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CHAPTER I

THE POET AND THE THEME

THIRTY YEARS or so ago scholars began to ask a new question about *Paradise Lost*. It was a question that in the long history of Milton criticism had never, really, been asked before. It was a question that would have caused Johnson to raise his eyebrows; and not only Johnson; it would have caused Coleridge and Arnold to raise theirs; it would have surprised Raleigh. The question was: what does Milton *mean* in *Paradise Lost*?

This question was really novel. The poem, of course, had always had its problems, but these in the main had been technical. Even the age-long question, Who is the hero? had been, after all, a technical problem, permitted in the end mercifully to lapse, shelved rather than settled, when at last it had become apparent that each of the four or five possible answers was equally right—or wrong—since each was the answer to a separate question. Dryden thought the Devil was Milton's hero, and we must agree that he was, if we are thinking (with Dryden) in terms of a giant who foils the knight and drives him out of his stronghold. Addison felt that if any person in the poem deserved the name it was the Messiah, 'who is the Hero, both in the Principal action, and in the chief Episodes';[1] and in this too there is a rightness. But it is Adam, as Landor pointed out, 'who acts and suffers most, and on whom the consequences have most influence'.[2] Is he not therefore the main character? In a sense, we see clearly, he is. But again, Adam is Man; his fate is that of all his progeny; should not we say, then, that the true hero

1 *Spectator*, No. 297.
2 *Imaginary Conversations* (Southey and Landor, first conversation).

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of the poem is the Human Race? In a sense, we must. And when M. Saurat, at the end of all, declares that nothing of this is to the point and produces for us the true hero at last—Milton himself—we must admit that in this assertion too, which triumphantly cuts the knot of the whole difficulty, there is a kind of reason. It seems obvious that each of these solutions is the right one—for a certain problem; each is the correct answer to a question, but the questions are not the same.

Neither this problem, however, nor any other was radical. Blake in his rather unhelpful paradox might suggest the presence of unresolved conflicts in Milton's mind, and in doing so point the way to those theories of our own time that find 'unconscious' meanings in the poem somewhat at odds with Milton's conscious intentions; but I doubt whether before the twentieth century it had ever seriously occurred to a reader of *Paradise Lost* to wonder what Milton was driving at. Some readers, indeed, had appeared to find the drift almost a little too clear for their comfort. 'The underlying thoughts are few,' said Bagehot, 'though the flowers on the surface are so many.'[1] Keats hoped that it would not be presuming, even between friends, to say that Milton's philosophy, human and divine, 'may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years'.[2] Plainly the poem had not yet been thought of as in any serious way problematical; it was still felt, and so until recent years continued to be felt, as a poem of quite unmistakable intention, a poem indeed, of rather exceptional clarity of outline, a poem that said what it had to say (even if that was thought by some to be not very much) with superb force and unquestionable point.

We may perhaps take, as representing the best critical opinion at the end of the nineteenth century, Raleigh's witty, suave and penetrating survey. There are no mysteries in

1 *Literary Studies*, ed. R. H. Hutton (1859), vol. 1, p. 205.
2 *Letters*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (1935), p. 144.

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Paradise Lost for Raleigh. He sees, of course, or thinks he sees, all that by the limitations of the theme or by Milton's own limitations of vision is ruled out, all that we must not fairly look for here. Subtle notations of emotion, sudden 'fidelities' to the mixed texture of human experience: these in the main were beside Milton's purpose, as perhaps in any case, Raleigh thinks, beyond his powers. Eve's quick spasm of jealousy at the thought of a successor and supplanter he considers to be about as near an approach to drama in the handling of a human situation as is to be found in all *Paradise Lost*. Indeed it was necessary in such a work to keep humanity at arm's length, to insulate the poem from contact with customary life, and shield it from everyday intimacies of feeling. 'The introduction, in *Paradise Lost*, of a real human child, such as Shakespeare brings into *Coriolanus* or *Macbeth*, would be like the bringing of a spark of fire into a powder magazine.'[1] Raleigh feels nothing more acutely than this carefully preserved isolation, the 'artificial perspectives' that Milton is obliged to maintain to keep the system of his poem intact. Such a work could at no time, 'not even in the most theological of ages', have borne the more searching tests of realism and verisimilitude; all the more wonderful, Raleigh thinks, is the art by which this 'gigantic filamented structure' has been raised into the air. There it stands like some enchanted palace, a monument to the miraculous skill of its maker—just stands, and no more: 'but that it should stand at all is the marvel, seeing that it is spanned on frail arches over the abyss of the impossible, the unnatural, and the grotesque'.[2] It is the precariousness of the achievement that Raleigh intensely feels, the quality of *Paradise Lost* as a sheer feat, a majestic *tour de force*. Taking his 'wildly intractable'[3] material (so Raleigh sees it) Milton reared a structure that by all the laws of poetic engineering should collapse under

1 *Milton* (1900), p. 122. 2 Op. cit. pp. 123–4
3 Ibid. p. 255.

