

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

John Milton's
Paradise Lost



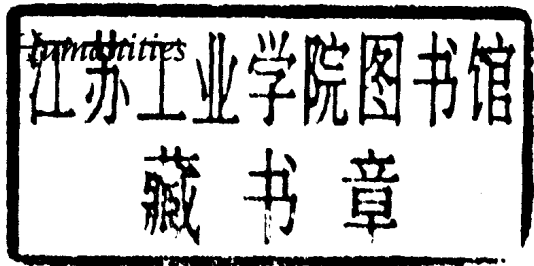
Modern Critical Interpretations

John Milton's
Paradise Lost

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of what I judge to be the most vital criticism of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* that has been published during the last decade, reprinted here in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to John Rogers for his aid in editing this volume.

Essentially the essayists appearing here owe their starting point to a great theoretician, Angus Fletcher, who in his *Allegory* (1964) associated Milton's mode of allusion with the ancient trope of transumption, a metaleptic substitution of earliness for belatedness which is the particular signature of Milton's stance towards his poetic precursors.

My introduction, published in an earlier version in 1962, is an attempt to bring forward again the High Romantic reading of Milton, and was written much under Fletcher's influence as he composed his seminal *Allegory*. His account of Miltonic transumption is developed antithetically in my essay here from my *Map of Misreading*, and achieves something close to a definitive statement in the poet John Hollander's learned treatment of the scheme of echo in *Paradise Lost*.

Patricia Parker and John Guillory, in very different yet related ways, can be said to carry on a kind of transumptive literary criticism of *Paradise Lost* in the next generation. Parker, subtly arguing for a more temporal and less teleological reading of the epic, traces the shadings between Eve and evening and relates them both to Milton's modifications of tradition and to later developments in what then becomes Miltonic poetic tradition. Guillory, analyzing the simile-allusion of Ithuriel's spear as an instance of transumption, moves the question of Milton's triumphant allusiveness into the crucial arena of poetic authority.

William Kerrigan, brilliantly reminding us never to forget that Milton believed in the Mortalist heresy, in which body and soul die

together and are resurrected together, traces this Miltonic monism in the imaginative materialism that centers on the metaphor of knowledge as food, poetry as digestion, spirit as energy. It is Kerrigan's distinction that he is the first critic to bring together, fruitfully, Freud and Freud's favorite poet, Milton. Maureen Quilligan looks at Milton's invocation to Urania in book 7 of *Paradise Lost* and considers the question of whether women would have been thought fit readers of the epic in seventeenth-century England, and, if so, with what limitations. In the final essay, written with Gordon Braden, Kerrigan shows us Milton transuming all that is most vital in Renaissance erotic poetry. Capturing the beautiful image of sexual fruition for his great epic, Milton "consumes a great tradition, and gives it back to us as representation and as understanding."

Contents

Editor's Note / vii

Introduction / 1

HAROLD BLOOM

Milton and Transumption / 13

HAROLD BLOOM

Echo Schematic / 31

JOHN HOLLANDER

Eve, Evening, and the Labor of Reading
in *Paradise Lost* / 43

PATRICIA PARKER

Ithuriel's Spear: History and the Language
of Accommodation / 65

JOHN GUILLORY

"One First Matter All": Spirit as Energy / 91

WILLIAM KERRIGAN

The Gender of Milton's Muse and the Problem
of the Fit Reader / 125

MAUREEN QUILLIGAN

Milton's Coy Eve: *Paradise Lost* and Renaissance
Love Poetry / 133

WILLIAM KERRIGAN AND GORDON BRADEN

Chronology / 157

Contributors / 159

Bibliography / 161

Acknowledgments / 169

Index / 171

Introduction

By 1652, before his forty-fourth birthday and with his long-projected major poem unwritten, Milton was completely blind. In 1660, with arrangements for the Stuart Restoration well under way, the blind poet identified himself with the prophet Jeremiah, as if he would “tell the very soil itself what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to,” vainly warning a divinely chosen people “now choosing them a captain back for Egypt, to bethink themselves a little, and consider whither they are rushing.” These words are quoted from the second edition of *The Ready and Easy Way*, a work which marks the end of Milton’s temporal prophecy and the beginning of his greater work, the impassioned meditations upon divine providence and human nature. In these meditations Milton abandons the field of his defeat, and leaves behind him also the songs of triumph he might have sung in praise of a reformed society and its imaginatively integrated citizens. He changes those notes to tragic, and praises, when he praises at all, what he calls the better fortitude of patience, the hitherto unsung theme of Heroic Martyrdom. Adam, Christ, and Samson manifest an internal mode of heroism that Satan can neither understand nor overcome, a heroism that the blind Puritan prophet himself is called upon to exemplify in the England of the Restoration.

