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Introduction, Notes, and For Further Reading  
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Note on John Milton, The World of John Milton and *Paradise Lost*,  
Inspired by *Paradise Lost*, and Comments & Questions  
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## John Milton

John Milton was born in London on December 9, 1608, to John and Sara Milton. The elder Milton was a well-to-do scrivener—a profession that combined the functions of solicitor, public notary, and moneylender—and was able to provide his son with a first-rate education and financial independence. Milton was educated at home and at St. Paul's School, then entered Christ's College, Cambridge. He quickly earned the respect of his fellow students and tutors, and completed a Master of Arts degree in 1632; then, living with his father outside London, he undertook an intense six-year reading program in history, philosophy, and literature. In 1638 and 1639 Milton made the Grand Tour of Europe, where he and his early verse were well received and where he met with such accomplished intellectuals as the great astronomer Galileo.

When Milton returned to England in 1639, the country was on the brink of civil war, in which Oliver Cromwell would lead parliamentary forces in a struggle that would culminate in the execution of King Charles I in 1649 and that abolished Anglicanism as the state church. Milton threw himself into the fray in 1641 by publishing pamphlets on ecclesiastical reform. Civil war was declared in 1642, and that year Milton, then thirty-three, married seventeen-year-old Mary Powell, an uneducated girl from a staunchly royalist family. Mary went back to live with her parents soon after the wedding but returned in 1645 and bore four children, dying in childbirth with the fourth in 1652. Milton would marry twice again.

Mary's desertion had prompted Milton to write a pamphlet, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), which earned him a place among the radical elements of the revolution. In 1644 he published *Areopagitica*, a defense of free expression, and *Of Education*, which promotes the study of the classics rather than of the Bible and Christian thought. In 1645 his first collection of poetry appeared, including "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," and "Lycidas." From 1648 to 1658, Milton served the

new government of Oliver Cromwell as secretary for foreign languages to the Council of State, a position that required him to justify to the public in England and abroad the execution of Charles I. Milton's vision had been weakening for years, and in 1652 he became completely blind.

The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 put Milton in grave danger, but he was allowed to retreat from public life into retirement. In 1667 he produced his greatest work, *Paradise Lost* (which he had been composing, in one form or another, since he was a young man), followed by *The History of Britain* (1670), and *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* (published together in 1671). John Milton died of gout on November 8, 1674.

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## The World of John Milton and *Paradise Lost*

1590— *The Faerie Queene*, by Edmund Spenser, is published.

1596

1603 King James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England, succeeding Elizabeth I.

1608

John Milton is born on December 9 in London to John and Sara Milton. During the next several years William Shakespeare's last plays appear, as do many works of poet and dramatist Ben Jonson.

1611

The King James Version of the Bible is published.

1616

William Shakespeare dies.

1618—

Milton is tutored by Presbyterian cleric Thomas Young.

1620

Milton attends St. Paul's School in London, where he receives instruction in classical languages and literature and in Christian doctrine. He reads and is greatly influenced by the works of Edmund Spenser and sixteenth-century French Huguenot poet Guillaume du Bartas. Milton befriends Charles Diodati, for whom he writes some of his first poems. In 1623 the first folio of Shakespeare's works is published.

1625

Milton enters Christ's College, Cambridge, intending to study religion. He leaves briefly during his first year due to disagreements with a tutor, but returns. The death of James I places his son on the throne of England as Charles I.

1629

Milton receives his B.A. and composes "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," his first major poem. The authoritarian Charles I discontinues parliament.

- 1631 Poet John Donne dies, and poet, dramatist, and critic John Dryden is born.
- 1632 Milton's "On Shakespeare," his first published poem, appears anonymously in the second folio of Shakespeare's works. Milton receives his M.A.; living with his father near London, he begins a six-year reading program in history, philosophy, and literature.
- 1634 *Comus*, a masque Milton has written at the request of composer Henry Lawes, is presented at Ludlow Castle in Shropshire.
- 1637 Milton's mother dies, as does Ben Jonson.
- 1638 Milton writes "Lycidas" in memory of a former Cambridge classmate who has drowned. He embarks on a Grand Tour of Europe and spends most of the next fifteen months in Italy, where he finds a warm reception and praise for his work. Among the prominent intellectual figures he meets is the aged astronomer Galileo, under house arrest in Florence. Milton's longtime friend Charles Diodati dies.
- 1639 Returning to England, Milton settles in London and begins tutoring his nephews.
- 1640 Milton completes "Epitaphium Damonis," an elegy to Charles Diodati. Parliament is reconvened.
- 1641 Milton begins publishing tracts calling for the reform of the Church of England.
- 1642 The First Civil War begins, with parliament opposing the monarchy. Milton marries seventeen-year-old Mary Powell, but she soon goes back to live with her parents, who are staunch royalists and therefore politically at odds with Milton and his Puritan allegiances.
- 1643 Milton's difficulties with Mary prompt him to write *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, the first of several tracts on that theme; the publication incites considerable controversy. The government puts into effect a licensing act that allows censorship before publication.
- 1644 Milton publishes *Areopagitica*, his defense of free expression, and *Of Education*, which promotes the study of the classics rather than of the Bible and Christian thought.

- 1645 Mary returns to Milton. His first collection of poetry appears; it includes "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," and "Lycidas."
- 1646 Mary gives birth to a daughter, Anne. The First Civil War ends with the defeat of the royalists. Mary's relations join the Milton household.
- 1647 Milton's father dies.
- 1648 Mary gives birth to the couple's second daughter, Mary.
- 1649 Charles I is executed and the Commonwealth is established. Oliver Cromwell, as the new ruler of England, appoints Milton secretary for foreign languages to the Council of State. Milton publishes *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which defends the execution of Charles I and argues that power resides in the people, and *Eikonoklastes*, which makes a case against monarchy.
- 1651 Mary gives birth to Milton's only son, John. Milton publishes *The Defence of the English People*, another argument in support of the execution of Charles I.
- 1652 Milton's eyesight has been failing for years; now blindness overtakes him. Mary Milton dies of complications from the birth of their daughter Deborah. The couple's son, John, also dies.
- 1654 *The Second Defence of the English People* appears in celebration of Cromwell and the Commonwealth he has established.
- 1656 Milton marries Katherine Woodcock. He begins *Of Christian Doctrine*, which will not be published until 1825.
- 1657 Katherine gives birth to a daughter, Katherine.
- 1658 Katherine Woodcock and her daughter die. In response, Milton composes one of his most touching sonnets, "Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint." Cromwell dies and is succeeded by his son Richard.
- 1660 Milton's *A Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* appears. The Restoration reinstates the monarchy and the Church of England and puts Charles II on the throne. Parliament burns Milton's works and orders his arrest. The influence of the poet Andrew Marvell and others secures Milton's life and his freedom.
- 1663 Milton marries Elizabeth Mimshull.

- 1665 Milton flees the plague that is overtaking London; he stays in the town of Chalfont St. Giles, in Buckinghamshire.
- 1666 The Great Fire destroys much of London, including Milton's home.
- 1667 *Paradise Lost*, Milton's masterpiece, is published.
- 1670 Milton's *The History of Britain* is published.
- 1671 *Paradise Regained*, a sequel to *Paradise Lost*, and *Samson Agonistes*, a tragedy based on the end of Samson's life as told in the Old Testament, appear in the same volume.
- 1674 John Milton dies of gout November 8 and is buried at the church of St. Giles Cripplegate in London, next to his father.

## Introduction

Many new readers of *Paradise Lost* may be tempted to agree with Victorian critic Sir Walter Raleigh's notorious description of the poem as a "monument to dead ideas." It took Milton's reputation most of the twentieth century to recover from this dubious accolade, but Raleigh's verdict was monstrously unjust. Milton himself would have recoiled from the suggestion that a book, any book, could be "a monument to dead ideas." Almost four decades before the publication of *Paradise Lost*, his poem in memory of William Shakespeare scorned as idolatry the very notion of external monuments. Shakespeare did not need "the labour of an age in piled stones," because he had constructed a "live-long monument" in the hearts of his admirers. A true monument could never be dead but must be living, animate. That is how Milton imagined the afterlife of his own work. In *Areopagitica* (1644), he declared:

Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of the living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragon's teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men.

Milton thought of himself as a prophet, doomed by Providence to speak truths that his age was not yet capable of understanding and to sow seeds of revolutionary upheaval that only posterity could bring to fruition. The most hardened skeptic must concede that on points ranging from freedom of the press to divorce, Milton's ideas have indeed proved prophetic. With regard to *Paradise Lost*, however, Raleigh's criticism might seem more plausible. Did Milton miscalculate when

he composed his main legacy to the ages in a theological vocabulary that would be obsolescent within a century?

