

PARADISE LOST AS A NOVEL

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In this paper I would like to discuss and discover to what extent one is justified in calling Milton's epic poem a novel. Initially, I would expect that very few readers of *Paradise Lost* could imagine the merging of two such different genres as epic and novel, a heroic poem and a middle-class orientated volume of prose, but eventually, through both a close reading of the poem and through a brief analysis of some ideas of the great Russian philosopher and literary critic Bakhtin¹⁸³ we will be able to accept that these polar concepts can reasonably find some middle ground. An approach such as mine must necessarily have as its starting point the belief that the ferocious attacks on Milton that were principally the work of the much maligned New Criticism contained within themselves an insistence on close reading which was really little else than a well-directed attempt to exclude uncomfortable political intertextuality. Milton becomes the dull authoritarian Puritan only when history, politics and religious controversy are pushed to one side: a politically gelded Milton is a docile animal whereas the contentious beast is not so easily handled. If art is divorced from history, this is done for cogent reasons, which, presumably, are as political as they are artistic: in fact it surely becomes impossible to swallow the cherished ideal that the former could ever exist without the latter; clearly the exclusion is itself inescapably politically motivated. Critics such as Christopher Hill¹⁸⁴ and Michael Wilding¹⁸⁵ have successfully managed to free Milton from the

¹⁸³ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975). The best introduction to his life and thoughts is the critical biography *Mikhail Bakhtin* by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984)

¹⁸⁴ See particularly *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977)

¹⁸⁵ See *Dragons Teeth; Literature in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Clarendon Press, 1987).

political strait-jacket in which he had effectively been tied up ; this political freedom and diversity, with clear tendencies toward such heresies as mortalism, make *Paradise Lost* a more dynamic poem for historian or politically motivated critic while simultaneously they inevitably lead to a greater freedom of aesthetic interpretation, if we can still accept this as a meaningful term. Once we discover the teeming multitude of political ideas in the poem, we can no longer accept the existence of rigidity which apparently restricts the poem's movements and turns it into a dull Puritan diatribe. Readers of the poem know that one of its central narrative strategies is the use of debates: it is unnecessary to comment on the striking effect of the devils' parliament or its contrast with the tight dialectics of the debate in Book III. The whole poem is full of argument and exchange of ideas: indeed, the whole central section of the poem, that is to say Books IV-VIII, only makes sense once the reader has begun to realise that it is only and always through dialogue that man receives knowledge, that the eating of the apple becomes, whether for male or female, the supreme act of egoism, in which the knowledge of and concern for otherness are pushed to one side and images of individualistic power and glory pour into the mind of the tempted. Hopefully, what should have emerged through my insistence on dialogue and multiplicity of significance of meaning, is my belief that *Paradise Lost* is an open poem, ready for the willing and inquisitive reader to partake of its fluidity.

The most fruitful approach (excuse the pun) to a reading of *Paradise Lost* is to start looking at the question of heroics. Blake's maxim has more or less centred the debate on Milton's attitude to politics and religion. Is Satan a republican hero or an exaggerated portrait of that most famous cavalier of them all, prince Rupert ? Blake's assertion that Milton is of the devil's party implies that this affiliation lies more in the subconscious than in the conscious. For many people (and for many years) the question of allegiance has been foremost: it would be reasonable to wonder why William Empson did not call his great study of the poem *Milton's Satan* rather than *Milton's God*.¹⁸⁶ Empson, as many readers have done, finds God a rather perplexing entity, and many other readers would possibly add just plain boring in speech and vindictive in deed. So, if we begin to study the question of heroics, it seems that we centre our attention on a fallen angel and dismiss the possibility that the heroic character might be God. In doing so, in insisting on

¹⁸⁶ *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).

