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Thoughts and Reflections on Milton*

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With the four hundredth anniversary of Milton's birth last year, it is more than appropriate that we at Temenos try to assess his role and significance as one of the supreme poets of the English imagination whose influence has been immense—even when revoked, as in the case of Keats and his composition of *Hyperion*. And Milton today seems to be more back in fashion than perhaps at any other time since T. S. Eliot and the Cambridge School of Criticism tried to dislodge and demote him as one of this country's very finest poets.

Milton, then, is a controversial yet seminal figure in the field of English studies, both poetry and culture—also, because of his alignment with the Puritan cause and his being Cromwell's Latin Secretary, in the field of politics and religion. Indeed, this last area was certainly one that made him antipathetic to T. S. Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism, even though (to be absolutely fair) Eliot can maintain that:

Wit is not a quality that we are accustomed to associate with 'Puritan' literature, with Milton or with Marvell. But if so, we are at fault partly in our conception of wit and partly in our generalizations about the Puritans.¹

And Marvell, although Puritan, certainly exemplifies wit, which involves playful intelligence, and is a staple of Marvell's poetry, if not of Milton's; which is nothing if not directly serious and, as we would say today, committed.

In short, wit was associated with Donne and the Metaphysicals and by natural extension, of course, with the culture of the court, the upshot of which was that Milton's poetry was by contrast viewed as being high-minded though solemn and possessing nothing of court sophistication at the level of linguistic complexity and ironic juxta-

* This is the text of a lecture which was presented to the Temenos Academy on 5 November 2009.

1. 'Andrew Marvell' (1921), cited from *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932), p. 294.

position; such as was found to inhabit in its own way the world of *The Waste Land*. Thus, a so-called 'line of wit' was found to run from Ben Jonson, Thomas Carew, and Marvell to Pope, say, with some roots back in Shakespeare and other Elizabethans, leaving Milton high and dry, as well as the Romantics and Victorians; until we pick it up again with T. S. Eliot. So that, for the Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis, Milton remains 'that heroic figure'—a large yet anomalous landmark outside the mainstream of English poetry, with 'his moral theme (being) held simply and presented with single-minded seriousness'.

T. S. Eliot, again, coming from his early and prolonged study of Dante, of whom he says that 'Dante's is a *visual* imagination', goes on to maintain later that 'At no period is the visual imagination conspicuous in Milton's poetry', stressing instead 'the auditory imagination', which he believes stems from the poet's weak eyesight and love of music:

The most important fact about Milton, for my purpose, is his blindness . . . I do not mean that to go blind in middle life is itself enough to determine the whole nature of a man's poetry. Blindness must be considered in conjunction with Milton's personality and character . . . It must also be considered in connection with his devotion to, and expertness in, the art of music.²

As a result, T. S. Eliot argues, 'To extract everything possible from *Paradise Lost*, it would seem necessary to read it in two different ways, first solely for the sound, and second for the sense'.³ This strikes me as being especially bizarre and certainly not conforming with my own reading experience; but it does illustrate T. S. Eliot's own theory of there having been a so-called 'dissociation of sensibility' during the seventeenth century and Milton's apparent role in all this:

In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.⁴

2. 'Milton I' (1936), cited from *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 139.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

4. 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), cited from *Selected Essays*, p. 288.

This famous statement both suggests that Milton (and Dryden) were somehow victims of an overall cultural 'dissociation' as well as themselves massively contributing to it. The upshot of all this is that Milton's verse is presented as being radically split down the middle, with thought and ideas on one side, music and magniloquence on the other. In terms of the latter, he is then demoted to a line of mellifluousness, incorporating Spenser, Shelley, Tennyson and Swinburne, which is opposed to the major so-called line of wit. As for Milton's thought and ideas, these are dismissed as being unworthy of 'solemn study' (Leavis's phrase), the give-away adjective indicating that such study is inappropriate to thought as heavy-handed as this, which is simply viewed as unwitty. Hence, not intelligent, a key adjective in 1950s Cambridge. With *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* in mind, both epic creations, it is clear that we have an attack on what was known as the grand style, something which particularly attracted the Victorians, as in Tennyson's description of Milton as that 'God-gifted organ voice'. Not that Milton's influence on the Victorians was at all especially positive, inculcating here simply a penchant for sublimity and uplift so different from the Romantics' interest in creating epics of the inner world (as with Blake and Shelley), apart from responding to this poet's figures of rebellion (e.g. Satan in *Paradise Lost*). But this is the fault of the Victorians themselves for not being galvanized by Milton's ideas.

