

The Harmony of Time in *Paradise Lost*

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In the first terrible misery following God's judgment on him, Adam longed for death. Nor could he understand the delay in carrying out the sentence. The conditions had been clear enough: "In the day thou eat'st, thou diest" (7.544).¹ "Why delays," he asked himself,

His hand to execute what his decree
Fixed on this day? Why do I overlive,
Why am I mocked with death, and lengthened out
To deathless pain? (10.771-75)

Adam's confusion is in some measure resolved by the time he comes to talk with Eve. He tells her that

. . . this day's death denounced, if aught I see,
Will prove no sudden, but a slow-paced evil,
A long day's dying to augment our pain,
And to our seed (O hapless seed!) derived. (10.962-65)

Because we readers of *Paradise Lost* are at home in this fallen human world, it can be instructive for us to imagine how it must first have impinged on Adam, as the strange consequences of his crime and his punishment were borne in on him. We discover that the poem's theological doctrine is a key not only to its meaning but to its narrative art as well. A consequence of the fall for Adam was his heightened awareness of duration and change, memory and anticipation—in other words, of a plot unfolding in time. From the almost timeless simultaneity of the heavenly *aevum*, Adam is expelled into a world of time, of history and story. The judgment of God is, he discovers, to be worked out in time, both the sentence of death and the promise of redemption. Eventually time will have a stop, Paradise will eventually be regained; this future hope is consolation for the dreadful sorrow that memory of his past happiness brings on him. But an

important human virtue in this new world of change becomes endurance, enlightened and made possible by memory and hope.

Except for the forbidden tree itself, everything in Eden was what it appeared to be. Sign and signified were the same. Except for the tree, the things that looked good and tasted good and felt good were good. The literalness with which Adam could understand language and his experience in Eden is no longer appropriate after the fall. He must learn new ways to interpret the laws and purpose of God, including both his own sentence to death and God's judgment on Satan: that Adam's progeny will bruise his head and that the serpent will bruise the heel of Adam's seed. The angel Michael, in describing the enmity between Christ and Satan, warns Adam not to be too literal in his understanding:

Dream not of their fight,
As of a duel, or the local wound
Of head or heel. (12.385-87)

In the visions of stories revealed by Michael, Adam learns that the history into which he has fallen is a multiplicity of cultural forms, whose true significance bears only a metaphorical relationship to their appearance. Michael's instruction in hermeneutics is also intended to instruct the reader. Before the fall Adam's intellectual ability was impressive, in our terms superhuman. It is evident in Adam's naming the animals and his understanding of their language. And with his prelapsarian wisdom came control and command. But after the fall that ancient language was lost. How this fall into metaphor, history, and cultural variety affects the aesthetics of *Paradise Lost* can be illustrated at the outset.

In Book I the poet asks his muse to say the names of the fallen angels who roused themselves at Satan's summons from their nine-day's slumber. He tells us first that their true, original names have been blotted out of heavenly records. So the muse must list them instead by the names they took on later, as false deities throughout the heathen world. The effect of the catalog that follows, which contains little thumbnail stories of the heathen gods, is to blend history and myth, to suggest a whole world of story in which the worst results of the fall appear as mythic and historical images of sin.

The time of Milton's main story — the plot of which moves here with glacial slowness — is before the creation of the world.

The time, however, of the names and stories in the catalog of devils disguised as gods is between the fall of Adam and the birth of Christ, still the ancient past. In a simile that introduces them, the alien angels are likened in numerousness to the barbarian Goths, who poured from the populous north in Christian times:

A multitude, like which the populous North
Poured never from her frozen loins, to pass
Rhine or the Danaw, when her barbarous sons
Come like a deluge on the South, and spread
Beneath Gibraltar to the Lybian sands. (1.351-55)

This is an example of what I call the harmony of times in *Paradise Lost*. Historical, legendary, mythological figures are organized and understood in one grand intellectual and poetic scheme. Here the idea is introduced into Book I by narrative devices that are themselves the relics of an ancient past. The invocation of the muse, the mythical and historical similes, and the catalog are all easily recognized features of Homeric epic, all made possible, so to speak, or necessary, by history, metaphor, and cultural fragmentation—the consequences of Adam’s fall. Because it is for me a useful way to approach Milton’s narrative art, I want to consider this particular relationship between Homeric and Miltonic epic in some detail. I am less interested in the influence of Homer on Milton than in the degree to which it may be said that *Paradise Lost* and the Homeric epics are “in harmony,” sharing a generic feature of epic, despite the great distances that separate them in time and culture. Milton’s poem is, I suppose, a special case of the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall, another way in which God turns evil into good. Adam says, toward the end of the poem in which he is a central character, “full of doubt I stand, Whether I should repent me now of sin” (12.473-74). Not only was his disobedience a necessary condition for the very existence of his story; but the great intellectual effort of telling the story is, in human and cultural terms, a kind of cure, a compensation for the loss of Adam’s wisdom and his fall into history and metaphor.

