1

Paradise Lost: Poem or "Problem"?

Two Propositions

I begin this short exploration of *Paradise Lost* with two simple propositions, which the rest of the book will be devoted to fleshing out and, I hope, substantiating. The first proposition is that *Paradise Lost* is a narrative poem, not a work of theology, or philosophy, or political polemic, and that it works on readers' minds according to the laws and procedures of narrative poetry, not according to those which govern the other kinds of discourse. The second proposition is that discussion of *Paradise Lost* always begins to go awry when the truth of the first proposition is forgotten.

The Laws of Poetry

What do I mean by saying that *Paradise Lost* operates "according to the laws of poetry"? "Poetry," of course, is notoriously difficult to define. When asked, "What is poetry?," Samuel Johnson is reported to have replied: "Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all *know* what light is; but it is not easy to *tell* what it is."[1] Elsewhere, however, Johnson ventured some more positive suggestions on the subject. When discussing, for example, some of the technical minutiae of versification employed by poets, he remarked:

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> Without this petty knowledge no man can be a poet; and … from the proper disposition of single sounds results that harmony that adds force to reason, and gives grace to sublimity; that shackles attention and governs passions.[2]

Johnson was here drawing attention to the way that the powerful emotional effects produced by poetry are the direct result of a skillful deployment of language, which is organized and patterned by poets to a far more telling and significant degree than is usual in either written or spoken language. Poets, to be sure, have regularly stressed the role of "inspiration" in the exercise of their art – the belief that they are, in some sense, in a "higher" state when composing their work than that which they command in ordinary life. Milton himself, indeed, powerfully invokes this idea when, at the beginning of Books I and VII of *Paradise Lost* he pleads for the assistance in his great task of Urania, the Greek muse of astronomy whom he identifies as the inspiring power behind the prophet-poets of the Bible.

But such inspiration goes hand in hand, Johnson's passage quoted above suggests, with a meticulous and painstaking exercise of verbal artistry. If poetic genius is, in another formulation of Johnson's, "cold" and "inert" without its capacity to "amplify" and "animate" its raw material, it is also a faculty that involves much labor of "collecting" and "combining."[3] Poets deploy the full resources of words – not only their meanings in the obvious dictionary sense, but their subtler resonances, overtones, connections, suggestions, and ambiguities. Poets are also attentive to the ways in which language has been deployed by predecessors in their art. They both absorb the language of their forebears silently into their own, and signal towards it openly by various kinds of imitation, allusion, and echo. In poetry, language is organized so as to exploit its sounds and rhythms to the full, its capacity to evoke or – so it has seemed to many – "enact" its subject matter by onomatopoeia, assonance, and other mimetic effects.[4] For this reason, poetry is best appreciated when read aloud, whether in a full vocal rendering, or to the mind's ear. It needs to be experienced sensuously and viscerally as well as intellectually. It speaks, in W. B. Yeats's famous phrase, to "the whole man – blood, imagination, intellect, running together."[5] In poetry, "form" and "content," "style" and "subject" are indivisible:

> If you read the line, "The sun is warm, the sky is clear," you do not experience separately the image of the warm sun and clear sky, on the one side, and certain unintelligible rhythmical sounds on the other; nor yet do you experience them together, side by side; but you experience the one *in* the other … Afterwards, no doubt, when you are out of the poetic experience but remember it, you may by analysis decompose this unity, and attend to a substance more or less isolated, and a form more or less isolated. But these are things in your analytic head, not in the poem, which is *poetic* experience. And if you want to have the poem again, you cannot find it by adding together these two products of decomposition; you can only find it by passing back into poetic experience. And then what you recover is no aggregate of factors, it is a unity in which you can no more separate a substance and a form than you can separate living blood and the life in the blood.[6]

Reflections of the kind summarized above have become commonplace in the discussion of poetry. But for many modern readers the term "poem" has effectively come to mean "short poem," and "poetry" today suggests a kind of writing – usually in the form of first-person reflection – that can be printed on one side, or at the very most, two or three sides, of paper. For most modern readers, the form most associated with storytelling is not poetry but the prose novel.

But Milton, of course, wrote in – and sought to extend and enrich – a tradition of narrative poetry stretching back to the great classical epics of Homer and Virgil. Narrative verse in this tradition – which enjoyed great prestige for centuries – was thought to have all the qualities associated with short poems, but many more besides. The great narrative poems were thought to have the same powers of verbal suggestiveness, animation and enactment that are found in shorter examples of poetic art. Such powers, it was felt, allowed readers of narrative verse a vivid emotional engagement with, rather than a mere intellectual comprehension of, the actions they depicted. Alexander Pope, for example, described the effect on him of Homer's *Iliad* thus:

> No man of a true poetical spirit is master of himself while he reads [Homer]. What he writes is of the most animated nature imaginable; every thing moves, every thing lives, and is put in action. If a council be called or a battle fought, you are not coldly informed of what

