

Reflections on John Milton's Epic Poem *Paradise Lost*

– by Brian Roberts – 5 August 2011

On 15 December 1660 there was issued the order of release from prison of the revolutionary thinker, polemicist, republican and poet John Milton. With great good fortune Milton had survived the Restoration of Charles the Second, and now free of State duties could concentrate on composing his epic poem which he intended to be 'doctrinal and exemplary to a nation.'

Part of that doctrine was Milton's belief in the principle that the individual had the right to study the Bible for themselves. It was indeed a duty, for in the Bible was the word of God and the only source of revelation. In this there is no role for a priest, nor a presbyter, nor indeed is a church essential, both in the sense of a holy building or a worshipping congregation. The individual conscience and its relationship with God were paramount. Milton also believed that

'The spirit of God, promised alike and giv'n
To all Beleever; ... ' (Paradise Lost Book XII lines 519/20)

was the guide for interpreting the Bible.

It is John Milton's individual conscience and his relationship with God that inspires his greatest poem and within that poem his interpretation of one of the fundamental stories of the Bible. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a poetic rendering of the story of the Fall of humankind told in Genesis chapters 2 and 3 imagined in such a way as to illuminate some of the central paradoxes of the human situation and the tragic ambiguity of men and women as moral beings. The conflict between an absolutist belief in predestination and a belief in our free will to choose between good and evil is at the heart of *Paradise Lost*. Did God, omniscient as he is, know that Satan would rebel and was God aware that Adam and Eve, when he created them, would eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? *Paradise Lost* contains the fundamental disputes of all Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries. Most important is the impact that Milton's work, especially *Paradise Lost* has had on the development of English thought, particularly on religious consciousness for over three hundred years. Whilst a convinced Protestant, Milton did not accept the Calvinist theology of predestination, and came to ally himself with those who believed the tenet of predestination was flawed because, whilst God might well be aware of the choices which would be made by human beings between virtuous and sinful acts, such acts were deliberate. Even though God knew in advance who the elect would be, humankind could still choose its destiny because of the gift of free will, given by God.

Paradise Lost is an epic poem with the most profound themes, focussed as in *Genesis* on a domestic tragedy. Milton attempts to retell freshly the Genesis story of the Fall. From the terse, elliptical words of the first book of the Bible, the poet brilliantly elaborates a tragic drama of separation, temptation, and falling, followed by a man and a woman's terrible psychological and emotional torment. The tragedy starts in Book IX where there is a marital argument induced by Eve's suggestion that they would get the gardening done all the

quicker if they were to work in different parts of the garden. Adam becomes both protective and possessive and therefore infuriatingly superior, but is reluctant to force his will against Eve's and so impair her free will. We are given a lingering and tender image of their separation:

Thus saying, from her Husbands hand her hand
Soft she withdrew, ... *(Book IX lines 385/6)*

There follows the long seduction of Eve by Satan in the form of the serpent, using the language of Renaissance love poetry. Then, taking only two lines to narrate the key action whose tragic consequences for humankind are so enormous, Milton emphasises the loss of the voluntary will in Eve's gesture:

'So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
Forth reaching to the fruit, she pluck'd, she eat.' *(Book IX lines 780/1)*

The impetuosity precludes careful choice as the act itself becomes a compulsion.

Unlike Eve, Adam is not deceived at all, yet like her he reveals that he too is emotionally vulnerable. He falls quickly. Adam cannot imagine life without Eve. She is completely irreplaceable, and with her absent, he would never stop weeping.

'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.' *(Book IX lines 911/16)*

Adam's emotional response can be seen as heroic and chivalric, an example of 'exceeding love' (IX line 961) that mirrors the behaviour of God the Son – though with a crucial difference as this is sacrificial love without voluntary obedience.

After Adam falls, there follows some impulsive and involuntary love making, and then an awakening into self loathing. Milton presents their fallen psychological state as an inner landscape of shame and despair:

They sate them down to weep, nor only Teares
Rain'd at thir Eyes, but high Winds worse within
Began to rise, high Passions, Anger, Hate
Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord, and shock sore
Thir inward State of Mind, calme Region once
And full of Peace, now tost and turbulent; *(Book IX lines 1121/6)*

Adam fiercely spurns Eve, but it is Eve who effects a reconciliation, and leads him out of his dark condition.

The experience of expulsion from the garden teaches Adam the nature of exile. In their exile Adam and Eve learn how to reshape their lives. They regain Paradise through acknowledging 'my Redeemer ever blest', but this is not the paradise of wondrous bounty and innocence of the Garden of Eden. Paradise at the end of Milton's epic poem is not so much a place as a symbol, located within the heart of the individual Protestant exile and believer. The true believer may carry the paradise within himself and herself. Our lives still contain possibility, choice and individual responsibility, even in a fallen world. The emphasis at the end of *Paradise Lost* is on Adam and Eve choosing, on what they can make for themselves in fallen history, as they are given many a sign of God's providence.

'The world was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took thir solitarie way.'
(Book XII lines 646/9)

Lines echoing Psalm 107:

They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way;
they found no city to dwell in.
.....
Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them out of their distresses.'
(Verses 4 & 13)

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