

MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*: THE FAILURE OF A REVOLUTION

John Milton was not an exception among XVIIth century scholars when it came to regard the Bible as the key pattern of conduct: political attitudes were not an exception to the rule. Such an assertion, however, was regarded as “dangerous” by ruling classes: Calvinism was a much better option, since it considered human beings as born sinners, that only an élite would attain the Kingdom of Heavens and the possibility of having faith as the unique saving grace was not convenient for political reasons. In fact, after the failure of the Puritan revolution which Milton supported, he had to thank his life to the influence of some friends. However, learned men began to be aware of their having been created to control forces which had been, up to that date, utterly unknown to them: the great geographical discoveries, scientific and medical advances, the “free-thinking” mind after the Restoration ... it all opened new possibilities, already hinted in *Genesis* 1 as regards to the purpose of the creation of man.¹

All this offered a new perspective which, however, implied as necessary a whole revision of man's nature. Freedom, according to Milton, was neither given nor attained. God Himself had created man free, it was a sacred gift inherent to man's nature, but it was also what God's Word was to give man. God creates through His Word, and it is His Word made into flesh, Jesus Christ, what grants us salvation. *Paradise Lost* is a revision of the Word: it recreates Adam's Fall in order to explain the failure of the Puritan.

Revolution as it was seen by Milton, in which the efforts of the “rationals”, so close to success, were frustrated by the depravity of a few. After turning out from Politics, Milton committed himself to find a historical meaning to this failure, to revise “*the justification of God's ways to Men*” (*Pl*, I, l. 26), to explain why “virtuous men” — as Adam, as himself — fail. However, the conclusion of Milton's work does not give place to tragedy or defeatism, as it could be expected: *Paradise Lost* is constructed upon a premise of hope which could be always sought for, even after the Fall.

Milton rejects the Calvinistic principle of predestination and supports that the saving grace is granted to all virtuous men. This new perspective implied a whole revision of the old myth of the Fall, whose basic contents were transmuted in order to offer the possibility of hope, even after defeat. The myth had traditionally summarised the sadness of a people oppressed for

¹ Milton makes of this point one of the main subject-matters in *Paradise Lost*, that is, man has been created to rule the forces of nature, to create a new order in which he would be the king. The fact that man has been made in God's image refers to his possibilities as a creator in this new order: “Let us make now Man in our image, man / In our similitude, and let them rule, / Over the fish and fowl of sea and earth / And every creeping thing that creeps the ground.” (*Paradise Lost*, VII, ll. 519-523).

centuries, cursed to undergo suffering in order to attain eternal life. Milton gives a new hope to the creative effort and places his “golden age” in a forthcoming future on earth: ¹

“... Only add
Deeds to your knowledge answerable, add faith
Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,
By name to come called Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loth
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A Paradise within Thee, happier far” (*PL*, XII, ll. 581-587).

Milton’s proposition of “*a Paradise within Thee*”, even happier than the one lost, must have struck — and even alarmed — his reading public. He recreates the paradox of the “fortunate fall” or *felix culpa*, which is, on the other hand, as old as Christianity itself. The assertion can only be explained in the light of the consequences that man’s Fall had for Milton himself: the virtues most admired by him were those which appeared only after the Fall, namely, self-assurance, courage in adverse situations and, above all, the capacity to choose, to decide for oneself (as opposed to determinism) and the creative effort of man, which was formerly God’s only. Adam’s role in Eden was that of a gardener, his creative capacity was limited to preserve the former order. After the Fall, and in the World that God had just created for man, he becomes the agent of a new order, he himself becomes the center and the rest of creation is subordinated to his power. It should be noticed that this new order is a reproduction of the initial biblical pattern “creator-creature”, but this time the roles are subverted and man is the creator, not the creature. On the other hand, the idea of man as a “creator” fits conveniently in the new bourgeois society in which Milton lived, that is, an individual who was socially free, economically independent and the subject of careful learning. The story of Adam in *Paradise Lost* is no other than his own education.

