Milton's Good God

A Study in Literary Theodicy

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TO MY
MOTHER AND FATHER
IN MEMORY OF MY SISTER
LYNN DANIELSON
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Preface

Does Milton worship, and present, a good God? Is his epic, *Paradise Lost,* any good? These two questions must be connected, given the fact that in *Paradise Lost* Milton openly sets out to justify the ways of God. If Milton presents a God who is wicked, or untruthful, or manipulative, or feeble, or unwise, then his epic poem must suffer accordingly. But if that poem recognizes the case that is brought against the Christian God and counters it (even if not conclusively) with a high degree of philosophical and literary credibility, then the poem and the poet must be praised accordingly. There have been enough critics who have affirmed that Milton and his epic are indeed undermined by the case against God. The purpose of this book is to argue systematically the second, contrary hypothesis, that Milton's theology informs and enhances his literary achievement, and that in fact his justification of God is all the more impressive for its being literary.

My study of Milton and of the problem of evil has its roots in concerns and interests I have had for what now seems a long time, and I take great pleasure in recording here my thanks to a number of people without whose spirit, wisdom, and encouragement my project could not have been the adventure it has been. My most long-standing scholarly debt of gratitude is to Patrick Grant, who first taught me Milton ten years ago in Victoria, who has been a valued friend and adviser since even before that, and who has often done his best to steer me away from a desiccated rigor. I extend my appreciation, too, to Laurence Lerner, Anthony Nuttall, and Stephen Medcalf, who in

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Sussex in 1973 encouraged my first stumbling attempts to explain what I wanted to do with a thesis on Milton's theodicy. To other teachers, friends, and acquaintances along the way whose lectures, conversations, or criticisms have been formative I am also grateful: John Hick in Victoria; Basil Mitchell, Alvin Plantinga, and John R. Lucas in Oxford; Milo Kaufmann and James Houston in Vancouver; Philip Sampson in too many places to mention; Norman Geisler in Los Altos, California. I want to thank, respectively, two of my colleagues and my research assistant: David Staines, for his great kindness in initiating my contact with Jane Majeski and her colleagues at Cambridge University Press; John Hill, for his advice on my use of Greek terms, as well as for his ongoing Miltonic fellowship; and Tony Cummins, for his valuable and uncomplaining help in preparing the index. I especially want to express my appreciation to Janis Bolster for the skill, hard work, and downright intelligence she displayed in copyediting my manuscript. And I would also here like to honor the memory of my late friend Henry Banman; our conversations about the problem of evil on the banks of the Nechako in 1974 have often come back both to humble and to inspire me.

In preparing the Ph.D. dissertation upon which this book is based, I had the rare privilege of being advised by two outstanding Milton scholars at two great universities. From October 1975 to July 1977 my work at Oxford was supervised by John Carey, whose keen, open-minded, and generous criticism encouraged me immensely in the earlier stages. Then for my last two years of doctoral research, at Stanford, I worked under the direction of J. Martin Evans, whose personal kindness and generosity encouraged me almost as much as did his advice on all matters Miltonic. He remains for me a model of supervision and scholarship. I am also grateful to Ronald Rebholz, whose friendly criticism and advice, beyond what one could expect of a reader, served as an invaluable lesson in the scholarly uses of "adversity." Finally, I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to my wife, Janet Henshaw Danielson, who for over eleven years has been the music and the anchor of my life. She has read and critiqued the entire manuscript, and has shared with me in the knowledge, without which this project could never have been begun, that

> Dominus ipse est Deus;
> Ipse fecit nos, et non ipsi nos.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (formerly the Canada Council) supported me from 1975 to 1979 with doctoral fellowships and enabled me through a further grant in 1980 to complete the research of which this book is the culmination; to the council I extend my sincere thanks. Chapter 3 is a revised version of my article "Milton's Arminianism and *Paradise Lost,*" in *Milton Studies,* Volume 12, edited by James D. Simmonds and published in 1979 by the University of Pittsburgh Press; it is used by permission. Parts of Chapters 4 and 5 appeared in my article "*Imago Dei,* 'Filial Freedom,' and Miltonic Theodicy," in *ELH,* Volume 47, published in 1980 by Johns Hopkins University Press; it too is used by permission.