the battle as being a two-sided affair, we omit other, equally fascinating possibilities. As possible candidates for the award of hero, we could also put forward the Son (Milton's insistence on this term rather than Christ or Saviour undoubtedly gives the poem heavy Oedipal overtones), Abdiel, Adam and Eve, Eve but not Adam, and finally, Adam but not Eve. We now have seven potential heroes. In addition to this list, we could use a different, though equally useful device: that is to define heroics in relationship to Milton's insistence on "the upright heart and pure" (Book I.18) as being the preferable virtues: could we gloss this as the heroic virtue of patience, necessary in both times of war and peace? My insistence on the variations of the Adam and Eve relationship has two important concepts within it. First of all, readers of the poem can see to what extent Milton uses both the P and Q versions of the Fall: the P version tells of simultaneous, egalitarian creation ("...in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them." *Genesis* 1.27) and the Q version, the story of consecutive creation from the rib. Furthermore, the possibility of one being heroic but not the other means that the Fall affects them differently and their reactions are noticeably dissimilar.

My assertion that Eve alone, or at least more than Adam, could be the possible hero, and for cogent reasons I use the word purposefully, could initially strike people as an instance of being persuaded by the very heated exchange of views that took place in *Critical Inquiry* and *PMLA*¹⁸⁷ some years back. Eating the apple becomes a bite for gnostic self-knowledge and freedom, a battle won against the invisible voices of patriarchal power. However, I would question assertions such as these, which have as much to do with questioning Freud's analysis of the visible and invisible as they do with Milton's poem. I think that we can detect some of Milton's views on a purely formal and conscious level. However persuasive analyses about gnosticism might be, they insist, rather as Blake did, that the intentions of the poem escape the author's intentions, and must, as a matter of course, reveal underneath, though not very deep down, the first of the masculinists.

¹⁸⁷ Christine Froula, *When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy*, *Critical Inquiry*, December 1983, 321-347. Edward Pechter, *When Pechter Reads Froula Pretending She's Eve Reading Milton: Or, New Feminist Is But Old Priest Writ Large* and Christine Froula's Riposte, *Pechter's Spectre; Milton's Bogey Writ Small*; or, "Why Is He Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?", *Critical Inquiry*, September 1984, 163-178. Sandra Gilbert, "Patriarchal Potry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey", *PMLA*, May 1978.

Classical culture, of which epic poetry is a part, is, many people will argue, a male domain which excluded women for centuries. This ultra-orthodox form of culture seems to be the framework which best suits descriptions of *Paradise Lost*. We know that Milton includes many formal features in his poem which all in all demonstrate the extent to which he is both a part of oppressive cultural values and a willing partner in their prolongation. This features include: beginning in *medias res*, councils of the gods about the fate of mortals, descent of the gods to intervene in human affairs, a parade of troops, a great battle¹⁸⁸ and so on, and stylistically we could explain (away) those famous extended similes as being Milton's indebtedness to classical tradition. Nevertheless, it is surely more important to notice when Milton breaks with classical tradition. This is most in evidence in the question of closure. One would expect, in the epic tradition, that the final speech, if not the final word, would go to the hero. This does not happen, unless we radically change our definition of heroism; the last words are Eve's:

Whence thou return'st, and whither went'st, I know,
 For God is also inn sleep, and dreams advise,
 Which he sent propitious, some great good
 Presaging, since with sorrow and heart's distress
 Wearied, I fell asleep: but now lead on;
 In me is no delay; with thee to go,
 Is to stay here, withou thee here to stay,
 Is to go unwilling, thou to me
 Art all things under heaven, all places thou,
 Who for my wilful crime art banished hence.
 This further consolation yet secure
 I carry hence; though all by me is lost,
 Such favour I unworthy am vouchsafed,
 By me the promised seed shall all restore.
 So spake our mother Eve, and Adam heard
 Well pleased, but answered not ...

(12. 610-625)

Any excerpt from such a dynamic poem as this leads to all sorts of discussion, so with obvious and hopefully excusable omissions, I would insist on a few, simple points. As far as initiative is concerned, the Fall becomes practically Eve's exclusive story. *Hubris* is hers and heroism will be

¹⁸⁸ These examples are from John Broadbent: *Paradise Lost*- Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

hers too, as *felix culpa* appears to be very much her province, perhaps exclusively so. Adam seems to be very much a submissive character whose future is acquiescence, silence and the history of the blank page. Again, I insist, not another word is spoken in the poem.