Thus, the replacement of the old order by a new one could only be attained by means of a Revolution. Milton, through his work and his revolutionary views, had endeavored the scheme of redeeming the English people, following the example of Moses, who released the people of Israel from slavery and conducted them to the Promised Land. Now, the English people is the “chosen one” and the Promised Land is no other than England. However, an earthly paradise could only be attained by means of effort and sacrifice, and could not take place without a revolution, which would be similar to the one that Moses led. In spite of this,

¹ Many scholars shared Milton’s point of view. Francis Bacon believed the Fall a matter-of-fact truth (cfr. *The Advancement of Learning*). However, and the same as Milton, he firmly sustained that man could build a new society on earth which would recreate Eden and would leave depravity aside. This aim could only be attained by means of education, reason and intense effort. As a result, the curse on the fallen man - work - would turn out to be the means which would allow him to rise again. From the point of view of Christian theology, these ideas were regarded as unorthodox, although they were quite popular among members of Parliament. They helped to reduce the shadow of “original sin” in favour of a better life on earth by means of human effort. The possibility of finding the lost happiness of Eden on earth was then being opened.

the revolutionay efforts did not succeed. From the point of view of faith, Milton could only explain the failure through the Bible, since it has, like history itself, a continuity, it is the ultimate myth which spreads through time and space, which trascends the tangible reality in order to point to eternal life.

The biblical history is also an interrupted search for the freedom of a people that has to undergo, however, destruction, slavery and defeat. In spite of this, hope is always reborn after each strike, because God's promise is granted. The dramatic structure of the Bible summarises this pattern: Creation, Fall, Exile, Redemption and Restoration, which is the same as *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Milton recreates the circular structure of the Bible, which is exemplified in the creation of the Tree and River of Life in *Genesis* and their Restoration in *Revelation*. The Bible, in spite of its different authors, has a hidden inspirer: in a Christian reading of the text, God has planned everything and performs through human beings. The events of *Paradise Lost* are not narrated by Milton either; it is the Muse who inspires him:

Sing, Heavenly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
In the beginning how Heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos (...) (*PL*, I, ll. 6-10).

This "Heavenly Muse" has a double meaning in Milton: on the one hand, it is a recurrent pattern of the classical tradition in which the poem is inscribed. On the other, following a Christian pattern, the Muse is a spirit who is the source of knowledge and inspiration and could be, therefore, identified with the Holy Ghost.

Unlike the classical pattern of history — *circuitus temporum* or eternal recurrence— key events in the Christian history are understood as a disruption. They imply an utter change in terms of breaking and regaining God's alliance. The World is created out of chaos, and shortly after, there is a Fall which leads to a world of suffering and corruption. From then onwards, the history of Israel develops in terms of loyalty / disloyalty to God until Christ's birth. This is the point of inflection which divides the World of Law and Promise from the World of Grace; it also grants a happy end with His Second Coming. Milton primarily deals with the Fall and its consequences, but this chain of events also appears in *Paradise Lost*. In this way, the presence of Christ by the Father and His offering to redeem man (Book II) before the Fall makes sense. In Book XII, a new set of events is being introduced by means of an epiphany, which is, on the other hand, a clever device to introduce events which, chronologically speaking, had not taken place yet.¹

¹ The theme of epiphanies is a recurrent one in the biblical pattern. The Transfiguration of Christ is one of the best known ones, together with the vision from the top of Pisgah, the end of the way from which Moses saw the Promised Land. The element of the Mountain - the vision always takes place in a high place - is not forgotten by Milton.

Paradise Lost shows an end full of hope in spite of the failure. The work recreates several apocalyptic images — which are already present throughout the poem — in order to build an open ending, in order to provoke in the reader a similar effect to the one produced after the reading of *Revelation*.¹ *Paradise Lost* reproduces the biblical pattern, which starts with the creation of heaven and earth and finishes with the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The history of man starts with his happiness in Paradise and ends up with happiness in an equivalent paradise. Man is restored then to his initial innocence, since “*there won't be more curse*” (*Revelation 22, 1-3*).

However, Milton's literary imagination had also been centered on the myth of pre-lapsarian happiness, summarised by the possibility of direct communication between God and man, which is often reflected in *Paradise Lost*. So many visitors come to Eden that God has to build a golden staircase, the one which appears in Jacob's dream in the Bible, which leads to Heaven:

The stairs were such as whereon Jacob saw
Angels ascending and descending, bands
Of guardians bright, when he from Esau fled
To Padam - Aram, in the field of Luz
Dreaming by night under the open sky,
And waking cried, This is the gate of Heaven. (*PL*, III, ll. 510-515).

