

Lecture on Milton's *Paradise Lost* Ian Johnston (1998)

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A. Introduction

In starting any discussion of *Paradise Lost*, we must first acknowledge that this is a massive and highly contested work. It is, for modern students, very difficult to read, and it does not take much experience of critical responses to this poem to discover that it has generated continuing fierce disputes about almost all aspects of the poem. One of the main reasons for studying it here is that even a cursory exploration of some of the interpretative problems and proposed answers is, as in the case of *Hamlet*, enormously rewarding to anyone wishing to develop literary critical skills.

I should begin, too, by saying that much of my understanding of this strange work has been decisively shaped by one of the most interesting works of literary criticism ever written in English, William Empson's *Milton's God*. While I will certainly be discussing other views of the poem, I shall be returning repeatedly to certain questions Empson raises and exploring in some detail a few of his responses to these questions. I am doing this in order to encourage students who are going on to further work in English literature to acquaint themselves with this work of literary criticism. I hope also to indicate some of the reasons why I find Empson's account so persuasive.

B. *Paradise Lost* As an Epic Poem

Before plunging into the controversies surrounding this poem, we should note that *Paradise Lost* is an epic, the great Protestant epic poem in English. Milton is deliberately attempting to write what for him and countless other poets is acknowledged as the highest challenge to poetic genius and which will, if he is successful, enable him to take his place with the great epic poets of all times: Homer, Virgil, and Dante.

An epic poem is characteristically a long narrative which, following the tradition established by Homer, is written in twelve or twenty-four books. Its epic quality comes from the scope which the work sets out for itself. Typically epic poems are all-encompassing cultural visions, with a huge scope which explores all aspects of a particular moment of civilization. Such poems explore big questions: the vision of an entire society, the relationship between human beings and the divine, the essential qualities which establish and perpetuate a certain moral vision of

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life, the historical framework and future destiny of a nation, and so on. Thus, epics are more than just stories; they are celebrations of what makes a particular culture what it is. For the ancient Greeks, at least until the rise of philosophy, Homer's epics were the source of all the knowledge that mattered most; for the Romans, Virgil provided the vision of how they saw themselves. Dante's *Divine Comedy* has long been considered the greatest poetic celebration of his own late medieval culture.

Now, what's curious about epics is that they are often written after the passing of the civilization which they are holding up for our inspection; they are, as one writer (whose name escapes me) has remarked, "celebrations of a culture at the moment of its passing away." Homer's poems are about a civilization hundreds of years previously; Virgil's celebration of Roman virtues comes just as the republican values which made Rome great were transforming themselves into imperial power. By Dante's time, the forces which were to overthrow his vision of the world were already gaining momentum. And Milton's great poem is written after the failure of the Protestant experiment in republican government, the Commonwealth established by Oliver Cromwell, which after Cromwell's death quickly fell apart so that the monarchy, which Cromwell had ended by executing Charles I, had to be restored. Now old and blind and in disrepute (for he had been Cromwell's secretary and an active participant in the great republican experiment), Milton poured his imagination into a vision of the nobility of the religion he so passionately fought for.

Writers of poetic epics, with one eye on Homer and Virgil, commonly use a set of conventions first established in the *Iliad*. The structure usually plunges the reader into the middle of the story, and the style of narration relies heavily on dramatic interchanges, set speeches. Typically epics will consciously rely upon allusions to or borrowings from other famous epics and will recreate in their own way many of the famous events from Homer and Virgil (e.g., the war in heaven). By tradition, epics aim at a certain nobility and gravity in their language. And this has a direct effect on the style (for example, in the long Homeric similes). Hence to set out to write an epic, as Milton does, is to have to deal with a set of conventions. Part of the pleasure of reading such a poem can be the recognition of the poet's skill in making allusions to earlier poems or in adapting famous incidents to his own purposes.

There is no doubt that Milton is very self-consciously using the material of earlier epics, and there is equally no doubt that he wants the reader to appreciate his enormous learning, the vast extent of his reading in more than a dozen languages, and the skill he has in summoning up various allusions or direct references to classical mythology and literature, the Bible, all sorts of Church documents, and so on. Milton is the first author we are reading who has had access to and has read an enormous amount of printed material from classical and Christian sources. He is also the first major author we read who wrote

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primarily to be read rather than heard (a point Christopher Ricks makes in his analysis of Milton's style).

However, the first important literary critical point we need to establish here is that following conventions well does not therefore convey literary merit. The test of the poet is to bring the conventions alive, to reinvigorate them, perhaps even to transform them. Merely following an established convention or merely making frequent reference to Homer or Virgil does not automatically confer quality. And the mere fact that a particular event is a famous incident in an earlier poem is no justification for a later treatment of it if the later poet uses that event but presents it badly. In other words, no appeal to earlier conventions justifies botching the job of writing poetry, or, in Dr. Johnson's much more pithy phrase: no precedents justify absurdity. This point I shall be coming back to repeatedly with reference to Milton, whose incorporation of material from other works is often excessively laboured (like the lists of allusions to famous monsters) or downright silly (like the war in heaven, where all the combatants are immortal, or the mention of angels' sex lives).

C. Milton as a Protestant

Above I have referred to this poem as the great Protestant epic, and Milton is the first great Protestant writer we encounter in this course. By this I do not mean that Milton is the first writer who was a Protestant in his religion, but rather he is the first great writer we meet who puts his Protestant religion right at the centre of his poetic imagination. Since we are going to be spending a good deal of time on this poem and since we are going on to read the most famous and influential prose work in the Protestant tradition, *Pilgrim's Progress*, it might be appropriate here to say a few things about what this term Protestant means. This is a highly complex issue which I cannot avoid misrepresenting in such a short discussion. But I would like to make some key point about it.

The term Protestant is immediately associated with the term the Reformation (the two words often occur together in the phrase the Protestant Reformation). This was an attempt launched by Martin Luther in the early sixteenth century to rid the Roman Catholic Church of some of the flagrant abuses which he and others perceived in the hierarchy and in the practice of the Roman Catholic religion. Luther, who was an Augustinian monk, demanded a return to what he perceived as a much truer vision of Christian life based on the Bible and an immediate end to the economic abuses of the clergy (of the sort we encounter in Chaucer's *General Prologue*). Luther was unsuccessful in launching a reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church, and he was excommunicated early in the sixteenth century. This launched a decisive split within the unity of Christian Europe, so that now there were two rival camps, the Roman Catholics and the break away Protestants.

It is important to note that the Roman Catholic Church had, from its earliest beginnings, been subject to large internal strains between those who wished to foster the Church's growing prestige, political power, and wealth and those who saw the essence of Christianity as a spiritual discipline which renounced earthly powers and devoted itself to contemplation or service. The growing wealth, power, and extravagance of the Papacy (to say nothing of its often scandalous political behaviour) had launched repeated reform movements for centuries.

