

## Milton's *Paradise Lost* Through the Looking Glass

John Milton is immortalized because of his achievements in literature and the English language. Regardless of an individual's respective claims for or against him, Milton's works remain as relevant today as at the time of their publication. *Paradise Lost* is considered not only a quintessential work by Milton, but of the English language. The achievement of this immortalization on Milton's part is the result of his inherent ideologies and convictions, but as a result of his immortalization, it is often the case that readers forget that Milton was a human being living within a specific context. With this insight it can be revealed how Milton masterfully wields his imagination and his collective experience to fashion a work that not only invites its characters to author themselves, but for the work's readers to become authors unto themselves as well.

The imagination is a tool to be wielded. It is not unlike a musical instrument that relies upon the user's knowledge and capacity for maneuvering it to affect the creation of music. In the case of Milton and of *Paradise Lost*, the imaginative concepts come into the delivery of the story of man's Original Sin. Seventeenth century readers were all the more familiar with the story of man's lapse from the ideal into the real than those from the modern day. This thought underscores the revelation that Milton's narrative is not focused on destination, but rather, the processes that constitute the journey to and away from that destination. “. . . The imagination is seen to mediate between sense and reason. Other axes of division are possible, but the fantasy maintains its function as mediator between the percept, liberated from the object of perception, and the higher faculties of the mind” (Guillory 2). This quotation from Guillory's "Poetic Authority" encapsulates the concept that imagination is both a tool to be wielded and a medium through which arguments can be made.

If imagination is only the basis for an idea, it requires shaping. As a mound of clay can be formed into a beautiful figure, so too can imagination be channeled into a structured form. The recognition that *Paradise Lost* is a composition can be both revelatory and degrading. This is what

Guillory names “Poetic Authority.” Readers inherently consume not only Milton’s works, but most poetic literature as doctrinal: “we want to believe that the words of the poet are spoken not only by him, but by some ‘superior power’” (178). The decision to divorce Milton’s work from doctrine enables a look into the reflexive authoring that takes place throughout the epic. It also allows for a depth of examination into the decisions made that illustrate Milton’s literary prowess all the more.

C. S. Lewis’ “Preface to *Paradise Lost*” gives the sort of hierarchical examination that becomes available when a reader chooses to incorporate this method of thought into their reading of the epic. The question of “how?” becomes of the upmost importance as it hinges on Milton’s previous experiences. “The first question he [Milton] asked himself was not ‘What do I want to say?’ but ‘What *kind* of poem do I want to make?’—to which of the great pre-existing *kinds* . . . are so recognizably distinguished in the mind of cultured readers” (Lewis 2). This quotation announces the premeditative processes that go into the composition of *Paradise Lost* and places emphasis on how genre itself serves as a rhetorical medium.

The genre, or perhaps more accurately, the “form” through which the *Paradise Lost* journey is communicated is the “epic poem”. This selection of epic poetry carries with it intertextual significance not only for Milton, but also for the poem’s readers. The core of the form is rooted strongly in classical antiquity. This correlates to Milton’s humanist identity and the sort of inherited compositional history that accompanies it. As Isabelle Rivers notes in *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry* a common tactic in humanist education is imitation which resultantly has significant influence on the vernacular utilized in *Paradise Lost* (129-130). This can be seen in Milton’s “encyclopedic” references to classical antiquity throughout the work. It is also seen in the deference to Latinate syntax which is especially common in Satan’s dialogues (Lerer). Moreover, the decision to compose an epic enables functional devices to emphasize what it is the Milton wants to *say* in the poem.

Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of epic poetry in the classical style is the implementation of the invocation. The invocation establishes the importance of events yet to unfold. They create a sense of what C. S. Lewis calls “*solempne*” or “solemnity” in the archaic sense of the word. “The *Solempne* is the festal which is also the stately and the ceremonial, the proper occasion for *pomp*—and the very fact that *pompous* is now used only in a bad sense measures the degree to which we have lost the old idea of ‘solemnity’. . . Epic, from the beginning, is *solempne*. You are to expect pomp” (17). This quotation acknowledges that the selection of a specific form arouses specific expectations in readers, chiefly among readers of epic poetry is this idea of exuberance, sanctity, or *solempne*. Milton’s integration of cross-lingual tactics is mirrored by his implementation of integrated genres within *Paradise Lost*.

While ‘epic’ may be the form of *Paradise Lost* on the whole, it in no way restricts Milton from utilizing strategies from other genres. Just as imagination is channeled into a form, Milton channels genres through a singular form. This is illustrated in the lyric love poems exchanged between Adam and Eve (Danielson). Take for example, the lyric of Adam’s love for Eve in Book Five of the epic: “Awake / My fairest, my espoused, my latest found, / Heaven's last best gift, my ever new delight, / Awake, the morning shines, and the fresh field / Calls us” (Damrosch 1815). Much of *Paradise Lost* can be read as excursions into different literary genres despite the work’s formation as an epic in blank verse. The poem can be read as a dramatization especially looking to Satan’s many soliloquys (Lerer 41). It can be read as an allegory, putting circumstantial events into discourse similarly to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. The range of interpretation and depth of comprehension is in the hands of the readership: “The mixture and multiplicity of literary forms in Milton's epic are an index of its comprehensiveness and vitality. As cultural signposts common to author and reader, they also provide an important key to the interpretation of *Paradise Lost*” (Danielson 126). Not only does the

range of generic scope allow for a range in interpretation of the epic itself, but it gives readers yet another glimpse into Milton's versatility and mastery of his craft.

The level of detail in *Paradise Lost* that discloses the journey within continues down to the most finite levels. Each character is depicted via different compositional techniques. Satan for example, employs rhetorical questions and similes in his dialogue. In his lecture on John Milton and *Paradise Lost* Seth Lerer notes the inward facing nature of similes. As by their nature, similes relate the external world to personally experienced prescriptions, that is, they relate something unfamiliar with that which is familiar to the respective speaker. This underscores the narcissistic nature of Satan, but also gives Milton a medium through which he can communicate his vast and "encyclopedic knowledge": "As whom the Fables name of monstrous size, / *Briareos* or *Typhon*, whom the Den / By ancient *Tarsus* held, or that Sea-beast / *Leviathan*, which God of all his works / Created hugest that swim th' Ocean stream" (Damrsoch 1733). This simile from *Paradise Lost* captures both the esoteric nature of Milton's similes as well as the relativity required to fully comprehend them. Milton goes even a step further with his hierarchical manipulation of the text when he aligns the revelation of sin with the line number 666 in book two: "The other shape, / If shape it might be call'd that shape had none / Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb, / For each seem'd either, black it stood as Night" (Damrosch 1763). Even in blindness it is apparent that Milton not only has full command of where he's been, but also where he wishes to go—this is perhaps the genius that makes Milton (Lerer).

All of the tactics that Milton employs in *Paradise Lost* are alone, testaments to the author's proficiency and even genius, but collectively what sort of assertions can be made? As noted in Shakespeare's : "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." Milton's meticulous craftsmanship is examined in C. S. Lewis' *Preface to Paradise Lost*, Milton is fully aware that the generic, figural, and characteristic traits are decisions as he is 'authoring' all of these things into the

narrative. “The Hierarchical idea is not merely stuck on to his poem at points where doctrine demands it: it is the indwelling life of the whole work; it foams or burgeons out of it at every moment” (79). This level of examination is only apparent to the ‘acculturated eyes’ as it were intended. The poem has such variance in the degree of detail that it enables readers of all levels to gain relevant insight into the work and perhaps even into themselves.

