

Three and Its Content: Thought, Hope, Poetry in Milton

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No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and resemblance of God himself.

John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (Milton 1991: 8).

Even though Milton wrote *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* to defend his Republican views, he could not –or did not want to– disentangle himself from the complexity of ideas that constituted his way of thinking. The epigraph evinces a strong claim for individual freedom and an interrelation of ideas taken from different fields, that is, we find the idea that the person has been created free as a consequence of God’s own freedom; also, the theological and philosophical belief that by being an image, man and woman may easily misunderstand what they reflect, they may sin, or simply take the wrong decision. This signifies that within the innate freedom that every single human being has been endowed with there is the possibility of choosing wrong, as well as choosing right. These few words also evince a trait of Milton’s character: he liked to express himself and his ideas directly.

Freedom became the tenet on which Milton constructed his way of thinking and made its defence a main concern throughout his life,¹ as he showed in the biographical explanations of the *Second Defence of the People of England*, where we discover that he had thought of writing for what we can call the three fields of application of the person’s freedom, that is, he conscientiously planned his prose tracts according to the “three species of liberty which are essential to the happiness of social life –religious, domestic, and civil” with the intention of publicly defending freedom in all its aspects (emphasis mine):

When the bishops could no longer resist the multitude of their assailants, I had leisure to turn my thoughts to other subjects; to the promotion of *real and substantial liberty; which is rather to be sought from within than from without; and whose existence*

¹ For a psychological approach see Driscoll (“Decisive Identiy”, 1993: 85-150).

depends, not so much on the terror of the sword, as *on sobriety of conduct and integrity of life*. When therefore I perceived that *there were three species of liberty which are essential to the happiness of social life –religious, domestic, and civil*; and as I had already written concerning the first, and the magistrates were strenuously active in obtaining the third, I determined to turn my attention to the second, or domestic species. As this seemed to involve three material questions, the conditions of the conjugal life, the education of the children, and the free publication of the thoughts, I made them objects of distinct consideration (Milton 1963: 389-390).

Although there seems to be a certain amount of obscurity in this explanation, there is none if we take the concept of freedom in its full meaning. For Milton freedom was choice, and where he writes that liberty was to be obtained from within he is considering the ability to choose that the person has been endowed with, together with the idea of reason which is hinted at, or made specific in the terms, “sobriety” (or regulation) and “integrity” (proper conduct); this last may be thought to make reference to *obedience* to the natural law or the natural needs of the body and to the law of the Republic, in all its application “proper conduct” is directly related to the concept “truth”. He dealt thus with all the aspects that concern happiness and welfare, showing at the same time his concern to obtain both and thence be of some use to the community and the commonwealth. This clear organisation of the prose tracts is useful and easy to handle and we need to refer to them when we try to understand the content of his poetical works, especially his latest poems, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. The discussion on whether poetry should or should not have content is not relevant in this study as Milton seemed to share the opinion of most humanist scholars about learning –learning through enjoyment–, therefore, it is easy to believe that he tried to communicate something more than beauty with his poetical writings. He also seems to have followed Cicero, who defended the combination of *sapientia* and *eloquencia*.² *Paradise Lost* is a clear example of this will to teach the reader as well as to communicate his main ideas through allegory and poetical beauty. The prosody and rhythm of its verses seem to serve the clear purpose of clarifying and emphasising the content that is being narrated in the lines concerned. The use of the allegorical Scriptural stories narrated in *Paradise Lost* is meant to facilitate the understanding of the lessons and ideas being taught.

In agreement with Stephen Fallon (1991), I would like to defend the belief that Milton should be considered among the philosophers, especially for the structured way that constitutes the bulk of his ideas. He took some trends of thought, which were current among the Humanists, and made them his own to account for human knowledge, understanding of reality, and the search for truth. He also used a syncretic combination of these different trends to account for evil and demonstrate the need for its existence.³ His vast knowledge of languages allowed him to read the Bible and the Classics in their original languages, thus developing his own interpretation of them, and eventually deriving his own syncretic thought. This syncretism was the result of an eclecticism that represented a reconciliation of different schools, and with this he seems to have followed Philo of Alexandria, who reconciled Hellenism with the Mosaic, and to which Milton added his Christianity.⁴ Putting together different schools of thought was his way of dealing with and trying to answer these traditional and long-standing questions that still trouble the human mind, such as: the existence of God and the exact role of the Son; the spirit, what he understood by spirit, and whether or not it is the third person forming the trinity; monism vs. dualism and/or mortalism, that is, the nature of mind and body as one single unit or two separate ones; materialism, and the search for an empirical analysis of reality; and, as

² See Cicero (1933). See also Armstrong (1980).