Typically the Roman Catholic authorities had dealt with pressures for reform in one of two ways: they made adjustments to the Church in order to accommodate the demands of the reformers (for example, by creating the mendicant orders of monks and friars for those who wished to dedicate their Christian lives to contemplation or to service, especially among the urban poor) or they had resorted to often harsh discipline, when the reformers proved adamant (e.g., some heretical movements). But the key principle for all the decisions of the Roman Catholic Church was that to be a Christian one had to be a member of the Church: as the traditional saying established, *ex ecclesio nulla salvatio* [no salvation outside the Church]. To be a devout Christian, one followed what the Church had established as appropriate behaviour, and one referred to the Church authorities any and all disputes over religious matters.

Luther was by no means the first to challenge the authority of the Papacy and the Roman Catholic hierarchy, but he was the first to succeed in breaking the power of that hierarchy in matters of faith. He succeeded where others failed for three key reasons: first, he was an uncommonly brilliant, courageous, and stubborn adversary; second, he had the incalculable assistance of printing, so that his views could not be regionally isolated and dealt with but could spread almost instantly; and third, he had strong secular support from some political rulers who were alarmed at the economic drain caused by so much money being siphoned off southward to Rome for the expensive projects of the Papacy (like the building of St. Peter's). The immediate cause of Luther's movement was the sale, by officials licensed from the Vatican, of indulgences (i.e., days off purgatory) for money. The greed of this practice disgusted Luther, and the cost to the local economy alarmed the secular princes.

The break with Rome launched one of the bloodiest wars in European history (the Thirty Years' War, from 1618 to 1648) in which Catholic princes sought to re-impose Catholicism on the break away states and the Protestants fought amongst themselves for which of them had the one true version of an alternative to Rome. After some of the most devastating military campaigns Europe had ever seen (which left large parts of Europe, especially in Germany, totally destroyed), peace was concluded, with no clear winners and losers, and the principle was adopted throughout Western Europe that the ruler of any particular region would determine the religion of the people (the *cuius regio eius religio* principle). The period we call the Enlightenment which followed marked the

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beginning of a turning away from religion as the basis for European life. Since people no longer agreed about religious matters and there was no authority to rule on disputed questions, the search was on for a new authority in reason and science.

The Protestants, however, were by no means united in anything other than two things: hostility to the Roman Catholics (especially to the insistence that the Church must determine all matters of faith), and the belief that Christianity was essentially a matter of an individual relationship between the believer and God. The only crucial material needed in this relationship was the holy text of the revealed word of God. Hence, Protestants really stressed the importance of translating and printing the Bible, distributing it as widely as possible, and justifying one's religion with constant references to it (rather than to any prescriptions from a Church hierarchy). The key concept in Protestantism (which is going to be such a marked feature of Pilgrim's Progress) is "grace," the free gift of God to the believer. Grace, according to Luther, comes only from one thing: from faith. It does not come from good works and certainly not from any external form of obedience to a particular church.

Attaining a state of grace is a radically individual experience which cannot be guaranteed. The only appropriate way to attain it is constantly to pray for it and to live all one's life awaiting some sign that one has achieved it. The spiritual life thus becomes a constant act of inward will, driving oneself forward in hopes of attaining grace and shunning anything that might get in the way (like physical pleasures or too many consumer goods). This is in marked contrast to the vision of religious values we get in Chaucer's General Prologue, where the emphasis is all on public virtues (i.e., our dealings with others). The ideal characters there are celebrated for their good works.

A prominent group of Protestants took this concept of divinely given grace to its logical extreme in the doctrine of predestination. Since there are no restraints on God and since He is omniscient, then everyone is predestined to receive grace or not to receive it, and thus to enter heaven or hell, no matter what they do in this life. This became the central claim of the Calvinists, a particularly stern and well disciplined version of Protestantism developed by Jean Calvin; Calvinism established a theocratic state in Geneva and developed a strong foothold in Scotland and (later) in North America.

There were literally hundreds of versions of Protestantism; sects multiplied over matters of scriptural interpretation and levels of authority, and wars were fought over questions of whether the communion wafer was the body of Christ or represented the body of Christ. As the Roman Catholics had long predicted, if once the one true Church lost its control over matters of doctrine and people were left to interpret the Bible as they saw fit, people would no longer agree and would kill each other over their disagreements.

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Broadly speaking, in England three general groups of Protestants emerged, and one needs to keep these in mind as an important background to English literature from now on. First, there were the Anglicans. These were the most conservative Protestants. The Anglican Church was a political creation of Queen Elizabeth which kept most of the Roman Catholic liturgy and hierarchy, but which adopted Luther's theology. The Anglican Church has thus never been a grass roots, fire-and-brimstone, passionately popular version of Protestantism; it has been, by contrast, as the saying has it, "The Tory Party at prayer." It was made the official religion of the country, and anyone who wished to enter university or a licensed profession or (in some cases) get married, had to formally subscribe to Anglican doctrine.

Queen Elizabeth created the Anglican Church to keep at bay, not just the Roman Catholics, but the radical Protestants. At the extremes, Protestantism was extremely dangerous politically largely because of its extreme insistence on individualism. It takes no great leap of imagination to see that once one has overthrown the authority of the Church in religious matters, one can easily move to wanting to overthrow the authority of the traditional political hierarchies in political matters. And so radical Protestantism spawned a number of highly charged, fiercely democratic, egalitarian, and often communal sects--the Anabaptists, the Fifth Monarchy Men, the Diggers, the Baptists, and so on. These often enjoyed strong popular support and were constantly getting in trouble with the authorities, who were only too happy to break with Rome but who wanted no such manifestations of religious individualism creeping into political life. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Methodists were the largest body of organized opinion in England, and the authorities were rightly alarmed at the enthusiastic following the Methodist preachers attracted. A really significant point in English political history is that the Methodists had no radical political agenda (although the authorities were not sure about that); if they had been as revolutionary as some of their Protestant brethren, the French Revolution might well have caught fire in England. Even Cromwell, the leader of the Protestant revolution in England, treated the radical fringe of the Protestant movement very sternly (although he used their energies to win his battles). Cromwell might be a Protestant, but he was also a gentleman and a landowner, and he had little patience with the extreme democratic yearnings of many of his followers.

Between the Anglicans and the radical Protestants stood a very significant group generally called the Puritans (the non-Anglican Protestants were commonly called the Dissenters). This group was particularly prominent among the business classes, largely because (it has been argued) their version of Protestantism saw success in business (i.e., making money) as one sign of God's favour. The Puritans were, in general, law abiding, but often hostile to the traditional structure of authority based on titles and land ownership. They welcomed reform and innovations in science and business. In effect, they formed

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a powerful nucleus for what was to become the Whig (or Liberal) party in the eighteenth century. The traditional authorities viewed them with suspicion and banned them from higher education and many professions (e.g., medicine). Puritans were, especially in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, harassed and discriminated against. The Pilgrims who came over on the Mayflower were Puritans who felt so persecuted in England that they wanted to put the Atlantic Ocean between them and the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Puritans went on to create one of the most formidable wealth generating groups the world has ever seen, the early capitalists. Because their faith demanded untiring efforts in work, sanctioned profit making as a sign of one's spiritual success, and yet denied the religious person the right to spend the profit on himself, the Puritans created astonishingly successful business men, who worked constantly and reinvested all their amazing profits into the business, adapting themselves quickly to accelerating changes in technology and always emphasizing the importance of practical education. These are the people who had more to do with the successful exportation of English culture to North America than anything else, and they were absolutely decisive in the development of Canada as a nation. For a powerful sense of the union between Puritan faith and money, you cannot do better than read the great classic by Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*.

