

Soren Bjornstad

Prof. Willcoxon

Great Con 217F

November 25, 2014

Hopefulness and Satan's Power in Milton's Fall

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic that mixes good and evil and hope and despair in surprising and sometimes even mystifying ways. Satan, although the cause of evil, is arguably the protagonist and is given far more character development than he is usually granted, far beyond the one-dimensional idea of "bad" used in most treatments of the Fall. Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a sin, yet Milton does not hesitate to say that, nevertheless, "goodness immense" will "evil turn to good" (Book XII l. 469–470). And Adam and Eve are forced to leave the Garden of Eden, Paradise. Yet Milton's Adam and Eve do not despair and are not discouraged; the last lines of *Paradise Lost* show that they take on their new place in the world with hope for the future, encouraged by the help they know God will provide, and in doing so, they reject the idea that Satan has triumphed.

There are three parts to my chosen passage, which consists of the final three paragraphs of the epic: Eve's speech to Adam; the banishment of Adam and Eve; and what we might call the "commencement," when they leave to begin their new life in the world beyond the Garden. Each has something different to contribute to the impression of hope for the world, and I will look at them in turn.

While Adam and the Archangel have been talking about the future, Eve has been sleeping, and God has visited her in a dream. Milton's choice of this method of informing her of the future, as opposed to (for example) simply having Adam tell her later, suggests that God is everywhere and will always be with Adam and Eve. Even in sleep, a state of

mind in which one is normally unreceptive to new knowledge and external information, God can reach Eve to comfort her. The dream not only serves to comfort Eve, however, but also to convince her that her Fall is not final and that she can continue to serve God and advance the world closer to a future state of regained Paradise. When she tells Adam what she has learned and asserts her readiness to go and her submission to his plans, she expresses this conviction by finishing her speech, “By mee the Promis’d Seed shall all restore” (*l.* 623). Milton chooses to emphasize not only the restoration (by placing that word at the end of the line) but also the fact that Eve will be the agent by which the restoration takes place (by placing her at the beginning, by using what the textual note of our edition calls the “emphatic form” of the pronoun *me*, and by placing it in a metrically stressed position). It may be Eve who brought “Death into the World, and all our woe” (book I, *l.* 3), but it is also Eve who will provide the means to reverse the process and eventually restore humanity’s state of Paradise. In this way she recognizes that she will be able to atone for her sin, that it will not be permanent, and she is prepared to begin that procedure.

Milton’s treatment of the banishment of Adam and Eve by the Archangel is harsh, filled with images of the elements and heat and force, but it nevertheless also contains several elements carefully selected to reinforce the idea of hope despite the apparent severity of the situation. In particular, the notion of God remaining with Adam and Eve is reinforced by a momentary respite from the harsh language, in which they are led out of the Garden by an Angel:

In either hand the hast’ning Angel caught
 Our ling’ring Parents, and to th’Eastern Gate
 Led them direct, and down the Cliff as fast
 To the subjected Plain. . . (*l.* 637–640)

Milton invokes a powerful metaphor of parent and children, God being the supreme Father, working through the Angel: Adam and Eve are “caught” by the hand and led out after having “lingered” too long, as one would do for a child. More importantly, Milton’s God does not choose to throw them out of the garden, or to nudge them out with the fire and swords that will guard the garden at their backs – instead, the Angel, almost lovingly but still firmly, “leads” them out. Despite their sins, God still loves them and will continue to help them, no matter what, as a parent would do for his or her children, all the way up until the sacrifice of Jesus. Another element of hope is the symbolism in the direction that Adam and Eve proceed after leaving the Garden: they go out the eastern gate, facing the rising sun, the direction of new beginnings. Milton did not invent this detail himself; the chapters of Genesis on which *Paradise Lost* is based include it as well. However, it is clear he wishes to emphasize it: he repeats it twice (“to th’Eastern Gate,” *l.* 638; “all th’Eastern side beheld,” *l.* 641), both times using it as an adjective without which the thought would still be perfectly complete. Adam and Eve are not ejected into hell, or to the west where the day ends, or in some unspecified direction; their direction is meaningful and deliberately set by God, set to the way that will allow them to begin the project of Paradise anew.