> was said or done as from a third person. The reader is hurried out of himself by the force of the poet's imagination, and turns in one place to a hearer, in another to a spectator.[7]

And Pope wrote in similar terms of a much shorter and much more recent narrative poem, John Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* (1697). In that work, Dryden had imagined how Alexander the Great – the alleged son of Jupiter ("Lybian Jove") and the mightiest conqueror in the world, who has just triumphed in battle over the great Persian empire – was disconcertingly transported by the mercurial artistry of his court poet-musician Timotheus into a succession of emotional states quite beyond his control. To read Dryden's poem, Pope suggested in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), is to feel Alexander's constantly shifting emotions with something like the irresistible immediacy experienced by the poem's "godlike hero" himself:

> Hear how Timotheus' varied lays surprise,
> And bid alternate passions fall and rise!
> While, at each change, the son of Lybian Jove
> Now burns with glory, and then melts with love;
> Now his fierce eyes with sparkling fury glow;
> Now sighs steal out, and tears begin to flow:
> Persians and Greeks like turns of nature found,
> And the world's victor stood subdued by sound!
> The power of music all our hearts allow;
> And what Timotheus was, is Dryden now.
> (374–83)

The great narrative poems, it was believed, did not merely reflect, reproduce, or record the world we inhabit in daily life. They could create "new worlds," inhabitable only in the imagination, drawing on the world we know but radically transforming, reconstituting, and recombining its elements. In the words of Shakespeare's Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

> as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
> (V. i. 14–17)

Narrative poets could, moreover, it was believed, combine emotional states and sentiments which would normally be thought incompatible, and could make attractive and comprehensible beliefs, relationships and events which would be perplexing, even repellent, in ordinary life. The poet Shelley commented memorably on this quality in his *Defence of Poetry* (written, 1821, published 1840):

> Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches.

Narrative poems, like dramas, it was thought, cannot be properly represented by extracts, or in parts, but work in a cumulative manner to produce their effects on the imagination. Like dramas, they contain speeches in which different characters are allowed their say, and different views are juxtaposed, without being resolved into any single perspective. In the great Preface to his edition of the works of Shakespeare (1765), Samuel Johnson noted that while Shakespeare's plays contain eminently quotable "practical axioms and domestic wisdom," "his real power is not shown in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable and the tenor of his dialogue." In the same way, the insights of a great narrative poem, it was thought, are not located, in a detachable way, in any of its local parts – even those in which the poet apparently speaks in his own voice and offers his own commentary on the action – but in the temporally unfolding and cumulative effect of the whole, and the dramatic interplay between its descriptive passages (including the extended similes that are a such a notable feature of epic poetry) and the various "voices" which speak within it.[8] Key sentiments and ideas are returned to, and seen from different angles as the narrative progresses. Apparent digressions and interludes turn out, as one reads, to be relevant to the poem's larger concerns. Significant words – in *Paradise Lost*, for example, such apparently simple terms as "bliss," "height," "love," "naked," "reason," "sin," "sweet" – acquire further depth and resonance as the story unfolds. And at the local level, the narrative

poet controls the movement, rhythm, and evocative power of his language in the way with which we have become familiar from shorter poems, thus enabling any "ideas" or "doctrines" which his work contains to affect the reader in a quite a different way from that in which similar material would affect them if encountered in a work of philosophy or theology.

Paradise Lost, this book suggests, operates as a narrative poem in the ways broadly sketched above. It achieves its objective of "justifying the ways of God to men" not by deductive reasoning or theological dogma, but by conducting us through an experiential process which conveys to us both the goodness of the divine dispensation which it imagines, and the perils of rejecting that dispensation. It allows us to live with paradoxes which in other kinds of writing would seem mere contradictions. It solicits our imaginative participation in the events which it depicts, and enables us to comprehend the sentiments of the various agents in those events with inwardness and sympathy. It brings home to us the complexities and difficulties of the choices which they face. It offers a plausible depiction of scenes, sentiments, and relationships which, in other treatments, might seem remote from human comprehension and concern. And it does all this in language that is remarkable for its variety, ranging from sublime grandeur to the most minute and sensuous delicacy.