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its own incredible stresses; wonderfully it holds, poised in its perilous equilibrium, an edifice within which one hardly dares whisper for fear of bringing the whole fabric crashing down. *Paradise Lost* does not *say* much to Raleigh, does not speak strongly to his heart. But he recognizes the 'power', the 'vagueness', and the 'grandeur', and can yield himself imaginatively to those. Above all he sees in the work a sublime triumph of craftsmanship, an achievement in which problems that one would have deemed beyond all human solution are yet somehow victoriously solved. Raleigh feels that on the whole they *are* solved, that the superhuman elevation is maintained, that the 'preternaturally majestic diction' accomplishes its object, that the structure, despite the unbelievable stresses, is firm; and he stands back from it and gazes at it with admiration and astonishment and awe.

It is in the second decade, I think, after Raleigh wrote that one begins to notice the first definite signs of a change of attitude. There was now a stirring in Milton criticism. What had absorbed Raleigh was Milton's technical conquest of his problems; it had never struck Raleigh that there could be serious doubt about what Milton was trying to do. But now this question itself is raised. The poem, so transparent (it had always seemed) in aim, now takes on a certain cloudiness; patches in it begin to blur.

In 1917, for example, the late Edwin Greenlaw contributed to *Studies in Philology* an article entitled 'A Better Teacher than Aquinas'. Greenlaw's chief purpose was to investigate the influence of Spenser on Milton. Dryden had declared categorically in the Preface to his *Fables*: 'Milton has acknowledg'd to me that Spenser was his original.' We have, as well, Milton's own testimony at the end of the famous passage in the *Areopagitica* in which he has spoken of the nature of true virtue and how it must stand its test in the world as it is: 'which was the reason why our sage and serious Poet Spenser, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus

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or Aquinas, describing true temperance under the person of Guion, brings him in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon and the bowr of earthly blisse, that he might see and know, and yet abstain.' Greenlaw explores the full significance of these declarations, comparing the book of Guyon with analogous parts of *Paradise Lost*, and reaches the conclusion that Milton is indebted to Spenser for not much less than the central theme of his poem. For, as Greenlaw sees it, the theme of *Paradise Lost* is not quite what Milton said it was—Man's first disobedience and the Fall—or at least is not to be taken as limited by the terms of this opening definition. Underneath is a conception that gives this announced theme its real meaning and point: the conflict in man's soul between the principles of reason and unreason. The struggle itself is exemplified in what Greenlaw feels to be the two interlocking 'adventures' of *Paradise Lost*, the story of Satan and the story of the temptation and fall of Adam. Satan is shown as mastered by one type of intemperance—'unworthy ambition and lust for power'; Adam by another—sensuality. 'The dominating theme of the entire story' is temperance. Thus, Greenlaw insists, the philosophy of *Paradise Lost* is ultimately from Greece, not Genesis. 'Adam fell because the irrational element in his soul, inflamed by a provoking object, triumphed over temperance, not because he disobeyed [as Raleigh had expressed it] a whimsical Tyrant, all of whose laws are arbitrary and occasional, and who exacts from his creatures an obedience that differs from brute submission in one point only, that by the gift of free-will it is put within their power to disobey.'[1] And again, summing up the whole: 'The story of the fall of Adam immediately gains significance and interest if we recognize that the apple is but a symbol, and that Milton's real theme is to show how Adam fell because he did not stand the test of temperance.'[2]

1 *Studies in Philology* (April 1917), vol. XIV, p. 201.
2 Ibid. p. 213.