The final five lines of *Paradise Lost* set the mood that the story ends on, and the tone and the style of narration change drastically, from focusing on specific events to a broader view of the situation Adam and Eve find themselves in. These lines, as well as the three before them, fit perfectly into the epic’s iambic pentameter, all of the stresses lining up exactly with ordinary pronunciation. This level of neatness occurs quite rarely in the rest of the epic, lending this section a noticeably different metrical quality, a quality which gives the reader the impression that everything is working out and the world is in order. Again, God is with Adam and Eve: “Providence” is “their guide,” with the word *guide* neatly emphasized

again by fitting in the final position right before a pause (l. 647). The lines leading up to that seem ambiguous on a first reading, though: “The World was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and Providence their guide” (l. 646–647). The reader’s interpretation of this probably depends on his or her personal feelings toward choices; someone who likes having many freedoms would probably find this a liberating experience, but someone else might find having the whole world open to her more upsetting than anything else. Milton slips in a key word which clears this up, though, and it is a lowly little conjunction, a seemingly unimportant word choice: *and*. When joined with *and*, these are not two separate statements; one may not follow directly from the other, but Adam and Eve clearly have God’s guidance in the act of choosing, and this makes all the difference: their choice is not left entirely up to them and it will be the first step on the road to recovery. The narrative does not tell us what happens next, but even without the knowledge of what the Bible has to say about it, we could assume that Adam and Eve, heartened by the knowledge that God is with them and that they can help to repair the damage they have caused, go on to begin the process of creating the world that God wants.

I earlier touched on the idea that Satan is arguably the protagonist of *Paradise Lost*. But Satan is conspicuously absent from this ending. Satan has done his damage, and for Milton, while Satan may have succeeded in changing the world, he has not truly challenged God’s power or the cosmic order set out by God. God continues to help Adam and Eve, and Adam and Eve continue to trust in God. Rather than being destroyed by their mistake, they merely look back with some regret on what they had, meanwhile moving on with life and the ambition of glorifying God, driven by their hope for the future, in which Paradise can be restored. If Satan has won, it is only temporary; God, in Milton’s view, can remain omnipotent and omnibenevolent.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. New York: Signet Classics, 2010. Print.

Passage (Book XII)

He [Michael] ended, and they both descend the Hill;
 Descended, Adam to the Bow'r where Eve
 Lay sleeping ran before, but found her wak't;
 And thus with words not sad she him receiv'd.

“Whence thou return'st, and whither went'st, I know; 610
 For God is also in sleep, and Dreams advise,
 Which he hath sent propitious, some great good
 Presaging, since with sorrow and heart's distress
 Wearied I fell asleep: but now lead on;
 In mee is no delay; with thee to go, 615
 Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
 Is to go hence unwilling; thou to mee
 Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou,
 Who for my wilful crime art banished hence.
 This further consolation yet secure 620
 I carry hence; though all by mee is lost,
 Such favour I unworthy am vouchsaf't,
 By mee the Promis'd Seed shall all restore.

So spake our Mother Eve, and Adam heard 625
 Well pleas'd, but answer'd not, for now too nigh
 Th'Archangel stood, and from the other Hill
 To their fixt Station, all in bright array
 The Cherubim descended; on the ground
 Gliding Metéorous, as Ev'ning Mist
 Ris'n from a River o'er the Marish glides, 630
 And gathers ground fast at the Labourer's heel
 Homeward returning. High in Front advanc't,
 The brandisht Sword of God before them blaz'd
 Fierce as a Comet; which with torrid heat,
 And vapour as the Libyan Air adust, 635
 Began to parch that temperate Clime; whereat
 In either hand the hast'ning Angel caught

Our ling'ring Parents, and to th'Eastern Gate
Led them direct, and down the Cliff as fast
To the subjected Plain; then disappear'd. 640
They looking back, all th'Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful Faces throng'd and fiery Arms:
Some natural tears they dropp'd, but wip'd them soon; 645
The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.