

Transcending Cultural Barriers : An Approach to *Paradise Lost*

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This is a paper of exploration: after presenting my experience of teaching *Paradise Lost* to graduate majors in English I hope I get some interesting and illuminating feedbacks. *Paradise Lost* is the kind of work that does not fail to generate a wide variety of responses.

However, let me begin by relating three anecdotes, two of which are directly relevant to my topic and the third is not far off the track. Some years ago at the beginning of term, one of my female students (I deliberately refer to gender for reasons that will be clear later) had great scruples about reading this religiously charged epic. How could she bring herself to read and interpret a work in which God, Christ and angels appear, talk and argue? How could God, the Almighty, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient and Omnipresent be brought before us upon the stage to speak, to argue and, of all matters, defend his wisdom? To her this is totally sacrilegious, in fact tantamount to blasphemy. She was about to leave the course, perhaps even drop out. With great difficulty I was able to convince her to continue.

The second anecdote concerns an official visit I made to a number of British universities. In one of the meetings the conversation with a colleague at Leeds took us to *Paradise Lost*, when to my surprise he

confessed the difficulties he had in motivating his British students to be interested in Milton's masterpiece. He, for his turn, was incredulous when I revealed that I have less difficulty in motivating my students to study the poem.

Finally, in a course dealing with world literature, one of my undergraduate students begged to be relieved from studying Gabriel Garcia Marquez' short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" because it deals with a figure suspected to be an angel in a dreary condition. For him it is irreverent to characterize angels in this way. I assigned him another more mundane story as a substitute.

When I began teaching *Paradise Lost* I was under no illusion that it was to be smooth sailing. It is true that we teach it to graduate students in the preliminary year, yet our graduates have not experienced such a work in terms of length, complexity and density of cultural barriers. As a matter of fact, very few of them have had experienced a poem of some length and richness even in their own literature (the *almu'allaquat* for instance). I do not want to enter here into the controversy of why we teach such a work or even English literature for that matter.

One thing is clear, however, and that is the difficulty of *Paradise Lost* even for native speakers who are closer to Milton in terms of language and cultural orientation. A teacher in an American university complains of the hurdles he faces in teaching *Paradise Lost*. His students, he says, "come to *Paradise Lost* lacking virtually all the extensive historical, literary, mythological and theological information necessary to a thorough or even partial understanding of the poem." (*Approaches*, p.54) Another teacher at another American institution, this time the United States Naval Academy, after admitting the affinities between the concepts prevalent in this school and the Miltonic concepts of religion, discipline, obedience, and freedom, says that "*Paradise Lost* is hard to teach well, even here." A little later he introduces his attempt to characterize what makes the poem a challenge to all 20th Century readers, that is, American readers, by the following succinct statement: "*Paradise Lost* is, especially today, an intractable poem. It does not bend easily to adapt itself to currently

popular notions about morality, politics, religion, or love. It stubbornly asserts its large ideas and its grand style in the face of the generally parochial predispositions and prejudices of modern readers.” (*Approaches*, p.60) This reminds us of the anecdote of the British teacher and his recalcitrant students.

As for the dilemma of the muslim reader vis-à-vis *Paradise lost*, Dahiyat (1987) says that “ it is a challenge to unravel the web of Milton’s intricate theological world and his elaborate patterns of thought and frame of reference.” And that this task for an Arab and a Muslim “is complicated further by significant differences in culture, beliefs and approach to Man’s first disobedience and its subsequent consequences ” (p.7). Even an Arabic poem that has supposedly been influenced by *Paradise Lost* seems for Hamdi al-Sakkut (1990) “strange to Arab ear,” and that when he read al-Aqqad’s poem “Biography of a Satan” for the first time and reached the place where Satan enveys God and declares his ambition for godhead (which is central to the poem as a whole), he could not swallow this misrepresentation of Satan’s character, until he found out that al-Aqqad was, in this, indebted to Milton’s arch devil.

