

Lecture 25: The Fortunate Fall

We experience Milton's epic as both an open-ended PROCESS of CHOOSING—a world of choices whose outcome is undetermined (Is Satan the hero of the poem?) — and as a closed STRUCTURE that finally balances falling and rising, loss and restoration.

That is the idea of THE FORTUNATE FALL: both a formal STRUCTURE (& theological abstraction) and a PROCESS, a psychological experience of freedom.

What is the theological doctrine?

What is the fortunate fall as a psychological experience?

Here is a way of thinking about the STRUCTURE: CHART



Here is how we begin to experience the poem as a PROCESS of loss and recovery, a series of CHOICES:

Of Man's first disobedience, and the **fruit**
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With **loss** of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat, 5

one greater Man: the second Adam; i.e., Jesus the
Messiah, Son of God. He is both greater than Adam and
greater than any Man (Heb. ha'adam) because also God.

Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That Shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos: or, if Sion hill 10
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That **with no middle flight intends to soar**
Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues 15
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

Who was *That Shepherd* (8)? What is odd about the relation between him and the *Heavenly Muse* (6)?

Notice the patterning: *Of Oreb, or of Sinai* (7) and *or . . . Sion hill . . . and Siloa's brook . . . the oracle of God.*

(10-12) There is also an implicit choice between those high places and *th' Aonian mount* (15)?

What is *th' Aonian mount*?

What is the bard saying when he expresses an intention to soar *Above th' Aonian mount*?

In this passage we are offered several pseudo-choices, both within the world of the Bible (Moses vs. the prophets of Siloa) and between biblical and classical (Aonian) modes of inspiration. Milton is always offering the reader choices, and they may be critical. But some times what looks like either/or turns out to be both/and. And so the biblical Holy Spirit to whom the poet prays is **also** the Muse of classical heroic poetry—even though she turns out later to be “an empty dream” (7.39). Go figure.

The blind singer continues:

And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread, 20
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss,
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, **what is low raise and support;**
That, to the height of this great argument,
I may assert Eternal Providence, 25
And **justify the ways of God to men.**

What is the problem that the poet seeks to resolve? Why does God need to be justified? Can God be justified?

The poet goes on to ask about first causes:

Say first—for Heaven hides nothing from thy view,
Nor the deep tract of Hell—say first **what cause**
Moved our grand parents, in that happy state,
Favored of Heaven so highly, to fall off 30
From their Creator, and transgress his will
For one restraint, lords of the World besides.
Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?

Everyone knows the answer to that question (sort of),
so then the poet asks **Why?**

Th' infernal Serpent; he it was whose guile,
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived 35
The mother of mankind, what time his **pride**
Had cast him out from Heaven, with all his host
Of rebel Angels, by whose aid, **aspiring**
To set himself in glory above his peers . . .

**But who tempted the Arch Enemy of God?
Who first seduced **him** to that foul revolt?**

In Book 3, we are told that Satan and his legions were
“self-tempted, self-depraved” (3.130).

Perhaps. But they were, to say the least, provoked:

Here is the first occurrence in the poem,
the moment from which everything follows:

Book V

Hear all ye angels, progeny of Light, . . . 600
Hear my decree, which unrevoked shall stand.
This day I have begot whom I declare
My only Son, and on this holy hill
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold 605
At my right hand; **your head I him appoint;**
And by my Self have sworn **to him shall bow**
All knees in heav'n, and shall confess him Lord:
Under his great vicegerent reign abide
United as one individual soul 610
Forever happy: him who disobeys
Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day
Cast out from God and blessed vision, **falls**
Into utter darkness, deep engulfed, his place
Ordained without redemption, without end. 615

Juxtaposing God's omnipotence and Satan's impotence presents us with a choice: Whose side are we on? The answer is not as obvious as it may seem. For orthodox Christians, the question may seem pointless. But the orthodox do not need to **justify** God. If there were no point to the question, "Whose side?", there would be no need to justify God's ways, nothing to question. Some people believe that the Deity imagined by orthodox creeds cannot be justified.

Here is what the Romantic poet Percy Shelly, thought:

Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system [viz., orthodox Christianity] of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support. Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in Paradise Lost. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil. Implacable hate, patient cunning, and a sleepless refinement of device to inflict the extremest anguish on an enemy, these things are evil; and although venial in a slave are not to be forgiven in a tyrant; although [they are] redeemed by much that ennobles his defeat in one subdued, [they] are marked by all that dishonors his conquest in the victor. Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spirit of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy—not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent . . . but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments. [1

Here is how things look from SATAN'S POINT OF VIEW:

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime . . .

That we must change for Heaven?—this mournful gloom

For that celestial light? Be it so! . . . 245

. . . farthest from him is best

Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme

Above his equals. Farewell, happy fields,

Where joy for ever dwells! Hail, horrors! hail, 250

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. 255

Is the mind really its own place? Stoicism or solipsism?

What matter where, if I be still the same,

. . . Here at least / We shall be free; . . . 260

Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice, . . .

Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

Next, we'll look at things from GOD'S POINT OF VIEW.

NOTES

1] Shelly, *The Defence of Poetry* (1821); *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Modern Library, 1951), 512.