As for Milton the man, how does one attain such a grasp of the human language? While there is no definitive assurance as to what Milton means on a particular line in a particular book in the poem, it can be beneficial to have an understanding of Milton’s self perception and the life defining events he encountered. In his biography of Milton, Thorpe outlines a triad of ideals that serve as the basis of Milton’s life 1) his sense of God; 2) his sense of his mission as a poet; 3) his sense of virtue (3). Thorpe depicts Milton as wholly religious and as attributing his compositional prowess to divine inspiration: “The inspiration of God enabled him, he believed, to see what would otherwise have been invisible to mortal sight, to understand what would otherwise have been mute.” This parallels the common theme throughout *Paradise Lost* to “know to know no more”. Milton is also described as having three main struggles or obstacles in his life: 1) his interpersonal struggle regarding the divorce of his first wife Mary Powell; 2) his physical struggle with blindness; 3) his political struggles, chiefly the restoration of Charles II. Each of these struggles are exhibited in some form within *Paradise Lost*.

Striking a balance between self-defined values and the various obstacles of life presents a challenge for most any human being. The aforementioned struggles and values faced by Milton can be collectively accounted for his struggle to find self meaning and paternal approval. Milton’s father, John Milton Sr. was a scrivener and amateur musician (Leer 4). Milton’s father’s legacy continually pressed down on the poet over the course of his life. One way of reading *Paradise Lost* is as paternalistic exploration. Milton’s father always wished that his son would pursue a similar career to

his own, while Milton Jr. sought to, in effect, ‘prove himself’ to his father as a poet and writer.

Poetry in and of itself can be seen as a justifying medium, in the case of *Paradise Lost* it is to “justify the ways of God to man” (Leer 11). Within *Paradise Lost* the paternalistic aspect is of heavy significance, be it of Milton to his father or of man to God.

In keeping with the concept of poetry as an act of justification, *Paradise Lost* can also be read as an epic justifying the fall of man to man himself. The concept of self-authorship through Milton’s own works is not exclusive to the author and his work, but applies mutually to the readers as well. It is the work’s immense detail that enables its universal appeal: “Miltonic authority as writer of a sacred text, speaker for the heavenly muse, is guaranteed by the source from which it emanates, and the literal power of that source. Milton’s humanity, however, remains as complex and troubled as the interior literary history of *Paradise Lost*” (Guillory 145). What is this internal literary history within *Paradise Lost*? As previously mentioned, it can be read as the discourse between father and son. Alternatively, the epic can be read as solely a hermeneutical retelling meant to serve similar allegorical purposes. Inherent in all of this is the requisite definition of what is good, what is bad, and ultimately the search for what defines the two.

Before something can be justified it must be substantiated. In the case of *Paradise Lost* it seems that the entire concepts of good and evil are rooted in humanity’s creation of them, or rather, the fall into them. It is interesting to consider that language is itself a construct—one that Milton has repeatedly demonstrated mastery in and in several vernaculars. Therefore, to call something ‘good’ is inherently subjective just as it is to call another thing ‘bad’. The commonalities between Milton’s Christian ideologies and interests in classical antiquity are based in the search for the ideal—the return to the original state of being. “The Paradise that is lost in Milton’s epic is both a physical place and a state of mind; the paradise that is regained is only the latter” (Rivers 11). The divorcing of physicality and mentality seems to be the optimal view in this reading of Milton: for if something

can be defined solely on the basis of what it true is rather than what it is called as the result of subjective influence. Undoubtedly once something is named it loses the sense of awe and wonderment as it becomes something that is bound rather than something that is fluid—this is an interesting juxtaposition to the intricacy in Milton's work.