I should add only that I have no one but myself to thank for all the gaps, errors, and crudities that remain.

Ottawa D. R. D.
8 May 1981

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1

The contexts of Milton's theodicy

"Milton's object . . . was to justify the ways of God to man! The controversial spirit observable in many parts of [*Paradise Lost*] . . . is immediately attributable to the great controversy of that age, the origination of evil."[1] This pithy comment made by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1818 suggests three overlapping contexts that will be the terrain of the present study, Milton figuring in each of them. First, there is the conceptual context: the so-called theological problem of evil. Secondly, there is the historical context in which Milton tackled the problem: seventeenth-century England, "that age" and its controversies. And thirdly, there is the context in which Coleridge's remark itself arises: that of the literary criticism of Milton and his writings, particularly *Paradise Lost.* My purpose will be to describe Milton's contribution to the first two of these contexts and in so doing to attempt my own contribution to the third. However much may have been written on Milton, I know of no major work that sets out to elucidate both conceptually and historically the immediate issues of theodicy – of the justification of God's ways – with reference to the great literary achievement that is *Paradise Lost.* My aim here is to fill that gap. The literary-critical relevance of my project I shall attempt further to justify at the end of this chapter; but first I must introduce contexts one and two, the conceptual and the historical.

The problem of evil

The importance of the theological problem of evil for an understanding of *Paradise Lost* will be argued implicitly and explicitly throughout this study. All I mean to do now is to describe the problem. Not all of what is said will find critical consummation in the discussion of Milton that follows, partly because Milton's theodicy is not exhaustive and has little to say about some issues raised by the problem of evil. However, the details I shall now lay out are all relevant to the problem as a whole; and the problem as a whole is relevant to an understanding of Milton. For the moment, I think, one can simply take Coleridge's word for that.

The *theological* problem of evil does not specifically concern the task we all share of dealing with pride, hatred, cruelty, deceit, adultery, envy, and covetousness (both in ourselves and in others), or with disease, flood, famine, and drought in the world at large. That task is fundamentally practical, whereas the theological problem of evil is theoretical in character, even though it does of course have practical implications. It begins with two claims made by orthodox Christians and by certain other theists, namely, that (1) there is a God who is omnipotent, and (2) this God is wholly good. These claims are considered together with a third claim – accepted not only by theists – that (3) the evil of hatred, disease, and so on, which I have just mentioned, does really exist in the world. Hence, in its barest form the theoretical problem is this: If (1) and (2) are true – if God is both omnipotent and wholly good – how is it that evil can in fact exist in the world? If (2) and (3) are true – if God is wholly good and evil does exist – how can God be said to be omnipotent? And if (1) and (3) are true – if God is omnipotent and there is evil in the world – how can God be wholly good? The word "theodicy," although it has entered English since Milton's time, is virtually synonymous with his phrase "to justify the ways of God."[2] Deriving from the Greek *theos* ("god") and *dike* ("justice"), it denotes any attempt to show the consistency and truth of (1), (2), and (3); or, more minimally, to support the claim that the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) is not contradictory.

One of the oldest and most famous formulations of the ques-

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tion is that of Epicurus (341–270 B.C.), as quoted by Lactantius (A.D. 260–330):

> God . . . either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?

Lactantius adds, understatedly, "I know that many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument."[3] I shall say much more about Milton's reaction to this section from Lactantius in Chapter 6, but for now it serves the purposes of this study simply by stating the issue, and by suggesting a long-standing connection between the assertion of providence as such and the justification of God, given the fact of evil.

Traditionally, three kinds of evil have been distinguished: "metaphysical," natural, and moral. It is the last that will demand most of my attention, as it did most of Milton's. One can provisionally define it simply as any evil directly resulting from or consisting in a rational agent's wrong act, choice, or habit, or the wrong acts, choices, and habits of a group of rational agents. Included in this category are the evils mentioned earlier, such as hatred, cruelty, and so on. For the purposes of this discussion, "moral" will be used in a very broad sense to refer to right and wrong not only in human and angelic matters, but also in matters that concern God himself. To some it may sound impious to apply the category of morality to God. But all I am saying is that I shall take cardinal proposition (2), that God is wholly good – to which anyone concerned with piety will presumably assent – as involving, not necessarily exclusively, the category of moral goodness. It is important to insist on that category's applicability to God at this stage because clearly what a challenge such as Epicurus's demands is a *moral* justification of God's ways, even though the challenge pertains to the existence of evil of every kind.