Modern readers often question the relevance of the biblical creation myth to our scientific age, in which the historical veracity of Genesis has been disproved. The first task facing newcomers to the poem is to overcome the prejudice, shared today by religious fundamentalists and secular atheists alike, that the Bible story must be either literally true or utterly false. We must understand that for Milton and his contemporaries, scripture was to be interpreted on many different levels, of which the literal was by no means the most significant. Similarly, we need to move beyond the naive question of whether one "believes in" beings such as God, his Son, or Satan. These are not entities comparable to the Yeti or the Loch Ness monster, which either do or do not exist. They designate, rather, aspects of human experience that, today, we usually think of in other terms. We tend to debate the matters on which Milton meditates through the abstract concepts of philosophy or psychology, but those disciplines employ figures, metaphors, and symbols just as surely as Milton's poem does, with its devils, angels, and talking snakes. To suggest that *Paradise Lost* presents "dead ideas" is like denying the relevance of the Oedipus complex on the grounds that King Oedipus never existed.

Milton believed that truth was historical, that it changed and developed along with human society. He viewed history as a narrative, a continuously evolving revelation of truth. As he puts it in *Areopagitica*: "The light which we have gain'd was giv'n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge." Truth is a journey, not a destination, and we are driven along this pilgrimage by a series of clashes between logically opposed forces: "Let [Truth] and Falshood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the words, in a free and open encounter." In *Paradise Lost*, the character who rebels against this historical and dialectical view of truth, boasting of his "mind not to be chang'd by place or time" (1.253), is Satan. Satan also denies the fact that he was created by a power beyond himself, investigates the idolatrous worship of signs, transmits his materialist approach to the world to human beings, and inculcates in them an empty, self-destructive hedonism. There is a good case to be made that the power Milton calls "Satan" has, in the twenty-first century, finally

conquered the world. *Paradise Lost* is the prophetic story of how he has achieved his triumph. There could be no idea less "dead" than that.

## II

Critics like Raleigh assume that the mark of genius is universality. They believe that a truly great artist must transcend their particular cultural and historical environment and be, as Ben Jonson remarked about Shakespeare, "not of an age but for all time." By this standard, Milton is indeed sorely deficient. His ideas, and the means by which he expresses them, are deeply rooted in the local circumstances of seventeenth-century England, and we must have some knowledge of this background before we can understand his work. But if we believe that human thought is a process, in which any era's events and beliefs are necessarily the consequences of their predecessors, then Milton's historical specificity is no bar to his continuing pertinence. We can learn much about early modern England by reading *Paradise Lost*, but we can learn even more about our own time, because we live among the consequences of the events it describes.

The most portentous process taking place in early modern England was the rapid expansion, and globalization, of a money-based, market economy. Such an economy demands two essential prerequisites: the recognition of money as an independent, self-generating force—an efficacious sign—and the commodification of human activity as "labor." During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England was moving painfully, often violently, through both of these processes. Millions of subsistence farmers were robbed of their land, and thus of their livelihood, by the practice euphemistically known to history as "enclosing." The means of enclosure varied greatly with time and place, but at bottom it involved large landowners stealing the property of the peasantry. The dispossessed peasants were forced to become wage laborers, who exchanged their labor-power for money. This gradually brought about an epochal shift in the way human beings regarded themselves. People came to view their productive activity as a *thing*, which could be bought and sold on the market like any other commodity. They began, in other words, to "objectify" themselves. Furthermore, they learned to conceive of an equivalence be-

tique was immediately extrapolated into an attack on the whole sacramental structure of the Catholic Church. The reformers felt themselves surrounded by image-worshippers, and they set out to destroy idolatry in its political, economic, and religious aspects, as well as within their own minds.

In England, Henry VIII inadvertently introduced the Reformation when he obtained the divorce that the Pope had refused to grant him by simply usurping the Pope's position as head of the church. The reformation provided him with a rationale and offered a protection against reprisals, but Henry was less than enthusiastic about Protestant doctrine, and this produced a set of ideological contradictions that permanently divided the Anglican faith. The official church retained a hierarchical disciplinary structure whereby the consciences of its members were compelled to follow the dictates of the monarch. In liturgical practice, the church continued to follow the logic of pre-Reformation theology, using set forms of prayer and copious iconic imagery as tools of devotion. From the moment of its foundation, the church was therefore plagued by "Puritans," who sought to purify it of these residual Catholic influences. Since the head of the state was also the head of the church, moreover, protests against the official religion inevitably acquired dangerous political overtones.

There was little organized political opposition to the English monarchy until the eve of the civil war. But during the reigns of James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649), relations between king and parliament deteriorated to the point where armed conflict became unavoidable. The monarch had traditionally summoned representatives of his noble and wealthy subjects for regular consultations, and by custom he had required their assent before introducing many legal measures, including the raising of new taxes. However, the growing power of the market economy, to which the expropriation of the peasantry and its conversion into a force of wage-laborers were necessary precursors, was bringing a new form of power into being: the power of money. Money, which could be acquired by trade, offered an alternative to the inheritance of land as a means to influence, and it proved a profoundly subversive social force. The logic of money, and of the market in goods and labor that generated it, was in many ways inimical to the traditional social order, and the possessors of money saw

tween their lives, which they parceled out and sold piecemeal as "labor," and the money for which they exchanged them. People learned, in other words, to translate themselves into a system of signs—for money, like language, is a medium of symbols through which human beings impose an artificial, man-made significance upon the world.

In Milton's day, the financial medium of signs was beginning the process of becoming autonomous and self-generating, as customary and legal restrictions on "usury" were gradually relaxed and a system of wage-labor was introduced. This independent power of signs struck many contemporaries as idolatrous, as did the concomitant necessity for people to conceive of their labor as a thing, a commodity. In the terms of modern philosophy, early modern England was experiencing a growing "autonomy of representation" and witnessing the "objectification of the human subject." The effects of these processes are so universal today that people often forget that they are quite recent developments. Their psychological consequences have become part of our identities, and it is therefore tempting to assume that they are natural and immutable. *Paradise Lost* tells us otherwise. Milton lived at a time when these tendencies were new enough to be clearly visible, and his work describes them in minute detail. He did not, of course, consider them to be "economic" phenomena: The concept of the "economy" was invented decades after his death, precisely in order to conceal the impact of "economic" practices throughout other areas of human life and thought. But the materialism, literalism, cynicism, and above all the idolatry with which Satan infects humanity are impossible to sustain without the simultaneous alienation of human life into symbolic form, and the progressive exaltation of symbols to the position of complete predominance that they enjoy over modern society.

The Protestant reformation began a century before Milton's birth, but the course of his entire life and thought was determined by its repercussions. Although it expressed itself in terms that we narrowly cord off as "religious," the reformation was a general, visceral reaction against the objectification of the subject and the autonomous power of representation. The spark that lit the fuse was Martin Luther's protest against the papal sale of "indulgences," which were fetishistic financial symbols of penitential human activity, but this cri-

was a Roman Catholic, one of many Englishmen who saw the vernacular Bible as a direct threat to the authority of their church, which rested on patristic and ecclesiastical tradition, rather than on scripture. He expelled his unrepentant son from the family home and disinherited him, forcing him to seek his own fortune among the sharp-elbowed merchants of London. John Milton senior prospered in the commercial metropolis, becoming a scrivener—a profession that combined the functions of solicitor, realtor, public notary, and money-lender.

Insufficient critical attention has been paid to the fact that the two towering geniuses of early modern English literature, Milton and Shakespeare, were both the sons of moneylenders. This profession was very controversial, and the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a series of debates in pulpit, press, and parliament about its legal and moral status. John Milton senior seems to have avoided criminal prosecution, but Shakespeare's father was twice convicted of usury by the Royal Exchequer. Many people felt that taking interest on a loan *ipso facto* constituted the sin, and the crime, of usury, which was regarded as an unnatural vice akin to sodomy and as an antisocial practice demonstrating a rapacious avarice utterly at odds with Christian charity. Milton must have been aware that his father's money, on which he lived well into adulthood, had been acquired by means that were widely considered disreputable.

