for writing and establishes the poet's work as subject to divine, not human, evaluation.

The laments for the incomprehensible loss of so promising a figure continue until St Peter admits that he too would rather have seen other, false shepherds die. He develops this into an evocation of the corrupt pastors in the church (suggested by Jesus's description in John 10) and concludes with a threat that no commentator has fully explained:

But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more

(lines 130-1)

After this sombre moment, the poem returns to pastoral conventions with a famous catalogue of flowers. Only these flowers should be destined "to strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies" and there is no body to bury since he was lost at sea. The poet's imagination pictures the dead man's remains swept northwards to the Hebrides or southwards to Cornwall. This is answered by the poet himself in terms both conventional in elegy and true to Christian faith: "Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more, / For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead" (lines 165-6). This expands into a picture of Lycidas among the joyful songs of heaven while on earth "the shepherds weep no more" and trust that Lycidas will help those who sail the seas.

The poem's ending reserves a surprise, for the last eight lines are spoken in another voice, that of the person assumed to have recorded the elegy: "Thus sang the uncouth swain to th'oaks and rills" (line 186). Milton dramatically distances himself from the pastoral voice he has been using; the lines that follow suggest the passing of a day;

At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

(lines 193-4)

The colour blue is associated with hope and the last line has puzzled commentators; is this the "uncouth swain" speaking of his future, or is it Milton? Certainly, there is the feeling that another day will follow this one and that life goes on. It is ironic that after these lines,

Milton was to write only one other poem, also an elegy, before almost entirely giving up poetry in favour of prose during the Civil War.

The Civil War and the Commonwealth

From 1637 to 1639 Milton travelled in Europe, meeting other noted humanists such as Galileo. Hearing of the approaching conflicts of the Civil War, he returned home. From that moment the only poems he wrote for many years were a few sonnets, and occasional poems in Latin or Italian. All his energies went into writing polemical pamphlets. In 1645 his collected poems were published, like those of so many other poets, by Humphrey Moseley. Milton was by that time a whole-hearted supporter of radical republicanism and it is strange to think that his poems were almost certainly published as an expression of nostalgic royalist support. Many of Milton's early poems are addressed to members of the nobility, their style is lofty and intellectual, and at least in *Il Penseroso* he evokes a style of worship much closer to the ideals of Laud than to the simple forms favoured by the Puritans.

Milton had come to the conviction that a truly Christian society was composed on a basis of freedom and equality; he was a republican and opposed monarchy as a form of government. During the first years of the Civil War he fought against the Royalists with his pen, writing short pamphlets in which he argued for a church without bishops. These were designed to reach a wide public and were written in a rough, aggressive style.

With his intense love of individual freedom, Milton was deeply troubled when the seventeen year old girl he married in 1642 (he was thirty-three) went home to her parents after a few weeks and refused to come back to him. Between 1643 and 1645, he published several pamphlets arguing in favour of divorce when two people found themselves in a marriage without union of minds. In 1645 however, they were reconciled and they had three daughters before her death in 1652. Milton's arguments in favour of divorce provoked great outrage, perhaps because marriage was rarely seen as a union of minds, and they gave him the reputation of being a dangerous radical since even those who wanted to change the structures of Church and State could not accept any challenge to the basic family unit.

Other important prose works by Milton include *Of Education* and *Aeropagitica*, both published in 1644. This latter was provoked by an parliamentary order of 1643 designed to permit the publication of a work only if it had been approved and was published by a licensed press. Milton pleads strongly in favour of freedom of expression, arguing that censorship was the hallmark of the Popes and kings that the Commonwealth detested.

The *Tractate of Education* was addressed to Samuel Hartlib, a German exile living in England. In publishing this work, Milton showed his sympathy for the millenarian campaign being waged by Hartlib and others in favour of Bacon's "Great Instauration" in the belief that by striving to attain greater knowledge, people could reverse the result of Adam's Fall and help bring about the second Coming of Christ. Milton expressed his main idea very simply: "The end... of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright".