Milton associated himself closely with the Puritan cause led by Oliver Cromwell, under whom he held an official post as Latin Secretary. In many ways, Milton was a tireless Protestant, constantly attacking all versions of unjust authority, not just in religion. He advocated liberalizing restrictions on speech and wrote one of the first great tracts on divorce. He turned his anger against the attempts of Protestants to establish new structures of authority. Again and again in a number of writings Milton demonstrated that he was a tireless champion of liberty from unfair domination in matters most important to human life: in faith and politics. Once the monarchy was restored, Milton was in considerable danger for his life, given that his superior, Cromwell, had executed Charles I. But the intervention of other poets and his own rapidly deteriorating condition spared him. It may be (and some have suggested this point) that in *Paradise Lost* we can feel the weight of his massive disappointment with the return of all those ancient authorities he had spent his lifetime combating. In a sense, we might view this poem as Milton's attempt to reveal to the English reader what the Protestant revolution, which they have evidently betrayed, is all about.

This brief review is all too short and unsatisfactory. But any student of English literature needs to be aware of the significance of the Protestant Reformation and of some of its varieties, because the Protestant vision of life now becomes an important feature of imaginative writing--not simply in the works of those who make it central to their vision of life (like Milton, Bunyan, and Defoe) but also to

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those who take time to stand up against it, who see it as a threat to the joys of life (as Shakespeare does in *Twelfth Night* or *Measure for Measure* and Dickens does repeatedly). An excellent place to start your exploration of Protestantism in its various manifestations is Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, one of the justly famous classic texts in the history of ideas.

D. The Critical Debate over *Paradise Lost*: Some General Comments

The arguments about *Paradise Lost* commonly begin by focusing on two aspects of the poem: first, the poetic style and, second, the handling of the story (including the nature of the main characters and the development of doctrine).

Hostile critics (especially F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot) argue that Milton's language is so artificially employed to develop an impressive sound and to display Milton's learning that the sense is constantly corrupted and the language becomes inert and frequently unintelligible. Milton's poem may often sound impressive, especially if one reads with only half attention, but upon intelligent analysis the style breaks down into a repetitive thumping rhythm and an often incomprehensible structure.

In arguing this point, such hostile critics commonly point to three stylistic features. First, the syntax (i.e., sentence structure) is extremely convoluted, incomplete, awkward, and confusing. Whatever language Milton thought in, he does not write (or dictate, since he dictated this poem to his daughters to transcribe) in clear, vivid, English. Second, Milton's language is excessively Latinized; he seems oblivious to common English usage and often confuses the reader with words which are either quite unfamiliar or which have primary meanings he clearly does not intend (e.g., in a famous example, Eve's use of the word "manuring" to refer to manual work, Milton seems oblivious to the possibility that readers will associate this word with a more common meaning and start imagining Adam and Eve spreading natural fertilizer on the plants in Eden). In addition the language is extraordinarily pedantic, unnecessarily scholarly. Finally, his poetical techniques are monotonous, often filled with irrelevant and exhausting figures of speech and scholarly allusions, with a complete lack of subtlety in his images, and so on. One of Eliot's comments is well known and worth quoting here:

The most important fact about Milton, for my purpose, is his blindness. . . . Had Milton been a man of very keen senses--I mean of all the five senses--his blindness would not have mattered so much. But for a man whose sensuousness, such as it was, had been withered early by book learning, and whose gifts were naturally aural, it mattered a great deal. . . . Milton's images do not give this sense of particularity, nor are the separate words developed in significance. His language is . . . artificial and conventional. . . . Thus it is not so unfair, as it might at first appear, to say that Milton writes English like a dead

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language. . . . To extract everything possible from *Paradise Lost*, it would seem necessary to read it in two different ways, first solely for the sound, and second for the sense.

Furthermore, the hostile critics maintain (especially A. J. Waldock in his book *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*) Milton has botched the story. He has (for one reason or another) made Satan and Adam and Eve much more attractive than God. He tries to counteract this effect by telling the reader repeatedly that Satan is really a bad character, but in all Satan's early speeches the readers sense a grandeur and power that contradict the narrator's obvious desires about how we should interpret the story. And Eve and Adam are so sympathetically presented (especially in comparison with God) that in contrast with divine justice, their conduct seems exemplary. In other words, far from justifying the ways of God to man, Milton's poem succeeds only in, at best, showing a paradoxical opposition of the goodness in humanity and the glory and power of God or, at worst, the tyrannical irrationality of a God who can only manifest His glory by lies, torture, and ridicule.

Defenders of the poem have sought to justify Milton's style by offering detailed analysis of subtle poetic techniques (see Ricks in *Milton's Grand Style*) and by holding up felicities of expression missed by the hostile critics. Not all Miltonic similes are irrelevant displays of pedantic scholarship; in fact, many work in complex and significant ways to reinforce the meaning of a passage. Similarly, the frequent references to other texts are not all irrelevant displays of learning but carry important connotations.

Milton's handling of the story has been vigorously defended as well (see, for example, Fish's well-known book *Surprised by Sin*). The paradoxes in the logic are intentional indications of man's inability (as a fallen creature) to comprehend the will of God, a central message of Milton's text. Milton deliberately makes Satan attractive to remind the reader of the seductive appeal of sin, especially pride. And if God seems austere, even harsh, that is because the reader's understanding is faulty. After all, each reader is, like Adam and Eve after the punishment, a fallen creature. Milton's treatment of the story thus succeeds because it forces the reader to recognize the primary need for unquestioning faith.

E. Some Initial Interpretative Considerations: Will and Imagination

How is one to negotiate all these claims and counter-claims? Is it possible to get some initially useful orientation on this poem? Well, here are a few points to think about:

So far as Milton's style is concerned, it seems fair to claim that some parts of the poem are better than others. A good deal of *Paradise Lost* (most of the poem, in

fact) is extremely difficult to read with any enjoyment. The style is just too obtuse, strained, pedantic, Latinate, and monotonous. Most student readers firmly endorse Dr. Johnson's comment that no one ever wished this poem longer than it is (some defenders are quick to reply that the reason for that is that the poem is perfect). On the other hand, there are some passages which deservedly rank among the finest dramatic utterances in all English poetry, unmatched for power and imaginative delight.

I would like to propose for your consideration the idea that those moments where the poetry is most alive, most vital and moving, are the most obvious places where the imagination of the writer is most fully engaged. Here he is expressing his deepest sense of his art. In those passages which register as much more laboured and pedestrian, his imagination is not at work (or not to the same extent) and he is writing from his will, with a conscious intentionality.