Over the course of the poet's lifetime, usury was defined in progressively narrower ways, and moneylending incrementally acquired legitimacy. This is generally acknowledged as a momentous process in the history of economics, since it prepared the ground for the system of capitalist global exchange that currently holds the world in its grip. But modern economists often neglect the ethical implications of this process, and it is here that the "Dragon's teeth" sown by *Paradise Lost* may yet bear the fruit that Milton prophesied. The fact that money was not somehow incarnated in precious metals, but was rather a sign with a purely figurative existence, was revealed to early modern Europeans by the sudden influx of American gold and silver into Europe and the consequent fluctuations in value of the coinage. The debate over whether money can or should be allowed to reproduce, as in usury, was at root a discussion about the ethical status of representa-

less and less reason to bow to tradition. The system of mutual bonds, relations, and ideas that we call "feudalism" was being inexorably undermined by money, and England's customary system of government was among the first edifices to topple.

From 1629 until 1640, after calling a series of acrimonious parliaments that either refused to grant new taxes or insisted on political and religious reform as their precondition, Charles I ruled without parliament's advice or consent. He developed methods of "personal rule" that tended toward absolutism and, as his opponents claimed, tyranny. The consequent resentment of many of his subjects, especially those whose wealth took the form of money rather than land, coalesced neatly with the Puritans' frustration with the state church. Despite the reservations of "revisionist" historians, it is not simplistic to say that the English revolution was brought about by an alliance of radical Protestant theology with the mercantile economic interest.

The king's opponents looked for precedent and inspiration to the "classical republicanism" of Athens and Rome, and especially to the Roman civil war between Julius Caesar and such republicans as Cato and Cicero. These latter figures became the heroes of the parliamentarians, and, combined with the more recent revolutionary examples of continental Protestantism, their work provided a potent rationale for civil disobedience and, eventually, insurrection. By 1642, when the king desperately needed to raise an army to quell a rebellion in Ireland, parliament was in no mood to trust him with its command. Unstandably unwilling to relinquish control over so fundamental a power, Charles left London and raised his battle standard at Oxford, thus initiating the civil war. It is at this crucial juncture that John Milton emerges from studious obscurity onto the stage of English history.

### III

The entire tenor of Milton's family history and early life had prepared him for the role he was about to play. The roots of *Paradise Lost* lie in a small Oxfordshire village in the mid-sixteenth century, when Richard Milton, the poet's grandfather, discovered his son John in possession of an improper book: an English Bible. Richard Milton



tion: Were signs properly referential, or did they enjoy an autonomous and self-generating existence—were they efficacious? The legitimization of usury was thus part of a wider movement whereby signs, whether financial, religious, or linguistic, floated free from the world to which they referred, attaining a degree of autonomous power that many people, including Milton, considered to be Satanic.

*Paradise Lost* is a broadly extended, but minutely detailed, diagnosis of idolatry. It embodies the source of idolatry in Satan, and it describes Satan's imposition of an idolatrous consciousness on humanity. A naive reader might say that since we know that Satan does not exist, Milton has indeed erected a "monument to dead ideas." But this would be to make precisely the error the poem indicts. It would be to commit idolatry, by taking the *sign* of Satan for the *referent*. Milton does not ask us to believe in the existence of a ruddy, cloven-hoofed fellow with a widow's peak and goatee—this creature is the traditional symbol of Satan, not the reality. Instead, *Paradise Lost* demands that we consider the reality of Satan, which it identifies as the tendency to bestow subjective agency upon mere symbols. Milton would have conceived of the tyrannical power accorded to signs today as clear evidence of the earthly triumph of Satan, and in *Paradise Lost* he has left us one of the most perspicacious accounts of this process.

The poet's background situated him solidly in the economic, political, and religious vanguards of his age—capitalism, republicanism, and Puritanism—and his temperament rendered him uniquely suited to reflect on their implications. He was born in 1608, in a mercantile neighborhood at the heart of the city of London, and soon revealed himself to be a preternaturally intellectual child. By the age of ten he was regularly substituting study for sleep, initiating a lifelong regimen that gives him a reasonable claim to be among the most learned men who have ever lived. He took lessons at home from the well-known Presbyterian cleric Thomas Young, while simultaneously astonishing his instructors at St. Paul's School with his precocity. At the age of sixteen he moved on to Christ's College, Cambridge, where he earned the soubriquet "the Lady" by means that are sadly lost to history. His surviving undergraduate work demonstrates a degree of learning that would be considered utterly beyond the reach of any modern teenager, and which also seems to have distanced him from his contemporaries.

In one of his "Prolusions," written for an audience of his fellow undergraduates, he claims that most of them bear "malice" toward him, and a painful altercation with his tutor led to a brief suspension from the university. Such conflicts were, however, resolved sufficiently for Milton to earn his B.A. in 1629, and his M.A. three years later.

The natural career for the academically inclined was then the church, and Milton at first planned to enter the Anglican priesthood. Over the course of his twenties, however, he became disillusioned with England's official faith. Like many "Puritans," Milton resented the remaining Catholic influences, or "rags of Rome," within the Anglican confession. He particularly blanched at the church's hierarchical organization, which gave inordinate authority to the bishops, and to its union with the state, which bestowed ultimate religious power on the king. Both these aspects of Anglican discipline appeared intolerably repressive of free individual inquiry, a liberty that Milton prized above all others. By his thirtieth birthday, his conscience had developed to the point that, as he later put it, he felt himself "church-outed by the prelates," and unable to fulfill the functions of an Anglican minister.

At this stage of his life, in fact, it was by no means clear what functions Milton was able to fulfill. After leaving Cambridge he effectively retired, living at his father's houses near London and spending the remainder of his twenties engaged in a spectacularly arduous program of study. By the time he emerged from his retreat at the age of thirty, he had fashioned himself into a veritable freak of erudition. There was little practical to show for it, however. The poems Milton composed during these years were occasional works, written for specific events, and usually at the request of others. They are remarkably accomplished and strikingly idiosyncratic, but by themselves they would not have won their author a seat among the immortals. For our purposes, their most notable characteristic is their anticipation of the thematic concerns that would come to fruition in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's basic preoccupations remain remarkably consistent throughout the vicissitudes of his life and career.

His earliest juvenilia includes several formal, elegiac verse letters to friends, and even these contain polished rehearsals of themes he would never abandon. The first elegy, composed at the age of eighteen

during Milton's suspension from the university, juxtaposes the competing attractions of the flesh and the spirit. The adolescent poet describes his pleasure in girl-watching, but pointedly rejects such trivia in favor of the cultivation of the mind. The paired poems "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" ("The Cheerful Man" and "The Melancholy Man") explore this dichotomy in greater depth, and they evince a finely tuned awareness of the interpenetration of opposites. Although the two lifestyles are sharply contrasted, Milton subtly introduces elements of melancholy into "L'Allegro" and hints of mirth into "Il Penseroso." He was never to lose this understanding that all binary oppositions are mutually definitive, that the terms of such polarities depend upon each other for their existence.

Milton wrote the hymn "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" within weeks of his twenty-first birthday. It treats the opposition between pagan idolatry and monotheism as the driving force of human history, and the lengthy description of the banishment of the pagan gods suggests that the destruction of the idols was the most significant result of the birth of Christ. These stanzas look forward to *Paradise Lost's* careful identification of pagan gods with the fallen angels, and Milton's thought always centered around the conflict between idolatry and true religion. He explored it further in 1634, when he composed the libretto to a masque celebrating the investiture of the Lord President of Wales. *Comus*, as this work is known to posterity, features an eponymous tempter, who uses magic and sensuality in a vain attempt to seduce a "Lady." The sorcerer's scheme involves arguments that we would call "economic"—he makes a protocapitalist case for the reproductive power of money in his effort to persuade the Lady to circulate her sexual favors—but Milton presents these as part of the more general phenomenon of magic, which he understands as the manipulation of representation for practical ends. Magic is the science of the efficacious sign; it is the practical, secular application of idolatry. The villainous figure of *Comus*, whose carnal temptations and magical arts feed off and blend into each other, provides a convincing rough draft for the Satan of *Paradise Lost*.

"Lycidas," the last significant work of Milton's early period, was written in 1638 for a volume in memory of one of his Cambridge classmates who had recently met an untimely death. The poem is egre-

giously inappropriate to this context. Milton was evidently unable to stem the stream of thought that drew him far away from his ostensible subject into an intricate meditation on the human condition and topical politics. His epigraph disingenuously describes "Lycidas" as a "monody"—a song in one voice. In fact, however, the poem presents the reflections of various characters, ranging from Apollo to Saint Peter, who speak to and through Milton. It thus prefigures the method of *Paradise Lost*, which was originally conceived as a drama and presents a conversation taking place within the poet's mind, as well as an external metaphysical conflict between supernatural beings.