After the execution of Charles I, Milton published tracts in favour of a republican form of society and became the Latin secretary to the new Council of State. His skills in writing Latin made him invaluable for correspondence with the rulers of Europe who wanted to know how a king could be executed. Many of his writings were so powerfully radical that they were condemned and burnt in France.

In the mid-1640s, Milton realized that his sight was growing weak, in part at least because of his endless reading. By 1652 he was completely blind. This gave rise to his most famous sonnet, that "On his Blindness", written while he was still struggling to accept this

terrible curse for a man whose main activity for God and his country involved reading and writing:

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
“Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?”
I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Milton was assisted as Latin secretary by assistants, the last of whom was Andrew Marvell. Cromwell died suddenly in 1658 and there was some confusion as to what should be done. There was no funeral for over two months. When the great official celebration was at last held, the officials of the administration walked in procession through London, with Milton and Marvell accompanied by a younger man who had recently joined their office, John Dryden, as “the secretaries of the French and Latin tongues”.

Milton continued to support the republican “Good Old Cause” to the end, publishing a final pamphlet in support of it in 1660. Inevitably, when the Restoration came he was imprisoned for a time, but he was soon released, reportedly thanks to the efforts of Marvell and others, although he had to pay a fine and most of his property was confiscated. The Commonwealth’s collapse meant the failure of the social and religious dream he had worked for. His second wife died in 1658 and in 1663 he married for the third time. The rest of his life was devoted to the composition of the three great works: *Paradise Lost* (1667 & 1674), *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* (1671). In 1673 there appeared a second edition of his *Poems*. He died in 1674.

Paradise Lost

Milton’s vision of poetry was essentially that which he received through the Italian tradition, that had already deeply influenced French and English poets such as Ronsard and the Pléiade in France, or Spenser. In this tradition, rooted in the classics, the highest form of poetic expression was the epic and a country could only claim artistic maturity if it had produced an acclaimed epic. Milton knew that if he was to be the great British poet God seemed to intend, he would have to write an epic, since Spenser had failed to complete the *Faerie Queene*. For a time he imagined that it would be a national British epic, perhaps about King Arthur. Milton originally (in about 1640) seems to have intended to use the subject matter of *Paradise Lost*, the Fall of Adam, for a tragedy.

Nobody knows when Milton decided to write his epic on the Fall of Man, instead of on the glories of Britain under God, but it seems likely that it was only when he realized that the Commonwealth had failed. It is hard to imagine Milton’s disappointment when human

pride and ambitions frustrated his dream of seeing the reign of God on earth, yet he did not lose his hope in God's Providence. Instead, he set out to show that even sin was a part of God's plan for humanity, and that the Fall leads towards an eternal promise of life. Human history, he seems to say, full of pain and death though it is, has meaning for those who know what God has in store for those who trust in him. The epic mingles tragic and comic perspectives, which has been a problem for critical purists. There is even much debate as to whether its ultimate meaning is pessimistic or optimistic.

Starting perhaps in 1658, Milton began to dictate his great poem to secretaries. Nothing is known of the details of its composition, for example whether Milton composed it from beginning to end as it now stands. He often composed the day's section mentally during the night, somewhere between sleeping and waking probably. It seems that often the poem almost wrote itself and Milton felt that God was guiding him.

The style of *Paradise Lost* has usually been criticized for its power rather than for its failings. Milton had read all the great European epics and chose to write in a high style often heavily marked by Latin. He develops many visual passages of great power, the poem's landscapes are frequently grandiose. Yet the enterprise was a daunting one, in many senses impossible, since Milton has to use words and images to portray the unspeakable and unimaginable. At the heart of the poem, and probably its greatest problem, is the representation of God. Milton's God has very often been criticized for seeming less than loving.

