

The Poetry of John Milton:

Paradise Regained's Stylistic Relationship to Paradise Lost

Paradise Lost employs a magnificent, elegant, and artificial style which emphasizes cerebral wording, and which alters the normal way an English sentence flows, often adopting instead a polished style most associated with the best writers in the Latin language. Many scholars have commented upon the grandeur of the verse and some even hear within its wording the sonorous tones of background organ music. This grand style seems perfectly appropriate for the Epic genre, which in the Renaissance was generally considered the loftiest form of literature. It seems a bit surprising then, when a reader picks up the sequel, *Paradise Regained*, and finds the style remarkably different.

Puritans tended toward things that were simple, direct, plain, and unvarnished as a means to avoid worldliness and to focus upon God and His Word. They didn't like their church buildings towering and lofty, filled with Gothic arches, gilded altars, or rainbow-hued stained glass windows. Instead, they preferred no-nonsense blank walls, a simple table instead of an altar, and perhaps a single cross on the wall behind the unornamented pulpit. They didn't like their sermons filled with elaborate Sophistic rhetoric, glossing, tropes, or allegories. Instead, they preferred clear, direct, and logical Ramist rhetoric, a focus upon the meaning of scripture alone, with edifying application to their daily lives.

Arguably, then, *Paradise Regained* can be seen stylistically as a Puritan Epic. It is clearly an Epic in genre, with its brief Invocation to the Muse, its statement of the Epic Theme, its Epic Council, etc., but it is an epic in a simpler style. *Paradise Lost's* subject matter is above and beyond the experience of most readers; we do not usually overhear a dialogue between God the Father and God the Son, nor experience the War of Angels, nor view in detail the machinations of Satan, nor dine with a perfect and unfallen human couple. Such lofty material deserves a grand style. But *Paradise Regained's* subject matter is more approachable to readers. The protagonist, Jesus, is someone the reader knows intimately from simply reading the Gospels, and the macrocosmic debate between Christ and Satan occurs to some degree microcosmically in the psyche of the reader every time he or she is tempted to have that second piece of cheesecake or to start smoking again. The simple truths of the Gospel seem to have required a simple style. Milton himself hints at this when he has Jesus denigrate the Greco-Roman intellectual style as "their swelling epithets thick laid / As varnish on a Harlot's cheek" (*Paradise Regained* 4.343–44), but then he has Jesus extoll the biblical writers as writing "in thir majestic unaffected style . . . In them is plainest taught, and easiest learnt" (*Paradise Regained* 4.359–361). Most critics judge *Paradise Lost* as superior to *Paradise Regained*, but Milton is not among them; he considered the sequel equal if not superior to the prequel. Perhaps Milton's attraction to Puritan simplicity is part of the reason he favored *Paradise Regained*.