The poem continues for a few lines more and ends with an almost cinematic image of the reconciled couple walking hand in hand towards the future, or perhaps into history, or perhaps off the page and into our lives. If Eve's having the last word, I use this expression in its widest possible sense, is clearly an evocative moment for a male epic poem, equally perplexing are the final lines of the narrative itself:

The world was all before them, where to choose
 Their place to rest, and providence their guide:
 They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
 Through Eden took their solitary way.

(12. 646-649)

The beauty of these lines demonstrates that the most moving parts of the poem are often those where language is simplest. Readers have not been blinded by them to realise that Milton would try and cheer us up by making us see that Eden and by extension happiness, if that is not too strong a word, are not restricted to the garden therein, but to any place where reconciliation and dialogue take place. What undoes this vision of happiness is the conflict between the idea that providence will be their guide and that their way, as the last line indicates, will be solitary. Surely, Milton cannot have it both ways. Either providence helps them or it does not, and if it does, it cannot leave them solitary. Indeed, it cannot escape anyone's notice that the striking nature of the last line is due in part to the odd location of their qualifying solitary. Would it not be normal to expect to see a singular possessive before solitary? We do, do we not, get the impression that their reconciliation is more than necessary; has God left even more open to danger and temptation than before? The consequence of their earlier defencelessness brought about the major event in history, the Fall. What will this new situation be like? However much we feel that Milton, at the poem's closure, is very much the humanist whose faith in human perseverance is unswerving, it surely is peculiar to note that this humanism breathes agnosticism, for it is the vague notion of providence rather than the certainty of a protective God who would help Daniel in the lions' den which might, or might not, assist us.

Up to this point, I have attempted to demonstrate how Milton's epic, if it is an epic at all, is a rather strange and unorthodox one: the fact that Eve has the last word and that God or the gods seemingly melt away are only two of many of Milton's idiosyncracies. My initial proposal must take us on to the thorny problem of Milton's answerable style. *Paradise Lost* has been attacked on many occasions for its Latinate magniloquence, most notably by Samuel Johnson. Christopher Ricks¹⁸⁹ was able to demonstrate the flexibility and potential of Milton's style, even in those aspects which appear so classically static, like, for example, the extended similes. I have already hinted, at least, that like Christopher Ricks, I believe that Milton often uses the simplest of language, and occasionally has moments of monosyllabic priority (this is noticeable in the lines I have quoted). I do not think that Milton's intentions are particularly hard to discover, though they are extraordinarily significant. The most memorable speech in *Paradise Lost* is Eve's, in Book X:

The serpent beguiled me and I did eat.

(10. 162)

It is memorable in the sense that it is so easy to memorise; its importance is a result of its brevity. Its simplicity is a result not only of its brevity but because of its stark contrast with what has preceded it. Adam has gone on for nineteen lines, of which eighteen are superfluous. Whereas Eve uses everyday language, Adam indulges in a good piece of rhetoric, in which everything is everyone else's fault. He is severely reprimanded not only for blaming God for having given him Eve as a helper but also for trying to worm his way out of responsibility under a veil of rhetorical nonsense. God's preference for simplicity and honesty of speech, which are Eve's virtues, ensures that only when Adam can finally assimilate them, at the poem's end, will reconciliation between man and woman, and man, woman and God be possible.