Such a general view of Milton's poem was once commonplace. What has caused it to lose its hold? One answer, I think, might go somewhat as follows. *Paradise Lost* contains, at various points, arguments that are close to those of philosophy or theology. The poem, no less than those of Lucretius and Dante, is, indeed, full of theological and philosophical argumentation. That argumentation, moreover – about divine foreknowledge, human free will, the relations between the sexes, the origins of evil – concerns issues on which Milton himself expressed strong views in prose, and about which his readers are likely to have strong opinions of their own. It has been very easy, therefore, for commentators on *Paradise Lost* to slide from talking about Milton's ideas and arguments as they are presented in the poem into discussing them as if they were independent entities, abstractable from "the progress of the fable and the tenor of the dialogue" of *Paradise Lost*. It has also been

frequently assumed that *Paradise Lost* contains much that Milton believed as literal, historical fact, but which we find quite unacceptable or ludicrous. Milton, it has been suggested, was asking us to accept and approve of a wrathful, omniscient, anthropomorphic God, and a hierarchical arrangement of the universe in which, at the centre, man and woman exist in a divinely appointed hierarchy. And he was asking us to believe in these not as fictions, symbols, myths, or metaphors, but as events with a factual, historical status.

Two French Critics and an English Poet on *Paradise Lost*

Such arguments, I would suggest, are based on serious misapprehensions about Milton's whole artistic endeavor. In support of such a proposition, let first us consider two general statements about *Paradise Lost* by critics of the past. They are both by Frenchmen of a decidedly skeptical temperament. The first is by the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778), and is taken from his *Essay on Epic Poetry* (1727):

> What Milton so boldly undertook, he performed with superior strength of judgement, and with an imagination productive of beauties not dreamed of before him. The meanness, if there is any, of some parts of the subject is lost in the immensity of the poetical invention. There is something above the reach of human forces to have attempted the creation without bombast, to have described the gluttony and curiosity of a woman without flatness, to have brought probability and reason amidst the hurry of imaginary things belonging to another world, and as far remote from the limits of our notions as they are from our earth; in short, to force the reader to say, "If God, if the angels, if Satan would speak, I believe they would speak as they do in Milton."
>
> I have often admired [wondered at] how barren the subject appears, and how fruitful it grows under his hands.
>
> The *Paradise Lost* is the only poem wherein are to be found in a perfect degree that uniformity which satisfies the mind and that variety which pleases the imagination, all its episodes being necessary

lines which aim at the centre of a perfect circle. Where is the nation who would not be pleased with the interview of Adam and the angel? With the Mountain of Vision, with the bold strokes which make up the relentless, undaunted and sly character of Satan? But above all with that sublime wisdom which Milton exerts, whenever he dares to describe God and to make him speak? He seems indeed to draw the picture of the Almighty as like as human nature can reach to, through the mortal dust in which we are clouded.

The heathens always, the Jews often, and our Christian priests sometimes, represent God as a tyrant infinitely powerful. But the God of Milton is always a creator, a father, and a judge, nor is his vengeance jarring with his mercy, nor his predeterminations repugnant to the liberty of man …

But he hath especially an undisputable claim to the unanimous admiration of mankind, when he descends from those high flights to the natural description of human things. It is observable that in all other poems love is represented as a vice; in Milton only 'tis a virtue. The pictures he draws of it are naked as the persons he speaks of, and as venerable. He removes with a chaste hand the veil which covers everywhere else the enjoyments of that passion. There is softness, tenderness and warmth without lasciviousness. The poet transports himself and us into that state of innocent happiness in which Adam and Eve continued for a short time. He soars not above human, but above corrupt nature, and as there is no instance of such love, there is none of such poetry.

The second passage is by the nineteenth-century French politician, man of letters, and one-time theologian, Edmond Scherer (1815–89), and is taken from his essay "Milton and 'Paradise Lost'" (1868):[9]

"Paradise Lost" is an epic, but it is a theological epic, and the theology of the poem is made up of the favourite dogmas of the Puritans – the Fall, Justification, the sovereign laws of God. Moreover, Milton makes no secret of the fact that he is defending a thesis: his end, he says in the first lines, is to "assert eternal providence And justify the ways of God to man."

There are, therefore, in "Paradise Lost" two things which must be kept distinct: an epic poem and a theodicy [a vindication of divine justice]. Unluckily, these two elements … were incapable

of thorough fusion. Nay, they are at complete variance, and from their juxtaposition there results an undertone of contradiction which runs through the whole work, affects its solidity and endangers its value … Christianity is a religion which has been formally "redacted" and settled; and it is impossible, without doing it violence, to add anything to it or subtract anything from it. Moreover, Christianity is a religion serious in itself and insisting on being taken seriously, devoted to ideas the gravest, not so say the saddest, that imagination can form …

But this is not all. Christianity is a religion of dogma: in place of the fantastic and intangible myths of which the Aryan religions were made up, it has abstruse distinctions, paradoxical mysteries, subtle teachings. In short, it amounts to a metaphysic, or, to return to the expression I used at first, a theology. And theology has never had the reputation of being favourable to poetry …