Milton knew very well that we cannot know God as God is, but only as God allows us to conceive of God with our fallen and severely limited human minds. (since the Eternal has no gender, it is today considered improper to use "he" or "she" of God, which is very awkward; Milton's "God" is the "Father" of the traditional Christian Trinity and may nonetheless therefore sometimes be referred to as "He"). Milton's God is therefore not to be seen as a failed picture of God, but as a precise picture of how people and the Bible have spoken of God. To become aware of the unsatisfactory aspects of this picture is not to find a weakness in Milton's art but to sense that God as God is other than anything humans can know. Similarly, Christians believe that Heaven has neither dimensions as we know them nor time as we know it, and that angels have no shape, locality, or history in our sense. Milton knows this, and expects his readers to feel the contradiction in his use of heroic conventions to describe the unimaginable War in Heaven.

In its final form, *Paradise Lost* tells the familiar story of the creation and fall of Adam and Eve in its second half, starting with book seven. The first half of the poem tells a story that is barely hinted at in the Bible. According to this ancient tale, that originated in the Middle East and was already current in Jewish circles before the birth of Jesus, Satan (the name means Adversary) was created by God to be the greatest of all angels, God's very special partner in love. His name then was Lucifer (Light-bearer, also the name of the "morning star"). In the instant of his coming into being, Satan was, like every angel, given the freedom to choose to accept God's love. Love cannot, by definition, impose itself on another person by force. Only Satan was so much "like God" that he chose to know no other than himself. He became the "rebel angel" and gathering part of Heaven's angelic host about him he waged war against God.

Modern thought is so accustomed to the idea of God's absolute omnipotence that we can hardly deal with the idea of a real struggle against him. In the Middle East, though, the nations were accustomed to the idea of clusters of gods ruling different parts of the universe and there were many tales of enmity and battles between the gods. In Old Testament times, the temple in Jerusalem celebrated the worship of YHWH as the Lord of Israel but its walls also sheltered shrines of other gods. The victory of monotheism in Israel was never assured and the concept of the absolute nature of God was always threatened.

According to the mythical tale of Satan, there was a great battle (reflected in the Apocalyptic battle described in the New Testament book of Revelation 12:7) which God and his army won by ejecting the rebel forces from Heaven. As in Greece, beings like angels were considered to be invulnerable and immortal so that not even God could abolish them. The fall of Satan and his angels ended when they arrived in the lowest point possible, which later cosmology came to turn “Hell”. In Israel, the myth continued by showing God looking around his half-empty Heaven and deciding to create Humanity as an experiment in the hope that, if all went well, human beings would finally prove worthy to occupy the place of the fallen angels. Satan could no longer confront God directly, so he decided to continue the struggle against him by trying to turn the newly-created human beings into rebels like himself. It is from this tale that comes the interpretation of Genesis by which the snake who causes Eve to eat the fruit is seen as Satan in disguise.

Milton’s intention in writing *Paradise Lost* was to give epic form to his own understanding of what it means to be human. Human life, for him, is given by God and is destined to be lived in obedience to God’s commands; ultimately, after human history has run its course, God will raise to a life of eternal happiness all who have served him. Milton was a radical Protestant, but not a “fundamentalist”. He was convinced that the Bible was God’s revelation of himself but that each human person had to come to an understanding of the sense of the words by thinking about what they mean.

Milton’s Latin text *De doctrina christiana* shows that he was often far from conventional Protestant ideas. In particular, Milton believed that the human person could not be divided into separate body and soul, as the Greeks and most Christians did. Milton knew that the Hebrew word for “soul” meant “(God-given) breath” and he believed that human life ceased when breathing stopped. He thought that eternal life would start on the last day when God raised the dead to life by giving them breath again. This position was known as “mortalism” and by it Milton avoided the problem of explaining what happens to the soul after the death of the body.

Milton’s greatest difference from other Protestants, who mostly followed Calvin and Augustine in believing that the Fall had corrupted human nature so utterly that no one could do anything good. Milton detested this doctrine of “absolute depravity”. He considered, with the Greeks, that although people were weak and found virtue hard, still there was always the possibility of using our powers of reason to see correctly what is right and our will to do it.