Let me expand on this idea for a moment. All writers have will and conscious intentions. These often frame the organization and planning of a work (the same is true for all artists, of course). And many artists remain consciously aware and in control of what they are doing throughout the execution of the work. But there are moments in the great artists when something takes over from the will; an imaginative power seizes control of the medium and shapes the work in accordance with no clear plan which the author originally and consciously set down. We call this process artistic inspiration. It has always been a well attested phenomenon, and some of you may have experienced it yourselves (perhaps even in the course of writing an essay for this course).

Now, inspiration of the sort I am talking about is under no conscious control. It is not something that can be summoned up or turned on and off like a tap. Often it arrives unexpectedly and departs just as unexpectedly. And what triggers it is unknown. Artists have for a long time liked to experiment with various experiences or substances which, in their view, might foster inspiration (i.e., bring it under human control), but so far no one has found any formula which will guarantee that.

It is also true that inspiration of this sort does not last. Most of an artist's life and perhaps even most of his work is uninspired. It is routine work (often of a very high technical calibre) carried out with a conscious sense of intention and a deliberate use of particular skills. An artist who sets out on a work hopes, of course, that inspiration will strike (as you do, no doubt, in writing an essay). But whether inspiration comes or not, the work must go on. And so it is not unusual to find in the work of any great artist a considerable range in the quality, from uninspired routinely skilful use of existing conventions to uniquely powerful and moving works of imagination. Nor is it uncommon within a single long work to recognize clearly moments when an interesting but recognizably normal style suddenly transforms itself into something much more exciting, imaginatively

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alive, and profound. If you are looking for evidence of such variety, you need look no further than Shakespeare's sonnets. Some of these are of very poor quality indeed (although they demonstrate a formal skill in sonnet writing); others (the minority) are among the finest poems ever written. The poet is the same; often the subject matter is the same. But it is not difficult to tell which works have been shaped by the imagination working at full potential and which ones have been shaped by the will (no pun intended).

The Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term Parnassian to describe a writer's normal uninspired style in order to distinguish that from the moments when the style becomes transformed by an imaginative power and excitement. Hopkins makes the interesting point that one can recognize a Parnassian style when one reads something which one can easily imitate or parody. A truly imaginative style, however, is unique and beyond parody. One can parody a great deal of Elizabethan sonnet writing, for example, but one cannot parody King Lear with any accuracy.

Hopkins's distinction is a useful analytical method of dealing with all writers of longer works, many (perhaps most) of which consist of a mixture of Parnassian writing and moments of inspiration. A Parnassian style is shaped by the writer's conscious use of his or her skill and may set a high level or may be quite laboured. A writer like, say, Melville in *Moby Dick* or Wordsworth in the *Prelude* writes consciously in a style which is often very pedestrian, even confused and awkward much of the time (a characteristic which makes them very easy to parody). We put up with this uninspired stuff in order to find within it the extraordinary moments when the imagination of the writer suddenly takes wing (as in the birth of the whales or the journey over the Alps). Other writers (like, say, Alexander Pope and Jane Austen) set a normal Parnassian style which is highly skilful and interesting (and much more difficult to parody). Few writers of long works, however, can establish and maintain a full sense of intense imaginative excitement from start to finish (*Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights* or *Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano* might be examples of exceptions to this observation).

I shall not belabour this point further, since I think it is obvious enough (for example, from our experience of being or witnessing performing artists). I do want to make the final point here, however, that the major task of being an artist is preparing oneself for those moments of inspiration. To be a writer is to spend most of one's time writing uninspired prose or poetry, to practice the craft, even though none of it may be worth removing from one's desk drawer. The purpose of such writing is to hone the technical skill so that when inspiration comes, if it ever does, the artist will be ready. As Ezra Pound once observed, a writer might spend an entire life practising for that one moment when inspiration comes. Without the practice, the skill necessary to use that moment of inspiration to create something truly great will not be available. If Melville had not set out to

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write *Moby Dick* and persevered in the task when he was not inspired, we would lack some of the greatest prose ever developed in a novel.

Anyway, I would like to apply this distinction to Milton's poem and propose that where the poetry is really fine Milton's imagination is most fully engaged, his poetical spirit is most fully alive; where, by contrast, the style is boring and flat, Milton's will is doing the work. If we admit this distinction, then we have to admit, I think, that Milton's Parnassian style is really difficult to wade through, for all the reasons the critics hostile to his poem repeatedly cite (and it invites parody, the sure sign of a routine Parnassian text).

And I would like to propose the following as a guide to sorting out some of the complexities of the poem: some of the major difficulties we have in interpreting *Paradise Lost* stem from the fact that Milton's imagination is working against his will; that is, he has conscious intentions about what he wants the poem to do, but his imagination is instinctively rebelling against this intention. If the result is a certain confusion, it is a fascinating confusion well worth our attention. This, if you like, is the central idea behind these lectures (which present my view of this poem).

This (as I shall make clear repeatedly) is by no means an original view of the poem--it has been presented many times. I like it because it takes us away from trying to pass a comprehensive judgment on the entire poem (good or bad) and invites us to see in the shifting quality of the work an intense drama going on within the spirit of the poet himself (as that manifests itself in the text). Since the contrast in quality is such a marked feature of the poem, it seems to me that's a useful place to seek an entry into what is going on.

F. Some Narrative Considerations

Before exploring that contrast in detail, however, I want to call attention to some of the problems associated with Milton's presentation of the narrative. For *Paradise Lost* is, before anything else, a dramatic story in which a cast of characters enacts a dramatic conflict with a beginning, middle, and end. Whatever we have to say about the poem must take this narrative into account.

Now, Milton sets out clearly as his deliberate purpose in this poem the task of justifying the ways of God to man. What does this mean? Well, the key term here is justify. That seems to mean that Milton is declaring in the opening lines his intent to account for, to provide adequate ground for, in short, to render intelligible the ways of God by exploring an old and odd story. If we take that statement of intention seriously (and there's no sense of an ironic purpose at work in the statement), then the narrator of the poem would seem to be indicating that we should emerge from the poem (if it is successful) with a finer acceptance of God's ways.

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Prima facie, there are two obvious ways in which one might seek to justify a set of events: first, one might seek to provide a rational justification, that is, to show that the actions of a particular character are rationally intelligible in terms of reasonable purposes and means, so that, even if we have trouble agreeing with all of the actions, we can see them as a reasonable way to proceed. Second, one might seek to provide an emotional justification, that is, a sense of aesthetic satisfaction in a story. There might be little direct rationality here, but the artistic structure of the story might provide a sense of emotional closure and acceptance (as, for example, at the end of a tragedy like Oedipus the King, which cannot be explained as a reasonable outcome but which makes sense emotionally). There is, if you like, a rational justification and an emotional justification (these are not mutually exclusive of course, but either one will serve).