Milton had planned a major poem since he was a young man, and he had associated his composition of the poem with the hope that it would be a celebration of a Puritan reformation of all England. He had prophesied of the coming time that “amidst the hymns and hallelujahs of the saints some one may perhaps be heard offering at high strains in new and lofty measures to sing and celebrate thy divine mercies and marvellous judgements in the land throughout all ages.” This vision clearly concerns a national epic, very probably on a British rather than a biblical theme. That poem, had it been written, would have rivaled

the great poem of Milton's master, Spenser, who in a profound sense was Milton's "Original," to cite Dryden's testimony. *Paradise Lost* is not the poem that Milton had prophesied in the exuberance of his youth, but we may guess it to be a greater work than the one we lost, for the unwritten poem would not have had the Satan who is at once the aesthetic glory and the moral puzzle of Milton's epic of loss and disillusion.

The form of *Paradise Lost* is based on Milton's modification of Virgil's attempt to rival Homer's *Iliad*, but the content of Milton's epic has a largely negative relation to the content of the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. Milton's "one greater Man," Christ, is a hero who necessarily surpasses all the sons of Adam, including Achilles and Aeneas, just as he surpasses Adam or archetypal Man himself. Milton delights to speak of himself as soaring above the sacred places of the classical muses and as seeking instead "thee *Sion* and the flow'ry brooks beneath," Siloam, by whose side the Hebrew prophets walked. For *Paradise Lost*, despite C. S. Lewis's persuasive assertions to the contrary, is specifically a Protestant and Puritan poem, created by a man who finally became a Protestant church of one, a sect unto himself. The poem's true muse is "that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim, with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases." This Spirit is one that prefers for its shrine, in preference to all Temples of organized faith, the upright and pure heart of the isolated Protestant poet who carries within himself the extreme Christian individualism of the Puritan Left Wing. Consequently, the poem's doctrine is not "the great central tradition" that Lewis finds it to be, but an imaginative variation on that tradition. Milton believed in the doctrines of the Fall, natural corruption, regeneration through grace, an aristocracy of the elect, and Christian Liberty, all of them fundamental to Calvinist belief, and yet Milton was no orthodox Calvinist, as Arthur Barker has demonstrated. The poet refused to make a sharp distinction between the natural and the spiritual in man, and broke from Calvin in his theory of regeneration. Milton's doctrine of predestination, as seen in *Paradise Lost*, is both general and conditional; the Spirit does not make particular and absolute choices. When regeneration comes, it heals not only man's spirit but his nature as well, for Milton could not abide in dualism. Barker makes the fine contrast between Milton and Calvin that in Calvin even good men are altogether dependent upon God's will, and not on their own restored faculties, but in Milton the will is

made free again, and man is restored to his former liberty. The hope for man in *Paradise Lost* is that Adam's descendants will find their salvation in the fallen world, once they have accepted Christ's sacrifice and its human consequences, by taking a middle way between those who would deny the existence of sin altogether, in a wild freedom founded upon a misunderstanding of election, and those who would repress man's nature that spirit might be more free. The regenerated descendants of Adam are to witness that God's grace need not provide for the abolition of the natural man.

To know and remember this as Milton's ideal is to be properly prepared to encounter the dangerous greatness of Satan in the early books of *Paradise Lost*. The poem is a theodicy, and like Job seeks to justify the ways of Jehovah to man, but unlike the poet of Job Milton insisted that reason could comprehend God's justice, for Milton's God is perfectly reasonable while the perfection of man in Christ would raise human reason to a power different only in degree from its fallen status. The poet of Job has an aesthetic advantage over Milton, for most readers rightly prefer a Voice out of a Whirlwind, fiercely asking rhetorical questions, to Milton's sophistical Schoolmaster of Souls in book 3 of *Paradise Lost*. But Milton's God is out of balance because Satan is so magnificently flawed in presentation, and to account for the failure of God as a dramatic character the reader is compelled to enter upon the most famous and vexing of critical problems concerning *Paradise Lost*, the Satanic controversy itself. Is Satan in some sense heroic, or is he merely a fool?

