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STEVIE DAVIES

## An Analysis of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book One, Lines 589-669

He above the rest  
590 In shape and gesture proudly eminent  
Stood like a tow'r; his form had yet not lost  
All her original brightness, nor appeared  
Less than Archangel ruined, and th'excess  
Of glory obscured; as when the sun new ris'n  
595 Looks through the horizontal misty air  
Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon  
In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds  
On half the nations, and with fear of change  
Perplexes monarchs. Darkened so, yet shone  
600 Above them all th'Archangel; but his face  
Deep scars of thunder had intrenched, and care  
Sat on his faded cheek, but under brows  
Of dauntless courage, and considerate pride  
Waiting revenge. Cruel his eye, but cast  
605 Signs of remorse and passion to behold  
The fellows of his crime, the followers rather  
(Far other once beheld in bliss), condemned  
For ever now to have their lot in pain,  
Millions of Spirits for his fault amerced  
610 Of heav'n, and from eternal splendors flung  
For his revolt, yet faithful how they stood,  
Their glory withered: as when heaven's fire  
Hath scathed the forest oaks or mountain pines,  
With singed top their stately growth though bare  
615 Stands on the blasted heath. He now prepared  
To speak; whereat their doubled ranks they bend  
From wing to wing, and half enclose him round  
With all his peers: attention held them mute.  
Thrice he assayed, and thrice in spite of scorn,  
620 Tears such as angels weep burst forth; at last  
Words interwove with sighs found out their way:  
'O myriads of immortal Spirits, O Powers  
Matchless, but with th'Almighty, and that strife  
Was not inglorious, though th'event was dire,  
625 As this place testifies, and this dire change  
Hateful to utter. But what power of mind  
Forseeing or presaging, from the depth  
Of knowledge past or present, could have feared  
How such united force of gods, how such

630 As stood like these, could ever know repulse?  
For who can yet believe, though after loss,  
That all these puissant legions, whose exile  
Hath emptied heav'n, shall fail to re-ascend  
Self-raised, and repossess their native seat?  
635 For me, be witness all the host of heav'n,  
If counsels different, or danger shunned  
By me, have lost our hopes. But he who reigns  
Monarch in heav'n, till then as one secure  
Sat on his throne, upheld by old repute,  
640 Consent or custom, and his regal state  
Put forth at full, but still his strength concealed,  
Which tempted our attempt, and wrought our fall.  
Henceforth his might we know, and know our own,  
So as not either to provoke, or dread  
645 New war, provoked; our better part remains  
To work in close design, by fraud or guile,  
What force effected not; that he no less  
At length from us may find, who overcomes  
By force hath overcome but half his foe.  
650 Space may produce new worlds; whereof so rife  
There went a fame in heav'n that he ere long  
Intended to create, and therein plant  
A generation, whom his choice regard  
Should favor equal to the sons of heaven.  
655 Thither, if but to pry, shall be perhaps  
Our first eruption, thither or elsewhere;  
For this infernal pit never shall hold  
Celestial Spirits in bondage, nor th'abyss  
Long under darkness cover. But these thoughts  
660 Full counsel must mature. Peace is despaired,  
For who can think submission? War then, war  
Open or understood must be resolved.'  
He spake; and to confirm his words, out flew  
Millions of flaming swords, drawn from the thighs  
665 Of mighty Cherubim; the sudden blaze  
Far round illumined hell. Highly they raged  
Against the Highest, and fierce with grasped arms  
Clashed on their sounding shields the din of war,  
Hurling defiance toward the vault of heav'n.

THE author of the great epic, *Paradise Lost*, was in middle age, and totally blind, when he began to write the poem. By the time

it came to be published, in 1667, he had lived through a period of cataclysm in English history and within himself, and *Paradise* had

been lost to him in both spheres. He was a revolutionary Puritan who had fervently supported the Cromwellian forces during the Civil Wars, and in the Interregnum had worked as Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of State, endorsing the revolutionary cause with massive intellect and devotion: but he had lived to see the great ideals of the Revolution disintegrate into a welter of power politics and authoritarianism. In 1660 the Restoration of the monarchy left him in bitter disappointment, tolerated by a regime that had replaced the dream of God's kingdom of liberty and justice established upon earth by the old frivolous aristocratic government. Paradise was lost on earth, then, in terms of politics, and within his own life as his sight failed and left him in darkness.

