IN PRAISE OF JOHN MILTON

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When the poet Milton was born in London in 1608, Shakespeare was still composing his plays. Eight years before, he had written the first of his major tragedies, *Hamlet*, a play about a young man whose vision of the world, full of the optimism of the young and of openness to new ways of thinking, is shattered by the re-emergence of the old, the atavistic, the suffocating burden of a father's demands for revenge:

> I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire; why, it appeareth to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

Hamlet echoes, even as he denies it, the vision of Christian liberty that moved the great Italian Platonist Pico della Mirandola a century before – the vision of the individual, free to choose God, free to choose good over evil, but free also to struggle against the powers of darkness in order to overcome them. It is this vision that John Milton carried with him through one of the most difficult periods in the history of England, but also one of the great moments in intellectual history. If Hamlet was overcome by pessimism, Milton never surrendered. In a Latin oration toward the end of his time as a student at Cambridge, the so-called Seventh Prolusion, he put it like this:

> If the greatest happiness of a man in society *does* consist in the noble and free joys of his mind, then his greatest pleasure will be found in Wisdom and Learning. What does it mean to grasp the nature of the heavens and of the stars, to comprehend all the motions and changes of the atmosphere, which terrify ignorant minds with the tremendous roll of thunder or with flaming comets, which freeze the snow and hail, or which let fall softly and gently the rain and dew? What does it mean to understand perfectly the changing winds and all the gases and vapors which the earth and the sea bring forth; to experience the hidden powers of plants and metals; to know the nature and, if possible, the feelings of every living creature; to have exact knowledge of the human body's anatomy and of medicine…? Gentlemen, when universal learning shall once complete its cycle, the spirit of man, no longer imprisoned in its gloomy reformatory, will stretch far and wide until its godlike greatness fills the whole world and the void beyond.

It is the same question that Shakespeare advanced, more tentatively, at the close of his career in the figure of Prospero in *The Tempest.* It is the question asked by Francis Bacon in his vision of scientific research, *The New Atlantis,* almost exactly contemporary with Milton's oration. And it was the question asked by René Descartes in his *Discourse of Method* published in 1637. In some sense, Milton was the first of the Moderns in English literature.

He was the son of a scrivener, a profession that involved conveyancing, dealing in real estate, and moneylending. His grandfather had been a noted holdout for Catholicism long after England had broken with Rome and apparently disinherited his son for turning Protestant. The son's success in his profession set *his* son the poet up for a life of scholarship, first at St. Paul's School, one of the leading educational establishments in England, and then at Christ's College, Cambridge:

> I was born at London from upright parents, my father a man of spotless reputation, my mother a very chaste woman and particularly known throughout the neighborhood for her charity. My father destined me while still a child for the study of humane letters, which I took up so eagerly that from the age of twelve on I hardly ever took to bed from my intense studies before midnight… My father saw to it that I received daily instruction both at a grammar school and at home by other masters. After I had thus been taught several languages and had tasted the sweetness of philosophy, my father sent me to Cambridge…. There I studied for seven years the curriculum in arts and sciences, far from every vice, approved by all good men, till having been admitted to what is called the degree of Master, I … freely returned home. At my father's country home, to which he had retired to pass his old age, I spent most of my time, entirely at ease, in the perusal of Greek and Latin writers; sometimes however I would exchange the country for the town, either to buy books or to add something new to my knowledge of mathematics or music, in both of which I then delighted. Having thus passed five years, being desirous, after my mother's death, to see foreign countries, particularly Italy, I gained my father's permission and started out…. (The Second Defense 1654)

What is remarkable about this narration, written in response to a scurrilous pamphleteer who had denounced him, is its emphasis on the purely personal. One can hardly imagine such an easy narrative of the self being written fifty years before. With Milton, we move into a new era, in which the human being is separable from his or her surroundings and is a proper subject of study. but we do so with the easy grace of a scholar who is steeped in the past and in theology. Milton does not deny the truth of scripture in order to establish the freedom of the individual, but builds on the great Christian paradox which declares that true freedom lies in the service of God. This pull of the traditional in a new setting, even a revolutionary setting, is Milton's great power.