This preference for simplicity again confirms those true virtues of heroism which are set out in the invocation to Book I; yet this idealistic simplicity would then have to make nonsense of those parts of the poem, and very substantial parts of the poem they are too, that are clearly rhetorical; this refers not only to what goes on in Pandemonium, but also to what occurs in

¹⁸⁹ Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

the City of God. The arguments as to whether debate or discussion take place only in one part of the universe rather than in another are inextricable from arguments which see Satan as a hero or not. I do not intend to enter in this area, rather I intend to look at one section of the poem which although used as indicative of Milton's ideology is not usually referred to when we talk about Milton's language. It is part of the famous hymn to wedded love:

Hail wedded love, mysterious law, true source
 Of human offspring, sole propriety
 In Paradise of all things common else,
 By thee adulterous lust was driven from men
 Among the bestial herds to range, by thee
 Founded in reason, loyal, just, and pure,
 Relations dear, and all the charities
 Of father, son, and brother first were known.
 Far be it, that I should write thee sin or blame,
 Or think thee unbefitting holiest place,
 Perpetual fountain of domestic sweets,
 Whose bed is undefiled and chaste pronounced,
 Present, or past, as saints and patriachs used.
 Here Love his golden shafts employs, here lights
 His constant lamp, and waves his purple wings,
 Reigns here and revels, not in the bought smile
 Of harlots, loveless, joyless, unendeared,
 Casual fruition, nor in court amours
 Mixed dance, or wanton mask, or midnight ball,
 Or serenade, which the starved lover sings
 To his proud fair, best quitted with disdain.

(4. 750-770)

Many people have commented on the opposition Milton makes between a healthy sex life inside a stable middle class marriage and the unhealthy frustrations of what happens not in the home, but in the court. It cannot escape our attention that ironically or otherwise, for many years Milton's achievements as a writer were associated with *Comus*, a mask, one of the much maligned forms of aristocratic, elitist art. It is feasible to see Satan as the rake, the aristocrat interested only in egoism, pleasure and the court. He has built for himself a most sumptuous palace where falling angels sing songs about their heroic deeds; in a similar vein, the force of the extended simile in Book IX is to portray him as the potential seducer and rapist on the look out for a luscious country girl, innocent and sadly unable to save herself (Eve). But if it is impossible to separate language from deed, the

words of seduction from the seduction, likewise we cannot separate Satan from Satan's rhetoric. In rejecting courtly aesthetics Milton inevitably rejects courtly rhetoric as the model that man should follow. What he should follow is the simplicity and honesty demonstrated by Eve, which should become the ethos of the emerging middle classes. One of the effects of the Fall is that Adam begins to talk like Satan. At that moment, Eve has the answerable style with which to encounter the new world.

It cannot escape my readers' attention that if they accept that *Paradise Lost* is an epic criticising epic conventions, and I have analysed how this is done linguistically, this might seem acceptable if we look at certain parts of the poem. However, how can I apply this strategy to those most central parts of the poem which deal with warfare in great detail, and, arguably, with great relish? It is warfare which occupies the central position in the poem, leaning heavily on classical epic conventions of warfare. The answer that is the war to end all wars does not seem very satisfactory. A way out can be found if we have not forgotten that Milton himself makes some very clear statements about epics and warfare in the invocation, again the place where intentions are set out, to Book IX:

Wars, hitherto the only argument
 Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect
 With long and tedious havoc fabled knights
 In battle feigned, the better fortitude
 Of patience and heroic martyrdom
 Unsung, or tilting furniture, emblazoned shields
 Impreses quaint, caparisons and steeds,
 Bases and tinsel trappings, gorgeous knights
 At joust and tournament; then marshalled feast
 Served up in hall with sewers and seneschals,
 The skill of artifice or office mean,
 Not that which justly gives heroic name
 To person or to poem. Me of these
 Nor skilled nor studious ...

(9. 28-41)

Milton seems to be having us on: war is the central subject, in structural terms, of this and other epic poems. We could again try the idea that this accurately describes Satan and the falling angels both in Books I, II & particularly VI, with its jeering speeches addressed to the flagging army of God. Yet inevitably, we will consider that Milton's joke about his ignorance

of war is a rather feeble excuse for the destruction of war ethics, which after all, are the arms used to overthrow Satan: we might find accounts of boulders and mountains being thrown around the heavens tedious, but they are effective. God uses the expression "war wearied"(Book VI. 695) to justify the Son's intervention. That is probably the readers' sensation too, though we do not forget Milton's love of symmetry will require the Son's intervention on the third day. The Son is rather reluctant to intervene, and introduces a variation on the question of obedience and independence:

But whom thou hatest, I hate, and can put on
Thy terrors, as I put thy mildness on,
Image of thee in all things ...