"Paradise Lost" is not only a theological poem – two words which cry out at finding themselves united – but it is at the same time a commentary on texts of Scripture. The author has chosen for his subject the first chapters of Genesis, that is to say a story which the stoutest or the simplest faith hesitates to take quite literally, a story in which serpents are heard speaking and the ruin of the human race is seen to be bound up with a fault merely childish in appearance. In fixing on such a subject, Milton was obliged to treat the whole story as a literal and authentic history; and, worse still, to take a side on the questions which it starts. Now these questions are the very thorniest in theology; and so it comes about that Milton, who intended to instruct us, merely launches us on a sea of difficulties. What are we to understand by the Son of the Most High, who, one fine day, is begotten and raised to the rank of viceroy of creation? How are we to comprehend an angel who enters on a conflict with God, that is to say, with a being whom he knows to be omnipotent? What kind of innocence is it which does not prevent a man from eating forbidden fruit? How, again, can this fault extend its effects to ourselves? By what effort of imagination or of faith can we regard the history of Adam as part of our own history, and acknowledge solidarity with his crime in ourselves? And if Milton does not succeed in arousing this feeling in us, what becomes of his poem? What is its value, what is its interest? It becomes equally impossible to take it seriously as a

> profession of faith (since this faith escapes us) and even to regard it as the poetical expression of a theodicy which is out of date, because that theodicy could only become poetic on the terms of being intelligible.
>
> (pp. 120–2)

Paradise Lost, Scherer concludes, "is an unreal poem, a grotesque poem, a tiresome poem." It does not "hold together," and the only thing that can be salvaged from the wreckage is "some episodes" which, Scherer concedes, "will be for ever famous." Milton therefore "ought not to be read except in fragments."

Voltaire and Scherer clearly differ drastically in their valuation of *Paradise Lost*. (Later in his essay, Voltaire goes on to register some reservations about parts of Milton's poem, but his dominant response remains emphatically positive.) Much of what both critics say is widely echoed, in one way or another, in criticism of Milton's poem before and after, respectively, the "great divide" in the poem's reputation which, I suggested in my Preface, occurred around the middle of the nineteenth century.

But as well as their diametrically opposed conclusions, there is, it will be noticed, a radical difference in the way that the two critics conduct their arguments. It is notable that both critics share a conspicuous lack of sympathy with the poem's raw material. But in Voltaire's view, Milton has transformed that raw material so completely that what one might have supposed before reading *Paradise Lost* would have been the most unpropitious subject matter for a narrative poem, has become, in Milton's handling, impressive, delightful, and convincing: "I have often admired how barren the subject appears, and how fruitful it grows under his hands." Scherer, in contrast, assumes from the start that a successful poem could not possibly have been made out of such unpromising material: "There are in 'Paradise Lost' two things which *must* [my emphasis] be kept apart: an epic poem and a theodicy." Voltaire is clearly articulating a first-hand response – delighted and surprised – to a work of art. Scherer assumes as his premiss that such a work of art could not possibly exist.

Voltaire's combination of surprise and delight is similar to that of Milton's friend Andrew Marvell, who, in the commendatory

verses printed in the second edition of *Paradise Lost* (1674), first registered his initial unease that Milton was planning an epic poem on a subject that would, it seemed, inevitably launch him on a sea of confusion and blasphemy, and then affirmed his belief that, against all the odds, Milton had succeeded in finding a style whose "majesty," "gravity," "ease" and "compass" had enabled him both to "delight" his readers, and to impress upon them the awesome "horror" of some of his subject matter:

> When I beheld the poet blind, yet bold
> In slender book his vast design unfold,
> Messiah crowned, God's reconciled decree,
> Rebelling angels, the forbidden tree,
> Heaven, hell, earth, chaos, all; the argument
> Held me a while misdoubting his intent,
> That he would ruin (for I saw him strong)
> The sacred truths to fable and old song
> (So Sampson groped the Temple's post in spite)
> The world o'erwhelming to revenge his sight.
> Yet as I read, soon growing less severe,
> I liked his project, the success did fear;
> Through that wide field how he his way should find
> O'er which lame Faith leads Understanding blind;
> Lest he perplexed the things he would explain,
> And what was easy he should render vain ….
> Pardon me, mighty poet, nor despise
> My causeless, yet not impious, surmise ….
> Thou hast not missed one thought that could be fit,
> And all that was improper dost omit: …
> That majesty which through thy work dost reign
> Draws the devout, deterring the profane.
> And things divine thou treats of in such state
> As them preserves, and thee, inviolate.
> At once delight and horror on us seize,
> Thou sing'st with so much gravity and ease;
> And above human flight dost soar aloft
> With plume so strong, so equal, and so soft.
> The bird named from that Paradise you sing
> So never flags, but always keeps on wing.