At 21 he writes his first great poem, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," a poem which, in its exaltation of the divine, none the less emphasizes the humanness of the birth of Jesus:

> This is the month, and this the happy morn,
> Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
> Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
> Our great redemption from above did bring;

For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high council-table,
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside, and here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

Not only does the poem impress with its mastery of style, particularly with its echoes of the poetry of Edmund Spenser, but it also draws into its unorthodox theology not only the Christian story but the classical gods and goddesses as well, along with the false gods mentioned in the Old Testament, driven out, we are told, by the arrival of the true Messiah. That arrival, the birth of Jesus, at midnight on Christmas Eve, takes place at the point, described by Saint Augustine, when significant time, *chairos,* breaks through the membrane of mere hours and days and months, *chronos,* to vest history itself with significance and to give meaning to human life. Time, quite literally, stops for a moment, and then, moving forward links past and future in a newly meaningful continuum running from the creation to the New Jerusalem.

Ring out ye Crystal spheres,
Once bless our human ears,
(If ye have power to touch our senses so)
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;
And let the Base of Heav'ns deep Organ blow,
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to th' Angelic symphony.

For if such holy Song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,
And speckl'd vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould,
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

Yea Truth, and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Th' enameld Arras of the Rainbow wearing,
And Mercy set between,
Thron'd in Celestial sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering,

And Heav'n as at some festival,
Will open wide the Gates of her high Palace Hall.

But wisest Fate says no,
This must not yet be so,
The Babe lies yet in smiling Infancy,
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss;
So both himself and us to glorify:
Yet first to those ychain'd in sleep,
The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep,

With such a horrid clang
As on mount Sinai rang
While the red fire, and smouldring clouds out brake:
The aged Earth aghast
With terror of that blast,
Shall from the surface to the center shake,
When at the worlds last session,
The dreadful Judge in middle Air shall spread his throne.

And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
But now begins; for from this happy day
Th' old Dragon under ground,
In straiter limits bound,
Not half so far casts his usurped sway,
And wrath to see his Kingdom fail,
Swindges the scaly Horrour of his folded tail.

The Oracles are dumb,
No voice or hideous hum
Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance, or breathed spell,
Inspires the pale-ey'd Priest from the prophetic cell.

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;
From haunted spring and dale
Edg'd with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent,

With flower inwov'n tresses torn
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

But Milton's speaker watches the departure of the old gods and goddesses with something like regret at the passing of their beauty, as their worship is replaced by the new worship of the Son of God. He watches, too, the departure of other false gods – Moloch, Osiris, Baal, "the moonéd Ashtaroth" -- banished by the power of the Messiah. Milton's love of the classics and love of artistic beauty conflicted productively with the severity of his belief in a universe based on unalloyed faith, in which only God's approval and our recognition of that approval imbues our lives with meaning. Beauty for its own sake is idolatry, the pursuit of false gods. This asceticism lies at the heart of the English puritanism of the seventeenth century, a legacy most particularly of John Calvin.

Among the other poems of this period was his first published poem, which appeared in the Second Folio of the Works of Shakespeare (1632). Given his later career, it is not obvious that he would have read and loved the works of Shakespeare for their contents, but the capaciousness of his mind and his extraordinary ability to absorb information readily accommodated Shakespeare's works, and of course it was from Shakespeare that he learned the art of blank verse, of which he was later to become one of the greatest practitioners. The sonnet to Shakespeare firmly establishes Milton's sense of his poetic inheritance.

What needs my *Shakespear* for his honour'd Bones,
The labour of an age in piled Stones,
Or that his hallow'd reliques should be hid
Under a Star-ypointing *Pyramid?*
Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
What need'st thou such weak witnes of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.
For whilst to th'shame of slow-endeavouring art,
Thy easie numbers flow, and that each heart
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book,
Those Delphick lines with deep impression took,
Then thou our fancy of it self bereaving,
Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving;
And so Sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,
That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

It was about this same time that Milton wrote two of his best-known poems, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso,* whose Italian titles betray the origins of their sentiments. These charming and lyrical poems, companion pieces, describe the life of the happy and mirthful man on the one hand and the life of the contemplative and melancholy man on the other. One glories in the beauties of the natural world, the other in the wisdom of books.

When Milton left Cambridge, having completed his MA in 1632, he had come to the decision that he would not enter the Church, his intended career, but instead dedicate himself to scholarship. He reached this decision, it would seem, because he was so strongly out of

sympathy with the hierarchical nature of the church, which, as he saw it, limited the spontaneity and individuality of belief and imposed limitations that had little to do with true religious faith. This was a turning point for the poet, because it was the beginning of the revolutionary fervor that would lead him to support not only the overthrow of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the civil war that was to follow in the 1640s but even the execution of the King in 1649. All authority, Milton believed, derives from God and must be exercised with God and God alone in mind, not for personal gain or power and certainly not to tyrannize over one's fellow human beings. All institutions have value only to the extent that they echo God's purpose: other constraints on liberty are mere creations of human vanity.