On the other hand, going back to T. S. Eliot and the Cambridge critics, Milton was also accused of a lack of sensuous particularity in his poetry. As Eliot puts it in his 1936 essay vis-à-vis Shakespeare in *Macbeth*: 'In comparison, Milton's images do not give this sense of particularity, nor are the separate words developed in significance. His language is, if one may use the term without disparagement, *artificial* and *conventional*.'⁵ This critique was then taken up elsewhere and applied in a fairly blanket manner.

The first critic-scholar to reject this approach and reply in its own terms was Christopher Ricks of Oxford,⁶ who argued that the Miltonic style *does* possess its own kind of precision and particularity, and is not 'incompatible with sharp, concrete realisation' (F. R. Leavis's formulation). Drawing on some insights of William Empson, Ricks shows

5. *On Poetry and Poets*, p. 140.

6. *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

via commentary and analysis that the verse of *Paradise Lost*, say, cannot simply be dismissed by pointing to (again quoting Leavis) 'the inescapable monotony of the ritual', 'the stylised gesture and movement', 'mere orotundity', or a 'concern for mellifluousness'.⁷ And whereas earlier scholar-critics such as C. S. Lewis tended to come back at Eliot and Leavis by maintaining that their principles of judgement were too narrow or wrong-headed (thereby setting up two separate aesthetic categories), Ricks attacks them on their own ground by accepting their principles of sensuous particularity and sharp linguistic realization, but finding that Milton's poetry does indeed possess these qualities—at least in terms of its own subject-matter.

Now in his prose-work, *Eikonoclastes*, Milton himself says that an opponent should not rely on 'the plausibility of large and indefinite words, to defend himself at such a distance as may hinder the eye of common judgement from all distinct view and examination of his reasoning'; and from this Ricks correctly infers that the poet himself would not in the least object to being judged by Eliot's and the Cambridge School's criteria—which is precisely what Ricks does. Thus he argues that the poet's style is not merely grandiloquent and sonorous—in Eliot's terms, 'the arrangement (of words) (being) for the sake of musical value, not for significance'—but sensitive, discriminating, loaded with meaning, imaginative and dramatic. Ricks then goes on to provide good practical critical exegeses of various passages from *Paradise Lost*, paying a lot of attention both to the poet's syntax and especially his verbs, the New Critics having tended to ignore syntax and concentrate on precise imagery instead. In fact, Ricks's concerns here would seem to fit in more with modern linguistics; T. S. Eliot and the Cambridge School with a more modernist and perhaps symbolist approach, minus, however, the transcendent auras of a Yeats, Rilke or Valéry. Indeed, stripped of these and with its stress on concrete particularity, it looks now more like a form of English empiricism, which has no direct relevance in Milton's world.

Nevertheless, and strange as it may seem, we get, according to Samuel Johnson, 'His play on words, in which he delights too often'⁸—

7. These formulations of Leavis's, from his book *Revaluation* (Penguin, 1964), are all cited by Ricks, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–3.

8. *Lives of the English Poets, and a Criticism of their Works*, 10 vols (Dublin: White-stone, Williams, Colles, Wilson, etc., 1779–81).

as, for example, in Book IX, lines 1067–8, from *Paradise Lost*: ‘O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear/To that false worm’—where there is an obvious play on ‘Eve’ and ‘evil’ and echoes of the Fall in ‘false’. Then again in Book I, where Satan is first addressing the fallen angels, we find this:

But he who reigns
 Monarch in heaven, till then as one secure
 Sat on his throne, upheld by old repute,
 Consent or custom, and his regal state
 Put forth at full, but still his strength concealed,
 Which tempted our attempt, and wrought our fall.
 (lines 637–42)

where the play on ‘tempted’ and ‘attempt’, which fuses the idea of enticement with that of endeavour, and which, with these lines immediately preceding, suggests, as it were, divine duplicity in ‘but still his strength concealed’, isn’t at all the word-play of the *Metaphysicals*, but that of theological irony in terms of key concepts and themes. Yet none of this is taken up by either T. S. Eliot or the Cambridge School. Instead, they concentrate on attacking ‘the organ voice’, remembering perhaps Matthew Arnold in ‘He is our great artist in style, our one first-rate master in *the grand style*’;⁹ so that one wonders whether they are not rather reacting against a purely Victorian Milton (backed by the Victorian cult of sublimity) rather than Milton himself. For the Milton of the Romantics, of Blake, Byron and Shelley, was primarily, as already intimated, a creator of epic inner-worlds peopled above all by figures of rebellion, with Satan as archetypal Romantic hero. Thus Blake could write in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, praising, as many have felt since, the dynamic presentation of the early scenes in Hell from *Paradise Lost* as opposed to the inevitably blander later scenes in Heaven, that ‘Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy’, and famously:

9. ‘A French Critic on Milton’, in *Mixed Essays* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1871).