Where couldst thou words of such a compass find?
Whence furnish such a vast expense of mind?
Just heaven thee like Tiresias[10] to requite
Rewards with prophecy thy loss of sight.
(1–16, 23–4, 27–8, 31–44)

A tell-tale sign that Scherer was condemning Milton's poem on a-priori grounds is that he offered a highly questionable interpretation of the famous last words of Milton's opening invocation to his Muse, where the poet says:

what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.
(I. 22–6)

In claiming that Milton "makes no secret of the fact that he is defending a thesis," Scherer clearly assumes that by "argument" Milton means what we would mean by the word: a chain of reasoning which proceeds by systematic, logical steps. He also assumes that by "assert" Milton means something like "propose assertively, in the face of opposition, as one would in a debate or polemical pamphlet." And he clearly believes that Milton's "justify" means something like "produce a cast-iron defence against the objections of skeptics." Scherer also states unequivocally that Milton believed the Genesis story to be "a literal and authentic history."

Scherer's gloss on Milton's "justify" is, indeed, supported by one modern commentator:

> In the poet's claim that he will *justify* God's actions lies the remarkable assertion not only that he is able to do this but also that God's ways are in need of justification. Richard Baxter wrote: "Justification … implyeth Accusation" in his *Aphorismes of Justification* (London, 1649), p. 135.[11]

But the modern scholarly consensus suggests that Scherer's assumptions both about Milton's expressed intentions in his exordium, and about his beliefs concerning the truth of Scripture, are highly

questionable. Scherer speaks of *Paradise Lost* as embodying "the favourite dogmas of the Puritans," including "Justification." But Milton, as is well known, emphatically rejects the Calvinistic aspect of Puritanism, putting a major emphasis throughout his poem on human free will.[12] Scherer's bias is also visible in his treatment of particular Miltonic words. This is most obvious in his implied gloss on "argument," when he says that Milton "makes no secret of the fact that he is defending a thesis." But, as one can see from Marvell's poem, by "argument," Milton simply means "the story I am about to tell." (The plot summary which Milton added in issues of his poem from 1669 is entitled "The Argument"). And "assert" seems, in the view of most of Milton's commentators, to mean not "put forward argumentatively," but "speak on the side of." Patrick Hume, Milton's first annotator (1695), noted the derivation of the word from the Latin *asserere*. Scott Elledge, the editor of the Norton Critical Edition (1993), explained that this verb originally meant "to put one's hand on the head of a slave to set him free or defend him." Hence, in *Paradise Lost*, "assert" comes to mean something like "to take the part of; to champion sympathetically." Similarly, in the view of most commentators, "justify," for Milton means not "produce a theological justification of," but something closer to "demonstrate the justice of." There is, therefore, no reason to accept Scherer's assertion that Milton thought that he was engaged in a theological argument (in the modern sense) to persuade readers of the justice of God's actions. Milton's invocation can be more plausibly seen as the expression of a hope that his poetical powers will be sufficient to enable him to tell his great story in a way that will demonstrate, in the manner proper to a narrative poem, the justice to humankind of the God depicted in the poem.

Knowing God

Moreover, when Scherer says that Milton believed the Genesis story to be "a literal and authentic history" he is seriously misrepresenting the way in which Milton and other contemporaries interpreted the "truth" of Scripture. In Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, Raphael, who has come to earth to explain God's ways to man, tells Adam that he will narrate the story of the creation of the world "so told as earthly notion

can receive" (VII. 179). Raphael's words are paralleled by Milton's own explanation, in an important passage in *De Doctrina Christiana*, the theological treatise in Latin which he was composing or compiling at the same time as he was writing *Paradise Lost*, of the way in which it might be said that human beings "know God":[13]

> When we speak of knowing God, it must be understood with reference to the imperfect comprehension of man; for to know God as he really is far transcends the powers of man's thoughts, much more of his perception … God therefore has made as full a revelation of himself as our minds can conceive, or the weakness of our nature can bear … Our safest way is to form in our own minds such a conception of God as shall correspond with his own delineation and representation of himself in the sacred writings. For granting that both in the literal and figurative descriptions of God, he is exhibited not as he really is, but in such a manner as may be within the scope of our comprehensions, yet we ought to entertain such a conception of him, as he, in condescending to accommodate himself to our capacities, has shown that he desires we should conceive. For it is on this very account that he has lowered himself to our level, lest in our flights above the reach of human understanding, and beyond the written word of Scripture, we should be tempted to indulge in vague cogitations and subtleties …. We may be sure that sufficient care has been taken that the Holy Scriptures should contain nothing unsuitable to the character or dignity of God, and that God should say nothing of himself which could derogate from his own majesty …. Let us require no better authority than God himself for determining what is worthy or unworthy of him.
>
> (Book 1, Chapter 2, trans. Charles R. Sumner)

Milton is here setting out what was known as the "doctrine of accommodation." The passage makes clear that his sense of the "literal truth" of scripture was radically different from that of some modern Christian fundamentalists.[14] Milton clearly did not think that Scripture was "literally" true in the positivist manner that is sometimes understood today, where it is assumed, for example, that the "truth" or falsehood of Scripture could be "proved" or "disproved" by an appeal to fossil evidence or carbon dating. Like other Christians of his time, he thought that God had, as it were,

composed his own fiction, had presented us with his own image, in Scripture. This made it necessary for Milton to include nothing in his poem which was flagrantly at odds with the biblical narrative. He could not, for example, make Adam eat the fruit before Eve. And, as many of his critics have noted, he had to exercise great care in choosing the words which he gives God to speak, making sure that God's utterance remained in absolute accord with Scripture and mainstream scriptural exegesis.