Milton’s vision of the place of the individual in human society was dominated by a fierce concern for individual freedom. He was convinced that Adam and Eve before the Fall had been free and happy. They lived in harmony with Nature, which was in turn totally harmonious and knew no cycles of growth and decay. In the Garden God gave them, Adam and Eve could enjoy total freedom because they were completely bound by the laws of Reason. Milton did not believe that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil had any magic powers; he thought that God had forbidden Adam and Eve to eat its fruit merely as a kind of test of their readiness to obey him, a token of their freedom. When they disobeyed God’s command, they followed their passions instead of their reason. That was the Fall. The tree of the “knowledge of good and evil” was so called because, after disobeying God’s command, Adam and Eve were in a state where they knew the good they had lost and the evil they had gained.

Milton was convinced that humanity needed to know both good and evil in order to become truly free. The Fall was something terrible, but potentially wonderful; after it comes the development of human history, culminating in Christ’s Redemption of a wiser humanity. Milton did not think we could know how or why the cosmos itself lost its primal perfection after Adam’s sin.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of *Paradise Lost* is the power of its overall structure. When he first published the poem, in 1667, Milton divided the poem into ten books of varying length, books seven and ten being much longer than the rest. He perhaps thought of the work as being comprised of two five-act dramas, while ten is also a symbolic number (1+2+3+4). Virgil's *Aeneid* has twelve books, though, and in the second edition (1674) Milton divided books seven and ten into two books each to bring the total to twelve. The summary of the contents placed at the start of the books dates from the second edition.

Paradise Lost is clearly divided into two halves, six books each in the second edition. Each half then can be subdivided by its contents into three sets of two books:

The poem starts with its most well-known portion, the initial invocation of the Spirit-muse and the exposition of the theme of the entire work in a dramatic question-and-answer which seems to suggest that the entire poem is the Spirit's reply to Milton's initial question about "the cause" of human society's and the cosmos's corruptions:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing heavenly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of chaos: or if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss
And madst it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

Say first, for heaven hides nothing from thy view
Nor the deep tract of hell, say first what cause
Moved our grand parents in that happy state,
Favoured of heaven so highly, to fall off
From their creator, and transgress his will
For one restraint, lord of the world besides?
The infernal serpent; he it was...

(Book I line 1-34)

Books 1 and 2 are centred on Satan. The poem begins, as tradition requires, *in medias res* with Satan and his fellows lying on the floor of Hell. The hall of Pandemonium rises and they gather in assembly round Satan, their manipulative dictator. In Book 2, after a debate on continuing resistance to God, in which Satan strikes poses of rebel hero, he sets out to find the newly-created world. At the gates of Hell he finds the figures Sin and Death; Sin says that Death is her son and that Satan is his father. Satan journeys through Chaos and arrives at the world.

Books 3 and 4 form a strong contrast. Book 3 is set in Heaven; the Father tells the Son what will happen to Adam and Eve as a result of Satan's journey. The Son freely offers to give his own life for the redemption of their sin. Meanwhile Satan is trying to find where Adam and Eve are living. In Book 4 Satan slips into Paradise disguised as a bird. The angels detect his presence and arrest him while he is trying to tempt the sleeping Eve, now reduced to the shape of a toad.

Book 5 introduces Adam and Eve in their perfect but slightly precarious harmony. God sends the archangel Raphael to warn them of the approaching danger. While Eve cuts fruit for their meal, Raphael starts to describe to Adam in suitably adapted heroic style how Satan rebelled, created an opposition party and easily fooled a host of angels by his seeming sincerity.

In **Book 6**, Raphael's tale continues: there is open warfare in epic mode; the hosts of God's angels are led by Michael and Gabriel. The first day's battle is inconclusive; on the second day, Satan's army invents heavy artillery but the guns are buried by God's angels under uprooted mountains. On the third day, the Son himself comes out to battle as Messiah and by his unique power drives the rebels straight through the wall of heaven.