Then, apart from language, length and richness, the greatest hurdle that my students, and most likely the majority of Arab Muslim students, face in approaching *Paradise Lost* is the question of belief. The problem here does not concern the belief in the framework story of the creation of Adam and Eve, their temptation by Satan to eat from the forbidden tree, their disobedience and their final descent from Paradise. These main events, we know, are narrated almost identically in the *Bible* and the *Qur’an*. Here in our part of the world, the student, be he muslim or christian, has obviously an advantage over the non-believer. I do not have to explain to my students, as another American teacher has to do, that “for a society accepting the *Bible* as the ultimate authority, it was easier to believe that the human race originated with Adam and Eve than it is for our own society to believe that the human race originated from a globule of protoplasm. As shown by geological charts (like those in early editions of the Authorized Version), it was natural to believe that Adam and Eve

were just distant grandparents. “(*Approaches*, p.69) Therefore, lack of motivation is not a problem with my students. If anything I often find them too eager to discuss the religious aspects of the poem at the expense of the imaginative and the aesthetic. But more of this a little later.

The problem is Milton’s artistry, his successful dramatic anthropomorphism motivated by his intellectually legal fairness, to present the unrepresentable, making it seem real. Consequently, an unbearable tension is created between the religious experience and the aesthetic experience of the poem. This tension is felt even by native speakers in the West: “Sensitive students. I find, are not fooled by efforts to make the poem an innocuous artifact in the genteel museum of English literary history” (*Approaches* p. 60).

One way out may be to “split apart the imaginative poetic experience and the didactic aims of the poet” (*Approaches*, p.60), a solution that seems “facile” to David Daiches (1985 : 208). For me it is the only way out. My students are not sophisticated enough to be able to follow Daiches’ recommendation, especially his second point: “So far as university teaching goes, I would say that the teacher’s responsibility is firstly to see that his students are in possession of the relevant knowledge to enable them to read the text properly, and secondly to demonstrate as sensitively as he can the way the poem’s meaning reaches out to create its own complex of meaning and emotion that both make contact with our experience and transcends it” (p.216).

Naturally, one begins a course in Milton, or any other foreign creative writer, by putting him in his historical context, intellectually, politically, and religiously. In my course, most of this is done by students themselves, reading the necessary reference material, with some guidance from the initial two lectures.

Then with a standard edition of Milton’s works (either Merritt Hughes or Douglas Bush’s, preferably the first) we start reading a selection of short pieces like “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity”, and Sonnets XIX to XXIII. Then we go to *Lycidas*, *Comus* and some passages from his prose

treatise *Areopagitica*, especially the ones beginning with the famous statement: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed." We read these pieces partly for themselves as manifestations of Milton's poetic art and his position in the development of English conventions and genres, but also as exercises on the long road towards writing his masterpiece. Simultaneously, the students are asked to read *Paradise Lost* at first on their own, reading it as fast as they can, without necessarily stopping at every word or every line, to get the feel of the verse, its rhythm and syntax, and be acquainted with the structure of the poem so that they have a good grounding when we come to read it in more depth.

Here I guard against the kind of objection voiced by that student who was about to drop out, by stressing the platitude of the fictionality of the poem, being a work of art, and that its characters have the same status of those in pagan mythology. I have devised this strategy even before coming across Daiches view that Greek poetry is less demanding than Christian literature in terms of the necessity to believe (p.213). As I said before, this is not particularly my problem. What is important here is that my strategy usually works. This way I was able to convince that scrupulous student to continue in the program.

Some of the pieces are read with an eye on *Paradise Lost* as I have just said. For instance, Sonnet XIX "On His Blindness" is interpreted in the context of the apostrophe to light in Book III of *Paradise Lost*; Comus valiant and highly rhetorical speech to tempt the lady to drink from his cup is studied as a preparation for the no less rhetorical and more convincing temptation of Eve in Book 9. The highly sensuous description of the multi-colored flowers that are "hither cast" (134) to decorate "the Laureate Hearse" of Lycidas look forward to the scene of lush tropical richness of Eden (IV,241-285) seen for the first time by Satan, perched on the Tree of Life (1.194). Moloch, the sullem pagan god who flies away terrified at the news of the birth of Christ in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", stanza 23, will be developed into Moloch the "Scepter'd King"

in *Paradise Lost* (II,43-105), advocating war against God in the Council Scene.