Continuing down the line of naming and attribution, the defining of what is 'evil' becomes all the more challenging. As the process that involves defining 'evil' is rooted in subjectivity and context. This ideology contrasts to the paradigms that have established particular acts as inherently evil, and also contradicts the idea that societal laws establish a collective morality. *Paradise Lost* devotes ample time to the pondering of morality rooted in context as opposed to a concrete view of evil derived from a juvenile understanding of life's interactions and the discourses therein. To label something or someone as 'evil' is to attribute some negative effect to that thing or person on the basis that the attributor presumed the negative effect. Moreover, to perceive evil is to perceive the absence of goodness which calls into question the namesake of the poem as a 'paradise'. The entire concept of 'Paradise' or 'Eden' in *Paradise Lost* is arguably an unattainable ideal. At face value, perfection is an inevitable human pursuit that will forever be subject to the inherent imperfections of humanity. Rivers remedies this when she describes Milton's paradise as a metaphor for the ideal Christian Life (11). This once again, is contextual. Married to the maintenance of perfection remains the lacking knowledge of good and evil. With this premise, the fall from the ideal or the corruption of perfection is inevitable as it seems the only way for Adam or Eve to recognize the full goodness of their situation is to compromise it. This revelation shines light on human being's curiosity. An instinctual "curiosity" can perhaps be equated to the appetite that Eve describes before the fall.

Before the fall in Book IX Eve gets a taste of the self-indulgence that accompanies the awareness of good and evil when Satan approaches her: "Wonder not, sovran Mistress, if perhaps / Thou canst, who art sole Wonder, much less arm / Thy looks, the Heav'n of mildness, with disdain,

/ Displeas'd that I approach thee thus, and gaze / Insatiate, I thus single; nor have feard / Thy awful brow, more awful thus retir'd" (Damrsoch 1898). This tasting is what in essence "corrupts" or rather, which piques Eve's interest to eat the fruit. As the awareness of what is 'good' and what is 'evil' has yet to be solidified for Eve it is through the very eating of the fruit and humanity's resultant fall that Eve becomes self-aware in all of their meanings: "Great are thy Vertues, doubtless, best of Fruits, / Though kept from Man, & worthy to be admir'd, / Whose taste, too long forborn, at first assay / Gave elocution to the mute, and taught / The Tongue not made for Speech to speak thy praise" (Damrosch 1903). This revelation that occurs after eating the fruit seems less a fall and more an awakening for Eve. Perhaps the fall is called so as Eve's first inclination is to question why the fruit was kept from man—in essence questioning God's will. This proves problematic as to question God is to question life itself which, for the "good Christian" as defined in River's text, should not ask these creationistic questions.

The designation of who determines what will be shared and how much of 'that' or 'x' will be shared, whether it is right and wrong, serves as the pinnacle struggle in this exploration of *Paradise Lost*. The questioning not only of what is inherently good and evil, but also of where these ideas originate is a common theme throughout Milton's works. In *Areopagitica* Milton writes: "And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evill? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian." This quotation encapsulates the essence of *Paradise Lost*. At the conclusion of the epic both Adam and Eve have become authors unto themselves and it is their very ability to discern and to reason that allows them to do so.

The most important notion to be gleaned from this text is that it is a *construct* meant to evoke critical thought. Reading *Paradise Lost* is akin to looking at an edited photograph or piece of artwork. Everything in the poem works to get the reader considering what is being said. The emphasis placed on encouraging self-thought and individual perspective has a hearty similarity to moral relativism. It seems that Milton has a desire to allow texts to be self-defining for readers.

What makes Milton immortal? Ultimately this question can only be answered on an individual basis for it is Milton's link to human beings' capacity for reason and subjectivity that have allowed his works to persist. Perhaps Milton is divinely inspired, perhaps he is not. While some may find solace in his work others may not. It is not universal appeal that Milton seeks in his works it is universal comprehension and consideration—or exposure. Milton is entirely self aware and because of this his work can be read, and should be read not as doctrine or as authority but as the work of a man who encounters all the same struggles as anyone else. In *Paradise Lost* "he [Milton] is telling the story of a spiritual pilgrimage—how one soul fared in its passage through the universe and how all may fear and hope to fare" (Lewis 132). It is for this excavation of human curiosity and the insights gained thereby that Milton's works should be read and reasoned with.

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