Note: The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.¹⁰

It is here clear that, whatever the nature and accuracy of their interpretation, the Romantics were supremely interested in Milton's ideas, not simply his sublimity. They were, for instance, especially taken with the poet's new and powerful upgrading of the mind vis-à-vis external reality which, in its awareness of the separation between the two, anticipated the future dislocation characteristic of the Romantic Age, as in the following key passage spoken by Satan in Hell towards the beginning of Book 1:

Farewell happy fields¹¹
 Where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail
 Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell
 Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
 A mind not to be changed by place or time.
 The mind is its own place, and in itself
 Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.
 (lines 249–55)

For the Romantics and indeed for the succeeding modern age as a whole, in its discovery of, and research into, psychology and psychiatry with their developed awareness and analysis of states of mind, this speech constitutes a seminal text. It likewise expresses the indomitable sense of an individualism capable of asserting itself against the most negative of environments and periods of time. Indeed, if you take this passage as it stands, together with the figure of Satan as a whole, it is highly instructive to make a comparison with the Shakespearean heroes of the tragedies and some of the later plays, such as *Macbeth*, *Lear* and *Prospero*, who extricate themselves from their respective quasi-medieval social webs on their way up or down. The same is true for the so-called villains implicated in these tragedies—say *Iago*, *Claudius* in *Hamlet*, *Antonio*, *Prospero's* brother and 'the

10. *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 150.

11. Incidentally the title chosen by Kathleen Raine for the first volume of her autobiography.

usurping Duke of Milan', and so on. In all these cases, as elsewhere in Shakespeare, if with immense variations of pattern and procedure, there is always an overall picture of individuals vis-à-vis the social web; whereas in Milton, as here in *Paradise Lost*, the web has receded to the point of disappearing, with Satan now the complete outsider.

Culturally and historically, one can see the connection—the response, if you like—to Tudor-Elizabethan forms of aggressive individualism such as were based on readings of Machiavelli and Francis Bacon and can be pinpointed in the activities of monopoly-holders and merchant-adventurers. These were stretching, even fracturing the framework holding medievalising Tudor society together, so that earlier medieval negatives like pure ambition, the ruthless pursuit of upward social mobility for its own sake, or the relentless accumulation of wealth, goods and property were seen to be sprouting up everywhere, hence characteristic of the new and altering times. This is essentially the world of Shakespeare's plays, and the world he so powerfully dramatizes, yet laments and fiercely criticizes; whereas Milton's begins on the other side of this, under the Stuarts, James I and Charles I, where their relationship to Parliament becomes more and more fraught to the point of antagonism and no return. Just think of the Long Parliament (1640–60), with the splitting of Parliament in 1641 into two parties—the Episcopalians and the Puritans, with Civil War breaking out the following year. Charles I was then tried and executed in 1649, as we know, with the Commonwealth being set up until 1653. After such experiences of antagonistic division and separation, any sort of traditionally unified society incorporating sets of long-established values could not any more be used as a reference point as in Shakespeare.

As an instance of what we get, even as early as 1634, the date when Milton's masque *Comus* was first 'presented at Ludlow Castle' to mark the inauguration of the Earl of Bridgewater as Lord President of Wales, the play's scene of action is sharply dualistic—being largely that of 'this ominous Wood', where Comus himself and his 'rout of Monsters' have 'a stately Palace', scene of enchantment, seduction and captivity, as against the masque's conclusion, set in 'Ludlow Town and the Presidents Castle'. Clearly, the two very different terrains, with the palace juxtaposed against castle, are deliberately contrastive. Moreover, the sumptuousness of Comus' palace, 'set out with all manner of deliciousness', as the stage directions put it, and its conscious appeal

to the senses with its 'soft Musick' and 'Tables spred with all dainties', is undoubtedly being offered, at least in part, as a mirror-image of the extravagance and wealth associated with the Jacobean and Caroline courts. Indeed, the masque itself as an art form derived from Renaissance Italy, primarily as a lavish court entertainment involving poetry, music, song and dance, as well as stage spectacle and magnificent costumes. It was the long collaboration of Ben Jonson with Inigo Jones from roughly 1609 to 1631 which determined the whole path of the masque in this country. Jones designed all the complicated stage-machinery and brought to the partnership a first-hand acquaintance with Italy and its architectural and dramatic arts. And it is more than likely that Milton was thematically inspired by Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618) and was aware of Jonson's presence as late as 1633–34, when the latter was still producing masques for the court while the former was at work on *Comus*.