³ On the use of evil as necessity and contrast see Tylliard (1968). Also Carey (1989).

⁴ Samuel (1949). Samuel deals with Philo's influence and states that Milton was interested in “Philo's reconciliation of Plato with the Holy Script”. Milton himself mentions Philo as an “authority and a weighty author” in his *First Defence*. See Milton (1991: 81).

aforesaid, the question of evil, or wickedness in the world.⁵ In spite of this eclecticism, the influence of the Bible, the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha seems to outshine that of other sources, which, in a way, facilitates our understanding and the following of his own train of thought. The complexity of ideas that has already been mentioned gains some light when discovering the organisation that he seems to have followed. Not only the prose tracts are distributed into the three groups that concern the “three species of liberty”, but his way of thinking also follows a clear distribution into three principles: freedom –his tenet and axis–, and two constraining principles, reason (“sobriety of conduct”) and truth (“integrity of life”). This latter may be achieved by some kind of perception that allows for the apprehension of the signification of signs and the ideas as objects.

The subjection of “freedom” to these two constraining principles is based on the need to avoid falling into an undemocratic “licence”. Relevant to Milton’s thought is the distinction that he makes between the concepts of “decree” and “command”. According to him, a “decree” will not be changed, and God’s high decree is freedom: “(...) The high decree / Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained / Their freedom, they themselves ordained their fall” (*Paradise Lost*, III. 126-128).⁶ A “command” refers to the law, an established and accepted law.

“Reason” and “truth” can therefore be explained by means of their active application in the different fields of human reality and thus be substituted by other synonymous words that account for each use, that is, their function is related to their *locus*, place. “Reason”, which is the faculty that allows the person to distinguish between good and evil, is also “will, temperance, harmony”. “Truth”, a more universal concept, is *love* and *obedience*, obedience to the law, not only to the Law of Nature –natural law would also include the constraints of the body or living a healthy life– and the law of the Scriptures (religious obedience), but also to the Common Law (the civil and political obedience). The person has capacity to experience love and the different passions but also capacity to choose what should control one’s temperament: reason or the passions, and that is what our freedom consists of. What one feels and does depends entirely on one’s choice, thus the consequences: happiness/peace of mind or unhappiness/misery. These three principles combine and intertwine constantly conditioning each other at the same time. *Paradise Lost* seems to have been written to offer these ideas as an alternative to find the true happiness using the stories of the angels and of Adam and Eve as metaphors that picture states, ways, and results. God’s explanation in Book III:

(...) I made him just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
Such I created all the ethereal powers
And spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
(*Paraise Lost*, III. 98-102)

is one of the multiple examples in the poem. The consequence of using freedom as according to one’s nature and to the regulations of the community is shown in: “Thrice happy if they know / Their happiness, and persevere upright” (*Paradise Lost* VII. 631), which also indicates the belief that true happiness is found in the knowledge and acceptance of God as explained in “God and nature bid the same” (*Paradise Lost*, VI. 176),⁷ and it is triple because the regulated freedom applies to the three fields: domestic, civil and religious.

⁵ For Milton’s monism see Rosenblatt (ch. 2: “Milton’s Hebraic Monism”, 1994: 71-137). See also King James Version, Genesis 2. Rosenblatt (1994: 72) remarks that Milton’s monism is specially present in the middle books of *Paradise Lost* and in the prose tracts of 1643-45.

⁶ All the quotations of *Paradise Lost* are from Fowler (1971).

⁷ See also Samuel (1949: 118-119).