The anti-Satanist school of critics has its great ancestor in Addison, who found Satan's sentiments to be "suitable to a created being of the most exalted and most depraved nature. . . . Amid those impieties which this enraged spirit utters . . . the author has taken care to introduce none that is not big with absurdity, and incapable of shocking a religious reader." Dr. Johnson followed Addison with more eloquence: "The malignity of Satan foams in haughtiness and obstinacy; but his expressions are commonly general, and no otherwise offensive than as they are wicked." The leading modern anti-Satanists are the late Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis, for whom Milton's Satan is to some extent an absurd egoist, not altogether unlike Meredith's Sir Willoughby Patterne. So Lewis states "it is a mistake to demand that Satan, any more than Sir Willoughby, should be able to rant and posture through the whole universe without, sooner or later, awaking the comic spirit." Satan is thus an apostle of Nonsense, and his pro-

gressive degeneration in the poem is only the inevitable working-out of his truly absurd choice when he first denied his status as another of God's creatures.

The Satanist school of critics finds its Romantic origins in two very great poets profoundly and complexly affected by Milton, Blake, and Shelley. This tradition of Romantic Satanism needs to be distinguished from the posturings of its Byronic-Napoleonic cousin, with which anti-Satanists have loved to confound it. The greatest of anti-Satanists (because the most attracted to Satan), Coleridge, was himself guilty of this confusion. But though he insisted upon reading into Milton's Satan the lineaments of Bonaparte, Coleridge's reading of the Satanic character has never been equaled by any modern anti-Satanist:

But in its utmost abstraction and consequent state of reprobation, the will becomes Satanic pride and rebellious self-idolatry in the relations of the spirit to itself, and remorseless despotism relatively to others; the more hopeless as the more obdurate by its subjugation of sensual impulses, by its superiority to toil and pain and pleasure; in short, by the fearful resolve to find in itself alone the one absolute motive of action, under which all other motives from within and from without must be either subordinated or crushed.

Against this reading of the Satanic predicament we can set the dialectical ironies of Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the imaginative passion of Shelley in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* and *A Defence of Poetry*. For Blake the Satan of books 1 and 2 supremely embodies human desire, the energy that alone can create. But desire restrained becomes passive, until it is only a shadow of desire. God and Christ in *Paradise Lost* embody reason and restraint, and their restriction of Satan causes him to forget his own passionate desires, and to accept a categorical morality that he can only seek to invert. But a poet is by necessity of the party of energy and desire; reason and restraint cannot furnish the stuff of creativity. So Milton, as a true poet, wrote at liberty when he portrayed Devils and Hell, and in fetters when he described Angels and God. For Hell is the active life springing from energy, and Heaven only the passive existence that obeys reason.

Blake was too subtle to portray Satan as being even the unconscious hero of the poem. Rather, he implied that the poem can have no hero because it too strongly features Milton's self-abnegation in assigning human creative power to its diabolical side. Shelley went further,

and claimed Satan as a semi-Promethean or flawed hero, whose character engenders in the reader's mind a pernicious casuistry of humanist argument against theological injustice. Shelley more directly fathered the Satanist school by his forceful statement of its aesthetic case: "Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*." Whatever else, Shelley concluded, might be said for the Christian basis of the poem, it was clear that Milton's Satan as a moral being was far superior to Milton's God.

Each reader of *Paradise Lost* must find for herself or himself the proper reading of Satan, whose appeal is clearly all but universal. Amid so much magnificence it is difficult to choose a single passage from *Paradise Lost* as surpassing all others, but I incline to the superlative speech of Satan on top of Mount Niphates (book 4, lines 32–113), which is the text upon which the anti-Satanist, Satanist, or some compromise attitude must finally rest:

O thou that with surpassing Glory crown'd,
 Look'st from thy sole Dominion like the God
 Of this new World; at whose sight all the Stars
 Hide thir diminisht heads; to thee I call,
 But with no friendly voice, and add thy name
 O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
 That bring to my remembrance from what state
 I fell, how glorious once above thy Sphere;
 Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down
 Warring in Heav'n against Heav'n's matchless King:
 Ah wherefore! he deserv'd no such return
 From me, whom he created what I was
 In that bright eminence, and with his good
 Upbraided none; nor was his service hard.
 What could be less than to afford him praise,
 The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks,
 How due! yet all his good prov'd ill in me,
 And wrought but malice; lifted up so high
 I sdein'd subjection, and thought one step higher
 Would set me highest, and in a moment quit
 The debt immense of endless gratitude,
 So burdensome, still paying, still to owe;
 Forgetful what from him I still receiv'd,
 And understood not that a grateful mind