These two themes—the contending forces of light and darkness; the conflict of revolutionary politics—will both be important in analysis of this passage from Book One of *Paradise Lost*, but the light here is a moral and spiritual experience, and the politics take place on a cosmic scale where God and Satan argue out the dialectic of good and evil. And here, the revolutionary party represents, as it had not done in Milton's earlier encounter with purely human political struggle, the party of evil: the establishment is all virtue. In an heroic language, where syntax and meaning have been wrenched into unfamiliar form through the imposition of Latinate constructions, Milton measures the forces of light and darkness in the universe against one another, as, in this extract, Satan collects his scattered armies together after the Fall and considers his own position.

Immediately one is impressed with the images of light which cluster round Satan. He retains some of his celestial 'brightness' (592); he is compared with the rising sun (594); ruined, he still 'shines' (599); he declares his affinity with light (659), and his followers embody it (666). And perhaps no poem ever depended as thoroughly as Milton's *Paradise Lost* on a polarisation of experience into light and darkness, the one sought and imagined as probably no seeing person is drawn to do, the other understood because it is the condition in which all life is lived. In *Paradise Lost*,

everything can be defined in terms of this duality, which also represents the criterion of moral worth. But such a distinction is complicated because in the universe of the poem appearance may not always correspond with reality: an entity like Satan may be radiant with his own hypocrisy, while the extremity of God's brightness may appear to creatures of lesser faculties as a kind of darkness.

Everything is instinct with ambiguity. Satan, the glorious ruin in Hell, still testifies that he was engendered in Heaven. But while Lucifer represents equivocation, God embodies paradox. The divine ambiguity is sustained by one whose potency reveals itself in the creation of phenomena at their most essential and absolute, so that Lucifer's 'excess Of glory obscured' (593-4) only travesties a Creator who later, in Book Three, will be perceived as 'dark with excessive bright' (III, 380), by worshipping spirits who encounter a light so intolerably great that it is apprehended as its opposite.

But Satan's is a real, and not an apparent, ambiguity. If, as the defeated hero, he has the glamour of his early beauty interestingly darkened by his fall, that self-contradiction will only mirror an ugly equivocation at the centre of his nature. Satanic beauty glittering across Hell from his tower-like height (591) and reflected back from his millions of allies, will lead in his oration to a display of heroism terrible because it is gloriously faithful to an obnoxious ideal, involving unscrupulous politics, fine phrases and poor grammar. When the speech is over, jingoistic Cherubim, roaring abuse up at God, respond in a way that is, equivocally, splendid and ludicrous. Milton says that the burning swords they draw 'far round illumined hell' (666), and that is, of course, on one level a moving, awe-inspiring spectacle. Fallen spirits, like a reflex of their leader and like a parody of God himself, can make light, and for Milton light represents perfection. So far, it is glorious, and there could be no drama in the myth or the poem if that were not so, and if one were not made to feel very deeply that the residue of power and beauty in Satan is an imposing thing. Satan must persuade his comrades to believe in a kind of Manichean universe, where good

and evil forces almost equally contend. The spirits rage 'highly . . . Against the Highest' (666-7): they carry a certain (and as yet not wholly defined) degree of that quality of which God represents the superlative. And so there is the fierce beauty of the light they make.

But there is also a sense here of another dimension, in terms of which all this manifold shouting and banging of shields is ridiculous, small. Milton implies this by a multiple shift of perspective in the passage. From the rolling, aggressive periods of Satan's speech and the sense of his massive personality at the centre of things, one's vision expands to include the army of his followers who are perceived as if from a distance: then attention is directed away from them altogether, and out into the silence of the sky beyond. The effect is firstly to diminish the stature of the Fallen Angels, and then to bring them into direct relation with 'the Highest', who, somewhere infinitely beyond, past the 'vault of heav'n', may be listening, or, not needing to listen, since he foreknew it all from the beginning, is simply present in his own supreme quiet. Who can imagine that all this thumping of shields and yelling of abuse fading out into space can have the least effect on the Creator's peace of mind?