The two halves hinge around the division between books 6 and 7, the fall of Satan in book 6 being followed in **Book 7** by Raphael's story (from Genesis) of the six days of creation by the Son who then returns to Heaven. They reach the point in the story where Adam is already created. In **Book 8**, Adam shows his human nature by taking over the story-telling from Raphael and plying him with questions about the mechanics of the cosmos. Raphael discourages too much scientific curiosity. The creation of Eve to be Adam's "fit companion" is described by Adam, who tells how they fell in love at a moment when Eve was in danger of falling in love with her own reflection in a pond. Raphael warns Adam and Eve again of the danger Satan represents, then withdraws.

The climax of the story comes in **Books 9 and 10**. Satan takes the shape of the serpent, tempts Eve while she is working away from Adam, she eats. Hearing what has happened, Adam is horrified. He recalls God's "you shall surely die" and decides he would rather die with her than live alone again. He eats and they are both overcome by liberated sexual passion of a degenerate kind that leads to discord. In book 10 the Son comes to judge them and give them clothes. Sin and Death create a highway linking earth and Hell while Satan returns to Pandemonium to tell of his success. All the inhabitants of Hell are turned into serpents eating ashes. The cosmos itself is corrupted as a result of humanity's Fall, although God in heaven promises the final victory of good. Adam and Eve consider suicide but Adam begins to use his reason, finds grounds for hope, and they turn towards God in prayer.

The final two books, **Books 11 and 12**, are oriented towards the future. The Son prays to the Father for Adam and Eve; his prayers are accepted. Adam and Eve must leave Paradise and live out in the harsh world. Michael is sent to tell them of their exile. Michael tells Adam of the future consequences of the Fall, as portrayed in the early chapters of Genesis, with the murder of Abel, the corruptions that follow, until God decides to send the flood to destroy humanity. Adam is appalled. Book 12 turns from disaster to hope, with the call of Abraham and his obedience to God. Michael tells Adam all the history of Israel, constantly wavering

between obedience and sin, until one woman, Mary, says yes to God and the Son is born. The life and death of Jesus are reported, and the continuing work of salvation in the Christian Church with the same alternations of disaster and hope until finally the Last Day brings the Return and final victory of the Son. Adam is comforted. Eve, who has been asleep, dreams similar things and together they set out to begin human society's history:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

(Book 12 lines 645-9)

Books 1 and 3, 7 and 9 each begin with an invocation to the muse who, in book 7, is named "Urania"--not one of the classical muses but a figure used in the Reformation times to refer to the inspiring Spirit of Christian poetry. These invocations divide each half of the poem into sections of two books followed by four, a significant pattern of harmony as well as indicating the proper proportion between reason and concupiscence according to Pico.

At the same time, the last book of the first half and the first of the second are marked by a double triumph of the Son; he drives the rebels from Heaven, then he creates the world. We see him mounting his chariot in book 6 lines 760-3:

He in celestial panoply all armed
Of radiant urim, work divinely wrought,
Ascended, at his right hand victory
Sat, eagle-winged...

It is no coincidence that in the first edition of the poem the exact half-way point in terms of line-count fell between "wrought" and "ascended". Similarly, though ambiguously opposite in content, the second half of the second edition in terms of books-count begins "Descend"!

The reception of *Paradise Lost* is a long story in itself. In many ways the work was a challenge. The choice of a biblical theme was criticized by Dryden, for example. Yet the greatness of the work was quickly recognized. The first edition, for which Milton received ten pounds, sold well over one thousand copies. The second edition, the final text, continued to be published after Milton's death.