Except for the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, it is hard to find narrative poems that can rightly be called epic pure and simple. There are “secondary” or “literary” epics, “romantic epics,” “allegorical epics,” “folk epics,” and so on. But by Milton’s time, or even by Virgil’s, the epic as a narrative genre had passed into the mists of time. Its relationship to the cultures and societies in which it developed and

flourished could not be replicated in succeeding ages of European history. The reason for this is that, very strictly speaking, the epic is not a *literary* form at all. It is instead a form of *oral* narrative.

A fuller account of oral narrative than I can manage might be offered by half the contributors to this volume for Father Ong. So I shall only mention its three primary characteristics and then discuss one of them as a way of seeing a common purpose in the epic of both Homer and Milton.

Oral narrative is *formulaic*, *rhythmic*, and *traditional*. Much has been written, of course, about the formulaic quality of oral narrative. It is what first led Milman Parry and Albert Lord to argue, by analogy with formulaic narrative songs in modern oral cultures, that the Homeric poems were orally composed. The rhythmic characteristics of oral narratives are more subtle and less well understood. Some of them consist of gestures, dances, or chanting by the performer. Others leave deeper traces in a transcribed text, such as stanzas, refrains, repeated motifs, temporal repetitions of all sorts, not only verbal but also thematic and imagistic. For its relevance to the epic as Milton understood the genre, it is the third characteristic of oral narrative — its *traditional* nature — that deserves some attention.

An oral performer is not an author. He is bound by tradition to tell his story the way he and his audience learned it. The quality of an oral performance is measured against some hypothetical or ideal performance that exists as well in the audience's mind as in the performer's. Since the performer is not an author, it may not be too far-fetched, if it is somewhat figurative, to say that the tradition is the author. The performer's allegiance is not to his own experience, to his private vision of the truth, or even to his own creative genius as we might conceive of such a faculty, but to the tradition. If an analogy with literary culture is useful, we might say that the oral performer's relation to tradition is analogous not to an author's relationship to a text, but to a conscientious reader's. In an oral culture, narrative art exists in performance; in a literary culture it exists in readings.

Since there are no authors of oral narrative, there can be no ironic disjunction between author and narrator. The performer and his audience in an oral culture are entirely taken up with the fictional world of the story. Except for rare and stereotyped invocations and comments on the events of the stories they tell,

performers of oral narratives do not talk about themselves, nor do they attempt to cultivate an intimacy with their audiences by questioning the values implicit in their story or the integrity of its hypothetical reality. In criticizing the narrative poets of his day, whose works are now entirely lost to us, Aristotle raised precisely this objection. In contrast to Homer and the dramatists, the later Greek epic poets did not so much imitate the speeches and actions of other men as they placed themselves at the center of the stage. To get some idea of what Aristotle objected to, we might imagine the chatty and ironic literary narrators of Chaucer's *Troilus* or Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*.

In *A Preface to Plato* (1963) and subsequent writings, Eric A. Havelock has placed the beginning of ancient Greek *literary* culture, as contrasted to *oral* culture, as late as the last third of the 5th century B.C. Writings attributed to an earlier date, and this includes the Homeric epics, Greek tragedy, and the archaic lyric, all show signs of oral composition. One feature of oral performance in particular may offer an explanation of its survival so late into a culture that had access to writing materials. In an oral culture there is a clear distinction between two forms of discourse. The rhythmic, traditional, formulaic performances worthy of being repeated, in some sense preserved and transmitted from generation to generation, are distinguished from all other forms of discourse that are not rhythmic, traditional, and formulaic. These latter utterances are ephemeral and will quickly disappear if they are not put into what, for a lack of a better word, we might call traditional "literary" form. In other words, a distinction is made between a verbal activity which might be called "literature" and verbal activities which are not. They have different forms and hence different statuses in the culture. The great event, then, that takes place when oral culture gives way to literary culture is that the distinction between "literature" and "nonliterature" is lost. A culture and an educational system that is based on books instead of on rhythmic, formulaic, and traditional oral performances is capable of preserving and refining verbal activities of every sort. Such a culture is capable of producing science, philosophy, history, and all the other forms of discourse which in a literate culture we are incapable of distinguishing from literature.