If Satan in this first book is sardonic, surely God's quietude is the greatest irony of all. Containing within his unity all contradictions and paradoxes, he can afford to be virtually absent from the poem while his fallen subjects exercise their own ambiguities—to be at once the makers of light and the inheritors of darkness, to be both menacing and impotent. Milton's language and his shifting of perspective work to sustain the tension of all this paradox in the reader's mind. You are to be simultaneously disturbed by sympathy and disgust for a Satan who is the supreme manifestation of your own fallen state. In a sense, Milton wants his reader to be taken in by Satan, so that he too will feel enmeshed in the satanic ambiguities, and, because the mind finds contradictions within itself uncomfortable, the reader will be led to struggle for the moral resolution which will emancipate him from that intellectual distress.

Unless the reader experiences this paradox to the full, the poet may be said to have failed to do what he promised in the invocation to Book One, 'to justify the ways of God to men' (I, 26), for if Satan does not appear to oneself to be extremely plausible and exciting, if one does not experience seduction by him, then the poem will not have impressed one fully, either dramatically or ethically. Blake thought that Milton was of the Devil's party without knowing it, and felt pleased with that, because it is always pleasant to find political allies in unlikely places. But it may be argued that Milton knew perfectly well that Satan's glamour would appeal to his audience: it was only realistic that it should, since he saw it happening in spiritual life every day around him. But that was policy, not accident. He manoeuvres you into sympathy with Satan at every point in Book One, but either implicitly or explicitly supplies the warning which should bring to mind the other half of the paradox.

As devil's advocate, one could of course make an excellent case in analysis of this extract for Milton's unconscious complicity with Satan. Here is a creature who first of all captures your sympathy because he corresponds to an archetype which tradition, in the form of the classical epic hero in defeat, and the universal human preference for the victim at the expense of the oppressor, has made very attractive. So Satan has this immediate advantage, which only seems confirmed when we are presented with those haunting images of the dawning sun, its action atrophied by mist, and of the sun eclipsed by the moon, sending fear into the superstitious consciousness of kings. Satan's appearance was

as when the sun new ris'n  
Looks through the horizontal misty air  
Shorn of his beams, or from behind the  
moon  
In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds  
On half the nations, and with fear of  
change  
Perplexes monarchs.

(I, 594-9)

But Milton's similes are seldom as guileless as that: they only appear so on a first reading.

When they are related back to reality, they often reveal deep ironies within themselves. If Satan is the rising sun, then certainly he carries the attribute of beauty, but dawning in a Hell which Milton has made as repulsive as possible, he also has a certain incongruity; if eclipse appals monarchs, then that just goes to show how very superstitious earthly kings are. Incidentally, the court censor was said to have taken exception to this passage, as being potentially subversive, and it is true that Milton profoundly disapproved of kings in general and tyrants in particular. During the Interregnum he had justified the execution of Charles I in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, holding that tyrannous kings 'may be as lawfully deposed and punished as they were at first elected.' He knew what happens when 'fear of change Perplexes monarchs', and had himself used arguments against the divine rights of Kings rather like Satan's scoff that God had seemed to reign 'as one secure . . . upheld by old repute, Consent or custom'.

But Milton's own heroically rebellious past and republican sympathies do not mean that he is here playing devil's advocate. If Satan grieves for the suffering that his army has incurred as a result of its fidelity to him, we are moved, and the magnificent rhythms of the blank verse invite us to be so:

yet faithful how they stood  
Their glory withered  
(I, 611-2)

Such tenacity to a loved ideal is, one feels, all the more admirable because it is in defeat. And yet it is worthwhile to remember that this current of emotion represents an interior monologue of Satan's own. It is Satan himself who, gazing on his legions, defines them first as 'fellows', then as 'followers' of his insurrection (606), the one word seeming to derive out of the other, but in fact contradicting it. Vanity permits one to have subordinates, but never equals. And vanity, mingled with self-pity, makes it perversely delightful to look round on the sharers of one's damnation, luxuriating in their devotion to oneself. When Satan weeps, the universe had better look out for itself, for such sorrow as this, as Milton goes on to demonstrate, turns vicious in a moment.

The speech which follows derives straight out of this sorrow, yet it is a masterpiece of political oratory, which moves from self-pity into self-justification, and ends in a reverberating war-cry. It begins with a remarkable, and very dramatic, instance of broken grammar, which stands out even from the strange and complicated syntax which is Milton's staple idiom in *Paradise Lost*:

'O myriads of immortal Spirits, O Powers  
Matchless, but with th'Almighty, and that  
strife  
Was not inglorious, though th'event was  
dire,  
As this place testifies, and this dire change  
Hateful to utter.'