By owing owes not, but still pays, at once
 Indebted and discharg'd; what burden then?
 O had his powerful Destiny ordain'd
 Me some inferior Angel, I had stood
 Then happy; no unbounded hope had rais'd
 Ambition. Yet why not? some other Power
 As great might have aspir'd, and me though mean
 Drawn to his part; but other Powers as great
 Fell not, but stand unshak'n, from within
 Or from without, to all temptations arm'd.
 Hadst thou the same free Will and Power to stand?
 Thou hadst: whom hast thou then or what to accuse,
 But Heav'n's free Love dealt equally to all?
 Be then his Love accurst, since love or hate,
 To me alike, it deals eternal woe.
 Nay curs'd be thou; since against his thy will
 Chose freely what it now so justly rues.
 Me miserable! which way shall I fly
 Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
 Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
 And in the lowest deep a lower deep
 Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide,
 To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.
 O then at last relent: is there no place
 Left for Repentance, none for Pardon left?
 None left but by submission; and that word
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
 Among the Spirits beneath, whom I seduc'd
 With other promises and other vaunts
 Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
 Th' Omnipotent. Ay me, they little know
 How dearly I abide that boast so vain,
 Under what torments inwardly I groan:
 While they adore me on the Throne of Hell,
 With Diadem and Sceptre high advanc'd
 The lower still I fall, only Supreme
 In misery; such joy Ambition finds.
 But say I could repent and could obtain
 By Act of Grace my former state; how soon
 Would highth recall high thoughts, how soon unsay

What feign'd submission swore: ease would recant
 Vows made in pain, as violent and void.
 For never can true reconciliation grow
 Where wounds of deadly hate have pierc'd so deep:
 Which would but lead me to a worse relapse,
 And heavier fall: so should I purchase dear
 Short intermission bought with double smart.
 This knows my punisher; therefore as far
 From granting hee, as I from begging peace:
 All hope excluded thus, behold instead
 Of us out-cast, exil'd, his new delight,
 Mankind created, and for him this World.
 So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear,
 Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost;
 Evil be thou my Good; by thee at least
 Divided Empire with Heav'n's King I hold
 By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign;
 As Man ere long, and this new World shall know.

Here Satan makes his last choice, and ceases to be what he was in the early books of the poem. All that the anti-Satanists say about him is true *after* this point; all or almost all claimed for him by the Satanists is true *before* it. When this speech is concluded, Satan has become Blake's "shadow of desire," and he is on the downward path that will make him "as big with absurdity" as ever Addison and Lewis claimed him to be. Nothing that can be regenerated remains in Satan, and the rift between his self-ruined spirit and his radically corrupted nature widens until he is the hissing serpent of popular tradition, plucking greedily at the Dead Sea fruit of Hell in a fearful parody of Eve's Fall.

It is on Mount Niphates again that Satan, now a mere (but very subtle) tempter, stands when he shows Christ the kingdoms of this world in the brief epic *Paradise Regained*. "Brief epic" is the traditional description of this poem (published in 1671, four years after *Paradise Lost*), but the description has been usefully challenged by several modern critics. E. M. W. Tillyard has warned against judging the poem by any kind of epic standard and has suggested instead that it ought to be read as a kind of Morality play, while Arnold Stein has termed it an internal drama, set in the Son of God's mind. Louis L. Martz has argued, following Tillyard, that the poem is an attempt to convert Virgil's *Georgics* into a mode for religious poetry, and ought therefore

to be read as both a didactic work and a formal meditation on the Gospel. *Paradise Regained* is so subdued a poem when compared to *Paradise Lost* that we find real difficulty in reading it as epic. Yet it does resemble Job, which Milton gave as the possible model for a brief epic, for like Job it is essentially a structure of gathering self-awareness, of the protagonist and hero recognizing himself in his relation to God. Milton's Son of Man is obedient where Milton's Adam was disobedient; Job was not quite either until God spoke to him and demonstrated the radical incompatibility involved in any mortal's questionings of divine purpose. Job, until his poem's climax, is an epic hero because he has an unresolved conflict within himself, between his own conviction of righteousness and his moral outrage at the calamities that have come upon him despite his righteousness. Job needs to overcome the temptations afforded him by this conflict, including those offered by his comforters (to deny his own righteousness) and by his finely laconic wife (to curse God and die). The temptations of Milton's Son of God (the poet's fondness for this name of Christ is another testimony to his Hebraic preference for the Father over the Son) are not easy for us to sympathize with in any very dramatic way, unlike the temptations of Job who is a man like ourselves. But again Milton is repeating the lifelong quest of his poetry; to see man as an integrated unity of distinct natures, body and soul harmonized. In Christ these natures are perfectly unified, and so the self-realization of Christ is an image of the possibility of human integration. Job learns not to tempt God's patience too far; Christ learns who he is, and in that moment of self-revelation Satan is smitten with amazement and falls as by the blow of a Hercules. Milton had seen himself in *Paradise Lost* as Abdiel, the faithful Angel who will not follow Satan in rebellion against God, defying thus the scorn of his fellows. Less consciously, something crucial in Milton had found its way into the Satan of the opening books, sounding a stoic defiance of adversity. In *Paradise Regained*, Milton, with genuine humility, is exploring the Jobean problem within himself. Has he, as a Son of God also, tried God's patience too far, and can he at length overcome the internal temptations that beset a proud spirit reduced to being a voice in the wilderness? The poet's conquest over himself is figured in the greater Son of God's triumphant endurance, and in the quiet close of *Paradise Regained*, where the Savior returns to his mother's house to lead again, for a while, the private life of contemplation and patience while waiting upon God's will, not the public life forever closed to Milton.