The parts of *Paradise Lost* that capture the students imagination are those in which Milton's dramatic ability is most effectively manifested. Like almost all readers of this epic, the first two books, especially the Council scene in Book 2, prove to be genuinely interesting to them. Here they see Satan in his full glory, in his miraculously built Pandemonium, at the head of his innumerable followers, debating what to do to have revenge on their arch enemy and regain their blissful seat in Heaven. This is totally a new and rich experience to them. They respond and usually argue about the relative importance of the different characters. They are fascinated by Satan's ingenuity and shrewd leadership, but they do not sympathize. They are not in danger of turning "satanists", in Marjorie Nicolson's meaning of the term (p.186).

By contrast, the scenes in Heaven, whether those in which God and Christ come on the stage(Book 3), or those in which God's words and actions are reported (Books 5-8), do not generally arouse real interest in my students. Although, by this time, I expect them to feel more relaxed at the dicussion of any aspect of the poem, many of them are reticent, probably unconsciously fearing a trespass on dangerous grounds, that is, when it comes to the roles of God, Christ and the angels. Daiches again is right here: "of course there are intrusive moments in some works in literature where the reader simply recoils and is unable to move beyond to the total pattern of meaning because of his hostility to some specific attitude or belief revealed explicitly by the writer" (p.213).

However, the most fascinating scenes are the ones that involve Satan and the human pair. Again, Adam and Eve in their prelapsarian state are not as fascinating as they are in the post-lapsarian state, as it is the case with most readers, because in the pre-lapsarian state they are superhuman, ideal creatures whose way of life cannot be comprehended by humans. Nevertheless, my students believe in the

existence of that state, in fact all adherents of revealed religions share this belief.

The irony is that whatever significance these pre-lapsarian scenes may generate comes only through their reflection in Satan's soliloquies (IV,358-392,505-535;IX,473-493). Here comes the good opportunity to compare Milton's dramatic soliloquies with the famous Shakespearean soliloquies, especially those of satanic figures like Iago. The students are usually delighted to discover the generic link in the tradition. But the links are not related to the past only : those Miltonic soliloquies can look forward to some important Victorian dramatic monologues like "Andrea del Sarto" , and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" by Robert Browning.

Books 9 and 10 are the climax of the poem structurally, thematically and humanly. They constitute the crisis and its aftermath. This is where Adam and Eve commit the sin and are consequently humanized. Once they are human the students respond with multifaceted reaction: they argue, lay the blame, sympathize, defend a position, weigh evidence, sometimes even passionately take matters to heart. Adam and Eve now are just ordinary human beings, having the weaknesses and the strengths of fallen humanity.

Who is to blame for the fall, Adam or Eve? This is the most crucial and most controversial issue in the poem. This is where the real lively discussions in class take place, most of the time with as little of my intervention as possible. My female students are usually more excited, and they put in more fertile effort than their male counterparts. I cannot speculate whether this would still be the case had we have a coeducational system. One thing is clear, however, and that is my female students take the issues raised by these two books more seriously than the male students.

All shades of the spectrum are represented, from the most liberal to the most conservative. But I have not detected, among the liberals, any consistent feminist tendencies. And because of the valuable contribution of my female students, I am greatly concerned when I meet a strange, though understandable, case like the one I referred to in the first anecdote.

Finally, in order to keep the students as close as possible to the text of Milton, I do not encourage them at this stage to read critical references lest they should be discouraged by the plethora of interpretive opinions. I am not alone here: the editor of the book *Approaches to Teaching Milton's Paradise Lost*, from which I have quoted before, has this to say:

In confronting these and related difficulties over the years, scholars have sown forests of criticism where fields would have served. Bewildering to the specialist, the mass of scholarship has become virtually impenetrable for the nonspecialist who seeks help in presenting Milton's epic to undergraduates. As often as not the scholar-critic, instead of acting as a guide through the Miltonic landscape, is content to clear a space in which to work a private patch. (p.4)

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