The title of this study refers to the importance number symbolism had for Milton, and the use he made of number three, which, apart from being very common among the Renaissance writers, hints at an organised and structured process that intends to produce a perfected work. Three seems to be the first tool or measure with which proper analysis and study can be performed. That is, we can think in terms of ‘beginning, middle and end’, or the first geometric figure, the triangle, and which can be used to measure things under study. It is the first number that approaches a human reality; and it is also a divine number in the Bible. Milton uses it to present triads and not trinities in *Paradise Lost*, to the extent that we might understand it as a purposeful intention that reinforces the rejection of the Trinity. Every single aspect dealt with in the poem has a counterpart in the world of darkness, *i.e.* contrasts are constantly presented, therefore the triad: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has its counterpart in Satan, Sin and Death. Notice that: the Father creates, Satan destroys; the Son is masculine, Sin is feminine; and if the Holy Spirit brings communication and wisdom, Death stops and destroys it. The moment God anoints the Son king is parodied by Satan producing Sin out of his head, and in this way evil is created and established as a permanent opposition to goodness.⁸ With that Milton seems to follow Philo, who identified the Logos, or the Son, with reason and right contemplation, and Satan with the wrong perception or misunderstanding of reason, that is, unreason.⁹ More contrasts are allegorised by the Son and Satan: right *vs.* wrong/evil, truth *vs.* falsehood; in spite of the similitude of the properties in each side: right and truth as opposed to evil and falsehood, these different contrasts allegorise several factors that refer to different aspects, to attitudes or ethics, to beliefs, and to space: heaven and hell, the upper and lower parts of the body, for example, thus offering a full application and presentation of choice. Frederick Plotkin (1971) points out that these contrasts “hell as a direct opposition and reversal of what heaven represents has didactic purposes”. This idea agrees with Victoria Kahn’s emphasis on individual responsibility.¹⁰ The origin of oppositions is closely related to the concepts and presentation of the creation as both the Son and Satan are creators. From them the qualities they represent expand to the lower worlds of angels and humanity.

Two beliefs taken from Plato’s *Timaeus* are relevant in this study, as they help to put together certain seemingly disentangled issues that belong to the core of Milton’s thought. The first concerns the term “ignorance”, which Plato defines as the “worst of maladies” (*Timaeus* 44b-c),¹¹ and which finds expression in *Paradise Lost* as “forgetting God” applied to Satan and the fallen world, where conscientious forgetting God and miscontemplation is characteristic. It explains Milton’s definition of evil as evil-for-evil’s-sake. The second belief concerns the explanation of evil as originating out of necessity and because the creation was carried out by inferior angels (*Timaeus* 42d, 48a). However, Plato offers a solution to these two problems –which fully agrees with Milton’s trend of thought into one core principle and two constraining ones– in terms of what the cosmos is and what it may represent. According to Plato the cosmos is a compound of *necessity* and *reason* and we can obtain a perfected universe by allowing reason to control necessity (*Timaeus* 48a). Edward Baldwin (1920), who has studied the relation and influence of the *Timaeus* in Milton, explains that the idea of necessity in Plato needs to be understood in terms of the personification of “formless matter” and that

⁸ See Kahn (1992).

⁹ Philo (1962). For contrasts and more work about Satan symbolising wrong perception, see also Budick (1985) and Hartmann and Budick (1986).

¹⁰ See Carey (1989), who has the same idea, and Kahn (1992).

¹¹ *Timaeus* 44b-c: “Hence it comes about that, because of all these affections, now as in the beginning, so often as the Soul is bound with a mortal body it becomes at first irrational. But as soon as the stream of increase and nutriment enters in less volume, and the revolutions calm down and pursue their own path, becoming more stable as time proceeds, then at length, as the several circles move each according to its natural track, their revolutions are straightened out and they announce the same and the other Other aright, and thereby they render their possessor intelligent. And if so be that this state of his soul be reinforced by right educational training, the man becomes wholly sound and faultless, having escaped the worst of maladies” (Plato 1981: 97-99).

to create is to put order into this chaos, thus coinciding exactly with *Paradise Lost* (II. 910-916) and Philo's *De opificio mundi* (1962: 20-25).¹² All of this reinforces the belief –found in Kabbalistic writings– that the creation is not finished, we are constantly creating, or uncreating in our everyday life.

