

[PDF] Paradise Lost

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Author: John Milton

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Description:

About the Author John Milton was one of the greatest English poets. He was also a great prose writer, historian, and pamphleteer. As innovative in politics as in literature, Milton's works have influenced generations of readers and exerted particular influence over the authors of the Romantic Movement. The epic poem "Paradise Lost," in which he sets out to "justify the ways of God to man," is his masterpiece. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. From David Hawkes's Introduction to *Paradise Lost*

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 recognizably 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 quandry: “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 then 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 characters 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.

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