Nevertheless, after Adam and Eve's Fall, the staircase disappears in order to prevent Sin and Death from entering Eden. In another passage, God sends Raphael, “*the affable Archangel*” (*PL*, VII, l. 41) to talk to Adam as “*friend with friend*”. Before Adam's Fall, God would converse with Adam about his daily life just after sunset. When Adam eats the apple offered by Eve and hides ashamed, God, who has gone to Eden to talk to him, cannot find his creature:

Where art thou Adam, wont with joy to meet
My coming seen far off? I miss thee here,
Not pleas'd, thus entertain'd with solitude,
Where obvious dutie erewhile appear'd unsaught: (...)
My voice thou oft hast heard, and hast not fear'd
But still rejoiced, how is it now become

¹ The meaning of *Revelation* should be seen connected to the Greek etymology of apocalipsis. Originally, it meant “truth”, which was never self-evident. Truth was always hidden, it was something which would be revealed after an experience. The book of *Revelation* and its imagery are constantly used by Milton in his work, since they may emphasize the search for a better world. This subject-matter is related to the two main concentric myths in the Bible: the myth of Genesis-Revelation and Exodus-Millennium. In the first one, Adam is expelled from Paradise, loses the Tree and River of Life and wanders through the labyrinths of human history until Messiah restores him to his original state. In the second myth, the people of Israel are expelled from their native land and wander through the labyrinths of Egyptian and Babylonian captivity until they are restored to their original state in the Promised Land.

So dreadful to thee? (*PL*, X, ll. 101-106; 119-121).

The loss of direct communication God'Man is, for Milton, the worst consequence of man's Fall.¹

The role of the Word is vital for Milton. God, in *Genesis* 1 creates through His Word and, in short, His Word is Jesus Christ, God.² This might be the reason why Milton used this account of creation instead of the second one, in which God plants a garden in Eden and puts man there. This text was written 500 years before the first account of Creation, and belongs to a more primitive biblical tradition.³

The order of creation cannot be conciled in the two accounts, but Milton recreates a combination of both. In *Gn.* 1, God creates the universe and all living things and eventually, makes man and woman simultaneously. The means that God uses to create are altogether different: in *Gn.* 1, He just uses His Word. Milton uses *Gn.* 1 for the creation of heaven, earth and all living creatures except man, in which case he recreates the image in *Gn.* 2 in which God appears as a potter who makes Adam in clay and blows in his nostrils to give the statue life:

Let us make now Man in our image (...)
This said, he formed Thee, Adam, thee, O Man,
Dust of the ground, and in thy nostrils breathed
the breath of life (...) (*PL*, VII, 519; 520-526).

Milton never doubted the historical truth of the events narrated in *Genesis* 1 and 2, although he also added some elements taken from his imagination and from some Christian comments to the Fall. For Milton, however, there should exist a bridge, a coherent explanation between an innocent and a sinful state, between Adam and Eve in Book IV and those characters who wake up one morning in Book IX (ll. 1053-1055):

¹ This situation is often stressed by Milton in the work: "No more talk where God or Angel Guest / With Man, as with his friend, familiar us'd / To sit indulgent, and with him partake / Rural repast, permitting him the while / Venial discourse unblam'd." (*PL*, IX, ll. 1-5).

² This seems to be related to the Gospel according to Saint John, who praises the eternal origin of the Word. He first presents its relation to God, in Whom the Word is (ll. 1-2); to the world, made by him (l. 3) and to men, to whom He is Light and Life (ll. 4-5): "In the beginning there was the Word / and the Word was in God, / and the Word was God. / All things were made by Him, / and without Him, there was nothing of what has been made. / In Him was the life, / and the life was the light of men". (*John* 1, 1-5).