The sets of triads are multiple in *Paradise Lost* and they all seem to serve a clear purpose. For example, the triad formed by the Father, Satan and the Son –which finds reinforcement in *Paradise Regained*, where Satan claims to be son of God as well– can be thought to constitute a triangle of a celestial representation, with the Father on the top in an upright position; another triad constituted by Satan, the Son, and Adam/Eve, these last at the bottom peak, that is, this triangle needs to be presented upside down as the level of Adam and Eve is below the angelical. If we join these two triads together we get a rhombi, God on top, Adam and Eve at the other extreme, and the two angels, fallen and unfallen, in the middle. Is there not a clear intention that relates God with humanity, leaving the Son and Satan as two metaphors that indicate the state of choice we can make? Furthermore, it also draws the global structure of the poem, in which three levels, or worlds, can be found: the intelligible world, or the Platonic world of ideas; the angelical or physical world, and the sublunary or organic world of the Earth (*i.e.* the world of maths or ideas, the physical, and the organic) (see Plato 1981). Also, in a Neoplatonic interpretation: the One or Monad, the Dyad or infinite reproduction of reflections sent by the One, and the mortalist concreteness of the human race. These possibilities indicate the influence of Platonism, of Biblical exegesis and mysticism, all condensed in different allegorical accounts with a beginning, middle and end in every single plot. *Paradise Lost* offers the possibility of being read according to a very specific distribution into three groups, each containing four books in order. Group one has the first four books of the poem, group two the other four, and group three the last four books. Even though the different ideas are constantly combining within different fields, there is an underlying issue in each group of books that relates it to a concrete level of reality. For instance, the first four books seem to reflect the world of the intelligences, fallen and unfallen, and the perfect world of the prelapsarian man/woman as being in close contact with them; the second group deals with the creation and the cosmos, or the physical world; the third refers to the postlapsarian world and our most immediate reality. Three worlds that move down from the perfected universe of the intelligences. This distribution agrees in both editions of the poem, and in each case when we sum up the lines of all of them, each group has more than three thousand, three being the common number.

It is obvious then that the use of three seems to have been done for special purposes. Each group is marked by 10, 7, and 9 respectively and these three numbers agree with the content of the books. 10, the perfection of heaven; 7, the cosmos and the creation; 9, the world of humanity, the Earth (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

This structure may signify a variety of things; also, it may never have existed in Milton's mind and be the result of a coincidence. However, this variety of possibilities hints at the freedom of the reader who, in this case, seems to be offered a very condensed poem that allows for different interpretations and ways of reading for both the pleasure of the senses and the pleasure of the mind. Also, it seems that Milton wanted to clearly establish a defence for individual responsibility to find either true happiness or true misery. The message of hope seems to be found in the last lines of the poem where Adam and Eve are left to their own destiny and choice, to their own creation. Hope can also be found

¹² *Paradise Lost*, II. 910-916: “(...) this wild abyss, / The womb of Nature, and perhaps her grave / Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire / But all these in their pregnant causes mixed / Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight, / Unless the Almighty Maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds”. And *De opificio mundi* 1962: 22: “(...) For of itself (matter) it was without order, without quality, without soul, (without likeness); it was full of inconsistency, ill-adjustment, disharmony: but it was able of turning and undergoing a complete change to the best, the very contrary to all these, to order, quality, life, correspondence, identity, likeness, perfect adjustment, to harmony, to all that is characteristic of the most excellent model”.

if we justified God's ways by analysing the question of time in relation to his foreknowledge; time and space are organic concepts that are not existent in the world of ideas, therefore, it seems impossible for God to interfere in man's affairs since he sees everything at once: past, present and future everywhere.

Appendix

TABLE 1. *PARADISE LOST*.

1st edition (1667);

GROUP 1: 3,610: 3-7 / 10.

2nd edition (1674):

GROUP 1: 3,610: 3-7 / 10

Book 1:	798	Book 1:	798
Book 2:	1,055	Book 2:	1,055
Book 3:	742	Book 3:	742
Book 4:	1,015	Book 4:	1,015

GROUP 2: 3,106: 3-7 / 10.

GROUP 2: 3,112: 3-4 / 7

Book 5:	904	Book 5:	907
Book 6:	912	Book 6:	912
Book 7:	1,290	Book 7:	640
		Book 8:	653

GROUP 3: 3,834: 3-15 / 9.

GROUP 3: 3,843: 3-15 / 9

Book 8:	1,189	Book 9:	1,189
Book 9:	1,104	Book 10:	1,104
Book 10:	1,541	Book 11:	901
		Book 12:	649

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