The category of natural evil is usually taken to include diseases, floods, famines, volcanoes, toothaches, and any evil not directly attributable to the wrong acts, choices, or habits of rational agents. Milton and his age had relatively little to say about this kind of evil so far as it concerns theodicy, partly, as will become clearer, because of what they saw as its connection with moral evil. I shall argue in Chapter 6 that Milton's position has important implications for a view of natural evil, even if that aspect of his theodicy is not explicit. For now I would simply emphasize that, although most seventeenth-century theodicists did not see it as lying at the core of their task, the problem of physical suffering in general was not lost sight of. Indeed, a number of modern introductions to the subject borrow Milton's vivid description of the "lazar-house" that appears to Adam:

> wherein were laid
> Numbers of all diseased, all maladies
> Of ghastly spasm, or racking torture, qualms
> Of heart-sick agony, all feverous kinds,
> Convulsions, epilepsies, fierce catarrhs,
> Intestine stone and ulcer, colic pangs,
> Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy
> And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,
> Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence,
> Dropsies, and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums.
> Dire was the tossing, deep the groans, despair
> Tended the sick busiest from couch to couch;
> And over them triumphant death his dart
> Shook, but delayed to strike, though oft invoked.
> [*PL*, 11.479–92]

The question now arises, if such suffering constitutes natural evil, and if natural evil is defined as that evil which is not obviously moral evil, then have we not already precluded any definition of "metaphysical evil" that does not overlap the other two kinds?[4] It is true that the distinctions quickly become blurred once the discussion of theodicy gets going in earnest; that is why I am trying to make them as clear as I can now. However, the answer to the question is essentially yes, for metaphysical evil is not properly actual evil at all. If God is the absolute Good, it is argued, then everything else must be less good than the Good; and to be less good is in some sense evil. In this manner, then, metaphysical evil can simply be taken as denoting the essential dependency, finitude, imperfection, and limitation of all created things.

This category, of course, is most at home in the ontology associated with the so-called Great Chain of Being, that essentially Neoplatonic, hierarchical view of reality according to which each thing participates (in the Platonic sense) in Being to either a greater or lesser degree than that which is adjacent to it in the chain. In this system, furthermore, a thing is good precisely in accordance with its degree of participation in Being, so that the farther down something is in the chain, the less good and hence the more metaphysically evil it is. Plotinus, the great third-century advocate of this scheme, nevertheless emphasizes that no one, neither God nor creature, is to be blamed for metaphysical evil – "nothing is to be blamed for being inferior to the First" – for "since higher exists, there must be the lower as well. The Universe is a thing of variety, and how could there be an inferior without a superior or a superior without an inferior? . . . Those that would like evil driven out from the All would drive out Providence itself."[5]

Plotinus's argument in fact might well suggest, at least to someone not committed to the Great Chain of Being, that evil of a metaphysical sort is not evil at all. I would like to retain the category, however, even while questioning its label's accuracy. For, first, it provides a basis for an etiology of evil. Even if creaturely finitude is itself not properly an evil, it does help to explain how natural and moral evil might have come about in a good creation. As St. Augustine put it, "All things that exist, . . . seeing that the Creator of them all is supremely good, are themselves good. But because they are not, like their Creator, supremely and unchangeably good, their good may be diminished and increased. But for a good to be diminished is an evil."[6] God could not logically have created another absolutely perfect and immutable being, another God; so if he was to create anything at all, it had to be to some degree imperfect and mutable. If it were imperfect and mutable, then the conditions would exist for evil to come about. One can see how such an argument could be developed in order to justify God, given the *possibility* of evil. And although Augustine was greatly influenced by Neoplatonism,[7] there is no need to consider his account of the metaphysical conditions for the ingress of evil into the creation as being necessarily grounded in a Neoplatonic cosmology. Perhaps that is where it first sprang forth; but it has shown enough vitality of its own to be capable of thriving in other soil. However, I shall leave further discussion of the metaphysical conditions for the existence of evil until Chapter 2.