Published with *Paradise Regained* in 1671, the dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes* is more admired today than the brief epic it accompanied. The poem's title, like the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, refers to the episode in the hero's life upon which the work is centered. The reference (from the Greek for athletic contestants in public games) is to Samson's ordeal before the Philistines at their Feast of Dagon, where he is summoned for their sport to demonstrate his blind strength, and where his faith gives him light enough to destroy them. *Samson* is Milton's Christian modification of Athenian drama, as *Paradise Lost* had been of classical epic. Yet Milton's drama is his most personal poem, in its experimental metric and in its self-reference alike. Modern editors cautiously warn against overstressing the extent to which Samson represents Milton, yet the representation seems undeniable, and justly so, to the common reader. Milton's hatred of his enemies does not seem particularly Christian to many of his modern critics, but its ferocious zeal fits both the biblical story of Samson and the very bitter situation that the blind Puritan champion had to face in the first decade of the Restoration. The crucial text here is the great Chorus, lines 652–709, in which Milton confronts everything in the world of public events that had hurt him most:

Chorus. Many are the sayings of the wise
 In ancient and in modern books enroll'd,
 Extolling Patience as the truest fortitude,
 And to the bearing well of all calamities,
 All chances incident to man's frail life
 Consolatories writ
 With studied argument, and much persuasion sought
 Lenient of grief and anxious thought,
 But with th'afflicted in his pangs thir sound
 Little prevails, or rather seems a tune,
 Harsh, and of dissonant mood from his complaint,
 Unless he feel within
 Some source of consolation from above;
 Secret refreshings, that repair his strength,
 And fainting spirits uphold.

God of our Fathers, what is man!
 That thou towards him with hand so various,
 Or might I say contrarious,
 Temper'st thy providence through his short course,
 Not evenly, as thou rul'st

Th' Angelic orders and inferior creatures mute,
 Irrational and brute.
 Nor do I name of men the common rout,
 That wand'ring loose about
 Grow up and perish, as the summer fly,
 Heads without name no more remember'd,
 But such as thou hast solemnly elected,
 With gifts and graces eminently adorn'd
 To some great work, thy glory,
 And people's safety, which in part they effect:
 Yet toward these, thus dignifi'd, thou oft,
 Amidst thir height of noon,
 Changest thy count'nance and thy hand, with no regard
 Of highest favors past
 From thee on them, or them to thee of service.

Nor only dost degrade them, or remit
 To life obscur'd, which were a fair dismissal,
 But throw'st them lower than thou didst exalt them high,
 Unseemly falls in human eye,
 Too grievous for the trespass or omission,
 Oft leav'st them to the hostile sword
 Of Heathen and profane, thir carcasses
 To dogs and fowls a prey, or else captiv'd:
 Or to th'unjust tribunals, under change of times,
 And condemnation of th'ingrateful multitude.
 If these they scape, perhaps in poverty
 With sickness and disease thou bow'st them down,
 Painful diseases and deform'd,
 In crude old age;
 Though not disordinate, yet causeless suff'ring
 The punishment of dissolute days: in fine,
 Just or unjust, alike seem miserable,
 For oft alike, both come to evil end.

So deal not with this once thy glorious Champion,
 The Image of thy strength, and mighty minister.
 What do I beg? how hast thou dealt already?
 Behold him in this state calamitous, and turn
 His labors, for thou canst, to peaceful end.

The theodicy of *Paradise Lost* seems abstract compared to the terrible emotion conveyed in this majestic hymn. The men solemnly elected