I wish to argue that Milton fails on both counts. This poem provides neither a rational justification for story of the fall of humanity which might include a reasonable interpretation of God's behaviour or plan nor an aesthetically pleasing account of why God behaves the way he does. On both counts God emerges as quite unacceptable, in spite of the narrator's obvious desire to make Him acceptable. As I have mentioned already, the tension between this deliberate intention and the failure of the poetry to deliver that intention is a source of major interest in the poem. In fact, following Empson, I would like to argue that it is precisely the failure of this poem to deliver on its intentions which makes it still (in spite of the obvious labour it requires to get through) so exciting to read.

I would like to deal with these two methods of justification separately, looking first at how Milton's treatment of the story deals with rational questions we might want to raise and then later at how his treatment of the characters in the story makes any aesthetic justification for God's ways impossible.

G. Justification of God's Ways: Part I

The centre of Milton's narrative is the creation myth of the Israelites as seen through the eyes of a Protestant Christian. In this story, the original paradisaical perfection of human existence is shattered by the disobedience of the first couple, Adam and Eve, to God's express prohibition. As a result of the punishment God metes out for this disobedience, the human beings and their descendants are punished with suffering and death. Hence, the evil in the world exists as a result of human disobedience. Evil is divine punishment for human sin.

How can one provide a rational justification for God's actions in this ancient story? The short answer to that question is that one cannot. It is impossible to provide any sort of reasonable justification which does not end up making God look contradictory and bad. The reason for this is simple: God of Genesis is the

only God, He is omnipotent, and omniscient and the creator of everything. Thus, he is the source of everything and, in the very process of creating man and woman, knows exactly what they are going to do in the future. Any evil we may wish to locate in Adam and Eve and the serpent (or any of the rebellious angels) thus has its origin in God. Hence, God or part of God is the origin of evil. This is an eternal logical puzzle endemic to monotheistic religions: we all know that evil exists in the world; if we believe there is only one God, the creator of everything, then He must have created that evil. How can we reconcile this with a belief that God is good. The short answer is that we cannot. We have to conclude either that God is partly evil or that the entire business is a mystery which cannot be accounted for rationally.

This analysis of the Genesis story is hardly new. One of the major problems with this story is that it makes the explanation of evil very difficult to establish reasonably. Hence, popular Christianity had to invent the devil and raise him almost to the level of God himself. In a dualistic universe, evil can be explained with reference to the bad god or to the conflict between the good and the bad god. Teaching people unable to appreciate the appeal of the mystery what Christianity has to say about the presence of evil in the world has always converted the monotheistic basis of Christianity into a dualistic vision (official Christian doctrine is firmly monotheistic; popular Christianity has always had a strong Manichean element of duality). That has always made Christianity much easier to explain to the masses (hence the Devil is especially prominent in grass roots religion like Roman Catholicism and radical Protestantism). However, the rational difficulties (which do not arise in popular sermonizing) remain.

How does one deal with the impossibility of a rational justification of God's conduct? Well, one way, the one adopted by the ancient Israelites, is to insist that God is an impenetrable mystery and that it is beyond the power of human beings to grasp that mystery. In fact, they are simply duplicating Adam's and Eve's sin when they try. The appropriate response to God is to worship Him without question as a formless mystery. This may be the reason behind the Israelite prohibition on conceiving God in any realizable form: thou shalt not take unto thee any graven image. Some people have suggested that this the line we must take with Milton's poem. For reasons which will be apparent later, I do not think that response is possible.

A second response, the one created by Christian doctrine, is to attach to this story of the fall the story of Jesus from the New Testament and to claim that God's plan does have a benevolent rationality because it includes redemption and a later reunion with God in Heaven. In other words, the existence of evil is only temporary; through the benevolence of God human beings will find paradise again. Thus, the fall becomes, in effect, the fortunate fall.

I am not going to attempt any exploration of these two responses in general. Milton draws on both traditions, and defenders of Milton have appealed to them to make the claim that the poem lives up to its declared intention. In doing this, many critics turn debates about this poem into debates about Christian doctrine. What matters here, however, is not centuries of Christian disputes over these questions but rather Milton's presentation of these ideas within the context of the poem. In other words, when we are dealing, as we are here, with a poem which is discussing ideas, we need to focus on, not the ideas themselves, but on the poetic presentation of them.

H. A Digression: The Problem of "Philosophical" Poetry

I want to really stress this point. In listening to or reading about defenses of this poem by students who are Christians, I often get the feeling that any criticism of Milton's orthodoxy or his justification of God must be an attack on their religious beliefs. Thus, the discussion of the poem can become arguments about the rationality or viability of Christianity in general. It should be clear to you by now that that is quite beside the point. Our concern here is Milton's vision of God in *Paradise Lost*, not the presentation of God in Protestant Christianity. It may well be the case (and I hope it will for some of you be the case) that Milton's treatment of this story piques your curiosity to read further into some of the questions his text raises, but such an exploration beyond the poem in the history of ideas or the philosophical adequacy of Christian doctrine is not our concern here.

Moreover, this presentation of the story is a poem, not a philosophical work. If we choose to ignore the poetic qualities, we can, I suppose, extract a "doctrine" which provides a justification acceptable to some. But we are dealing here with characters in conflict, people who speak to each other (and thus to us), who act from particular motives, and who often suffer harsh consequences. What matters in the evaluation of this poem is the response to the poetry, not the conversion of the poem into something that might pass muster as a reasonable defense of Christianity. Christianity is not on trial in discussion of Milton's poem, but Milton's characters are. To carry out this task we have to attend to the poetry.

The issue of interpreting poetry which presents ideas or which structures itself around what looks like a philosophical argument is important to understand. We can easily be seduced into spending all our time discussing the logical structure of the argument or in seeking to construct prose summaries of it. Now, this is a legitimate process in helping us to understand the content of the poem, but it is no substitute for proper interpretation. Poems are not philosophical arguments, and if we insist on treating them as if that is all they are, then we miss the point of the poetry. What is at stake here is the emotional content of the argument: how does the poem present an emotional response to the argumentative position being staked out? If we don't attend to the poetry, then we are left wondering why someone like Milton didn't just write a prose tract defending his position.

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In any case, in many "philosophical" poems, the philosophical content is very thin. No one would, for example, put Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Wordsworth's *Prelude* or *Paradise Lost* in any course in philosophy. Yes, they present ideas. But the ideas are not presented in a particularly complex or interesting philosophical manner. The treatment of them is, from a philosophical point of view, cursory. On the other hand, these works belong in any list of significant poems, because they take the reader so movingly through the emotional wrestling with and discovery of ideas (as revealed in the language).

What I'm trying to stress here (and those of you who are going on to study the Romantic poets next semester should attend very carefully) is this point: no poem presenting ideas can be adequately interpreted simply by summarizing its philosophical position. As an interpreter, one needs to attend to how the language presents and plays with the ideas, to gather a sense of the emotional tensions within the speaker's or narrator's consciousness. That will be the poetic centre of the work.

