

## Lecture 29: A Paradise Within

According to Milton (and orthodox Christians in general) human beings (and some other creatures) are, by definition, fallen—fallen, that is, from a state of blissful innocence into a world of sin, and death. Here is Milton's assessment of the fallen human condition:

So shall the world go on,

To good malignant, to bad men benign. (12.537-38)

The promise with which *Paradise Lost* begins is that we may one day recover from that fallen condition:

one greater Man [will]

Restore us, and regain the blissful seat. (1.4-5)

For some humans, at least, the Fall will someday be Fortunate.

That formula raises an obvious question, to which the poem offers a variety of answers:

Here's one version of the question:  
What do we do in the meantime?

Satan offers one possible answer,  
his version of the Fortunate Fall:

From this descent  
Celestial Virtues rising, will appear  
More glorious and more dread than from no fall.  
(2.14-16)

This affirmation is based on the proposition that it is  
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven (1.263)  
and ultimately that:

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.  
(1.254-55)

Mammon has a practical scheme for achieving this vision:

Let us . . . seek  
Our own good from ourselves, and from our own  
Live to ourselves, though in this vast recess,  
Free and to none accountable, preferring  
Hard liberty before the easy yoke  
Of servile pomp. Our greatness will appear  
Then most conspicuous when great things of small,  
Useful of hurtful, prosperous of adverse,  
We can create, and in what place soe'er  
Thrive under evil, and work ease out of pain  
Through labour and endurance. (2.249, 252-62)

That seems to me like a morally responsible way to realize Satan's ambition of reigning in Hell: fallen beings can frustrate God's malignant purpose by triumphing over a hostile environment, effectively rejecting God's rejection of them, recreating light out of darkness.

### What's wrong with that project?

Satan has a larger aim in view, an active subversion of God's plan rather than a mere passive rejection:

If then [God's] providence  
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,  
Our labor must be to pervert that end,  
And out of good still to find means of evil. (1.162-65)

This scheme leads to *all our woe* (1.3),  
and it leads Satan to discover the emptiness  
of his claim that he can make *a heav'n of hell* (1.255):

for within him Hell  
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell  
One step, no more than from himself, can fly  
By change of place. (4.20-23)

Satan is thus driven to an agonized confession:  
Me miserable! which way shall I fly  
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?  
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;  
And, in the lowest deep, a lower deep  
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,  
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven. (73-78)

Although human beings may often find ourselves in like case, the poem does offer an alternative vision of human possibility; as God affirms in Book III:

*The first sort* [that is, Satan and his followers]  
by their own suggestion fell,  
Self-tempted, self-deprav'd: Man falls deceiv'd  
By the other first: Man therefore shall find grace.  
(3.129-31)

This grace will accomplish salvation for those who choose to receive it:  
[God] will clear their senses dark,  
What may suffice, and soften stony hearts  
To pray, repent, and bring obedience due. (188-90)

In these terms, the poem appears to offer a clear choice between faithless, Satanic rebellion against ultimate reality and faithful obedience to the Word of God. Stated in those terms, and given the consequences, the choice looks like a no-brainer. Only an idiot would choose *to reign in Hell*.

On closer examination, however, the choice may not seem quite so clear cut. Suppose Shelley was right?

It is a mistake to suppose that [Satan] 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 spite 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.

Suppose Satan's claim on our allegiance, however "venial," is morally more compelling than slavish obedience to God's brutal and arbitrary despotism? The choice between eternal torment and slavish obedience to a tyrant does not look like much of a choice.

The poem does offer other ways of looking at things, in terms of *rational* obedience to the way things are. Here is Adam's response to the Good News of Christ's redemptive sacrifice:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!  
That all this good of evil shall produce  
And evil turn to good; more wonderful  
Than that which by creation first brought forth  
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice  
Much more, that much more good  
                                thereof shall spring,  
To God more glory, more good will to men  
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound.  
(12.469-78)

That rapturous affirmation of the Fortunate Fall is a profound expression of Adam's new-found faith. But that faith is immediately complicated by a question:

But say, if our Deliverer up to Heaven  
Must re-ascend, what will betide the few  
His faithful, left among the unfaithful herd,  
The enemies of truth? (12.479-82)

Michael's answer—*Just so*—brings us back to our  
original assessment of the fallen human condition:  
So shall the world go on,  
To good malignant, to bad men benign  
(12.537-38)

and to the question with which we began.  
Some may ultimately be saved; there will come a day  
of respiration to the just,

And vengeance to the wicked, at return  
Of him so lately promised to thy aid,  
The Woman's Seed; . . . he will dissolve  
Satan with his perverted world; then raise  
From the conflagrant mass, purged and refined,  
New Heavens, new Earth, ages of endless date,  
Founded in righteousness, and peace, and love;  
To bring forth fruits, joy and eternal bliss.

(540-42, 546-51)

But that brings us back to the first question:

## What do we do in the meantime?

Here is Adam's officially sanctioned response to the "interim" problem of evil and suffering:

Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,  
And love with fear the only God; to walk  
As in his presence; ever to observe  
His providence; and on him sole depend,  
Merciful over all his works, with good  
Still overcoming evil, and by small  
Accomplishing great things. (561-67)

Michael approves of this resolution, with a proviso and a promise:

This having learnt, thou hast attained the sum  
Of wisdom; hope no higher, . . . only add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith,  
Add virtue, patience, temperance; add love,  
By name to come called charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loth  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
A Paradise within thee, happier far.  
(575-76, 581-87)



The proviso is huge—*only add*—and the promise is uncertain: How is a Paradise *within* happier than the Paradise of Eden that Adam and Eve had enjoyed before they fell?

Ultimately, the idea of the Fortunate Fall is a question rather than an answer. There are many possible ways of thinking about that question. Here's how I see it:

The first man and first woman were not quite “human” before they “fell.” Humans “naturally” cherish what we believe we have earned; we find it hard to value what has merely been given to us.

As fallen creatures, we are given a chance to participate in the dynamic of God's Providence by working actively to transform evil into good.

Perhaps even more crucially: as I said last week, everything depends on our freedom: our ability to choose. In my opinion, we are not really free until we have tasted and tested the limits of that freedom. That is the note of very limited optimism on which the poem ends: “The world was all before them, where to choose” (646).

## NOTES

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