Surprised by Sin

The Reader in *Paradise Lost*

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resignation, of his willingness to forgo action until God calls him to action, of his faith, which dissolves the Gordian knot of Satan's riddle. As he continues to 'await the fulfilling' (II. 108) he does not know, any more than Samson knows, how the situation will resolve itself. But he knows that God knows, and this knowledge which is not knowledge through reason, but through faith, is his stay against the illusion, however compelling, of remedilessness.

What, then, ought Adam to have done? Any number of things, all of which, admittedly, would seem forced and 'unnatural' in comparison to what he does do. He might have said to Eve, 'what you say is persuasive (impregn'd with reason to my seeming), but I would rather not make such a momentous decision without further reflection.' Or, as Lewis suggested, he might have 'chastised Eve and then interceded with God on her behalf'.[1] The second course of action recommends itself particularly because it would accord with everything Adam knows about God. 'Whatever was to be risked', Irene Samuel explains, 'demanded only Adam's faith that the benevolence he had always known would remain benevolent . . . Eve was not irredeemably lost, as Adam at once concluded in his immediate assumption of a hostile universe.'[2] (Nor does this necessarily involve believing that God has lied when he promulgated his absolute decree, for it is not inconceivable that the Almighty should find a way both to fulfil justice and to show mercy.) Christ, continues Miss Samuel, offers himself as a sacrifice confidently, declaring 'I shall rise Victorious', not because he foreknows his resurrection, but because he trusts in 'the

[1] *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 123.

[2] 'The Dialogue in Heaven: A Reconsideration of *Paradise Lost*, III, 1–417', *PMLA*, lxxii (1957), 601–11, reprinted in *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arthur E. Barker (New York, 1965), p. 243.

omnipotence and perfect benevolence of the Father'. 'Adam . . . might, like the Son, have risked himself to redeem Eve.'[1] Of course Adam does not know anything of Christ, but as an analogue which argues for the 'possibility . . . for every being' of 'the trust that confronts and by confronting changes',[2] the example of Christ is pertinent, as is the more available example of the good angels, who stand their ground although circumstances and appearances would seem to dictate otherwise. This is surely the moral Adam draws from Raphael's narrative: obedience founded on a base of boundless trust which is proof against the evidence of sense or reason. It is a moral he could have remembered and acted on, and on that basis we must judge him.

To this Empson would reply, 'The poem somehow does not encourage us to think of an alternative plan',[3] and Milton would say in return: true, the poem does not encourage you to think of an alternative plan, just as the situation (as it seems to be) does not encourage Adam to think of an alternative plan; but I require you to think of one yourself, drawing encouragement from an inner resource which prevails against the claims of a dramatically persuasive moment, even if the moment is one I have provided; and God requires the same of Adam. The inner resource is, of course, faith, which is what remains to Adam and the reader (and to Eve) when circumstances and their own intelligences misinform them. Faith supplies the strength of will that enables us to recall the simplicity and inclusiveness of the moral issue — God or not God — in the face of the more immediate claims of subordinate and, in some sense, illusory, issues. (A leap of faith is always a refusal to accede to what, at the moment, seems remediless.) Here is the ultimate 'responsive choice', where the spiritual ideal, to which the reader's faculties should be answerable, is absent, and must be supplied by his

[1] Ibid., p. 242. [2] Ibid., p. 243. [3] *Milton's God*, p. 189.

own sense of what is real and truly beautiful. Again the poet is silent, except for the mild and muted disapproval of 'fondly overcome with Female charm', leaving us 'to decide, in terms of [our] response to the controlled mimetic movement, what is happening and is meant'. With Adam we may decide to believe in the appearances which flatter our desires (choosing Adam, we choose ourselves, or at least our baser selves) or we may insist that he cling with us to the dazzling clarity of the divine word and see things truly. The relevance of our decision to Milton's great purpose can be seen in the fact that, while in the analogues (*Jerusalem Delivered* and *The Aeneid*) and in his other poems, we are asked to measure our response against that of the hero, in *Paradise Lost* we are asked to condemn the hero's response, and, moreover, to condemn it because, at the moment of crisis, he is too much like ourselves. John Peter says as much: 'only by inverting our own natures and values can we even begin to reproach him.'[1] But the inversion of our natures is exactly what the poem hopes to achieve by bringing us to put off the Old Adam — the body of sin, the conformity to the world, the inborn tendency to evil — and to put on the New. Here, in Book IX, looking in fact on the Old Adam and having to judge him, we are given that (interpretative) choice, and, as before, our response measures us.

This is the terminal point of the reader's education, the trial to which he will be adequate only if he has succeeded in recovering the vision Adam now proceeds to shatter. The specific act he is asked to perform is literary, simply the determination of meaning; but by deciding, as he has had to decide before, exactly what the poem means, he decides between the philosophical and moral alternatives mirrored in the interpretative possibilities (Adam is right, Adam is wrong), and in this instance these possibilities embrace the

[1] *A Critique of Paradise Lost*, p. 131.

full range of contraries whose differentiation has been his concern in the body of the poem — true and false heroism, true love and love of self, freedom and licence, in sum, union with divinity and therefore with everything of value, or thraldom to the false values created by a distorting perspective. In short, if the reader has applied himself assiduously to the lessons the poem would teach him, and so effected the purging of his intellectual ray, the superficial appeal of Adam's gesture will be neutralized by his understanding of what it means — a transgression of the whole law and therefore of those obligations in whose name the sin is committed; but if, on the other hand, he has been slack and inattentive, and so failed to penetrate 'far below the surface' to the truth Milton encloses in his knotty riddle, the Fall will appear to him in one or all of the guises discoverable to a still-unregenerate reason. Not that the poem is finally ambiguous, at least as a moral statement; rather, its readers are ambiguous, and their ambiguities (crookednesses) are reflected in the interpretations they arrive at. There is, however, only one true interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, and it is the reward of those readers who have entered into the spirit of Milton's 'good temptation' and so 'become wiser by experience': others 'sport in the shade' with half-truths and self-serving equivocations and end by accusing God or by writing volumes to expose the illogic of His ways.

(v) DEXT'ROUSLY THOU AIM'ST

While Adam and Eve fail us as models in Book IX, accepting the promptings of carnal reason before the law of God, after the Fall they do perform truly heroic actions. Left to his own devices when Christ re-ascends to join the Father,