The Homeric epics viewed in this light, that is as the products of an oral culture before the development of nontraditional literary forms, combine a number of aesthetic and intellectual

impulses which in a literary culture tend to seek separate and often antagonistic forms of development. The attack made both by Plato and by the early Greek historians on the “lies” perpetuated by Greek oral tradition illustrate this point. From the epic poems themselves we get some idea of their cultural function. To a surprising extent, for example, the adventures of Odysseus are narrated not directly by Homer but by Odysseus himself and other characters within the story. The description of the blind singer Demodochos in the palace of Alkinoos suggests the formal communal function of heroic song in an aristocratic society. The manners, values, and experiences of a heroic warrior class are combined with history and sacred myth to produce an almost seamless amalgam of narrative impulses.

All fiction attempts to protect itself to some extent from the charge that it tells lies. To do so it advances, or so its defenders claim, either some higher truth that through the veil of its apparent lies can be discovered by the learned adept (generally the way of allegory), or it attempts to represent universal truths, not through particular instances but through typical ones (generally the way of realism). Aristotle is the greatest theoretician in ancient times of this second line of defense. Classical allegories, on the other hand, had no single advocate so distinguished. Theogenes of Rhegium (c. 525 B.C.) is at best only the first of a long, long line.

Aristotle had another tactic for defending fiction against its detractors, an extremely important one. When the poet cannot say something that he knows to be true, he should say things that men have always *thought* to be true. While he gives preference to universal truths derived from the representation of typical and plausible characters and events, he does allow for the perpetuation of tradition, even in a literary culture. This Aristotelian license permits traditional stories a place in literary epic, no matter how implausible they may be. The sanction was buttressed by the Greek allegorists and later by the traditions of Pauline typology as reflected in Books 11 and 12 of *Paradise Lost*. Virgil, who as far as influences on Milton go, is a great deal more significant than Homer, was the beneficiary of a combination of strategies such as these, which allowed him to perpetuate the mythological and legendary features of epic, while at the same time focusing on moral and psychological experience far more complex than anything to be found in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.

Erich Auerbach (1953) has done full justice to the surface

realism of the Homeric epics.² In comparing the episode of the scar of Odysseus to the scriptural story of the sacrifice of Isaac, he may have been reading the Old Testament through somewhat anachronistic Pauline glasses. But his point about the *Odyssey* is a good one; the lives of the characters are out in the open for us to see. Even the interior monologs are not an attempt to represent inarticulate spiritual or psychological experience. The great scenes are communal, either public or domestic, as are the great themes. The worlds of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are in this sense like Adam's world in Eden. Sign and signified are much the same thing. The literal level of the poem, or, by extension, of its fictional world, has not yet "fallen" into a doubtful relationship to a truer meaning. It is not yet a vehicle for some higher tenor. And this is what we miss in all later epics — the society of real men, albeit generals and princes, in all of its rich detail of manners, technology, and policy. There is some of it in the *Aeneid* to be sure, but none at all in Milton.

Virgil is a bridge from Homer to Milton in another respect as well. The narrator of the Homeric epic is not distinguished, even potentially, from the author. I have mentioned the reason I believe this to be true. But in a literary culture, which produces books with title pages, not only are we aware of an author; we also expect him to put his own individual stamp on every feature of his work. A distinction between author and narrator is not just potential; it is actual. In this matter as in so many others, the greatest naturalness conceals the greatest art. Because it is difficult for us to imagine Virgil's doing less to create a narrator as a character separate from the author, we need not consider this a missed opportunity. Almost any characterization of a narrator would bring about the charge leveled by Aristotle against the later Greek epic poets, namely that they talked about themselves rather than imitating the actions of other men. Such developed characterization of a narrator would seem, by epic decorum, to be low, ironic, and a deterrent to the audience's full commitment to the world and the value of the story being told. How, then, could Virgil meet the demand for an authorial identity and yet maintain the diffidence expected of an epic narrator?

The author of a literary epic cannot depend upon the stereotyped response of an oral audience which listens to a familiar traditional sound. Because the events in which he is most interested tend to be the spiritual, moral, and psychological

experiences of his hero, hidden to some degree beneath the surface of the inherited epic trappings, and because by the time he comes to write his epic he has a personal and public authority based on his own literary accomplishments to date, Virgil must be and is able to adopt a self-conscious ethical posture from which to guide his audience's response to essentially ethical situations. This was Virgil's solution, an extremely influential one, since it has been followed by every epic poet since his time, including Milton.