But what is now of central importance in all this is the question of Milton as ostensible and committed Puritan in his involvement with the masque as court entertainment. The Royalist musician, Henry Lawes, who wrote the songs and dances for *Comus*, was a friend to whom he addressed a sonnet as 'the Priest of Phoebus Quite' as late as 1646, yet was also music teacher to Lady Alice Egerton, the original of the Lady in Milton's masque. Here we get a glimpse of the inter-connections between the poet and the family his work was meant to celebrate, thereby interweaving court culture with high-minded Protestant ideals, something which nevertheless does not prevent us from seeing *Comus* himself and his 'stately Palace' as images of Caroline libertinism firstly rejected in the play. Again, in line with this, we should recall that, when a student at Christ's College, Cambridge, itself a very Puritan seat of learning within the university, the young Milton went around carrying a sword and wearing long hair (mark of the Cavaliers not the Roundheads, of course). He was given the nickname of 'the Lady of Christ's', itself suggestive of a marked feminine grace and demeanour differentiating him from the student body of the time. So whatever Milton developed into over the years, via his turbulent marriages and his time as Cromwell's Latin Secretary, he was essentially not your strait-laced one-track Puritan, but a complex fusion of qualities stemming from both sides of the divide, proof of which is embodied in *Comus*. Clearly, this complication of character was responsible, apart from anything else, for the poet's ensuing

richness of viewpoint and work, while in literary-cultural terms we get a marriage, though not without resonant tensions, of Renaissance classical myth with Protestant high ideals, as in the masque's very opening, spoken by the Attendant Spirit, a Neoplatonic being who himself marries classical Renaissance spirituality with Protestant inwardness and 'descends or enters':

Before the starry threshold of Jove's court
 My mansion is, where those immortal shapes
 Of bright aerial spirits live insphered
 In regions mild of calm and serene air,
 Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot,
 Which men call Earth, and with low-thoughted care
 Confined, and pestered in this pinfold here,
 Strive to keep up a frail, and feverish being
 Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives
 After this mortal change, to her true servants
 Amongst the enthroned gods on sainted seats.
 Yet some there be that by due steps aspire
 To lay their just hands on that golden key
 That opes the palace of Eternity:
 To such my errand is, and but for such,
 I would not soil these pure ambrosial weeds,
 With the rank vapours of this sin-worn mould.

(lines 1–16)

If we look at the phraseology and concepts of this passage, we can see straightaway the sources of the various expressions and ideas. The opening lines, in common with the nature of the masque, are classical, charting where the 'bright aerial spirits live insphered', just outside 'Jove's court'; whereas, as soon as we descend towards earth, the human condition and its problems enter via a more Christian context in 'Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives/After this mortal change, to her true servants', followed by a classical reference to 'the enthroned gods', but a Christian one again with 'on *sainted* seats'. Finally, the Attendant Spirit's reference to 'these pure ambrosial weeds', which is nothing if not classical, undergoes the risk in Christian terms of being *soiled* 'With the rank vapours of this *sin-worn* mould'.

Thus Milton's sensibility during the 1630s—his youngish years—is a decided amalgam of classical with Christian-Biblical and tells us a good deal about his specific cultural inheritance as well as his personal sympathies and values. As he gets older, however, and more involved in the politics of his time, becoming Cromwell's Latin Secretary in 1649, things develop and change with *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, which are all now predominantly Christian-Hebraic, in spite of the last-mentioned work's partly Greek title.

It is instructive at this point to compare *Comus* with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play Milton must have known well, since a magic wood is the centre of both, in which its 'other reality' as compared with the urban settings of Athens and Ludlow lies at the heart of both writers' meditations on the complex relations existing between man and nature. Both woods, however, are nevertheless different from each other, simply in terms of the beings inhabiting them. Whereas Shakespeare's is the home of Oberon, Titania and the fairies, together with the mischievous folk-figure, Puck, Milton's Attendant Spirit states that:

Within the navel of this hideous wood,
Immured in cypress shades a sorcerer dwells
Of Bacchus, and of Circe born, great Comus,
Deep skilled in all his mother's witcheries . . .
(lines 521–3)