In the coming Age of Reason, Milton's poem might appeal because of its reasonableness. Milton was not much interested in the laws of universal mechanics that were the dominant interest of the scientific age, he never chose between the old earth-centred system and the new sun-centred one, but he did consider that Christian belief, based on the Bible, was in accordance with the demands of reason. Milton wanted to know and express in words the truth, as much as any other seventeenth or eighteenth century philosopher.

Milton was writing in an age that had largely lost the ability to take seriously the old myths of Greece and Rome, or even to use them in metaphorical ways. He benefits from this, since his subject matter is still universally recognized as true and treated with the deepest respect, even though many of the details of the Bible, the Old Testament in particular, were already beginning to be found unacceptable to a modern enlightened sensibility.

One of the most influential writers in the elevation of *Paradise Lost* to the rank of a great classic was Joseph Addison (1672-1719) who wrote a long series of articles centred on *Paradise Lost* in the Saturday issues of *The Spectator*, starting in January 1712. He compares

the poem to the great classical epics and applies Aristotle's criteria, to show that Milton's work is in effect superior to the old epics, in part at least because it is Christian and therefore "true" in ways their pagan mythologies could not be.

Later in the century, Dr. Johnson published a well-known essay on Milton's works in 1779 in which he spends a long time on the excellence of *Paradise Lost*:

Here is a full display of the united force of study and genius; of a great accumulation of materials, with judgement to digest and fancy to combine them: Milton was able to select from nature or from story, from ancient fable or from modern science, whatever could illustrate or adorn his thoughts. An accumulation of knowledge impregnated his mind, fermented by study and exalted by imagination.

His main complaint is that the poem has "neither human actions nor human manners" since all happens in Heaven, in Hell, or in Paradise where Adam and Eve "are in a state which no other man or woman can ever know".

Dr. Johnson was blunt enough to add a celebrated comment with which many have had to agree:

But original deficiency cannot be supplied. The want of human interest is always felt. *Paradise Lost* is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions.

The history of reactions to *Paradise Lost* is one of admiration and rejection.

Paradise Regained and *Samson Agonistes*

In 1671 Milton published *Paradise Regained*, an epic poem in four books intended to form a sequel to *Paradise Lost*. As Adam and Eve lost Paradise because of Satan's temptation, so Christ is able to restore it by resisting Satan's temptations. The poem relates in a restrained manner the story of Christ's triple temptation found in St. Matthew's Gospel. The political and cultural temptations to which Milton and his readers might have been exposed are present in the background. The Satan figure is here all cunning and pretence, with nothing of the heroic dimensions he claims in *Paradise Lost*. The final message seems to be that the Christian must remain hidden, away from society and its false pleasures, away from the ambitions of the world. *Paradise Regained* has never enjoyed any of the prestige of *Paradise Lost* and it rarely read or studied for its own sake.

Samson Agonistes was published in the same volume as *Paradise Regained* but critics cannot agree fully on its dating. It contains sections in rhyme, whereas Milton in the first edition of *Paradise Lost* had included a comment hostile to rhyme. There may be grounds for dating the tragedy to the late 1640s and the early 1650s, the time when Milton was slowly going blind. There are some stylistic similarities with *Comus*. It is a classical tragedy written mostly in blank verse, a closet drama for reading never intended to be played. The classical unities of plot, time, and place are strictly observed in its portrayal of the last moments in the life of Samson, the heroic Old Testament figure from the book of Judges who was betrayed by Dalila.

The word *Agonistes* means “champion, wrestler” and it may be related to St. Paul’s image of the Christian life as a race where all strive to win the prize. Samson was famed for his strength, the gift of Israel’s God, that he lost when Dalila cut off his hair as he slept. The action of *Samson Agonistes* begins when he is already the blinded prisoner of the Philistines:

O glorious strength
 Put to the labour of a beast, debased
 Lower than bond-slave! Promise was that I
 Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;
 Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
 Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,
 Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke;
 Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt
 Divine prediction...