(6. 732-734)

The Son would rather be mild, but circumstances demand that he be fierce; his natural mildness is replaced temporarily by the not-so-natural guise of the warrior. Man, as he is made in the image of God, should believe in the other form of heroics. As man and angels both possess seminal choice as their most outstanding feature, there is really little justification for war. Perhaps we are not so far away from the world of *El Quijote* at this point(which likewise deals with outmoded ethics). Clearly, Satan tilts at more important things than windmills, but his vision as to what is needed in the new world of humanism is badly dimmed. The Son resorts to militarism, but has the knowledge, as Milton has the desire, that this kind of solution is outdated. Not only must militarism and its ethos disappear, but so must its language. Speeches, such as Satan's "O friends, why come not on these victors proud ?"(Book VI. 609-619), can now surely be seen as parodic, full of courtliness, empty of relevance. They might enthuse the devils in hell or the courtiers, but neither the former nor the latter have much in importance in the world glimpsed at the end of Book XII. That world needs new ethics and new, simpler language. Heroics and rhetoric become inseparable. If heroics no longer serve any purpose, then the whole argument about who is the hero serves no purpose whatsoever. Heroics are evil, because heroics are so far away from the needs of the modern state. Similarly,lofty military rhetoric cannot describe the realities modern man encounters and is in the process of being supplanted by the prose of Bunyan or Defoe. *Paradise Lost* thus itself becomes the epic to end all epics. Some people might quarrel with the term *parody*. How can you, people will argue, insist that Milton parodies the centre of his poem ? Perhaps, we should extend the term *parody* to include not only the destruction of its ethos, but by suggesting what its replacement

will be. Something similar happens with the question of heroics. If we insist that Adam and Eve, the united bourgeois family are the true heroes of the poem, that seems to me perfectly acceptable if we realise that what we are given is a new code of heroics, that of the family, that of the novel, that of ordinary people.

Bakhtin's aesthetic theories place the epic and the novel as two polarities. The epic has a single voice and a tendency to be centripetal, to draw into itself all ideology towards a single world view. The controlling viewpoint of the national voice is clearly authoritative. The novel functions differently by being basically centrifugal. This idea can be synthesised thus:

To a greater or lesser extent, every novel is a dialogized system made up of the images of 'languages', styles and consciousness that are concrete and inseparable from language. Language in the novel not only represents, but itself serves as the object of representation. Novelistic discourse is always criticising itself.¹⁹⁰

Bakhtin suggests that a simple method of verification would be to analyse the effect of a poem or short extract of poetry spoken as a poem, and then go on to compare the different effect caused by inserting this poem into the voice of a character in a novel: friction would be immediately noticeable. Poetry becomes the static medium imprisoned within one voice and further restricted by rhythm, the novel the more dynamic medium where voices and languages meet and are appropriated by others to become others and others'. This process is best illustrated by the novels of Dostoyevsky. In the concluding section of this paper, I would like to demonstrate how such an analysis can be usefully applied to *Paradise Lost*.

Initially, it would seem to some that I have set myself an impossible task, as the rigidity of Milton's epic is well defined by Bakhtin. *Paradise Lost* has, it could be argued, the simple dogmatic basis of Thatcherism: there is no alternative ! However, it will help understand many things if we just bear in mind the idea that we are what we speak, or more eloquently, "The ideological becoming of a human being is the process of selectively

¹⁹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 49.

assimilating the words of others."¹⁹¹ If we go back to the discussion of Adam and Eve's respective explanations of what went wrong, we will remember that Eve simply explained what had happened whereas Adam resorted to rhetoric. In other words, Adam has assimilated the words, ideology and character of Satan: lustful, intolerant and egoistic. His fall, at this moment, is, or can be read as linguistic: he has spoken as Satan in the presence of God. The fate of Satan and the fallen angels yields itself to similar analysis. His transformation into a serpent confirms the inseparability of thought and deed: formally he became as a serpent and spoke as a serpent; after the Fall, the metamorphosis is taken to its logical conclusion to become his punishment: he will be what he feigned. Furthermore, the fallen angels suffer the same fate as they also assimilated Satanic rhetoric, and through their assent and acceptance of his proposals are as him. Their words make them accomplices to the crime.