In some cases, Milton implements this principle with almost legalistic rigor. An interesting instance occurs in Book XI of *Paradise Lost*, where God is declaring to the angels that the fallen Adam and Eve must leave the Garden of Eden. At one point in the Book of Genesis, it seems to be envisaged that Adam might, if allowed to stay in Eden, acquire immortality by eating the fruit of the Tree of Life:

> And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil. And now lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground, from whence he was taken.
>
> (Genesis, 3: 22–3)

But in the imagined world of *Paradise Lost* the Tree of Life has no such magic powers. It is, in the words of Milton's editor Alastair Fowler, "significative not effectual" – a symbol of the true immortality which Adam and Eve will be granted if they remain faithful, rather than a potential means of their gaining immortality against God's wishes. When Milton comes to imagine the same moment in *Paradise Lost*, he reworks the biblical passage as follows:

> Lest therefore his now bolder hand
> Reach also of the tree of life, and eat,
> And live for ever, *dream at least to live*
> *For ever*, to remove him I decree,
> And send him from the garden forth to till
> The ground whence he was taken, fitter toil.
>
> (XI. 93–8)

Milton follows Genesis closely, but his God is given a scornful additional phrase (italicized above) which makes it clear that, in this retelling, the possibility of Adam's gaining immortality by eating from the Tree of Life is a mere "dream." Milton sticks closely to the biblical wording, but supplements it significantly to square it with the imaginative world created in his own poem.

Such an example shows Milton exerting minute care not to contradict, however much he might gloss, Scripture. But such considerations did not prevent him, in other areas, from expanding, elaborating, recasting, and interpreting the Genesis narrative at great length and with great freedom in his poetic retelling. The Genesis narrative of the creation and Fall of Man takes up less than four pages in the Geneva and King James versions of the Bible. Milton's poem, in the finished, twelve-book version of 1674, is 10,565 lines and 333 pages long, and contains numerous incidents, descriptions, and sentiments that have no direct basis in the Bible. These include the narrative of the angels' revolt, which has no substantial source in canonical Scripture. And the whole characterization of Satan as a fallen angel, so central a feature of Milton's poem, derives more from the Church Fathers than from the Bible.

In the light of all this evidence, there is, I would argue, no good reason to suppose, with Scherer, that Milton's invocation, or his beliefs about the "truth" of Scripture would have necessarily produced a misconceived botch in which theological dogma and poetry would seem as incompatible as oil and water. There is no good reason, that is, to believe that there was an obvious and simple conflict between Milton's loyalty to his religion and to his art, between his perceived duties as a Christian, and his obligations as a narrative poet. Nor did Milton's early readers and commentators – two of whom, Zachary Pearce and Thomas Newton, were Anglican bishops – think that there was.

A Poem Divided Against Itself?

But the kinds of criticisms made by Scherer have continued to reverberate to this day in commentary on *Paradise Lost*. Scherer's own wariness about Milton's poem is not hard to understand.

Scherer had, in his earlier career, been a Protestant clergyman and theologian. But by the time he came to write his essay on *Paradise Lost*, he had lost his religious faith, renounced his holy orders, and adopted a free-thinking agnosticism. His essay on Milton can therefore be seen as a by-product of the "crisis of faith" that affected so many people across Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, under the impact of analytical biblical scholarship and new developments in geological and evolutionary theory. Scherer, one can suppose with confidence, had become so deeply embarrassed with the subject matter of *Paradise Lost* – which he assumed Milton believed in, simple-mindedly, as literal truth – that he could not bring himself to suppose for a moment that an imaginatively convincing poetical fiction could possibly have come out of it. His embarrassment was shared by many later commentators. A. J. A. Waldock's Paradise Lost *and its Critics* (Cambridge, 1947), for example, a work much read and commended in the mid-twentieth century, effectively repeated many of the same root-and-branch objections to Milton's enterprise. It is not surprising that admirers of Waldock's book such as F. R. Leavis and John Peter adopted a position of open hostility towards Milton. But reservations such as those voiced by Scherer and Waldock have also haunted the minds of some later commentators who have professed themselves among the poet's admirers.