The other reason for retaining the category of metaphysical evil, together with some of its initially Neoplatonic baggage, is simply that it has provided not only an etiology but also, and even more importantly, an ontology of evil for almost the entire history of Christian thought since Augustine. In his *Confessions,* Augustine declares: "You [God] have made all things good, nor are there any substances at all which you have not made. And because you did not make all things equal, therefore they each and all have their existence."[8] Whereas Plotinus, as we have noted, saw evil ontologically as a thing's being "inferior to the First," Augustine would see a thing's existence at the level of "inferiority" at which it was created as being good, its finitude and mutability notwithstanding. What constitutes evil, therefore, according to this Augustinian view, is not something's "inferiority" in Plotinus's sense but rather its *being diminished:* "For a good to be diminished is an evil." In other words, evil is not the absence of a goodness that a thing has never and could never possess, but rather the *lack* of a goodness in some sense original to it – in the words of Thomas Aquinas, a goodness "which it ought to have but has not."[9] Metaphysical-evil-as-limitation is thus transformed in Christian thought into actual-evil-as-*privation*. The importance of this conception in avoiding dualism will be touched on again in Chapter 2. But for now it is enough to recognize the role the notion of metaphysical evil has played in suggesting that, ontologically, evil might be seen as privative. Hence, of course, the famous and influential conception of evil as *privatio boni*.

Having briefly considered kinds of evil and, before that, the three propositions that basically define the theological problem of evil, we must now ask what forms a theodicy might take and what the criteria for its success might be. I say *might*, because I do not intend to lay down strict guidelines.

The most ambitious theodicy conceivable, one supposes, would set out to establish with absolute certainty the truth of the three propositions – (1) that God is omnipotent, (2) that he is wholly good, (3) that evil exists in the world. (From their truth, of course, their consistency would follow automatically.) By contrast, the most modest theodicy would merely attempt to demonstrate that there is an interpretation of the three cardinal propositions such that their conjunction implies no contradiction. I know of no attempt to accomplish the former; there is in modern philosophical circles a major attempt to accomplish the latter, though its main spokesman denominates it a *defense* rather than a theodicy, in that it concerns itself with matters of mere consistency rather than actual truth.[10] However, I think we can assume that most theodicies will attempt something in between, something consciously less ambitious than apodictic demonstration but also less formal than a logical defense of consistency. They will seek to establish for their solutions not only a bare possibility, but also some degree of probability or plausibility. In so doing they must avoid farfetched interpretations of "omnipotent," "good," and "evil" that might nevertheless guarantee a consistent solution, and must instead seek a consistency in accordance with an interpretation of the terms that is reasonable or at least not contrary to their ordinary sense. For it is that sense which constitutes the problem as a problem in the first place.

Given these general guidelines, we are in a position to say, if nothing more, what form a successful theodicy shall not take. For the sake of brevity, let me simply present a stereotype of the three forbidden forms, which correspond respectively to theodicy's three cardinal propositions.

The advocate of theodical "heresy" number one, although claiming to accept propositions (1), (2), (3), seeks to solve the problem of evil in one way or another that involves a de facto denial of (1), God's omnipotence. Of course omnipotence does need to be defined and qualified; otherwise we leave the way open for nonsense of the sort that claims God is able to create rocks so heavy he cannot lift them. But neither must it be qualified beyond recognition. Where that happens, the result is generally some form of *dualism.*

Heresy number two assents to the proposition that God is wholly good, but defines goodness in such a way that it is meaningless as applied to God. The common form of this error in the history of Christian thought views what God wills as being good and just merely in virtue of the fact that he wills it. In effect, God himself is thus made "good" by definition alone, and proposition (2) is accordingly rendered devoid of content. This I shall refer to as theological *voluntarism.*

The third heresy, finally, qualifies proposition (3) in such a way that it loses its meaning. Most obviously, *illusionism* declares the unreality of evil and thus treats the problem of evil as primarily a subjective or psychological matter.[11] In a Christian context, however, this heresy has mainly taken a somewhat more subtle form, declaring that the evils we see around and within us combine with the good to form a beautiful whole, like the dark and light shades of a master painting. Partial evil somehow constitutes universal good, and in the final analysis whatever is, is right. In this system, as Voltaire sarcastically says, "everything is for the best," and, as Karl Barth puts it, "the wolf not only dwells with the lamb . . . but actually

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