From Virgil the Renaissance epic poets learned, rather than to fashion a created narrator distinct from the creating poet, to speak in their own public voices. The model for doing so comes from an oral tradition of sorts that flourished in both Rome and Renaissance Europe — public oratory. Rather than adopt a character in the fictional sense, the orator adopts a character in the ethical sense, an *ethos* that is suited to his argument and to his audience, one carefully designed to persuade. The idealized *ethos* of the Virgilian narrator provides a model for his audience to follow. When he weeps, feels pity, indignation, or fear, they respond in like fashion. He is a reliable guide through uncharted realms of moral experience, reliable because he does not threaten the fictional integrity of his story by bringing attention to himself, and reliable also because he draws on his public reputation as a poet of proven and superior ability.

Returning briefly to the role of traditional story in literary epic, it is safe to say that Milton took a more rigorous view than did any of his predecessors. He was ambitious to meet Homeric standards, a complete reconciliation, amalgamation, and harmony of tradition and truth. An historical setting had since Homer's time been an epic necessity; but the fracturing of the Homeric amalgam of myth and history in subsequent Greek culture meant that the modern epic poet had to choose between intellectually valid history on one hand and what could be best be called only legend on the other. From Virgil onward most epic poets have opted for legend; all of the really successful ones have, except for Milton. In planning an epic poem he rejected the legends of Arthur for exactly this reason—they were not true. Instead, he chose the only story that was both traditional *and* true, both mythical *and* historical: the revolt of Satan, the creation of the world, the fall of man, and his redemption by Christ. By choosing the Bible as his source he achieved a coherence of idea and story that no epic poet since Homer had managed.

Milton's ability to solve the problem of belief—can the poet and his audience simultaneously believe in ancient traditional stories and at the same time satisfy new canons of moral, philosophical, and historical truth?—was owing to the accomplishment of that whole cultural movement we call Christian Humanism. Its Christian elements rest on the achievements of Paul and Augustine in the understanding of scripture so as to preserve an amalgam of historical, moral, and philosophical truth.³ Because Milton based his epic on scriptural tradition, he moved even closer than Virgil did toward the solution of that other problem that confronts any epic poet who aspires to the cultural importance of a Homer. He comes closer than any other writer of literary epic to being a singer or performer, rather than an author. The intellectual grandeur and complexity of Milton's poem are immense. In English narrative poetry his aesthetic achievement is rivaled only by Chaucer and Spenser. And yet Milton did not, and could not, take credit for his traditional story in quite the same sense that most literary authors are entitled to. He pretends, in the conventional way, to be divinely inspired, as did Homer. Whether, like the Homeric singers, he composed his mighty song through the intellectual and aesthetic mastery of a great tradition or, as he may himself have believed, through a process more akin to divine inspiration and prophecy, his authorial role in the poem is more nearly limited than in other literary epics to the disposition of materials and the telling of the story rather than the invention of its matter.

What it really meant, then, for Milton to imitate Homer was to tell a traditional heroic story, familiar to his audience, in such a way as to conform to the philosophical and historical truths of his time. That he was able even to attempt such an accomplishment is a tribute to the coherence of the cultural tradition to which he and his fit audience belonged. Furthermore, however, he had to find some place for himself in the poem that would neither detract from its traditional character nor obscure the fact that its great intellectual and artistic achievements were uniquely his own. That he felt compelled to make a thing “unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” he states explicitly, and yet, as Samuel Johnson remarked, he disappointed later canons of taste by repeating matter too familiar to please. I hope I have shown some reason for believing that Milton intended to do exactly what Johnson blamed him for.

What then *was* new about *Paradise Lost*, that had as yet

been unattempted? Of many answers to the question I might begin with the remarkable extent to which he succeeded in bringing to his poem a cultural and intellectual richness that is everywhere related to his central theme, a modern (that is, seventeenth-century) human understanding of Christian myth, a justification of the ways of God to man. This cultural richness I have already attributed to Milton's humanistic education. It includes not only the traditional story of scripture and classical antiquity, but the theology, astronomy, natural history, and other forms of learning that in literate cultures tend to go their separate ways. One aspect of this Miltonic synthesis from which I have chosen to view his narrative art is its harmony of time. Let me return to the text for an example. In describing Adam's shame after his amorous play with Eve and subsequent restless sleep, Milton writes:

To guilty shame he covered, but his robe
 Uncovered more, so rose the Danite strong
 Herculean Sampson from the harlot-lap
 Of Philistine Dalilah, and waked
 Shorn of his strength. (9.1058-62)

Adam wants to hide, to "live savage, in some glade obscured" and proposes that they

. . . devise
 What best may for the present serve to hide
 The parts of each from other, that seem most
 To shame obnoxious, and unseemliest seen,
 Some tree whose broad smooth leaves together sewed,
 And girded on our loins, may cover round
 Those middle parts. (9.1091-97)

In the woods

. . . they chose
 The fig-tree, not that kind for fruit renowned,
 But such as at this day to Indians known
 In Malabar or Decan spreads her arms
 Branching so broad and long, that in the ground
 The bended twigs take root, and daughters grow
 About the mother tree, a pillard shade
 High overarched, and echoing walks between;
 There oft the Indian herdsman shunning heat
 Shelters in cool, and tends his pasturing herds

At loop-holes cut through thickest shade: those leaves
 They gathered, broad as Amazonian targe,
 And with what skill they had, together sewed,
 To gird their waist, vain covering if to hide
 Their guilt and dreaded shame; O how unlike
 To that first naked glory. Such of late
 Columbus found the American so girt
 With feathered cincture, naked else and wild
 Among the trees on isles and woody shores.
 (9.1100-18)

Leaving aside the psychological response to guilt and shame, the range of reference here is remarkable and all remarkably appropriate. Hercules and Sampson are conflated from their separate cultures as types of Adam. The fig-leaf of scripture is preserved but explicitly related to the tree that “at this day” (that is, August 1667) bends down to hide the primitive Indian, in contrast to the upright tree and innocent unfallen Adam. The leaves themselves are compared to the shields of the Amazon warriors in classical legend, to suggest the hostility of the sexes resulting from the fall. The finished garments are contrasted, in the kind of narrator’s guiding aside to which I referred earlier, with the naked glory of the newly created Adam and Eve. Then back again to modern times and the savage Americans discovered by Columbus. In commenting on the catalog of fallen angels, I mentioned that the poem’s plot moves with glacial slowness. Like a glacier it inches forward along a huge front. But the telling of the story synthesizes a new poetic and intellectual whole out of the cultural and historical materials whose very vastness and diversity and hidden significance are themselves a consequence of the fall.

Reading the poem, therefore, mitigates for us the consequences of the fall, as the cloudy metaphoric relationships between signs and their significance are made intelligible, with something like a prelapsarian clarity. Reminded continuously of our place in history and of its temporal relationships to other times and other cultures, the reader is nevertheless afforded a vision which reconciles human with sacred time, the *aeuum* of medieval philosophy.

The role of the poet in this is that of a Christian visionary whose imagination experiences simultaneously both historical time and a divine spirit in which all times are one. If his vision lifts us up to Heaven, it also brings Heaven down to earth. Nowhere else that I know of is the story of the fall told with real human

characters as they are understood by modern man. Nor is such great human love in any earlier version of the story celebrated as both the chief joy of man's unfallen condition and also the reason for Adam's fall. Eve in earlier versions of the story is at best only half of man. Here she is a whole human being, without whose company Adam cannot imagine himself happy. Adam's action in following Eve to death is analogous to Christ's. It is an entirely understandable human gesture which leads us to a greater understanding of the Son's divine love. Because on this human level the poem still appeals to us—it is a form of “science fiction” in which normal human beings are put in a context we have never experienced—the reader's imaginative experience constitutes the last level of time. “Yes, that is how *I* might feel in similar circumstances,” we say, “it rings true, no matter how long ago it may have happened.”

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Notes

¹Citations of *Paradise Lost* are made to Fowler 1971.

²By “surface” realism I refer to Auerbach's point that nothing of significance in Homer is to be inferred from some “deeper,” implied, “inner” experience of the characters. Even events long in the past, such as the wound that left Odysseus' scar, are brought to the center of a continuous narrative present. It is tempting, of course, to associate this feature of Homeric narrative with what Father Ong and others have observed of the “primary oral mentality” in general, that it exists only in the present, unable to distinguish stages of the past from a generalized ideal. I am indebted for this suggestion to Thomas J. Farrell.

³For a comprehensive description of the synthesis of pagan and Christian ideas and imagery in the literature of the Renaissance, see Allen 1970:espec. pp. 289-96 on Milton.

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