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I will not stay at this point to comment on Greenlaw's Spenserian thesis. I do not think it can be doubted that he drives his analogies very hard. He finds them in other books of the *Faerie Queene* as well. After the Fall and the quarrel between Adam and Eve 'the analogy between the story of Adam and that of Redcrosse becomes very marked', and Greenlaw traces it point by point. Redcrosse is led astray by Duessa and falls into the hands of Orgoglio; Despair tries to induce him to kill himself; Una saves him; and then, with the arrival of Arthur, comes 'a period of purgation and training in preparation for salvation'—the sojourn in the house of Cœlia. 'All these steps', Greenlaw thinks, 'are followed by Milton.'[1] This, surely, is nonsense.

The real interest of Greenlaw's article lies in the view that it expresses of the nature of *Paradise Lost*. I make one or two remarks on this and on the general attitude to the poem that the article discloses.

One sentence seems to me particularly noteworthy—I have already quoted it: 'The story of the fall of Adam immediately gains significance and interest if we recognize that the apple is but a symbol, and that Milton's real theme is to show how Adam fell because he did not stand the test of temperance.' 'The real theme': it was a new phrase in serious and reasoned discussion of *Paradise Lost*, a phrase that would have sounded oddly in the ears of the Milton critics of previous centuries. It is interesting to remember what Addison made of the 'real theme', or, as he called it, the 'great Moral' of the poem, a moral, he thought, 'the most universal and most useful that can be imagined'. It was this: 'that Obedience to the Will of God makes men happy, and that Disobedience makes them miserable.' Here, said Addison, 'is visibly the Moral of the principal Fable which turns upon Adam and Eve, who continued in Paradise while they kept the Command that was given them, and were driven out of it as soon as they had

1 Loc. cit. p. 214

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transgressed.'[1] This, we may say, was very unsophisticated, and we may agree readily enough that the possibilities of meaning—indeed, the patent meanings—in *Paradise Lost* are hardly exhausted by Addison's summary of its scope. And yet, when Addison tells us that the *visible* moral of the principal Fable is just what he proceeds to assert, it is not very easy, surely, to contradict him. The opposition between Reason and Passion, we know well, is deeply embedded in the theory of *Paradise Lost*. The idea of 'temperance' is there too, and perhaps in certain passages seems to us to be not far distant from the heart of the poem. Yet in the complex and difficult business of assessing a literary masterpiece nothing, I suppose, is of much greater importance than that we should make a determined effort to put first things first, and to keep second things second. The 'visible' moral of the poem—the moral that is proclaimed at the outset, that is dwelt on and driven home at innumerable points throughout it, that is stated and reiterated by God, man, angels and the Devil himself—is the moral that Addison enunciates. And we may wonder whether Greenlaw, in making all turn on the Platonic virtue of temperance and ranking everything else in the poem as subordinate to this prime meaning, has not, after all, succeeded in elevating what is properly a second thing into the place of a first.

There is something else deserving note in the sentence quoted. 'The story of the fall of Adam immediately gains significance and interest if we recognize....' There are telltale signs here I think, of the attitude (largely, no doubt, unconscious) that is behind the article. Greenlaw, in a sense, is rescuing *Paradise Lost*. Earlier in the article he had pointed out the curious parallelism between the destiny of Milton's great poem and the destiny of Spenser's in critical history. 'Both great poems have been patronized for their insufficiency of thought; Spenser's poem has been criticized for

1 *Spectator*, No. 369.

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vagueness, lack of structure, tedious length, and because it is an "allegory"; Milton's for inconsistency, for representing an outworn theology, and for triviality. Both poets have been praised chiefly for certain "poetic" qualities at the expense of intellectual power, a judgement which they would have resented.'[1] Greenlaw resents it too. He sees, at any rate, the implication that lies dormant in such praise and such blame; it would be hard, if such praise and blame were true, to predict for *Paradise Lost* any lasting future except as a majestic derelict, a great white elephant of poetry without real use or function. Even in Raleigh's criticism, intensely appreciative as in so many ways it is, there is perhaps the faint foreshadowing of such a thought. It is clear, at least, that if Raleigh's *Paradise Lost* is the real *Paradise Lost*, the modern mind is out of touch with it; the poem, as interpreted by Raleigh, has no real chance of speaking to the modern mind, any more than it spoke to Raleigh's mind. And yet it would be a pity if this were so: that is what Greenlaw feels. It would be a good thing for us and for *Paradise Lost* if beneath the announced theme and its 'triviality' it were possible to find another and better one, hitherto missed—a 'real theme' —of richer significance, and wider appeal. I think we may see in Greenlaw's article the first of a number of attempts to refit *Paradise Lost* for the modern mind.