Magnificent as they are, it is hard to avoid the impression that works like *Comus* and "Lycidas" are addressed to posterity, rather than designed to win fame in Milton's lifetime. Many of his early works announce his intention to write a great epic poem at some future date, and he frequently suggests that his shorter poems are merely place markers, preparing the way for this impending *magnum opus*. His juvenilia won him some local acclaim, but as Milton approached his thirtieth birthday, he had neither a career nor any obvious desire for one.

In 1638 Milton belatedly began the conventional final phase of an upper-class seventeenth-century education, setting off to visit the sites of classical antiquity in Italy and Greece. After a brief passage through France, he arrived in Italy, where his budding talent definitively bloomed. He attended the symposia of literary academies in Florence and was delighted to find that his Latin poetry won the praise he knew it deserved, and he visited Galileo, who was under house arrest following his persecution by the Inquisition. Milton's strong faith in his own literary abilities was thus confirmed, as was his equally strong aversion to ecclesiastical tyranny. But as he was on the point of departing for Greece, he received news of serious civil strife in England. This struck him as a vocation, and he felt compelled to abandon his journey and return home to share, and if possible participate in, his country's tribulation.

## IV

We can divide the causes of the English revolution into "religious," "political," and "economic" spheres for our convenience, as long as we

remember that the people of the seventeenth century did not view these as discrete areas of experience, but rather as elements within a unified, overarching totality. The sullen hostility between King Charles I and parliament blazed into conflict over the question of who should control the army, which we would consider a political matter. But the parliament could draw on the support of those who resented the liturgical practices of the Anglican Church, and it could also exploit the dissatisfaction of the mercantile classes at being taxed to fund the aristocratic extravagance of the court. For Milton, these various grounds for opposition to the monarch coalesced to form the earthly manifestation of a greater, metaphysical conflict between the forces of good and evil.

The intricate connections between the different issues at stake are immediately apparent in Milton's writings from the 1640s. On his return to London, Milton hurled himself into the maelstrom of controversy raging in the revolutionary capital. Parliament had lifted the government censorship in 1640, unleashing an unprecedented torrent of radical opinion, and Milton eagerly joined the fray. His first pamphlets, such as *Of Reformation* and *The Reason of Church Government*, advocate the Presbyterian case for ecclesiastical reform, but they range wildly beyond these bounds, alluding to aesthetic, political, economic, and, above all, personal concerns. In fact, the most striking characteristic of Milton's early tracts is their assumption of an intimate and indissoluble connection between the psychological and the political arenas. He considered the argument ad hominem to be perfectly legitimate, because he believed that only those in a condition of interior servitude to their own appetites and desires could argue for the subjection of free men to a tyrannous ruler. Milton's political writings help us to understand why the political dispute between republicans and royalists was simultaneously a conflict between "puritan" and "cavalier" lifestyles. For Milton, the personal is always political, and the prevalence of this notion in our own time is sufficient demonstration that his ideas are by no means superseded.

This connection is evident throughout the "antiprelatical" tracts. Milton believed, correctly though immodestly, that a church not broad enough to accommodate him must be irrationally narrow, and his first prose works are acts of revenge on the bishops who had

"church-ousted" him. Similarly, such later works as *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *The Defence of the English People* argue for the identity of personal virtue and political liberty. Milton's domestic circumstances during the 1640s predisposed him to perceive the intimacy between these spheres, for the crisis in the English state coincided with an equally profound crisis in his personal life. The convergence of these events was painful, but it spurred his thought into regions where it might not otherwise have ventured. In 1642, as the nation descended into civil war, the thirty-three-year-old Milton married a seventeen-year-old girl, Mary Powell. It was by any standards an inauspicious match. The Powell family was royalist, so Milton soon found himself quite literally at war with his in-laws. Stranger still, Mary's father, Richard Powell, had been heavily in debt to Milton's family for more than fifteen years, and in 1640 Milton had repossessed some of his lands for nonpayment. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Powell was, formally or informally, giving away his daughter in order to ameliorate his financial obligations. Milton acquired his bride through usury.

The sin of usury was fraught with sexual implications. It was constantly compared to sodomy, because it perverted the properly barren nature of money, artificially making it "breed," just as sodomy perverts the properly generative nature of sex, making it sterile. If, as seems likely, both Milton and Mary were aware that she was in some sense an interest payment on a loan, this can only have introduced further distractions to an erotic relationship in which—we must presume—both parties were complete novices. Such speculation is consistent with the fact that three weeks after the wedding, Mary ran away, taking refuge with her family and refusing to acknowledge Milton's messages. When war broke out two months later, the couple was separated by physical as well as emotional battle lines, and reconciliation must have seemed impossible.

Milton's reaction tells us a great deal about his intellectual orientation, and also about the spirit of the times. He immediately, and as it were instinctively, turned his personal disappointment into a public issue. In 1643, a year after his wife's desertion, he published *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, the first-ever argument for what we would call "no fault" divorce, or divorce on the sole grounds of psychologi-

cal incompatibility. He rested his case on the analogy between divorce and political revolution. Both events involve the abnegation of a contract that has been invalidated because of its failure to meet the end for which it was devised. In the case of marriage, that end is spiritual companionship; in the case of politics it is government for the good of the country as a whole. Where those ends are not achieved, claimed Milton, both contracts are automatically void.

As in sixteenth-century Germany, eighteenth-century France, and twentieth-century Russia, in England revolution was accompanied by the startling emergence of "antinomian" sects who sought to radicalize personal morality along with the political state. Groups such as the Ranters believed themselves above the moral law, and thus free to practice communism, free love, and various forms of hedonistic debauchery. To his horror, Milton's divorce pamphlet earned him a place among such company in the public mind. He was accused of advocating "divorce at pleasure," a man's right to cast his wife aside on a whim and take another, or even to practice polygamy. These charges were not entirely groundless; Milton did explicitly permit polygamy in *Of Christian Doctrine*, he did consider a bigamous marriage, and *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* conspicuously failed to explain how a genuine, objective incompatibility could be distinguished from a merely whimsical or lustful desire for a new or more attractive mate. Knowing his own motives to be pure, however, Milton was outraged by charges that he was a libertine, and he spent two years in bitter controversy with his accusers.

He also faced a more practical threat. The Presbyterian party, which controlled parliament following the departure of the royalists, had been taken aback by the seething cauldron of radical opinion revealed by the lifting of the censorship, and Milton's divorce tract was singled out in parliament as an especially egregious example of such dangerous views. Milton felt personally insulted by the proposal to reimpose censorship that came before parliament in 1644, and his opinion drove him yet further in advance of contemporary public opinion. In *Areopagitica*, published in the same year, Milton's opposition to the Presbyterians overflows into a general justification of freedom of the press. It was the first theoretical statement of a position that became a fundamental tenet of liberal democracy centuries after Mil-

ton's death, and it testifies to the quantum leaps made by his intelligence in these revolutionary years.

Not all the attention Milton generated was unwelcome. His innovative mind won him friends on what we would now call the "left wing" of the revolution, and as these more radical elements gained ascendancy, Milton's star rose. The leaders of the Independent Party, who soon displaced the Presbyterians as the guiding lights of parliament and its army, saw the potential in his indisputable brilliance, and they determined to harness it. By 1648 Milton was close to the centers of political power. For the next decade he served the government of Oliver Cromwell, as secretary for foreign tongues—a more important post than it may sound, roughly approximate to a modern foreign secretary—and as its chief propagandist, responsible for justifying the ways and means of England's new rulers to the European public.

By this time Milton's wife had returned. In 1645, facing the prospect of a royalist defeat and the confiscation of their property, and perceiving that Milton was poised for prominence in the new regime, the entire Powell family threw itself on his mercy. Although he had been courting a woman named Mary Davis, Milton accepted his wife's plea, even allowing her family to share his house. This was an act of great magnanimity and unselfishness, which belies his mother-in-law's ungrateful characterization of the poet as a "harsh and choleric man." The marriage was sufficiently harmonious for Mary to give birth to three daughters, and to a son who died in infancy. Mary herself died shortly following the birth of her third daughter, whom Milton named Deborah, after the prophetess who liberated the Israelites from their heathen oppressors. He married again in 1656, but his beloved wife Katherine Woodcock died two years later, along with a stillborn daughter. Milton married a third time in 1663, to Elizabeth Minshull, who survived him.