In 1634, two years after he left Cambridge, Milton received the commission to write a masque in celebration of the inauguration of the Earl of Bridgewater as Lord President of Wales. It is known as *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* or more commonly simply as *Comus.* Masques were allegorical theatrical and musical presentations often performed privately in the homes of the aristocracy, by the aristocracy themselves, to mark special occasions. Their content and presentation, while spectacular, were often superficial. Milton, however, chose to use the occasion to stage a debate on chastity, between a young lady, performed by the daughter of the Earl of Bridgewater, and a pagan spirit of the forest, Comus. Comus is the son of the enchantress Circe and the god of wine and drunkenness Bacchus. He tries to persuade the young lady to join him and his riotous monsters and become his consort. Her brothers set out to save her, but she is placed under a spell and can be rescued only by Sabrina, the nymph of the River Severn that runs close by.

The masque is Milton's first treatment of the theme of temptation, which comes to the fore in *Paradise Lost.* The Lady's virtue, as it is described here, derives above all from Milton's fusion of the philosophy of Plato with Christianity – a combination that he learned above all in the Christian Platonism of the Italians. But the poetry itself is shot through with echoes of Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and others.

At every turn we hear the cadences of Shakespeare. This is how Comus introduces himself, in words and lyrics that echo *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest.*

> *Comus.* The Star that bids the Shepherd fold,
> Now the top of Heav'n doth hold,
> And the gilded Car of Day,
> His glowing Axle doth allay
> In the steep Atlantic stream,
> And the slope Sun his upward beam
> Shoots against the dusky Pole,
> Pacing toward the other goal
> Of his Chamber in the East.
> Mean while welcome Joy, and Feast,
> Midnight shout, and revelry,
> Tipsy dance, and Jollity.
> Braid your Locks with rosy Twine
> Dropping odours, dropping Wine.

Rigor now is gone to bed,
And Advice with scrupulous head,
Strict Age, and sour Severity,
With their grave Saws in slumber lie.
We that are of purer fire
Imitate the Starry Quire,
Who in their nightly watchful Spheres,
Lead in swift round the Months and Years.
The Sounds, and Seas with all their finny drove
Now to the Moon in wavering Morris move,
And on the Tawny Sands and Shelves,
Trip the pert Fairies and the dapper Elves;
By dimpled Brook, and Fountain brim,
The Wood-Nymphs deckt with Daisies trim,
Their merry wakes and pastimes keep:
What hath night to do with sleep?

The Lady speaks in blank verse:

A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory
Of calling shapes, and beckning shadows dire,
And airy tongues, that syllable men's names
On Sands, and Shores, and desert Wildernesses.
These thoughts may startle well, but not astound
The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended
By a strong siding champion Conscience.-------
O welcome pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope,
Thou hovering Angel girt with golden wings,
And thou unblemish't form of Chastity,
I see ye visibly, and now believe
That he, the Supreme good, t'whom all things ill
Are but as slavish officers of vengeance,
Would send a glistring Guardian if need were
To keep my life and honour unassail'd.

Comus poses as an innocent country boy, familiar with the walks and ways of the woods, with language that echoes that of Oberon most particularly but that moves in new lyrical directions. But when he closes with the Lady, he offers us a vision of the world's profusion that in one sense echoes Milton's idea that the world is there for us to discover and in another sense undermines it, because Comus's purpose is wrong:

Comus. O foolishness of men! that find their ears
To those budge doctors of the Stoic Fur,
And fetch their precepts from the Cynic Tub,
Praising the lean and sallow Abstinence.

Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth,
With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,
Thronging the Seas with spawn innumerable,
But all to please, and sate the curious taste?
And set to work millions of spinning Worms,
That in their green shops weave the smooth-hair'd silk
To deck her Sons, and that no corner might
Be vacant of her plenty, in her own loins
She hutch't th' all-worshipt ore, and precious gems
To store her children with; if all the world
Should in a pet of temperance feed on Pulse,
Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but Frieze,
Th' all-giver would be unthank't, would be unprais'd,
Not half his riches known, and yet despis'd,
And we should serve him as a grudging master,
As a penurious niggard of his wealth,
And live like Natures bastards, not her sons,
Who would be quite surcharged with her own weight,
And strangl'd with her waste fertility;
Th' earth cumber'd, and the wing'd air dark't with plumes,
The herds would over-multitude their Lords,
The Sea o'refraught would swell, and th' unsought diamonds
Would so emblaze the forehead of the Deep,
And so bestud with Stars, that they below
Would grow inur'd to light, and come at last
To gaze upon the Sun with shameless brows.
List, Lady, be not coy, and be not cosen'd
With that same vaunted name Virginity,
Beauty is natures coin, must not be hoarded,
But must be current, and the good thereof
Consists in mutual and partak'n bliss,
Unsavoury in th' enjoyment of it self.
If you let slip time, like a neglected rose
It withers on the stalk with languish't head.