Greenlaw and his fellow American scholars, in conjunction with a less numerous European group, began a movement that by 1920 or so had developed a picture of Milton as thinker and poet that differed in many important respects from the traditional image. Essentially he was regarded now as a Renaissance artist and no longer in any narrow or painful or disturbing way as a Puritan. The work of M. Saurat, as he himself says, lay a little outside that of both these groups, though he was extremely sympathetic towards their results. What was felt a little curious was that no English scholar

1 Loc. cit. p. 201.

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had joined the movement. Professor Grierson, indeed, showed great interest in what was going on, intervening often to correct an excess or to redress a balance that, as it seemed to him, had been upset. Now he will hint to Liljegren that English scholars do not, after all, cling quite as tightly as some Continental critics think to the austere, unmodified Puritan tradition of Milton. Now he will interpose to suggest that Saurat is pressing the results of his researches a little hard, and that Christian doctrine in Milton's thought is, after all, still basic. At another time he will turn aside to reprove gently a French scholar who at this late day has misguidedly written a paper on *Adam est-il le héros du poème?* It is a question, Grierson tells him, that 'we in this country have long ago settled'.[1] Grierson in this way observed, supervised and corrected; but not yet had England produced a New Miltonian. England produced one (though with a difference) in 1930.

The critical attitude embodied in Dr Tillyard's *Milton* is of such interest that I must pause for a brief note on it.

I will begin with two quotations. This is the first paragraph of Dr Tillyard's Introduction:

> No one reading through *Paradise Lost* with any degree of seriousness can help asking with what the poem as a whole is most truly concerned, what were the feelings and ideas that dominated Milton's mind when he wrote it. Such was my own experience, and when I found the question difficult to answer, I sought help from the books on Milton that are most read in England. But they helped very little. The majority, however good on other topics, made no attempt at all to answer this particular question; or what they did say went no further than to summarize Milton's own professions as to the true subject of his poem. The only critics who seemed to tackle the problem in the right kind of way were the Satanists, namely those who invested the character of Satan with all that Milton felt and valued most strongly. But the more I considered the Satanic explanation, the more inadequate it seemed: far too simple to solve so complicated a problem. And so I was led to work out my own solution, the results of which attempt are the central part of this book. I found

1 *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 1920–1, p. 104; 1927, p. 204; 1928, p. 202.

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in due course that more had been written on the subject than I had known, especially in America, where opinion had already reacted against the Satanists; but nothing I have read has convinced me that there is not room for several more attempts to find out with what *Paradise Lost* as a whole is most truly concerned.

And this is the first paragraph of his section on *Paradise Lost*:

It is strange how little, till quite recently, critics have concerned themselves with the meaning of *Paradise Lost*. The style, the versification, the celestial geography, the thought, who is the hero: all these have concerned the critics far more than what the poem is really about, the true state of Milton's mind when he wrote it. Perhaps to those of earlier generations the meaning appeared too simple to need discussion: does not Milton himself tell us all we need to know about it in his opening lines? But such simple-mindedness can ill satisfy a generation which is sceptical of professed motives and which suspects the presence of others, either concealed or not realized by the author. It is not surprising, then, that in the last ten years or so there has been more discussion of the subject than in all the rest of the time during which *Paradise Lost* has been in print. From the differences of opinion it may be judged that the question has by no means been settled, and another attempt to answer it may well be pardoned.

It is perhaps not quite fair to isolate these passages. It is certain that we may object to every one of the literary principles they proclaim and yet be grateful for the study to which these principles led. Dr Tillyard's work has enlarged our knowledge of Milton on every side. Nevertheless, it would be difficult, I think, to find elsewhere in Milton criticism so compact a cluster of questionable assumptions. Observe, first, how Greenlaw's conception of a 'real theme' returns, but now with an interesting difference. Greenlaw in the course of his investigations lighted on what seemed to him the real theme of *Paradise Lost*, and was very pleased to find it; but he does not impress one as having always known it was there. Dr Tillyard, before he begins his investigations, *knows* that there is a deeper meaning in *Paradise Lost* than the meaning that is obvious: this is not something that has to be demonstrated: it is self-evident. What *Paradise Lost* seems to be about, or even what Milton tells us it is

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