There will always remain one unsurmountable difficulty in an analysis such as mine, which, I would like to believe, is beginning to make more sense to readers of *Paradise Lost* than it did a few minutes ago. Bakhtin insists that friction of languages is the defining factor (of the language of the novel). It must also be stated that the juxtaposition of two languages does not necessarily mean that that friction occurs. Placing a speech by Adam beside a speech by Abdiel does not create conflict. We are consequently obliged to consider, briefly and insufficiently, the daunting question of author, authorship and authorial intention. If we are to make sense of the poem from a Bakhtinian analysis we have to consider whether we see the poem as having a single, controlled voice that restricts the linguistic rebelliousness of its principal speakers, those entities who have at various times been considered heroes, or whether we believe that the speakers are able to move outside these restrictions of authorial control through discourse. The extent to which we accept the latter determines to what extent we are justified in calling *Paradise Lost* a novel. It must be stated that opinions concerning the openness or authoritarianism of *Paradise Lost* will eventually be many and diverse, each reading could turn out different interpretations, whether this be classified as the work or readers, reader communities, social determined groups, gender or whatever we consider to be the determining, dominant factor. From a Bakhtinian standpoint it must be stated that the prose of those seeking to confine Milton within a set of constricting parameters cannot

¹⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 341.

escape the conclusion that by imposing upon the poem the view or reading that Milton has a authoritarian voice intending to impose a monoglossic view upon language stands or falls by those same rules. The refusal to notice certain genres or discourse within a poem, something which I feel is quite clear in many of Milton's opponents' views is itself an act of authoritarianism, as the critic's or opponent's prose strives to suppress friction, with more or less success than that which is attributed to Milton himself. To insist that, for example, Satan or Eve, the most common alternative heroes, break down authority is such an act.

Finally, I am left with the task of identifying those parts of Miltonic discourse which, by being novel, break with the singular world view. Parody, one of the fundamental forms of discourse, is present, I have argued in Books VI & VI, which not only deflate the ethics of war, the central topic of epic poetry and the corresponding ethos of heroics, but give perspective to Satan's heroics, that very perspective he himself is unable to perceive. Without making too grand an assertion, it seems to me that the answer can be found in Adam and Eve. Here is Bakhtin again, referring to a situation that precedes the end of cultural hegemony:

The situation is analogous in those cases where a single and unitary literary language is at the same time another's language. What inevitably happens is a decay and collapse of the religious, political and ideological authority connected with that language. It is during this process of decay that the decentred language consciousness of prose art ripens, finding its support in the social heteroglossia of national languages that are actually spoken.¹⁹²

This is the situation that we are shown in the closing lines of the novel. Milton's humanism is unable to sustain an authoritarian predestination of history, and it is for this reason alone that the role of 'providence' remains highly ambiguous. This quotation aptly describes the end of national epics and the next day in the life of two ordinary but extraordinary people will doubtlessly have to be told in the ripe language of the novel. It is for this reason that I insist that *Paradise Lost* is and can be handled as a novel, or is at least a highly significant step in that direction. I will close appropriately, in a

¹⁹² *Ibidem*, 370.

paper which has spoken at some length on appropriation with a quotation. Here is the reader reading me reading Bakhtin reading Hegel:

A man must educate himself or re-educate himself for life in a world that is, from his own point of view, enormous and foreign; he must make it his own, domesticate it. In Hegel's definition, the novel must educate man for life in bourgeois society.¹⁹³

Milton, I imagine, would agree.

¹⁹³ *Ibidem*, 234.