His most important and difficult professional task was to justify the execution of Charles I, which took place in 1649. This act, which horrified most English people and terrified the crowned heads of continental Europe, was completely without precedent. Never before had a reigning monarch been tried, convicted, and executed by his subjects. The idea, so familiar to us today, that political power ultimately and rightfully resides with the people, had few adherents, and Milton has

as good a claim as anyone to have invented its modern form. His regicidal tracts, such as *Eikonoklastes* and *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (both published in 1649), mingle religious, political, and economic arguments, but they rest their case, once again, on personal morality. The problem with the hereditary principle, according to Milton, was its inability to guarantee the rule of the most virtuous men. Unfortunately, neither Milton nor anyone else was able to devise a system that would guarantee such rule. His recourse was to extol the surpassing virtue of Oliver Cromwell, but this could only be temporary; after Cromwell's death in 1658 the Restoration of the monarchy was only a matter of time.

When it came, in 1660, Milton had good reason to fear for his life. Charles II was wisely merciful to most of his opponents, but he did exact vengeance on those directly responsible for his father's decapitation, and several regicides were executed. Fearing such a fate, Milton went into hiding, but in the event he suffered only a brief imprisonment before being released on condition that he play no further part in public affairs. He may have been saved by the fact that, since 1652, he had been completely blind. His enemies found it convenient to interpret this affliction as divine retribution for his faulty political vision; they were content to let him live on as an example to other heretics until his peaceful death in 1674.

Here, the royalists made a mistake that was to prove fatal to their successors. Milton used the enforced retirement of his old age, as he had used the voluntary retirement of his youth, to undertake a course of study and meditation that issued in his three greatest works, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. All three are protests against tyranny that would inspire future generations of revolutionaries, but *Paradise Lost* is much more than this. Milton had been working on it, in one form or another, for his entire life. The verse letters he wrote as a teenager allude to a work in progress dealing with spiritual conflict in Heaven and Hell, and he showed a completed section of the poem to his nephew in 1642, twenty-five years before the publication of the first edition. It would appear that Milton consciously assimilated his whole life's experience, with its bold intellectual insights, its personal triumphs and misfortunes, and its righteous but failed political enterprises, into the architectonic framework of his literary legacy.

## V

As we have seen, Milton's earliest work reveals an interest in the mutual determination of such binary oppositions as mirth and melancholy, or the flesh and the spirit. This relational view of identity informs the staggeringly complex morality of *Paradise Lost*, where the conflicts between good and evil, and between God and Satan, are presented as at once real and illusory. The monotheist belief in an omnipotent God requires that apparent evil must be seen as part of the divine plan and thus, finally and paradoxically, as good (the opposing, Manichaean, view that evil is an independent force is espoused, in *Paradise Lost*, by Satan). To grasp the implications of Milton's epic, we must take seriously his contention in *Areopagitica* that:

It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom that Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good by evil.

This does not, however, imply moral relativism. On the contrary, his awareness of their mutually determining nature sharpened the intensity of Milton's distinction between good and evil. He was an extremist by nature, to whom the middle ground was foreign territory, and his writings are notable for their radicalism of opinion and vehemence of expression. How can Milton's fiercely partisan approach to every issue that he considered—from whether day is preferable to night in his student exercises, to whether God is more admirable than Satan in *Paradise Lost*—be reconciled with his constant conviction that every concept, and every thing, is defined by its other?

The answer lies in the distinction between "concept" and "thing." Milton believed that the kind of knowledge that can be attained by the human mind was necessarily contingent, or limited. It was limited by cultural and historical context: The ancient Greeks, for example, had been culturally unable to arrive at monotheism. But it was also inherently limited by its internal properties. The human mind is designed, or has developed, in such a way as to live in time and space. To exist

outside time and space, the human mind would have to become something different than what it currently is. The same goes for such ideas as causality or extension; without the capacity to think according to these categories it would be simply impossible to have any kind of recognizable human experience. We do not, therefore, experience the world as it really is, we experience the world as it appears to human beings. And we know that this experience is contingent upon—limited by—the inherent nature of the human mind.

It follows that the concepts we form of things, the way they appear to us, do not correspond to the things in themselves. There are thus two kinds of truth: the truth "for us," in what modern philosophers call the world of "phenomena," and the truth "in itself," in what is known as the world of "noumena." In John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," for example, the poet laments that he can never experience the urn in its noumenal state, as it is in itself. Keats comes to this realization by considering the difference between the significance it possesses for him, as a modern Englishman, and the meanings it conveyed to its creator, an ancient Greek. The "phenomenal" appearance of the urn has changed, although the urn "in itself" has not. In a sense the noumenal is more true, because it is more absolute, than the phenomenal, but the truth "in itself" is by definition beyond the grasp of human thought. We are stuck with a consciousness that we know to be incomplete. This is philosophical terminology, but Milton expresses the same ideas in quasi-mythological, religious terms. *Paradise Lost* hinges upon the fundamental, unbridgeable, qualitative distinction between the world of earthly phenomena as experienced by Adam and Eve (and also by the poem's all-too-human narrator), and the world of spiritual noumena as it is represented to them (and us) through the intricate system of characters, figures, and images that make up the Western mythological and religious traditions.

Above all, Milton insists on the disparity in nature between the Creator and His creation. *Paradise Lost* describes the alienation of labor in a cosmic context; it tells of how the universe that God made came to be alien to Him, and how it came to seem autonomous and self-generating to its inhabitants. The disjunction between the Maker and the made involves a contradiction between two different kinds of value, of significance. It follows that any knowledge we can have of

God or His Providential designs must always be "mediated," translated into the contingent terms and concepts to which the human mind has access.

Almost half of *Paradise Lost* consists of stories told to Adam and/or Eve through the voices of the archangels Raphael and Michael. These characters incessantly remind their auditors that they are attempting the impossible task of representing noumena in terms of phenomena. Asked to describe the fall of Satan to the human couple, Raphael falls into a quandary: "how shall I relate / To human sense th'invisible exploits / Of warring spirits" (5:564-566). He decides that he must tell his story in the form of an extended metaphor, using images that Adam and Eve are equipped to understand: "what surmounts the reach / Of human sense, I shall delineate so, / By likening spiritual to corporal forms, / As may express them best" (5:571-574). We are thus warned not to take the action of the "war in Heaven" that the angel describes literally, but to remain conscious that we are receiving figural representations of spiritual (we might call them psychological or philosophical) events. We can only understand those events if we take account of the fact that they are mediated for us through contingent human discourse:

Immediate are the acts of God, more swift  
Than time or motion; but to human ears  
Cannot without process of speech be told,  
So told as earthly notion can receive (7:176-179).

The action of *Paradise Lost* takes place, then, in many different registers simultaneously. The ability to read a text as both literal and symbolic, and also at infinite gradations between these poles, came more naturally to educated people in Milton's time than it does to us, trained as they were in the intricate hermeneutics of biblical exegesis. Furthermore, their facility with textual interpretation was matched by a happy disregard for the boundaries between what we regard as mutually exclusive intellectual fields. *Paradise Lost* is certainly a work of theology, representing the spiritual conflict between metaphysical beings, but this conflict is also the determining factor in world history, as well as within the human psyche. Although more than twenty char-

acters address us in the course of the poem, such figures also represent disputing forces within Milton's mind and, by implication, within the mind of the reader.

The poem describes the attempted conquest of Heaven, the world, and the mind by the forces of evil. It personifies evil in the figure of "Satan," which, as Milton repeatedly reminds us, is the Hebrew word for "enemy." The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a pan-European (and even transatlantic) panic over what was perceived as Satan's vastly increased practical power in the world. Tens of thousands of people were executed as "witches," on the grounds that they had entered into a pact with Satan that enabled them to use magical signs and rituals to achieve pragmatic ends. Ritual magic works on the assumption that signs are efficacious, so that, for example, harming the image of a man can bring harm to the man himself. The "witch hunt" may have been vicious and misogynist, but it was by no means irrational. It seemed extremely important to establish the point that the use of efficacious signs was not, as the magicians argued, an ethically neutral practice, but the work of the devil. This produced the necessity of forcing, by torture if necessary, witches to confess that they had signed a formal contract with Satan. *Paradise Lost* is replete with references to magic, and to such associated concepts as sorcery, witches, charms, wonders, prodigies, and other forms of Satanic "art." We are left in no doubt that Milton considers the power of the devil to be genuinely, literally, active in the real world.