The nymph Sabrina is invoked to free the Lady from Comus’s spell:

Sabrina fair,
Listen where thou art sitting
Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave,
In twisted braids of Lilies knitting
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair,
Listen for dear honour's sake,
Goddess of the silver lake,
Listen and save.

In 1638, Milton set off for the Continent. He visited the great Hugo Grotius, founder of international law, in France, and traveled on to Italy, where he spent most of his stay in Florence, Rome and Naples, visiting Galileo at Fiesole, on the hill above Florence. He was familiar with Italian, even to the extent of having written poetry in that language, and he soaked up the atmosphere, the literature and, above all, the art of Italy, even as he sought to contain his strong dislike for Catholicism. In the summer of 1639 he returned to England, having abandoned plans to travel to Greece on learning of increasing political unrest at home.

Returning home, at once he changed direction, concentrating in the coming years on pamphleteering, first by attacking the system of bishops and other trappings of the church left over from the Church of Rome, in the pamphlet *Of Reformation in England* (1641) and subsequent pamphlets, including *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), then inveighing against a narrow interpretation of the institution of marriage in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643). The latter was perhaps tinged by Milton's experience with marriage. He had recently married Mary Powell, the 17-year-old daughter of an Oxfordshire squire of no particular intellectual pretensions. She left him within weeks, but later returned, bearing him three daughters before her death in 1652. A second marriage, to Katharine Woodcock in 1656, ended all too soon when she died in childbirth in 1657. Whether Milton was the misogynist he is sometimes accused of being, or whether his sense of freedom was not easily constrained and he was as concerned for Mary Powell as much as he was concerned for himself, we shall perhaps never know.

The war that broke out between the Parliamentary forces and the King in 1642 devastated the country. Milton continued his writing as champion of the Parliamentary forces. In the midst of it all he wrote his grand defense of freedom of speech and the press, the *Areopagitica,* a work that stresses freedom to search for and to test the truth. Truth untested, Milton suggests, is no truth at all: it is our freedom to err that validates our avoidance of error:

> I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness…. Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with less danger, scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books [freely] read.

In the same year, 1644, Milton published his essay *Of Education:*

> [JM] The end then of Learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as

> we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection. But because our understanding cannot in this body found itself but on sensible things, nor arrive so clearly to the knowledge of God and things invisible, as by orderly conning over the visible and inferior creature, the same method is necessarily to be followed in all discreet teaching.

While Descartes made a clear separation between the things of God and the things of humankind, thereby freeing the latter up for scientific investigation, Milton holds to a unified world view. His is a sensibility based on synthesis and reconciliation, and on a kind of unifying universalism of the intellect. Though he supplements this first, religious, definition of education with a more secular definition, it is this idea of repairing the origins of our first parents, of using education to atone for and amend our past shortcomings, that remains central to his thinking.

In 1649 Milton was appointed Latin Secretary to the Council of State, responsible particularly for communication with foreign countries, which was normally conducted in Latin. His sight began to fail. Through the years of the republic, from 1649 to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and even as the government of Oliver Cromwell became increasingly dependent on military force and on the very exercise of power that Milton detested, he remained loyal to its stated ideals of freedom. In a parallel that was not lost on him, these years of increased oppression were also the years of the onset of blindness. When the end of the Commonwealth came in 1660 and Charles II returned to London, Milton was jailed for a while, accused of treason, and could well have been executed were it not for the intervention of his friends. He retired from public life to work on his greatest poem, *Paradise Lost,* a work of visual splendor written by a blind poet, and a work of freedom written by one who was imprisoned both literally and by his blindness.

Milton's purpose was none other than to write an epic, based on the great tradition of national epics, that dealt with the origins not of a country but of the entire human race:

> Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
> Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
> With loss of *Eden,* till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
> Sing Heav'nly 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 the Heav'ns and Earth
> Rose out of *Chaos.* Or if *Sion* Hill
> Delight thee more, and *Siloa's* Brook that flow'd
> Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
> Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song,
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above th' *Aonian* Mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme.
> And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer

Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great Argument
I may assert th' Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view
Nor the deep Tract of Hell, say first what cause
Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,
Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
From their Creator, and transgress his Will
For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?
Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?

Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd
The Mother of Mankind, what time his Pride
Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host
Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
He trusted to have equal'd the most High,
If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battle proud
With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power
Hurld headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to Arms.

The poet William Blake, a century later, famously declared that Milton was "of the devil's party without knowing it." His Satan is a powerful figure, whose rhetoric echoes in the caverns of Hell. But, in line with Milton's insistence on the fact that the freedom to do right is conditioned on the option of doing wrong, it is appropriate to present Satan as tragic hero. Satan must at the very least present a serious threat to our sense of our selves, as he does in his grand confrontation with the Archangel Gabriel in Book Four. But Satan squats like a toad at Eve's ear, filling her head with false dreams. We must see the fall itself not in the terms to which we have grown accustomed in our own day, but as the struggle of incomplete humanity with the temptations of a world that offers enslavement under the name of freedom, and that removes our liberty by chaining us to our solipsistic and narcissistic selves.

When ultimately in Book Nine Eve succumbs to temptation and eats the forbidden fruit, Adam chooses to eat too – a choice freely taken in a way in which Eve's is not – and falls with her. The truth is that, being human, he cannot live without her, nor should he.

> Thus *Eve* with Countnance blithe her storie told;
> But in her Cheek distemper flushing glowd.
> On th' other side, *Adam,* soon as he heard
> The fatal Trespass don by *Eve,* amaz'd,
> Astonied stood and Blank, while horror chill
> Ran through his veins, and all his joynts relax'd;
> From his slack hand the Garland wreath'd for *Eve*
> Down drop'd, and all the faded Roses shed:
> Speechless he stood and pale, till thus at length
> First to himself he inward silence broke.
>
> O fairest of Creation, last and best
> Of all Gods Works, Creature in whom excell'd
> Whatever can to fight or thought be found,
> Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet!
> How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,
> Defac't, deflourd, and now to Death devote?
> Rather how hast thou yeelded to transgress
> The strict forbiddance, how to violate
> The sacred Fruit forbidd'n! som cursed fraud
> Of Enemie hath beguil'd thee, yet unknown,
> And mee with thee hath ruind, for with thee
> Certain my resolution is to Die;
> How can I live without thee, how forgoe
> Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly joyn'd,
> To live again in these wilde Woods forlorn?
> Should God create another *Eve,* and I
> Another Rib afford, yet loss of thee
> Would never from my heart; no no, I feel
> The Link of Nature draw me: Flesh of Flesh,
> Bone of my Bone thou art, and from thy State
> Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe.

Milton went on to write *Paradise Regained*, a shorter poem lacking the dramatic tension of *Paradise Lost,* and the dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes,* the agonies of whose hero, the blind Samson, mirror his own.

But it is *Paradise Lost* that we remember – not because of the reworking of the Biblical description of the Fall so much as because of its exploration of the human psyche and of the condition of humankind. Our history, Milton says, is tinged with the infinite sadness of our inadequacy; but, even in the face of apparently indomitable forces and the outrages of fortune,

humankind, “how infinite in faculties,” will move forward with an optimism constantly renewed by the human spirit, put there by a God who has made us in his image.

We can do no better than to end with the farewell to Paradise with which this greatest of long poems in the English language concludes: Adam and Eve leaving the Garden to confront the perils and opportunities of the world. The world that they are entering will, like Hamlet’s, be weighed down by the outrages of fortune and by the loneliness of sin; but humankind, “how infinite in faculties,” will, Milton seems to suggest, ultimately prevail.

> So spake our Mother *Eve,* and *Adam* heard
> Well pleas'd, but answer'd not; for now too nigh
> Th' Archangel stood, and from the other Hill
> To their fixt Station, all in bright array
> The Cherubim descended; on the ground
> Gliding meteorous, as Ev'ning Mist
> Ris'n from a River o'er the marish glides,
> And gathers ground fast at the Labourers heel
> Homeward returning. High in Front advanc't,
> The brandisht Sword of God before them blaz'd
> Fierce as a Comet; which with torrid heat,
> And vapour as the *Libyan* Air adust,
> Began to parch that temperate Clime; whereat
> In either hand the hastning Angel caught
> Our lingring Parents, and to th' Eastern Gate
> Led them direct, and down the Cliff as fast
> To the subjected Plain; then disappear'd.
> They looking back, all th' Eastern side beheld
> Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
> Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
> With dreadful Faces throng'd and fiery Arms:
> Some natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;
> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
> Through *Eden* took their solitary way.