—which makes it a very different and much more frightening thing altogether. As Circe's son, Comus transforms his victims into subservient animals, while Puck admittedly also turns Bottom's head into that of an ass, but only for the length of Titania's dream. In short, whatever the underlying seriousness of Shakespeare's concerns in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the intertwined themes of love and the imagination, the play as a whole is much more comic and light-hearted than Milton's masque, the direct and explicit seriousness of which marks it out, as does its essentially ideological and oppositional nature. For the opposition and conflict between the Attendant Spirit and his world as against Comus and his 'wild wood', so phrased in the opening stage directions, pinpoint the work's value-centres, which are portrayed and discussed throughout in a highly imaginative if oppositional manner. Indeed, the picture I am trying to describe

of the similarity yet ultimate difference between these two works for the stage, with only roughly forty years between them, illustrates the great shift between the Tudor-Jacobean age and that of Caroline times. It is clearly mirrored in Shakespeare's plays where, even through the tragedies and beyond, what is presented and dramatized, however disastrous the outcome, stays firmly within and in terms of Tudor-Jacobean society and its tensions; whereas with Milton such tensions are now ranged against each other in open confrontation and conflict, then actual warfare, such as we find in terms of the Roundheads and Cavaliers leading to civil war. Such an atmosphere automatically produces the oppositional and ideological, as is the case with regard to Blake and the French Revolution. Hence it is not for nothing that Milton and Blake are our foremost, if not only, ideological poets, in how they conceive and present things of the spirit. One need only think of Satan versus God in *Paradise Lost* and Samson against the Philistines in *Samson Agonistes*, a nothing if not oppositional title, or again Blake's Innocence versus Experience, where it is not for nothing that the title of one of the latter's late inner epics is *Milton*, prefacing which, of course, we get the poem, 'And did those feet in ancient time', in the course of which we get the line, 'I will not cease from Mental Fight'. Milton, in fact, was of direct concern to Blake in a way Shakespeare never was. And this disposition of mind, I would want to maintain, was highly characteristic of our founder, Kathleen Raine, and her concept of *Temenos*.

Now one of Milton's great features is the way in which he reinterprets and invests with new significance every literary genre he takes up. With the court masque, for example, he massively extends the concerns and boundaries of the Ben Jonson-Inigo Jones model that immediately came down to him, as he does those of classical elegy in *Lycidas* or the Greek-Roman epic in *Paradise Lost*. And, of course, in the case of his masque, he invests it with a new and complex seriousness of purpose, involving, as already quoted, an Attendant Spirit from 'the starry threshold of Jove's court', whose descent as messenger and helper from above, then as active participant in the human world below, and finally his ascent back to the realms above, after his mission has been accomplished, gives to Milton's masque an inclusive shape and circular form which themselves possess a symbolic focus. The Attendant Spirit's final epilogue that closes the play finishes like this:

But now my task is smoothly done,
 I can fly, or I can run
 Quickly to the green earth's end,
 Where the bowed welkin slow doth bend,
 And from thence can soar as soon
 To the corners of the moon.

Mortals that would follow me,
 Love Virtue, she alone is free,
 She can teach ye how to climb
 Higher than the sphery chime;
 Or if Virtue feeble were,
 Heaven itself would stoop to her.

(lines 1012–23)

Significant here for this poet's outlook is the categorization of Virtue through freedom and therefore its power in being able to create an almost endless upward movement, as it were, and accompanying state of grace. This parallels precisely the Attendant Spirit's downward entry in his opening prologue and returning upward progression at the end. Curiously, again, or perhaps not so, the Spirit's first six lines here echo the character of Shakespeare's Ariel; and, indeed, *The Tempest*, one of the playwright's very last works would seem, on reflection, to be moving towards Milton's more divided world. For Prospero's island, where almost the entire action of the drama takes place, is nevertheless constantly opposed *in absentia* by the Italian mainland of Milan and Naples, thereby creating a sense of a world geographically but also ethically in opposition—in other words, somewhat Miltonic. Indeed, *Comus*, one might say, is a subtle morality play slanted towards the court and possessing vertical as well as horizontal levels of reality, having wedded the Jonsonian type of masque to the older allegorical interlude and pastoral drama. All this implies that *Comus* itself can certainly be seen as a Platonic allegory of the descent and ascent of the soul with the wood as life's labyrinth—'the perplexed paths of this drear wood' as the Attendant Spirit puts it—and the enchanter's 'stately palace', opposed to 'the palace of Eternity', where Comus is able to immobilize the Lady's body, but not her mind—'Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind', as she puts it. Clearly, at the dramatic centre of the masque, we get the temptation scene. Here the Lady is invited, then