The power of autonomous signification was not the exclusive preserve of magicians. Protestants of Milton's stripe saw the same Satanic influence in Catholic and Anglican religious practices, which implied that icons and rituals could be magically efficacious for salvation. Republicans like Milton believed that monarchy was the secular arm of religious idolatry, since it evoked an analogous fetishistic awe in its adherents. And many people identified the burgeoning autonomous power of money, a purely abstract sign, as a further example of diabolical influence. Milton is not generally regarded as having been interested in the "economic" debates of his day, but this is only because modern critics often impose their anachronistically narrow understanding of the term "economic" onto the seventeenth century. *Paradise Lost* is an extended protest against the fetishizing, or making

an icon of, the sign, and this fact is the key to its continued relevance. Our own "postmodern condition" is characterized by the virtually complete dominance of representation over reality, but few twenty-first-century thinkers are capable of constructing an ethical critique of this situation. *Paradise Lost* offers such a critique, and that is why Milton's poem is more pertinent today than ever before. In our time, *Paradise Lost* is revealing itself as what Milton thought it was: a prophecy.

Far from representing "dead ideas," *Paradise Lost* reinterprets and re-vivifies the entire Western cultural tradition. It blends Judeo-Christian monotheism with Platonic idealism, Homeric mythology, Italian humanism, recent English literature, personal biography, and topical politics, to produce a wholly original, syncretic account of the universe and humanity's place within it. The opening lines of book I stake Milton's claim to be writing a third testament, directly inspired by both the Holy Spirit and the classical muses, and thus empowered to surpass both Hebrew and Hellenic wisdom. The poet invokes the Gods of Sinai, Sion, and the human heart (by which he means, respectively, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), to guide him beyond the insights of classical literature, represented by Mount Helicon, the "Aonian mount" (1.15) above which Milton "intends to soar" (1.14). But his ambitions do not stop there. When Milton informs his readers that he will pursue "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (1.16), he announces his intention to surpass not just pagan poetry, but the Bible itself.

## VI

It often comes as a surprise to new readers of Milton to discover that he was not, in any orthodox sense, a Christian. Among many other heresies, Milton denied the Trinity, and he did not believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the only incarnation of Jehovah. He took from Christianity, as from classical polytheism, only those elements that he found congenial to his own system of thought. That system was heavily influenced by the political and personal events of his life, and his historical view of truth suggested that the ideas expressed in ancient texts were inevitably subjected to a process of constant revision.

For example, Milton often alludes to the war of the Titans

against the Olympian gods, as it is described in Hesiod's *Theogony*. He suggests that this pagan myth is primitive and inexact, but he also treats it as an alternative expression of the same conflict that monotheism represents as taking place between angels and demons. In the prefatory poem published in the second edition of *Paradise Lost* (1674), Andrew Marvell recalls his worry that Milton would "ruin," or reduce, "the sacred truths to fable." But that was not Milton's intention. Instead, he elevates classical mythology to a prefiguration of the sacred biblical truths, and he sees his own work as a further updating of these truths in the light of recent events. Like such later philosophical works as Immanuel Kant's three *Critiques* (1781, 1788, 1790), Georg Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), and Karl Marx's *Capital* (1867), *Paradise Lost* announces itself as the accumulation and transcendence of all previous human wisdom. If *Paradise Lost* is indeed a "monument to dead ideas," however magnificent, it is according to its own terms a failure. It was intended to be a prophecy, addressed to posterity, to us, and it is as a prophecy that it must be evaluated.

What the poem prophesies is the degeneration of human consciousness from monotheism into idolatry. The curtain rises on the fallen angels weltering in Hell, and we are informed that they will persuade mankind "to forsake / God their Creator, and th'invisible / Glory of him that made them, to transform / Oft to the image of a brute, adorn'd / With gay religions full of pomp and gold, / And devils to adore for deities" (1.368-373). The devils will become "various idols through the heathen world" (1.375), and Milton identifies them with the gods worshiped by the Israelites' neighbors in the Old Testament. Their significance is more than local, however. Dagon, Asteroth, and their colleagues are not dead; they are more powerful today than ever before. Mammon, for example, is merely the Hebrew word for "money," but Milton's personification tells us in detail of money's psychological effects, and also predicts the spread of those effects over the course of history:

... Mammon led them on,  
Mammon, the least erected spirit that fell  
From heaven: for even in heaven his looks and thoughts

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Were always downward bent; admiring more  
The riches of heaven's pavement, trodden gold,  
Than aught divine or holy else, enjoy'd  
In vision beatific: by him first  
Men also, and by his suggestion taught,  
Ransack'd the centre, and with impious hands  
Rifled the bowels of their mother earth  
For treasures better hid. Soon had his crew  
Open'd into the hill a spacious wound,  
And digg'd out ribs of gold. (Let none admire  
That riches grow in hell; that soil may best  
Deserve the precious bane.) (1.678-692).

Money is at once a fictional character in the poem and a real historical force. Its effect is to distract us from the contemplation of God, thus involving us in a hostile and rapacious attitude toward the nature He has created. Financial value constitutes an artificial "second nature" that human beings impose upon the first, and the impious violence of such imposition is marked by the "wound" that the devils open. Mammon's advice to his colleagues is that they should "seek / Our own good from ourselves, and from our own / Live to ourselves" (2.252-254). The power of money makes possible a demonic recreation, as Martin Luther had understood when he remarked that "Money is the word of the Devil, by which he creates everything in the world, just as God creates through the true Word." Mammon suggests that the devils can construct an image of Heaven that will surpass the reality: "This desert soil / Wants not her hidden lustre, gems, and gold; / Nor want we skill or art, from whence to raise / Magnificence; and what can heaven show more?" (2.270-273) The entire Satanic enterprise aims at this perverse, artificial distortion of God's creation, allowing the devils to imagine a second nature "in emulation opposite to heaven" (2.298). The Satanic sin is to deny the distinction between phenomena and noumena; to imagine that the contingent world the devils construct in Hell is equivalent to the disposition of the divine Creator.

This gulf between noumena and phenomena, which Milton represents as "Chaos"—a "wild abyss" (2.917), the "nethermost abyss"

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might make him stronger than the Deity. This is the revolt of the clay against the potter, the work against the worker, that forms the biblical definition of idolatry: "Their land also is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made" (Isaiah 2:8; King James Version). Satan rebels against the power that, as he admits at one point, "created what I was" (4-43), and *Paradise Lost* often reminds us of the basic absurdity of Satan's daring to "defy th' Omnipotent to arms" (1.49). All of Satan's apparently heroic exhortations must be viewed in the light of the madness of trying to be the equal of an omnipotent God. This false equivalence is identified as the root of idolatry both in *Paradise Lost*, as when king Jeroboam is mocked for "Lj'king his Maker to the grazed ox" (1.486), and in the Bible, where God mockingly asks, "To whom will ye liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like?" (Isaiah 46:5).

Satan's aim is to replace the worship of the Creator with the idolatrous worship of created things, and he must therefore deny that he was created by a force outside himself. He believes himself to be autonomous and self-sufficient, and thus "trusted to have equal'd the Most High" (1.40). In this sense, "Satan" is what happens to created beings when they refuse to refer their existence to an end beyond themselves, and thus "fall off / From their Creator" (1.30-31). Milton repeatedly identifies this mistake as the basic component of Satanic consciousness. When Satan manages to raise himself from the fiery lake, we are reminded that the power that allows him to do so is not his own:

... nor ever thence  
Had risen, or heav'd his head, but that the will  
And high permission of all-ruling Heaven,  
Left him at large to his own dark designs (1.210-213).

The devils, however, remain under the illusion that their power is autonomous; a little later we find them "glorying to have scap'd the Stygian flood, / As gods, and by their own recover'd strength; / Not by the suff'rance of supernal power" (1.239-241). This leads them to worship Satan, "and as a god / Extol him equal to the highest in

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(2.969), a "dark abyss" (2.1027), and "the vast immeasurable abyss" (7.211)—introduces a paradoxical, or ironic, dual perspective into *Paradise Lost*. For example, the poem's pivotal event, the Fall of Man, is unequivocally a bad thing "for us," and Satan, as the being who brings it about, is thus unequivocally evil from a human perspective. On the monotheistic assumption of an omnipotent God, however, we must inevitably conclude that God intended the Fall to occur, and that it and its author, Satan, are therefore, in a sense that is by definition beyond human comprehension, good.