(lines 36-44)

Many critics have seen in Samson’s situation a parallel with that of Milton in Restoration society, but if the play was in fact complete by 1654 that would be a sentimental misreading. It is equally possible to see the parallel between Samson and Milton in their blindness, still a subject of bitterness expressed in an intensely pathetic language that seems almost to echo that of *King Lear*

O loss of sight, of thee I must complain! 67
 Blind among enemies, O worse than chains,
 Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!
 Light the prime work of God to me is extinct, 70
 And all her various objects of delight
 Annulled, which might in part my grief have eased,
 Inferior to the vilest now become
 Of man or worm; the vilest here excel me,
 They creep, yet see, I in dark exposed
 To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,
 Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
 In power of others, never in my own;
 Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, 80
 Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
 Without all hope of day!

The play’s Chorus is composed of members of Samson’s tribe of Dan who come to visit him. Then comes his father. He laments Samson’s fall and blames God; Samson corrects him, insisting it is all his own fault. He tells of Dalila and the apparent triumph of the Philistine god Dagon, but promises that soon Dagon will be overwhelmed by Israel’s God. His father wants to ransom Samson but he tells him not to bother, he deserves to suffer. He seems inclined to despair of life. The Chorus meditates on the ways of God:

God of our fathers, what is man!
 That thou towards him with hand so various,
 Or might I say contrarious,
 Temper’st thy providence through his short course,

Not evenly, as thou rul'st
The angelic orders and inferior creatures mute,
Irrational and brute. *(lines 667-73)*

The tone suddenly becomes lyrical with the appearance of Dalila; there seems to be a faint echo of Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra on the river of Cydnus (*Anthony and Cleopatra* II ii 191-218):

But who is this, what thing of sea or land?
Female of sex it seems,
That so bedecked, ornate, and gay,
Like a stately ship
Of Tarsus, bound for th'isles
Of Javan or Gadire
With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,
Sails filled, and streamers waving,
Courtied by all the winds that hold them play,
An amber scent of odorous perfume
Her harbinger, a damsel train behind
(lines 710-721)

Dalila laments his sufferings and seems eager to help him but Samson rejects her offers as hypocrisy and temptation and finally she turns away from him, congratulating herself on what she has done for her people. The Chorus mediates in an anti-feminist mode on the difficulties of marriage.

A Philistinian champion, Harapha, comes and engages Samson in dispute, refusing the physical combat that Samson demands. After this, Samson is summoned to appear at the feast of Dagon but he refuses to celebrate any foreign god. Then he has second thoughts, as the idea of his final act comes to him. Much critical discussion has centred on Samson's self-destructive victory over the Philistines, as to whether it is suicide or not, a heroic victory or a last desperate act.

After Samson has gone, his father comes back, still hopeful of buying his release. There is a great shout, followed by a terrible groan, and the messenger of classical tragedy brings a report of Samson's last moments as he pulls down the theatre on the heads of the leading Philistines. This leads to a formal lament of great lyric power in which Samson's fame is compared to the phoenix:

So virtue given for lost,
Depressed and overthrown, as seemed,
Like that self-begotten bird
In the Arabian woods embossed,
That no second knows or third,
And lay erewhile a holocaust,
From out her ashy womb now teemed,
Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
When most unactive deemed,
And though her body die, her fame survives,
A secular bird ages of lives.
(lines 1697-1707)

In the drama there are many lines that query the justice of life under God's supposed providence, but the Chorus's conclusion is that such anxiety comes from human passion:

All is best, though we oft doubt,
What the unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.
Oft he seems to hide his face,
But unexpectedly returns
And to his faithful champion hath in place
Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns
And all that band them to resist
His uncontrollable intent,
His servants he with new acquit
Of true experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismissed.
And calm of mind all passion spent.

(lines 1745-58)

Further Reading

John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems, edited by John Carey. Longman, 1968, 1971.

John Milton: *Paradise Lost*, edited by Alastair Fowler. Longman, 1968, 1971.

The Cambridge Companion to Milton, edited by Dennis Danielson. Cambridge University Press, 1989.