pressured to take 'this cordial julep here/That flames and dances in his crystal bounds' (lines 672–3), ending with 'one sip of this/Will bathe the dropping spirits in delight/Beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise, and taste' (lines 811–13). At this point her two Brothers, accompanied by the Attendant Spirit disguised as the shepherd Thyrsis, enter. The situation is obviously a foretaste of Eve's temptation by Satan in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, the crucial difference being, however, that Eve succumbs, thereby precipitating the loss of paradise; whereas the Lady of the masque wins out, at one stage putting her arguments so convincingly that Comus himself almost succumbs: 'She fables not, I feel that I do fear/Her words set off by some superior power;/And though not mortal, yet a cold shuddering dew/ Dips me all o'er . . .' (lines 800–803). It is the Lady, likewise, who is the only one clear-eyed enough to separate the real identity of the woods from their human inhabitants, calling them 'the kind hospitable woods' (line 187); since we must not forget that Comus himself is not native to them. Instead, he is really a usurping *genius loci*, 'Who ripe, and frolic of his full-grown age,/Roving the Celtic, and Iberian fields,/At last betakes him to this ominous wood', as opposed to Sabrina, a real *genius loci* of the River Severn, whose beneficent powers are able to overturn those of Comus and free the Lady from the 'marble venomed seat' in which he has imprisoned her. Thus the masque presents us with two opposed concepts of nature which are dramatized and made to confront each other during its course.

In sum, at this point, Milton's use of the court masque is committed, ideological and didactic, whatever the richness of its imagery and imagination, and to this degree is on the Puritan wavelength. For in narrative terms what we get is a story of trial via temptation and triumph, where the Lady as Virtue is tried by Comus' blandishments and threats, neither of which prove to have any hold over her. Thus Milton, unlike Jonson, is not concerned with the formal virtues of an idealized court, where, as Comus himself puts it, 'Beauty is Nature's brag, and must be shown/In courts, at feasts and high solemnities' (lines 745–6), but with internalized virtues like honour, truth and purity. And in this he is meticulously Puritan. Nevertheless, we must not at all forget that, strictly speaking, *Comus* belongs to Pre-Puritan England and its preceding masque tradition; so that the clash between Comus as Cavalier and the Lady and her Brothers as Puritan can be seen as mirroring a similar clash in Milton's own mind and as being

fought out there. Having said this, it is vital to point out that Milton is not a lyrical poet: he needs stylized and distancing forms in which to work and give expression to what personally absorbs him, e.g. masque, pastoral or epic. Indeed, what strikes one about the major poems of the 1645 volume, in which *Comus* appeared, is the great delicacy and colour of their imaginative worlds. The poet's mind is so stocked with mythological figures and events that they form the poems' staple. He knows how to use, evoke and vivify them, as with a tapestry, his world seemingly shaped out of classical and biblical lore, emblems, stories, myths, prophecies, music, philosophy and learning. Finally, for the Lady and her two Brothers, Milton's masque enacts a kind of *rite de passage* (to use Arnold van Gennep's term), whereby all three young people are portrayed as being on the edge of puberty and then, becoming separated and thereby isolated in life's wood, undergo a kind of initiation, as a result of which they take the first steps towards adulthood, being transformed along the way; until, with the help of the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina, they ultimately reach Ludlow and, via another initiation, are reintegrated with their family and society in general. As against this underlying theme of the play, we find right at the beginning that Comus himself is celebrating quite other 'rites':

Come let us our rites begin,
 'Tis only daylight that makes sin
 Which these dun shades will ne'er report.
 Hail goddess of nocturnal sport
 Dark-veil'd Cotytto, t'whom the secret flame
 Of midnight torches burns . . .

(lines 125–30)

Comus is therefore quite simply the most complex and intellectual of masques, subtly conceived and presented.

To go from *Comus* to *Paradise Lost* is to leave a localized domain of 'wild wood', River Severn, and 'Ludlow Town' plus 'President's Castle' for an epic and cosmic world of more general and universal attributes. Nevertheless, certain themes and preoccupations are carried over from the earlier to the later work: first and foremost, as already mentioned, the central temptation scene of the Lady and Comus, which compares to that of Eve and Satan in Book IX of the longer poem.