I. Justification of God's Ways: Part 2

Now, what is particularly curious about this aspect of the poem (the poetic presentation of a rational justification of God's ways) is that Milton's treatment of it tends significantly to complicate and confuse an already complex and difficult issue. There are places where a character in the poem clearly wants to offer us a rational defense of God's conduct (God himself does this at the opening of Book 3), but the more the poem tries to sort out the complications, the more blatant the contradictions appear (I shall be attending to some of the more important ones shortly). It's as if (to adopt a metaphor from Empson) Milton is determined to work out a solution but the more he wrestles with the issue within his dramatic narrative, the more frustrated he gets because his poem is making the entire fabric of the story even more absurd and irrational and unacceptable than the Genesis account.

Let me cite just a single example. It is the first moment in the poem when, as I read, I get a serious jolt about the curious logic of the story. In itself this moment does not add up to much perhaps, but it initiates an issue which keeps surfacing and is never satisfactorily resolved. This is the passage which describes Satan's moving off to find an appropriate place for himself and his followers now that they have been defeated in their attempts to overthrow God:

So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay,
Chained on the burning lake; nor ever thence
Had risen or heaved his head, but that the will
And high permission of all-ruling Heaven
Left him at large to his own dark designs

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That with reiterated crimes he might
Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
Evil to others, and enraged might see
How all his malice served but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace, and mercy shown
On man by him seduced, but on himself
Treble confusion, wrath, and vengeance poured. (1.209-220)

The problem with this (from a logical point of view) is clear enough: how does one reconcile the goodness, mercy, and justice of God with such a diabolical plan? At the very least, this seems an unnecessarily complicated way of achieving divine ends, and the notion that God is deliberately releasing Satan to commit more evil so that He can punish him further seems to violate some basic principle of rational justice. The reasonableness of God's plan seems very suspect. And these questions multiply as we continue.

Well, if the poem does not deliver a suitable rational justification for God's ways, then what about its aesthetic justification? Does the story carry with it an emotional intelligibility that encourages us to accept God's ways as justified and satisfactory, even if we do not fully understand the reasoning behind them? In order to answer this question, we have to look at the story as a drama involving a cast of characters; we have to weigh each character and assess, as best we can, where our sympathies go and how the particular actions of God and the various reactions to them shape our emotional response to the poem.

If we start to do this, we may make a remarkable discovery. The parts of the poem which are most excitingly alive, which most truly move us, which fully transcend the Parnassian style and deliver the most astonishingly powerful poetry consistently emerge from the mouths of those people defying God: Satan, various rebel angels, Adam, and Eve. By contrast, the poetry describing God, the angels, and the heavenly host is consistently uninspired, flat, Parnassian. A selection of the best poetry from *Paradise Lost* would feature the rebellious characters to the virtual exclusion of all else.

If what I have claimed earlier in the discussion of imagination and will has any merit, this feature of the poem clearly and consistently suggests that Milton's imagination was most fully alive in rebellion against God rather than in worshipful poetic service to Him. As William Blake observed long ago:

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it. (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

The point is made again in a very well-known remark by Shelley, which is worth quoting in full:

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Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in Paradise Lost. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil. . . . Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments. Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged to be a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his god over his devil. And this bold neglect of a direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius. (Defence of Poetry)

What Blake and Shelley are pointing to here presents the single greatest critical challenge of the poem. How do we account for it? Blake's response, that Milton's imagination is on the Devil's side, in opposition to his conscious intention, is a fascinating one and makes sense out of this remarkable difficulty. It is worth exploring further.

We might well ask, "Who is the hero of Paradise Lost? Who, that is, takes the place of Achilles in the Iliad or Odysseus in the Odyssey or Aeneas in the Aeneid? What character holds our attention as engaged in the most intense and important dramatic conflict for the longest period?" Various answers suggest themselves: Satan is clearly the most magnificent character (until he is degraded and turned into a snake); God is the most powerful controlling presence in the poem; Adam and Eve are the human protagonists; and the reader needs to make a heroic effort to finish the poem. Which of them is the central figure? Empson, picking up on Blake's suggestion, makes the intriguing suggestion that the hero of the poem is none of the above: the central character of the greatest interest in the poem is the narrator himself, who spends the entire poem wrestling with the divided nature of his understanding, trying to sort out the deep conflict between his imaginative sympathy for the rebels and his deep abhorrence of God's justice and his willed belief that this story requires God to be just, merciful, and justifiable. What makes the poem fascinating in Empson's view is the moral confusion of a narrator wrestling with questions which he cannot resolve because he is divided between his unconscious imagination and his willed belief:

The recent controversy about the poem . . . has largely been conducted between attackers who find it bad because it makes God bad and defenders who find it all right because it leaves God tolerable, even though Milton is tactless about him. Surely this is an absurd spectacle; the poem is not good in spite of but especially because of its moral confusions, which ought to be clear in your mind when you feel its power. I think it horrible and wonderful; I regard it as like Aztec or Benin sculpture, or to come nearer home the novels of Kafka, and am rather suspicious

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of any critic who claims not to feel anything so obvious. Hence I also expect that most of the attackers would find their minds at rest if they took one step further and adopted the manly and appreciative attitude of Blake and Shelley, who said that the reason why it is so good is that it makes God so bad. (Milton's God 12-13)

J. The Opening Drama

It is possible to argue, and some have argued, that the difficulties Milton is wrestling with are inherent in the story itself. For example, the logical difficulties of dealing with an all-powerful single creator facing rebellious evil which He himself must have created establishes a narrative problem incapable of solution. This may well be true. But what's significant about this poem is that Milton's treatment of those difficulties makes them even greater than in the original story. In other words, rather than offering some resolution (however unsatisfactory) of the problems of God's justice, Milton's treatment exacerbates the problems.

By way of establishing this point, let us look all too briefly at the opening of the poem. In typical epic fashion, *Paradise Lost* begins by plunging the reader into the middle of the story. The rebel angels have been defeated and cast down from Heaven. We first encounter them gathering themselves together after the defeat and seeking to sort out what they are now going to be doing.

If we treat this narrative in the way we treat any other narrative, we start trying to evaluate characters' action and motives and to assess those against the various options they face. Immediately certain questions arise.

First, how much of God's omnipotence, authority, and creative power were the rebel angels aware of before their revolt? If they were under any doubts about these matters (and they genuinely appear to be), then why didn't God make such matters clear to them? And why does He get so vengeful when they do rebel?

Milton is facing a narrative problem here. In order to create the dramatic tension which will make the poem interesting, he has to present the devils as formidable opponents, real threats to cosmic moral order. If they knew of God's power in advance of the rebellion, then fighting God would be stupid. So Milton does not say that. On the other hand, if, in order to impress us with the intelligence, courage, and menace of Satan, Milton indicates, as he does, that Satan and his followers really doubted God's power and authority and thought they had a chance, this bolsters the characters of the rebels (at least they were not stupid) but leads us immediately to wonder about God's character.