Various ploys have been adopted by such commentators for evading or side-stepping the negative consequences of such reservations. Some, for example, have been prepared to admit Milton's failure to resolve the conflicts in which his enterprise involved him, but have argued that such a failure is positively stimulating for the reader. The poem, they have suggested, is enjoyable not because it resolves the tensions and conflicts which it contains, but because it provokes readers to strenuous and profitable thought about them. This was broadly the position adopted by Christopher Ricks in the Introduction to his Signet (later Penguin) edition of *Paradise Lost* (first published in 1968), and (in a much more extreme form) by John Carey in his little volume on Milton in the Literature in Perspective series (London, 1969). "*Paradise Lost*," wrote Carey, "is great because it is objectionable. It spurs us to protest" (p. 75). His account then focused almost entirely on what he saw as the

poem's contradictions, absurdities, and provocative unpleasantness. More recently, others have welcomed Milton's self-divisions as evidence of a systematic "poetics of incertitude."[15]

Others again have seen a positive moral virtue in Milton's failure to carry out his expressed intentions. In the view of the most celebrated of such critics, William Empson, the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is an evil tyrant and Milton's poem emphatically (and admirably) reveals him as such.[16] Yet another critical tactic has been to explain the apparent tensions and contradictions within the poem in terms of the distinctive processes which, in the critics' view, Milton's text provokes in its readers. In *Surprised by Sin* (New York, 1967; second edition, 1998), perhaps the most influential work of Milton criticism of the later twentieth century, Stanley Fish argued that the apparent sympathy which Milton elicits for Satan – long since thought to have been one of the ways in which *Paradise Lost* contradicts its own intentions – is a deliberate strategy whereby Milton "entraps" his readers, tempting them to sympathize with sentiments and personages in a way which, as they read on, they come to realize is sinful. The reader thus passes imaginatively through a process of fall and redemption which parallels that experienced by the poem's main characters.

Poetry and Belief

All of the approaches sketched above have undoubtedly served, in their different ways, to sharpen readers' perceptions of different elements in Milton's poem. But none of them seems to me to represent a necessary or fully satisfactory critical move. Most current readers of *Paradise Lost* are likely to be less troubled by the religious subject matter of the poem than their nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors – either because they have no Christian belief whatever, or because their Christianity takes a radically different form from those obtaining in former times. Without the understandable threat that the poem's raw material presented to recently lapsed Christians such as Scherer, modern readers may be better placed to read *Paradise Lost* as a poem, based on mythical material associated with a religion which is certainly part of their heritage

(and in which they may, indeed, be believers), but in the details of whose specific subject matter they might not feel directly implicated. Such readers might, that is, be willing to read *Paradise Lost* as a poem whose fiction they are required to "believe in" no more – or less – than they would be willing to "believe in" the events depicted in other works of non-realistic fiction.

In his writings on *Paradise Lost*,[17] C. S. Lewis sometimes gave the opposite impression: that only those who shared Milton's (and Lewis's) Christian faith would be likely to enjoy or respect the poem. But elsewhere Lewis wrote suggestively about the ways in which works of literature can transport us outside ourselves and our own direct commitments and convictions, and invite our imaginative participation rather than any kind of absolute "belief":

> In reading imaginative work … we should be much less concerned with altering our own opinions … than with entering fully into the opinions, and therefore also the attitudes, feelings and total experience, of other men ….
>
> In good reading there ought to be no "problem of belief." I read Lucretius and Dante at a time when (by and large) I agreed with Lucretius. I have read them since I came (by and large) to agree with Dante. I cannot find that this has much altered my experience, or at all altered my evaluation, of either. A true lover of literature should be in one way like an honest examiner, who is prepared to give the highest marks to the telling, felicitous and well-documented exposition of views he dissents from or even abominates.[18]

Lewis's comparison of the lover of literature with "an honest examiner" perhaps gives the unfortunate impression that he thinks that literary reading should be conducted in a dispassionately detached manner. But elsewhere in the same book, Lewis makes it clear that our willingness, in the act of reading, to enter imaginatively into "other worlds" meets a basic and passionately felt human need to escape the prison of the self:

> Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. And even when we build disinterested fantasies, they are saturated with, and limited by, our own psychology … But we want to … see with other

> eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own … We therefore delight to enter into other men's beliefs … even though we think them untrue … It is *connaître* not *savoir*; it is *erleben*; we become these other selves. Not only nor chiefly in order to see what they are like, but in order to see what they see, to occupy, for a while, their seat in the great theatre, to use their spectacles and be made free of whatever insights, joys, terrors, wonders or merriment those spectacles reveal.[19]

Lewis's insistence that we can "delight" to enter the beliefs of others "even though we think them untrue" offers an implicit challenge both to those readers who object to *Paradise Lost* on religious grounds and to those – nowadays perhaps more numerous – who reject it on the strength of its treatment of the relations between the sexes. In the Preface to this book, I noted the current tendency of some critics to judge Milton not so much on the quality of his poetry as on the strength of his ideological beliefs. Milton perhaps receives more praise than blame these days for his republicanism. But such strong hostility is sometimes expressed to the attitudes to women that *Paradise Lost* is thought to embody and to have encouraged, that it is in danger of creating in our own time an a-priori resistance to the poem no less powerful than that which was formerly entertained for religious reasons.