Then, much earlier on in Book v, the Angel 'Raphael comes down to Paradise' to warn Adam in advance of Satan's approach recounted in Book iv, which, although very different, parallels the descent of the Attendant Spirit. However, unlike Comus, Satan is the successful protagonist of *Paradise Lost*, just as Christ is of *Paradise Regained*; for it is Satan, after all, who causes paradise to be lost by successfully tempting Eve, then, following her, Adam; and the epic is basically about this—the temptation and fall of man via Satan as evil. He is therefore bound to be the poem's chief actor; and he does most things—rules in Hell, flies to Eden, corrupts Eve, returning then to Hell. By comparison, Adam and Eve are relatively passive; with neither the Messiah nor Raphael or Gabriel being instigators in the poem like Satan; so that as the story of paradise *lost* the epic is substantially about Satan, who stands at its centre, even if he is only actually present in Books I, II, and IV, then Books IX and X, yet indirectly present in Books V and VI. However, Satan's role in Milton's epic and our view of him as a character change substantially during the course of the poem. First, he is rebel angel, proud and heroic; second, he becomes the wily tempter, non-heroic and evil, bringing about mankind's downfall out of malice and spiteful revenge; third, as a result of his second role, he arrives back in hell and is himself transformed into a serpent, something distasteful. Satan's character, therefore, declines throughout the progress of the epic, so that Milton clearly means us to keep all three aspects and roles before us. To concentrate on Satan as arch-rebel, proud and demonic, as did the Romantics, to the exclusion of all else, however, is completely *un-Miltonic*—even if the figure of Satan had most influence via this, from Blake, Byron and Shelley onwards.

Certainly, Blake's statement from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* about Milton has some basis in fact when we remember Milton's role in the Parliamentary Revolution against the monarchy and that Satan is *Paradise Lost's* most compelling figure, in comparison with whom both God and Messiah are relatively pale creations. But this does not at all mean that Milton's fundamental sympathies are with Satan, not even unconsciously, as Blake maintains. Again, even if Milton does show admiration for Satan, this is restricted to the early books of the poem—to Satan, namely, in his heroic role. And even here, in Book II, lines 5–6, we find 'Satan exalted sat, by merit rais'd/To that *bad* eminence'. And although he is a rebel against God, he himself is also a monarch of hell 'with monarchical pride' (Book II, lines 427–8).

With the Romantics, nevertheless, the figure of Satan becomes anti-establishment and characteristic in its cut-off, suffering, proud aspects of the new type of alienated artist or outsider such as themselves, now to be aligned with Prometheus and Faust. Thus Milton and his work, as from thence discovered, possess a forward link with Romanticism and individualism of the utmost importance. In *Paradise Lost* there is no definite sense of place, yet a definite sense of different atmospheres that circumscribe areas spatially and qualitatively, so that the reality becomes both extra-terrestrial as well as internal, and this seems to have been taken up by the Romantics when writing their own internal epics—e.g. *Hyperion*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *Jerusalem*.

To recapitulate: Blake's statement, then, is a brilliant, essentially Romantic insight in which he can be seen fitting Milton into his own system of opposites. Of course, it has some basis in fact, in that most readers feel that Satan is *Paradise Lost's* most compelling figure. Finally, Satan would seem to symbolize different forms of evil, external and internal—in the early Books of Milton's epic representing pride, self-love and revolt, in which he functions as the Lucifer figure of myth. However, in standing for temptation via the serpent, he appeals to and incorporates something *inside Eve*, appearing to her first of all in a dream—hence a psychological force. And in this role he is more sinister and repellent, losing all his previously heroic traits.

Paradise Lost, one must not forget, contains two rebellions—Satan's, of course, but also man's, which is linked to the first, since 'Man's First Disobedience' is propelled into action by Satan's temptation of Eve, soon to be joined by Adam, and is defined as such:

Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?
Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd
The Mother of Mankind, what time his Pride
Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host
Of Rebel Angels . . .

(Book I, lines 33–8)

What all this then results in is the main underlying theme of the poem and highly characteristic of Milton and his cultural ambience—namely, loss of liberty, as the Angel Michael makes clear to Adam in the work's final Book:

To whom thus *Michael*. Justly thou abhorr'st
 That Son, who on the quiet state of men
 Such trouble brought, affecting to subdue
 Rational Liberty; yet know withall,
 Since thy original lapse, true Liberty
 Is lost, which always with right Reason dwells
 Twinn'd, and from her hath no dividual being:
 Reason in man obscur'd, or not obey'd,
 Immediately inordinate desires
 And upstart Passions catch the Government
 From Reason, and to servitude reduce
 Man till then free.