Second, given that the rebel angels have made a great mistake in challenging God and have now recognized that, what are they supposed to do? They

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consider various options, including the possibility that if they behave themselves they will be forgiven eventually. Yet we are told that everything they say is inappropriate. Much of what the rebel angels say comes across as perfectly reasonable (especially the speech of Belial, which proposes that they not rock the boat any further and perhaps in time God will ease up his punishment); the only great mistake they make in this assembly is to underestimate the cruelty and irrationality of God. Once Satan determines that the best course of action is to tempt human beings, we are expressly told that he gets away with that plan only because God allows him to do so, and we are then told why God is allowing Satan room to move around: in order to heap more damnation upon himself. We might be able to reconcile God's allowing Satan to provoke the fall of humanity (which He is fully aware of all the time), but there is still a problem (as we shall see) with God's extremely angry response when what He knows will happen and has allowed to happen does, in fact, happen. In a similar way, we might echo the observation that a rebellion in which one third of the senior executives join in fighting the boss indicates some serious problems with the management.

The point is (to repeat what I mentioned a little earlier) that by giving the reader such a close, extended, and dramatic look at the rebel angels discussing what has happened to them and the options they now have, Milton raises the problems latent in the story to the level of major issues which demand an immediate resolution.

One might argue that Milton cannot change the major details of the story which are firmly established in Christian doctrine. Thus, he does not have the freedom to manipulate the main outline of the story as, for example, Homer or Virgil could. That is true. But nevertheless in choosing to open the poem in the rebel parliament and to present us with a full debate over the options, Milton is making the major order of business some very thorny problems of the logic of the narrative (which in a different treatment might have been dealt with, as they are in Genesis, in a way that does not call attention to such difficulties).

Let me clarify this point somewhat: Paradise Lost makes the story of the creation and the fall a clash of particular characters; the dramatic emphasis in the presentation of the story is very pronounced. Now whether this characteristic is due to the influence of the epic models Milton is consciously imitating or not, we cannot help, as readers, dealing with these important Christian stories in terms of the conflict of particular characters. That is how Milton clearly chooses to present it. And with this dimension of the poem, as with others, we can surely say that Milton's treatment raises far more problems than it resolves.

In order to make this point more clear, I would like in the next few sections to consider some of the main characters in this epic and treat them as we would characters in any complex fiction, that is, seek to evaluate them.

K. Satan

These opening questions we have raised above are enormously emphasized by the extraordinarily powerful depiction of Satan himself. The portrait of this character at the opening of *Paradise Lost* is justly famous as containing some of the most inspired epic writing in English (as the quotation from Shelley especially indicates). And what makes Satan so heroic is not the particular situation he is in or any facts about him: his magnificence comes from the inspired verse which Milton puts into his speeches. No one reading these speeches can miss their power and eloquence.

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost: the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?

It is no accident that when Winston Churchill was looking for something to rally the British people after the military disaster of Dunkirk, he used these lines on the radio. There is nothing in English literature to match the heroic determination, power, courage, and energy manifested here and throughout Satan's early speeches. And his followers are appropriately energized:

He spake, and, to confirm his words, out flew
Millions of flaming swords, drawn from the thighs
Of mighty cherubim, the sudden blaze
Far round illumined Hell. Highly they raged
Against the Highest, and fierce with grasped arms,
Clashed on their sounding shields the din of war,
Hurling defiance toward the vault of Heaven. (1.663-669)

What also seems clear (and I really want to stress this point, which I am going to make repeatedly) is that as soon as Satan begins to speak, the narrator of the poem seems to get alarmed at what the poem is doing. The narrator wants to control our response to Satan, to make sure that we don't respond to the magnificent poetry in a manner inappropriate to the willed intentions in the doctrine. This becomes a marked feature of the poem:

So spake th' apostate angel, though in pain,
Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair; (1.125-126)

Here we see an early example of what is to happen repeatedly in the poem: the narrator's attempt to interpret our response to a particular speech. The narrator wants us to take Satan's speech as a "vaunting" or "boasting" piece of hypocrisy; but that's not the way the speech reads. It's as if the narrator is worried here that

the imaginative fiction (the magnificent character he is creating) is running away with the orthodox lines he wants the story to have. As I say, we are going to see this tension between the fictional characters and the narrator again and again in the poem.

Throughout much of the early part of the poem, as we watch Satan launch and carry out his plan to tempt Adam and Eve into sin, he retains this hold on the imagination of the reader: a powerful and complex character seeking to assert his identity against invincible odds, refusing to bow in submission to someone he perceives as a tyrant. Even though we may understand where he fits in the framework of the story, Milton's presentation of him makes it very difficult not to respond to him with some admiration and sympathy. Later in the poem, of course, the treatment of Satan changes. His independence as a heroic character is destroyed, and God turns him and his followers into snakes, an action which seems to violate the integrity of the fiction. It's not that that power to transform Satan is not understandable as falling within God's abilities; it's simply that the story arbitrarily takes away Satan's character with what amounts to a trick. One wonders why God didn't do that at the start.

Of course, we are dealing here in Books 1 and 2 with Satan, and his followers are the rebel angels. We may be impressed in many ways, but we are hearing only one side of the story at this early stage in the poem. And according to the story, Lucifer is a very impressive figure. So at this stage we must feel we are entering a fascinating drama: if Satan is so magnificent in his rebellious defeat, how much greater must God be in his divine victory.

L. God

I would suggest that the first large jolt in this poem comes at the opening of Book 3 when we first encounter God. We are going to be discussing His first speeches in detail in seminar, so I won't go into specifics here. But it is very difficult to avoid the sense, as we read God's speeches carefully, that we are dealing with a harsh egotist whose major interest seems an inadequate defence of His own actions and grim delight in the pain He can now inflict. I find it almost impossible not to agree with Shelley and Blake, that of the two chief characters I meet in this poem early on, Satan is far more admirable than the tyrannical and querulous egoist God.

It's fair to ask, as Milton himself does in the invocation to Book 3, whether it is possible to portray God as a character in a fiction and not invite criticism from some quarter. After all, any portrayal of God in a human form, with an appearance and a speaking voice, is going to invite a evaluative response. That is quite true, and that is probably the reason why the ancient Israelites prohibited any depiction of God and made even his name unpronounceable. They insisted that God is an eternally powerful mystery and must be accepted as such. For the

same reason, Dante gives no direct description of the Almighty, focusing instead on the narrator's reaction to approaching the presence of God. Both of these methods convey the might and majesty of God without inviting us to judge Him.

But Milton chooses to make God a character in the poetic drama. And as soon as he does that, he invites the readers to bring their powers of judgment to bear on the character he is presenting. As Empson observes (in a key critical principle), every character is on trial in a civilized narrative. So if the character of God becomes a problem in *Paradise Lost*, that happens because Milton treats him in a certain way, first, by making him a character, and, second, by presenting him the way he does.