This irony informs many of the poem's exquisite ambiguities, which have produced the most heated critical debates in Milton criticism, such as whether Milton sympathized with Satan, and whether he subscribed to the doctrine of *felix culpa* (the fortunate fall), which suggests that since God intended it, the fall must be good. From a consideration of such issues alone, it would be easy to get the impression that the poem's morality is somehow ambivalent, but of course this is very far from being the case. This is because, for Milton, sin consists in the refusal to recognize, and thus in the attempt to bridge, the abyss between the world of experience and the world beyond experience. This is the sin of Satan, whose basic mistake is the failure to understand that the difference between himself and God is qualitative, rather than quantitative. In one of his soliloquies he recalls how, in Heaven:

I sdain'd subjection, and thought one step higher  
Would set me highest, and in a moment quit  
The debt immense of endless gratitude,  
So burdensome still paying, still to owe;  
Forgetful what from him I still receiv'd,  
And understood not that a grateful mind  
By owing owes not, but still pays, at once  
Indebted and discharg'd (4.50-57).

Because he does not understand the absolute nature of the distinction between Creator and creation, Satan imagines that it is possible to usurp the place of God. He thinks of his relationship to God in numerical, financial terms, whereby a quantitative increase in his strength

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heaven" (2.478-479). More reliable sources also inform us that equality with God is Satan's purpose; the Father tells the Son that Satan "intends to erect his throne / Equal to ours" (5.725-726), and Raphael describes him as "affecting all equality with God" (5.763).

What this means in historical terms is that Satan obtrudes the world of appearances, of phenomena—the sphere that early modern people referred to as "custom"—in front of the world of essences, of noumena—of "nature," in Milton's term. He claims, in other words, that the contingent appearances of things constitutes their true reality. Idolatry involves the worship, and magic the manipulation, of appearances, of signs. In "economic" terms, the Satanic claim is that the significance, the value of the world lies in its financial representation rather than in its natural qualities—in "exchange value" rather than in "use value." In "scientific" terms, it involves the Baconian substitution of the empirical, material causes of things for their teleological, final causes, as the proper end of human reason. The serpent, or rather Satan in the serpent, aptly summarizes the empiricist approach to the world in his temptation of Eve:

The gods are first, and that advantage use  
On our belief, that all from them proceeds:  
I question it; for this fair earth I see,  
Warm'd by the sun, producing every kind,  
Them nothing . . . (9.718-722).

Eve's first actions after her fall are to worship the tree itself, and to extol "experience" as her "best guide" (9.807-808). The two impulses are intimately connected. Empiricism takes the surface appearance of the world—the way it *seems*, to use *Paradise Lost's* most important word—for its reality. It ignores the fact that the world as it appears to us has been constructed by us, mediated through our systems of understanding and representation. It treats the sign as though it were the referent. This is, in fact, the very definition of Sin in *Paradise Lost*. When the allegorical figure of "Sin" recounts her birth to her "father" Satan, she recalls how the witnessing angels were initially startled at her appearance:

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. . . back they recoild, afraid  
At first, and call'd me Sin; and for a sign  
Portentous held me: but familiar grown,  
I pleas'd, and with attractive graces won  
The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft  
(Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing)  
Becam'st enamour'd (2.759-765).

Satan becomes "enamour'd" of Sin when he forgets that she is a sign, and instead perceives her as his own "perfect image." The distinction between a "sign" of an Other and an "image" of the Self may seem trivial from the perspective of our unsophisticated semiotic capacities, but it was of fundamental importance to Milton. The ability to make this distinction is the first lesson Eve must learn after her creation. At first, in a recapitulation of the Narcissus myth, she mistakes her own image, reflected in a pool, for reality:

A shape within the wat'ry gleam appear'd,  
Bending to look on me: I started back;  
It started back: but pleas'd I soon return'd;  
Pleas'd it return'd as soon; with answering looks  
Of sympathy and love: there had I fixt  
Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire,  
Had not a voice thus warn'd me: What thou seest,  
What there thou seest, fair creature, is thyself;  
With thee it came and goes: but follow me,  
And I will bring thee where no shadow stays  
Thy coming, and thy soft embraces, he  
Whose image thou art: him thou shalt enjoy,  
Inseparably thine . . . (4.461-473).

Eve's tendency to make a spectacle of herself later provides Satan with his successful means of tempting her: "one man except, / Who sees thee? (and what is one?) who shouldst be seen / A goddess among gods" (9.545-547). To idolize an image is to forget that it is an image, and thus neglect to refer images to their source in an ultimate *logos*. *Logos* is the original Greek term for the "Word" of God, which is iden-

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tified with His Son in John 1:1-14. In philosophical terms it refers to the origin and final cause of all meaning. Consider, for example, the relation between Satan and the serpent, into which he enters in order to deceive Eve. The Genesis account does not mention Satan, but ascribes the temptation of Eve to "the serpent [which] was more subtil than any beast of the field" (Genesis 3:1), while New Testament glosses like the one in Revelation interpret the serpent as a material symbol for a spiritual being, referring to "that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan" (Revelation 20:2).

Milton emphasizes the centrality of this distinction in the Argument to book I of *Paradise Lost*, which ascribes the Fall to "the serpent, or rather Satan in the serpent." This qualification preempts any confusion when the verse itself names "th' infernal serpent" (1:34) as humanity's seducer, immediately before reporting "his" expulsion from Heaven "with all his host / Of rebel angels" (1:37-38). Right at the beginning of his epic, Milton directs his readers' attention to the fact that he is dealing simultaneously with the material symbols of phenomenal experience (the serpent) and with their imperceptible, noumenal referents (Satan in the serpent). The serpent is merely a sign; if we are to understand the nature of the Fall we must learn to read the concealed significance within such appearances.

The snake is not, however, an arbitrary sign: It could not mean just anything. There are qualities inherent in the serpent's nature that make it a "fit vessel" (9:89) for Satan. Before the Fall, Milton describes how "the serpent sly / Insinuating, wove with Gordian twine / His braided train, and of his fatal guile / Gave proof unheeded" (4:347-350), and he creates the acrostic "SATAN" with the initial letters of five lines that describe the snake's initial approach to Eve (9:510-514). Human beings are not free to interpret signs as they please, but must learn to distinguish natural, God-given significances from customary, humanly imposed meanings. As in Genesis, therefore, Milton stresses that the Son of God curses the serpent *quod* serpent:

To judgment he proceeded on th' accurs'd  
Serpent, though brute, unable to transfer  
The guilt on him who made him instrument  
Of mischief, and polluted from the end

XL

Of his creation; justly then accurs'd,  
As vitiated in nature . . . (10.164-169).

The sign, as well as the referent, is cursed, because it has ceased to be a sign. The serpent's "nature" has been "vitiated;" it is a serpent in appearance and physical manifestation, but this natural aspect of the animal has attained an unnatural significance. Milton's assertion that the Son of God is "unable" to curse Satan at this point is provocative and startling. It clearly cannot mean what it appears to mean, since the Son shares with the Father the quality of omnipotence. The following lines explain that the Son is "unable" to do this only because His purpose is to instruct the human couple, and Adam and Eve would be unable to understand a curse on a purely spiritual entity. Like Raphael, the Son accommodates his speech to human understanding, "measuring things in heaven by things on earth" (6:893). Human knowledge must always proceed through the mediation of symbols like the serpent:

. . . more to know  
Concern'd not man (since he no further knew)  
Not alter'd his offence; yet God at last  
To Satan, first in sin, his doom applied,  
Though in mysterious terms, judg'd as then best  
And on the serpent thus his curse let fall . . . (10.169-174).

Satan is the being who denies the mediating function of signs. In other words, he is a literalist, who does not understand that the phenomenal world is a set of signs that designate noumenal referents. As a result, he is confident that the Son has cursed the sign alone, and that he himself has escaped judgment. As he reports to his colleagues in Hell:

True is, me also he hath judg'd, or rather  
Me not, but the brute serpent, in whose shape  
Man I deceiv'd: that which to me belongs  
Is enmity, which he will put between  
Me and mankind; I am to bruise his heel;  
His seed, when is not set, shall bruise my head.  
A world who would not purchase with a bruise . . . (10.494-500).

XLI

The devil imagines that he is to receive a literal "bruise," and he makes a canny, financial evaluation of the exchange. His error is immediately and ironically revealed by his literal, physical transformation into a serpent. As Raphael does with Adam, God accommodates his message to Satan's understanding—the literalist who takes appearance for reality is instructed by the forcible union of the form in which he appeared with his essential nature—and the devil finds himself "punish'd in the shape he sinn'd" (10.516).