³ In *Gn* I the biblical author starts from an initial situation of chaos and darkness, in which everything is flooded by water (aquatic cosmogony). In six days, and by means of His Word, God creates the world separating the waters from the rest. He makes the light (first day), the sky, separating the waters above and below (second day), separates land from sea and creates the trees (third day), separates day from night and creates the sun, the moon and stars (fourth day), creates aquatic animals and birds (fifth day), creates earthly animals and man and woman (sixth day) and rests on the seventh day. Milton is very interested in the solemnity of chapter one: however, for the creation of man, he chooses chapter 2 in *Genesis*, probably because he did not want man and woman to appear to be created at the same time. Before making any living creature, God creates man and plants a garden for him to look after. Man feels lonely, and God makes the beasts and birds to keep him company. Nevertheless, none of them fits in man's necessities, and God creates the woman out of Adam's rib.

Soon found their eyes opened, and their minds
How darkened. Innocence, that as a veil
Had shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone

The character of Eve seems to be that connection, and that might be the reason why Milton used *Gn. 2* to account for the creation of man. In this way, the text itself would stress that man and woman were not created at the same time, and that woman was made out of Adam's rib. Milton's effort to underline that fact has often been pointed out by feminist readings of *Paradise Lost* in the last years. It seems clear that Milton's intention was to stress woman's obedience with respect to man.¹ The crisis of *Paradise Lost* starts when Eve yields to the serpent that flatters her vanity and eats the fruit as a result. As a theologian, Milton had to preserve Eve's innocence until the very instant in which she eats the forbidden fruit. As a poet, he had to stress that Eve was predisposed to sin. The omens of Eve's Fall start from her very birth, when she tells Adam how she came to consciousness, "*under a shade of flow'rs*", watching her image reflected in the pond. The reader immediately associates the passage with the myth of Narcissus, which appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (III, 401- 510).²

The myth has traditionally been regarded as the epitome of the destructiveness of self-love. But Milton goes even further: the birth of Sin, which is described in Book II and refers to the legend of Palas Athene's birth, is extremely similar to Eve's. Both Sin and Eve are already adults when they are born, are incredibly beautiful and are made in the image of their creators. Satan sees in Sin his perfect image and, the same as Eve, falls in love with it.

Eve's sexual implications are also extremely important. Adam confesses to Raphael that he cannot resist Eve's sexual charms. Milton also compares the union of Adam and Eve with Jupiter and Juno's marriage, which is an extremely negative association: Jupiter, the same as Adam, is betrayed by the woman he loves. Eve's dream is also pregnant of sexual connotations; being in this dream when Eve falls for the first time, an omen of the real disobedience. Satan has overheard the circumstances of Eve's birth and, therefore, knows how to tempt her naive vanity. He is not only successful, but also able to make Eve deviate her thoughts from Adam, her leader. Having done this, she concentrates her mind on herself, on that self-love which will be her destruction. Thus, she looks for Adam in her dream, but she cannot find him; she literally falls down, reaches the Tree of Knowledge and eats its fruit: "*My Guide was gon, and I, methought, sunk down*" (*Paradise Lost*, V, l. 91). The author is being explicit enough when he anticipates Eve's fall and therefore, the reader is not surprised when Eve actually eats the fruit. Satan is successful in his endeavour: he leads Eve astray from her guide

¹ The biblical author may have had in mind the amazing reality of marriage (in fact, the whole passage of *Genesis 2* is a justification of marriage), in which man leaves his family in order to create a new one with his wife. The fact that Eve was made out of Adam's rib is an image of deep attachment and intimacy between husband and wife. This explains why Eve only can fulfill Adam's life in Eden.

² The parallelism is even more distressing if one takes into account that Milton uses classical myths as a device to refer to Satan and his Angels from Hell. In this way, the destructive character of these beings is underlined. As it could be expected, Eve and Satan are associated by this recurrence to classical mythology.

and encourages her latent pride.¹ Adam's failure in *Paradise Lost* is depicted in a very different way. Adam resembles too much the classical hero: his love for Eve leads him to reject the eternal innocence of Eden, and he prefers to sink down with her.

The dramatic structure and subject-matter of *Paradise Lost* was intended to give his author the justification of man's fall, but also an explanation of his own failure. For Milton, it was not God who allowed his Revolution to fail, in the same way as it was not God who chose Adam's fall. It was man himself, although unaware of it, who became the creator of a new order that he would have to learn to rule.

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¹ This is actually what Satan had previously done: when, still in Heaven, God presents His Son (Book I), Satan automatically feels envious and deviates his eyes from God to look at himself, which is the first act of pride.

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