And what is the issue here? Well, briefly put, the major problem, no where more prominent than at the opening of Book 3, is God's tone. He sounds like an irascible, peevish, irrational tyrant, filled with a self-defensiveness that, in a surprising way, makes some of the conclusions the rebel angels had reached about him in the previous books sound at times quite accurate. All of a sudden their desire for rebellion, the possibility that God lured them into rebellion so that He can punish them to satisfy His desire to punish, and their decision to support Satan in his desire to tempt Adam and Eve make a lot more sense. If this is a vision of divine mercy and justice, the figure seems badly flawed.

This problem gets emphasized by the narrative incident in which God calls for a volunteer to suffer crucifixion and death on behalf of mankind, so as to make their redemption possible. Milton presents this matter as high drama: God outlines (with some pleasure, it seems) the pain and sacrifice involved, so that one wonders why He has to resort to such torture in order to demonstrate mercy for human beings. The angels are so horror struck that no volunteer steps forward. This may be designed to make the Son's putting himself forward all the more extraordinary, but, if so, the gesture is dearly bought, because it forces us to match the embarrassing lack of courage and love of the angels against what we have just witnessed, the courage and resolution of the rebel angels.

Again the question here is not necessarily the problems with orthodox Christian doctrine, but with Milton's presentation of it. He wants to look at the story in detail as a dramatic enactment which will make God's justice justifiable. But in giving us the story in this way he raises all sorts of questions that make that justification all the more puzzling. If we don't have trouble with the logic of the crucifixion and the redemption of humanity before we read the poem, it is difficult to avoid them as we work our way through this rendition.

L. Adam and Eve

The difficulties which the opening books of the poem establish reach a climax in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. Again, we will be looking at some of the

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key moments here in the seminars (particularly at Eve's decision to eat the apple), but we can note here that there is the same tension between our human sympathies for Adam and Eve and the justice of the way God treats them. Simply put, the story, as Milton presents it, seems to be stressing the radically unjust treatment. The narrator tells us what happens in a way that calls that justice strongly into question and then insists that our reaction cannot be the appropriate one. So strong does this tension become, Waldock argues, that the poem breaks in half, and our sense of any unity disappears.

This is a large topic (and I refer you to Waldock's book *Paradise Lost and Its Critics* if you want more detail). But let me focus on a single speech which highlights the difficulties I have been talking about.

The key incident I refer to is Adam's eating the fruit from the tree. Before doing so, he gives a speech which is surely one of the most wonderful declarations of love in all English poetry:

O fairest of creation, last and best
Of all God's works, creature in whom excelled
Whatever can to sight or thought be formed,
Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet!
How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,
Defaced, deflowered, and now to death devote!
Rather how hast thou yielded to transgress
The strict forbiddance, how to violate
The sacred fruit forbidden! Some cursed fraud
Of enemy hath beguiled thee, yet unknown,
And me with thee hath ruined, for with thee
Certain my resolution is to die
How can I live without thee, how forgo
Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined,
To live again in these wild woods forlorn?
Should God create another Eve, and I
Another rib afford, yet loss of thee
Would never from my heart; no, no! I feel
The link of nature draw me: flesh of flesh,
Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe." (9.896-916)

However, I with thee have fixed my lot,
Certain to undergo like doom: if death
Consort with thee, death is to me as life,
So forcible within my heart I feel
The bond of nature draw me to my own,
My own in thee, for what thou art is mine;

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Our state cannot be severed; we are one,
One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself." (9.952-959)

I defy anyone to read this passage without applauding Adam's selfless love for Eve. In making this declaration he is manifesting something most of us rank as one of the highest values of human life, the courage and honesty to act upon one's truest feelings of love for another person. And one will have to search for a long time in English poetry to discover a passage which expresses this feeling more eloquently than Adam does here.

And yet (and this is the crucial point Waldock makes) the narrator insists that Adam here is doing something very wrong:

. . . he scrupled not to eat,
Against his better knowledge, not deceived,
But fondly overcome with female charm. (9.997-999)

But we know that phrase "fondly overcome with female charm" violates the values we feel are manifested in Adam's declaration of love. If that's what Adam's declaration of love really amounts to, then the story is asking us to repudiate our highest human values, to turn against the highest possibilities for significant human experience. If God's justice requires us to condemn Adam here for his love of Eve, then God's justice is, as Adam says later, "inexplicable."

This incident, like the earlier presentation of Satan and his followers, really brings out the point I stressed long ago at the start of this lecture: the conflict between the imagination of the poet and his conscious intention. Milton's imagination inspires him to his finest poetry (and thus to passages which most move the reader's imagination) in those places which violate the logic of the story; his will, his conscious intention, then tries to yank our responses back into line with the orthodox logic of Christian doctrine. But the tensions in the poet are transferred to the reader: how can one assent to Adam's actions and at the same time recognize them as evil, deserving the very harsh punishment which God now inflicts. My view, like that of a number of other critics, is that one cannot: the imaginative poet cannot be reconciled to the doctrinaire Protestant, and the poem, as Waldock observes, fall apart.

M. Some Final Observations

Before winding up this rapid (and overlong) introduction to Milton's great poem, I would like to mention two interpretative possibilities which seem to me inadequate.

First, I do not think we can ascribe any conscious ironic intention to Milton, that is, a desire openly to reveal the emotional and logical inadequacies of orthodox

Protestant Christian doctrine. A sense of the inadequacy may indeed be what many readers take from the poem (and, as I have been arguing, Milton's presentation of the story seems to invite such a reaction), but I have little doubt that such an ironic disparagement of Christian doctrine goes against the conscious intentions of the poem (and the desires of the narrator).

Second, I have little sympathy with the interpretation (advanced most notably by Stanley Fish in *Surprised by Sin*) that such an ironic deflation of Christian doctrine is a deliberate tactic employed by Milton to remind us that we are all fallen creatures (like Adam and Eve) and that, in reacting so favorably to Satan and Adam and Eve we are simply demonstrating that we are like them, too susceptible to earthly delights. Hence, the poem is designed to trap the reader into a recognition of his or her own fallen nature. This is a sophisticated attempt to establish that Milton is successful in justifying God's ways to human beings by showing us our fallen nature. But the logic of this interpretative argument is very suspect, since it seems to amount to saying that defects in the poem (like incomprehensible imagery or violations of logic or repellent divine characters) are intentional reminders of the imperfections of all things human, that Milton intentionally writes bad poetry in many places in order to remind us of the lack of perfection in human understanding. It strikes me that if Milton had wanted to acquaint us with the power and glory of God beyond human understanding, he would not have brought the characters and the issues down into the human realm so insistently. This interpretative possibility resolves the problems of the poem by removing or ignoring its most obvious and intriguing characteristics.

From everything we know about Milton personally (not that this is prescriptive), he was the last person to accept justice as a mystery. He spent his life bringing all religious and political issues before the bar of rational fairness and was untiring in his demands for justice against unfair authority. This part of his personality in this poem (I have been arguing) is in conflict with his desire for an understanding of Protestant doctrine as embodied in the great Biblical story. If he is unable finally to reconcile the two, to justify the story as he would like to, he has left behind, as Empson insists, a fascinating study of a divided soul. The power of the poem resides, more than anything else, in that.