## VII

This inability to perceive the mediating functions of signs is not merely the effect, but also the cause of Satan's alienation from God. As he flies toward the earth, for instance, the devil catches sight of a stairway leading to Heaven. He instinctively assumes that it is a literal means by which he could, in theory, reascend to the presence of God. This leads him to interpret the vision as a cruel mockery, intended by God to "aggravate / His sad exclusion from the doors of bliss" (3.524-525). In fact, however, the stairs are supposed to be read not as a physical entity, but as a sign: "Each stair mysteriously was meant, nor stood / There always, but drawn up to heaven sometimes / Viewless" (3.516-518). But Satan is a materialist, and does not believe in things that are "viewless." It is on these grounds that he denies the fact of his creation, as his scornful rhetoric in the debate with the virtuous Abdiel reveals. The zealous angel asks whether Satan can truly believe himself to be "equal to him, begotten Son? by whom, / As by his Word, the mighty Father made / All things, even thee . . ." (5.835-837). At this point Satan reveals his basic misconception:

That we were form'd then say'st thou? and the work  
Of secondary hands, by task transferr'd  
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new;  
Doctrine which we would know whence learn'd, who saw  
When this creation was? remember'st thou  
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?  
We know no time when we were not as now;

XLIII

Know none before us, self-begot, self-raisd  
By our own quick'ning power . . . (5.853-861).

Satan's reasoning is in sharp contrast to the unfallen Adam's reaction to his creation. From the fact of his existence, Adam immediately and logically deduces both the existence of a Creator and the need for communion with Him: ". . . how came I thus, how here? / Not of myself; by some great Maker then, / In goodness and in power pre-eminent; / Tell me how may I know him, how adore . . ." (8.277-280). The answer to his question is that the Creator can be known through his "Son," and Adam's awareness of this fact constitutes the difference between his perspective and Satan's. It is, in fact, the exaltation, or "begetting," of the Son that provokes Satan to revolt. Modern readers tend simply to identify the "Son" of God with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, but the concept is far more complex than that. Milton's interest in *Paradise Lost* is not in the Galilean, but in the *logos*. The term *logos* can be translated as "word," but also as "mind," "act," and "thought," and Milton clearly includes all these senses, and more, in his conception of the Son, whom the Father calls "My word, my wisdom, and effectual might" (3.170).

*Paradise Lost's* most significant departure from orthodox Christianity is its declaration that the Son was created by the Father in time. This heresy is known as Arianism, and it has been anathema to the church since the fourth-century Council of Nicea. Milton finds it vitally important to distinguish between the Creator (the "Father") and His power of creation (the "Son"): "So spake th'Almighty, and to what he spake / His Word, the filial Godhead, gave effect" (7.174-175). The Son is the *logos* that guarantees an ultimate meaning in the world, and thus the mediator between creation and the Creator:

. . . of all Creation first,  
Begotten Son, divine similitude,  
In whose conspicuous count'nance, without cloud  
Made visible, th'almighty Father shines,  
Whom else no creature can behold: on thee  
Impressed, th'effulgence of his glory abides,  
Transfus'd on thee his ample Spirit rests (3.383-389).

XLIII

Theologically speaking, the "begetting" of God's "Son" involves the declaration that the universe is God's creation, that He is immanent within it, and that He is the meaning of which it is the sign. The "Son" of God, in short, is the guarantee that life is significant, that it means something, rather than nothing. It is this proposition against which Satan reacts. Thus Raphael tells Adam that Satan was:

... fraught  
With envy against the Son of God, that day  
Honour'd by his great Father, and proclaim'd  
Messiah, King anointed, could not bear,  
Through pride that sight, and thought himself impair'd (5.661-665).

It is the notion that the created world is an image of something beyond itself, a sign pointing to a referent, that Satan cannot stand. As he says himself, he finds it intolerable to be asked to give worship "to one, and to his image now proclaim'd" (5.784). The recognition of the "Son" logically implies the existence of a "Father," and for Milton, the "Son" is essentially the referral of creation to a Creator. The Son describes Himself to the Father as "Image of thee in all things" (6.736), and this renders His "dearest mediation" (3.226) genuinely efficacious, in contrast to Satan's artificial, magical efficacy. The Son, in short, is what Satan aspires to be: "Equal to God, and equally enjoying / Godlike fruition" (3.306-307). In "begetting" the Son, God announces his immanent presence throughout creation; he declares the world to be his handiwork. His exaltation immediately induces the birth of Sin from Satan's head, as the possibility of regarding creation with reference to the Creator simultaneously produces the antithetical possibility of denying the Creator and regarding creation as autonomous. It is this latter tendency of thought that Milton presents under the figure of "Satan."

Satan's conception of himself as autonomous and self-created has several important consequences. Being now "alienate from God" (5.877), he ceases to perceive an ultimate cause or significance—a logos—behind appearances, and he becomes unable to distinguish representation from reality. This produces an idolatrous attitude to creation, with which he infects first his fellow devils—who regard him as

an "idol of majesty divine" (6.101)—and then the human couple. In serpentine guise he assures Eve that "ye shall be as gods" (9.708), that the fruit is itself "divine" (5.67) and thus "able to make gods of men" (5.70), and he urges her to "Take this, and be henceforth among the gods, / Thyself a goddess" (5.77-78). He also adopts an empirical approach to knowledge, assuming that the world of experience, the world of appearances, is the real world. His address to the tree of knowledge contains one of the poem's many connections between Baconian science and idolatry:

O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,  
Mother of science, now I feel thy power  
Within me clear, not only to discern  
Things in their causes, but to trace the ways  
Of highest agents, deem'd however wise (9.679-683).

The "causes" after which Satan will seek are the "material," empirically perceptible causes, rather than the "final," teleological, and thus invisible cause. The newly fallen Eve's reaction to the plant is similar; she displays signs of worship and

... low reverence done, as to the power  
That dwelt within, whose presence had infus'd  
Into the plant sciential sap, deriv'd  
From nectar, drink of gods . . . (9.835-838).

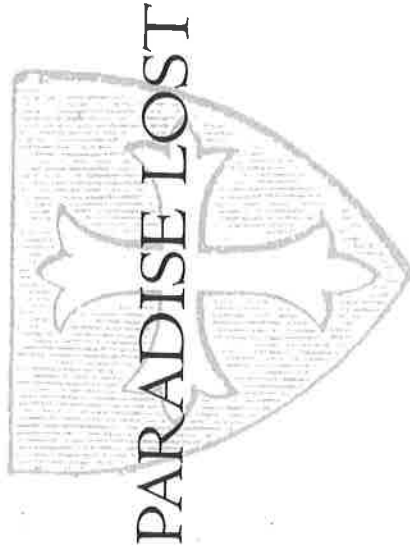
In these lines Milton skillfully indicts both primitive animism, which perceives a spirit within the plant, and classical mythology, which evolves a complicated pantheon of nectar-swilling gods.

But if we are tempted to relegate such idolatry to the superstitious civilizations of the past, we have paid insufficient attention to the message of *Paradise Lost*. The idea that what the Bible calls the "work of men's hands" (Psalm 135.15) can enter into an alien, hostile relationship to their producers should not be foreign to our world, which is ruled by the autonomous representation of human activity known as "money," and which systematically instills in its denizens the illusion that the domain of appearances is real. It is often remarked today

that we live in a "society of the spectacle," in a condition of "alienation"; in some circles the biblical figure of "Babylon" still functions, as it did for Milton, as an appropriate trope for our situation. Generally speaking, however, the secularized Western mind eschews the vocabulary of scripture as representing what Raleigh called "dead ideas." Milton's historical understanding of truth as continuous revelation would have predisposed him to accept our abandonment of religious terminology with equanimity. He would not, however, have accepted the concomitant abandonment of the concepts to which that terminology refers. Nor should we. *Paradise Lost* teaches us that the inseparable companion—the "son"—of Sin and Satan is Death. If we choose to adopt the modes of thought and behavior that the poem describes as sinful and Satanic, we must confront the possibility that it is not Milton's ideas that are "dead," but our own.

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DAVID HAWKES is Associate Professor of English at Lehigh University. He is the author of *Idols of the Marketplace* (Palgrave, 2001) and *Idology* (Routledge, second edition, 2003). His work has appeared in *Milton Studies*, *The Nation*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, and *Studies in English Literature*. Professor Hawkes recently received a long-term fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to work on a book-length history and analysis of the Faust myth.



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