(Book XII, lines 79–90)

In short, *Paradise Lost* is as much about the inner man as about theology and myth; and that brings us to the poem in terms of its being a fundamentally Protestant epic—inward and dynamic, assertive and marked by conflict. One only has to think, by contrast, of Dante, whose work is allegorical, visionary, pellucid, operating within a static world-view. With Milton, on the other hand, we get a portrayal and assertion of power against established hierarchies at several levels, even in poetry itself, where 'Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme' (Book I, line 16) will apparently be given expression. And, with Dante still in mind, Milton's epic is much more active and strenuous, unfinished and onward-going, as it were, from the fall of Satan to Adam and Eve's exit from the garden, with everything moving forward through conflict, victory and defeat. Indeed, one may argue that, apart from Books I–III recounting Satan's epic journey from heaven down to hell and on to Eden, itself heroic in its way, the temptation and fall of man constituting the poem's heartland is basically more dramatic, with morality-play overtones leading to a move away from an actual, if mythical, paradise to a subjective one inside man himself, the so-called 'Paradise within' of Book XII (line 587). In short, a move towards the Protestant, the introverted, the Romantic—something which the poet clearly associated with his growing blindness, as in his address to the light at the beginning of Book III:

. . . but thou
 Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain
 To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;
 So thick a drop serene hath quenched their orbs,
 Or dim suffusion veiled . . .
 So much the rather thou Celestial Light
 Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
 Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
 Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
 Of things invisible to mortal sight.

(lines 22–6 and 51–5)

A different kind of breakthrough is advertised at the very outset of the poem in Milton's piece on 'The Verse', where he argues for blank verse as opposed to what he terms 'the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming', which thus becomes the formal technical counterpart to his loss of liberty concerns.

Having said this, it is finally imperative to try and categorize our poet's imaginative and cultural world in a more specific way, since only then will we be able to see his work in some kind of perspective against that of his immediate predecessors, contemporaries and successors. Shakespeare, for instance, writing throughout the latter part of Elizabeth's reign and the first half of James I's, is exploring (among other things) the tensions within Tudor-Jacobean society which, especially and more so under the last Tudor monarch and bearing in mind the defeat of the Armada in 1588, expresses a feeling of unity and nationalism via the crown. Yet the court of Elizabeth was already in some sense 'commercial' by virtue of its courtiers often acting as the already briefly mentioned merchant adventurers (e.g. Raleigh, Drake, Martin Frobisher) or becoming knighted because of such roles, with the result that one can begin to speak of a *titled bourgeoisie*, with the court itself certainly becoming middle-class in its interests, if aristocratic and absolutist in its ideology. In a comparable way, one might argue, Shakespeare both in lifestyle and plays exhibits this same combination—as contrasted, say, with the aristocratic Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard and Philip Sidney, near contemporaries. Spenser, however, essentially middle-class in origin and a major early influence on Milton, is writing in *The Faerie Queene* about knightly heroes who are

Puritan-Platonic in outlook and behaviour. Indeed, Milton himself, middle- or burgher-class by origin yet aristocratic by leaning like Spenser, was contemplating something similar to *The Faerie Queene* in subject matter before coming down in favour of paradise lost as theme.

Finally, in sum, we can say that under Elizabeth, court and city were in relatively close harmony, as mirrored in Jonson, Shakespeare and other playwrights; that Elizabethan literature was a product of cultural synthesis rather than total nationhood; and that this is what we essentially find in Shakespeare's unified world. When we come later to Donne and the Metaphysicals, however, we find, to quote Donne himself on this, that the world is now 'all in pieces, all coherence gone'—something which points much more to T. S. Eliot's 'dissociation of sensibility' than anything in Milton, whose poetic universe is nothing if not unified, from the *Nativity Ode* and other early poems onward. Indeed, Eliot himself in his 1931 essay on Donne says that 'In Donne, there is a manifest fissure between thought and sensibility, a chasm which in his poetry he bridged in his own way . . .'.¹² In this, he seems to be anticipating Cartesian dualism, whereas Milton, while coming after the Elizabethan-Shakespearian synthesis, seems rather to join up sixteenth- with seventeenth-century humanism, the early poems being a mixture of classical, Elizabethan and Puritan-Renaissance elements held in solution. And this seems to have been his response to Cambridge's outdated medievalism while he was studying there. The concern with universals, however, is itself humanist, with the emphasis on providence being Puritan instead of a person-to-person relationship to God, which was a relic of medievalism. It is therefore characteristic of Milton that he shows no interest in the hunger of the soul for God, such as we still get in Donne and Herbert; and indeed his entire theological landscape requires careful etching-in; but this would require a separate occasion.

12. 'Donne in Our Time', in *A Garland for John Donne, 1631–1931*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Gloucester MA: Peter Smith, 1958), p. 8.