(I, 622-6)

The peroration to the Fallen Angels, dignifying them with their old grandiose titles, suddenly breaks down at the word 'and', as though the weight of emotion wrenched syntax awry as a conflicting sense of failure and achievement forced its way to the surface of his mind. It had been a glorious battle, though its results were appalling—but the repetition of the word 'dire' suggests that at this moment the gloom and darkness of Hell invade Satan's consciousness, impressing him for the time being more than the memory of a glorious cause. Darkness before the Fall had been an unknown condition, and in the staggering grammar of that sentence one feels Satan's mind straining to accommodate itself to a new world where this is the only given reality.

But the motive for this accommodation is, of course, the desire to exploit. Satan the politician can turn any situation to his own advantage, so that what we witness in this speech is a succession of arguments designed to reinstate his own ego at the centre of events. One might narrate it in terms of a Parliamentary report, and, remembering that Milton had endured, and no doubt drawn on, all the zealous and self-vindicating rhetoric of pre-Restoration politics, this may be a very relevant exercise:

Satan maintained that his instigation of  
the rebellion was justified on the grounds  
that the exact extent of God's military

resources had not been at that time ascertainable, and went on to suggest that, God's army being so depleted at present, Heaven might still be won. For himself, he knew that he had acted with integrity and courage. It was clear that the blame for the revolt should rest with God, for in concealing his power he had wilfully invited civil war. Satan went on to say that, in view of their new knowledge, the Fallen Angels might now proceed to devise stratagems for outwitting the enemy, who would find to his cost that mind may triumph over brute force. He suggested that the rumoured creation of a new world by God would probably afford opportunity for such a retaliation, the details of which could be worked out in due course. He ended by advocating the necessity of war. There was applause from all sides of Hell.

To report the gist of the speech with such deadpan neutrality is to reveal both Satan's strengths and weaknesses. He is an excellent rationaliser, attributing for instance the origin of civil war to God's habitual veneer of mildness, which gave the impression of divine obsolescence, and reinforcing this by a shifty use of semantics which pretends to derive the rebels' 'attempt' from God's 'tempting' (642). But he is not a rational creature, for tumbling headlong into Hell has not cured him of the delusion that Heaven is still there for the taking. This illogic stems from the fact that argument for Satan inevitably has as its first premiss his own ego, and as its object the conversion of his audience to subordination

to that ego. 'Self' is the beginning and the end of all intellectual processes, so that the Fallen Spirits shall reascend to Heaven 'self-raised' (634), and Satan's anxiety to vindicate himself is enacted in phrases like 'for me', 'by me', placed at the beginning of a line so as to take all the emphasis (635, 7). Such a dialectical principle leads to the kind of falsehood that implies that, since he and his legions are the only beings that count, and since they are no longer in Heaven, then Heaven must be empty (633). But Satan knows perfectly well that the myriads of immortal Spirits under his jurisdiction are matched by the millions who are the friends of God and still populate Heaven. Hyperbole is one of his favourite arts, and he can turn a fine phrase with a spectacular feeling for what will animate an audience. God will discover:

who overcomes

By force hath overcome but half his foe.

(649)

But alliteration and the invention of new grand aphorisms will not conceal the absurdity of imagining that the God who was omniscient since the beginning of things, who himself created knowledge, has anything to learn that Satan's intelligence could supply. When the speech is over, one is left with the image of the Fallen Angels into whose nature Satan's rhetoric has penetrated, at once heroically and absurdly preparing to test out for the second time the satanic system of logic against the Creator who has already conclusively proved himself to be its refutation.

*Further Reading:* As a useful corrective to the point of view expressed in this article, I would suggest W. Empson's *Milton's God*, London, 1961, an astringent criticism of the ethos of *Paradise Lost*. A work by Christopher Ricks called *Milton's Grand Style*, Oxford, 1963, I have found invaluable: it's an exploration of the way Milton's eccentric, complex use of language enriches his material. Helen Gardner's *A Reading of Paradise Lost*, Oxford, 1965, contains some very interesting ideas on philosophical and aesthetic considerations in *Paradise Lost*. Dr. Johnson's weighty and often amusing pronouncements in his *Life of Milton* (in *Lives of the English Poets*) are most instructive. An lastly, I would recommend J. B. Broadbent's *Some Graver Subject*, London, 1960, where you will find amongst other things some fine analysis of the imagery of *Paradise Lost*.