In later chapters, I argue that Milton's depiction of woman in *Paradise Lost* is in fact considerably more sympathetic and appreciative than has sometimes been supposed. But I want for the moment to enlist C. S. Lewis's support for the more general principle that, before immediately castigating any poet for "views" with which we cannot "agree," we should submit ourselves to the imaginative experience of his or her work, taking it in the first instance on its own terms, and attempting to understand how the world which it depicts is imagined, and how its various elements derive from, and contribute, to the poet's larger conception. The suggestion is not that we should blandly accept all aspects of *Paradise Lost* unquestioningly, or fail to acknowledge that it contains within it strenuous debate on difficult issues. It is, rather, that we should seek, in the first instance, to grasp the "problems" with which it deals as they are treated within the poem's narrative, in all their complexity and interrelatedness, rather than in

and for themselves, as quasi-separable sites of theological, philosophical, political, or sexual-political dispute. As Christopher Ricks rightly observed in the Introduction to his Signet edition, Milton "offers God's justice, not as the *donnée* of the poem, but as its subject" (p. xxiv). A. J. A. Waldock believed that, at the moment of Adam's fall, Milton presents the counterclaims of Adam's love for Eve and his duty to God unsatisfactorily, so that our sympathies lie, contrary to the poet's design, entirely with Adam. Commenting on Waldock's analysis, Ricks argued that, for us to feel Adam's agonized sense of his incompatible obligations to God and Eve, Adam and Eve's debt to God cannot be simply assumed, but has to have been "truly embodied in the poem itself" (p. xxi). Ricks, however, seemed to share Waldock's conviction that such a "true embodiment" has not occurred. But as we have seen, Voltaire – a critic no more enamored of Christianity than Ricks – thought otherwise. The hope of the present book is that if we approach *Paradise Lost* with the open-minded charitableness advocated in the passages from C. S. Lewis quoted above, we may come to feel, with Voltaire, that Milton's poem does, indeed, offer a convincing imaginative "embodiment" of its subject: that it presents us with "beauties not dreamed of before" and "transports" us into regions that, for all their apparent strangeness and unfamiliarity – even potential distastefulness – can genuinely inspire and delight us in the way to which Voltaire, and Milton's other earlier critics, paid repeated testimony.

Endnotes

1 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford, 1934–50), 3. 38.
2 Samuel Johnson, in *The Rambler*, No. 88 (1751).
3 Samuel Johnson, in the 'Life of Pope' (1781).
4 For a sophisticated defence of what is sometimes dismissed as 'the enactment fallacy', see Michael Silk, 'Language, Poetry, and Enactment', *Dialogos*, 2 (1995), 109–32.
5 W. B. Yeats, 'Discoveries', in *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), p. 266.
6 A. C. Bradley, 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake', in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1909), pp. 14–15.

7 Alexander Pope, in the Preface to *The Iliad of Homer* (1715).
8 I return to this important point in Chapter 3.
9 Edmond Scherer, 'Milton and "Paradise Lost"', in *Essays on English Literature*, trans. George Saintsbury (London, 1891), pp. 98–131. Scherer's essay was brought to the attention of English readers by Matthew Arnold, in 'A French Critic on Milton', *Mixed Essays* (1879).
10 Jupiter gave Tiresias the power of prophecy after Juno blinded him (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III. 336–8). Milton was blind by the time he composed *Paradise Lost*.
11 *Paradise Lost*, ed. David Scott Kastan: based on the classic edition of Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis, 2005), p. 8.
12 In *Milton among the Puritans: The Case for Historical Revisionism* (Aldershot, 2010), Catherine Gimelli Martin has argued that it is misleading to describe Milton as a 'Puritan' at all.
13 On the circumstances of the composition of this treatise, see Gordon Campbell, Thomas N. Corns, John K. Hale, and Fiona J. Tweedie, *Milton and the Manuscript of* De Doctrina Christiana (Oxford, 2007).
14 Milton was here working in a long and rich theological tradition. For an instructive parallel, see, for example, Henry Chadwick's summary of St Augustine's subtle treatment of scriptural interpretation in *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 37–9, 91–4.
15 See Peter C. Herman, *Destabilizing Milton*: Paradise Lost *and the Poetics of Incertitude* (London, 2005). This approach is explored further in *The New Milton Criticism*, ed. Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer (Cambridge, 2012).
16 William Empson, *Milton's God* (2nd edition, London, 1965).
17 See particularly *A Preface to* Paradise Lost (Oxford, 1942).
18 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 85–6.
19 *Ibid.*, pp. 137–8.