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MILTON AND ECOLOGY

In *Milton and Ecology*, Ken Hiltner engages with literary, theoretical, and historic approaches to explore the ideological underpinnings of our current environmental crisis. Focusing on Milton's rejection of dualistic theology, metaphysical philosophy, and early modern subjectivism, Hiltner argues that Milton anticipates certain essential modern ecological arguments. Even more remarkable is that Milton was able to integrate these arguments with biblical sources so seamlessly that his interpretative "Green" reading of scripture has for over three centuries been entirely plausible. This study considers how Milton, from the earliest edition of the *Poems*, not only sought to tell the story of how through humanity's folly Paradise on earth was lost, but also sought to tell how it might be regained. This intriguing study will be of interest to eco-critics and Milton specialists alike.

KEN HILTNER has published widely on Milton. His articles have been published in *Milton Studies*, *Milton Quarterly*, and *English Language Notes*.

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Portions of my second and third chapters appeared, in somewhat different form, under the title “The Portrayal of Eve in *Paradise Lost*: Genius at Work” as chapter 4 of *Milton Studies* 40, ed. Albert Labriola (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001). Sections of my final chapter were first published as “Place, Body, and Spirit Joined: The Earth–Human Wound in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Quarterly* 35 (May 2001). Additional material was also drawn from my “A Defense of Milton’s Environmentalism,” which is forthcoming in *English Language Notes*.

Preface

Why consider the role of place in Milton's poetry? A few years ago, while attending a seminar conducted by Diane McColley on the relation of nature to culture in the literary history of the natural world, I found myself returning again and again to the same question: what happens when culture is privileged over place? No mere academic question, as the last acres of the place my family had farmed for generations had given way to bulldozers the year before, I found myself feeling that I had somehow lost my place in the world. What was most startling about this development was the total disregard for the place: the great homogenizing culture of late twentieth-century America had seen my family's farm as merely space in which to develop itself. In order to make this "space" into the current suburban dream, nearly every aspect of the landscape was altered, with whole lakes appearing overnight. That this *space* developed was once a remarkably self-contained *place*, which offered food, fuel, water, shelter, and life, was lost with the place.

In one sense, the answer to my question of what happens when culture is privileged over place was appallingly clear: if a human culture has enough resolve, technology, and belief in its destiny, it can literally landscape every last feature of a place to conform to its vision of itself. To such a culture – to what is now our culture – place is all but irrelevant. To be clear, the farming practices of my family may have also done some violence to the place, but underlying our habitation of the land was an ancient peasant pact between the place and the culture dwelling upon it – an acknowledgment that, as part of the place, our lives were inexorably caught up there.

In another sense, as it became increasingly clear to me, my question of what happens when culture is privileged over place has another less obvious answer: in the two decades which saw my family's farm give way to our culture's need to spread itself out in space, there was coincidentally an extraordinary interest in certain circles being directed towards "culture" – which in many quarters became *the* academic buzzword. That culture has

come out of the margins of academic discourse is no doubt positive, but what if the focus on culture has marginalized something else? As our preoccupation with culture had utterly destroyed the place that was my home, so too our privileging of culture in less literal fields – the field of literary study, for example – might marginalize place as well.

In comparison to culture, place, as place on the Earth, is rarely found in academic circles. Though Edward Casey has recently written the first book-length account of place, the environmental importance of place is hardly to be found in the work. With place having such a comparatively small role in academic discourse, it was with some surprise that I first read Diane McColley's writings on Milton. By drawing attention to the place Adam and Eve dwelled through their relation to the Garden, McColley's work marks a crucial shift in Milton studies as she restores Milton's own emphasis on place: not only is *Paradise Lost* filled with astonishing descriptions of the Garden place (so much so that we, like Satan, might be struck speechless at first encountering the immense fertile beauty of the place), but the epic itself is the story of a place, called Paradise, lost.

To my surprise, my question of what happens when culture is privileged over place was also asked by Milton in *Paradise Lost*: when we, like Eve (tempted by the thought of what we might become) forget, even for a moment, that we still need our roots to run deep into our place on Earth, what happens to the place? Milton's answer is that the place will surely suffer as Earth feels the wound of our uprooting. This is not merely an environmental ethic, but a reclaiming of the original sense of the Greek *ethos*, which was not only a custom or habit but also an accustomed (a-customed) place. Ethical behavior is to act well towards not only the human beings in our place but also towards the plants and animals found there – as well as the place itself. To act ethically is to be in the habit of the place we dwell. For just a moment Milton's Eve, the poet's shining paradigm of Christian ethical behavior (who should be an ecological exemplar for us as well) is tempted to uproot herself from her place on Earth. In many respects the epic *Paradise Lost* is an answer to a simple, though rarely asked, question: how does one consider the allegory of the Fall, which introduces the Judeo-Christian *ethos*, without pondering our own place on the Earth?

If in reading *Paradise Lost* (or any work of literature for that matter) we give in to the temptation to dwell on culture, what happens to the place on Earth where we dwell? This same question concerning the relation of culture to place, whether asked regarding the field of literary study or the fields of a family farm, elicits the same answer given by Milton: it is not

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only our place on Earth which suffers from our marginalizing of it, but, as Eve laments when she is exiled from her place, it will also be felt by us as an unexpected stroke worse than death – a startling and altogether chilling prophecy on Milton’s part that is now being felt in innumerable places across the Earth. This is as much an ethical matter for Eve as it is for Milton who tells her story: for the poet not to tell the story of Paradise (place) lost would also be to forget his deep roots in the Earth.

This is also an ethical matter for those in the field of literary study: to marginalize place as culture becomes central to our readings may do as much violence to place as those bulldozers did to my family’s farm. In contrast to this violence, *Paradise Lost* is a call to regain our lost place on Earth. As I understand the work of Diane McColley and others who seek to read Milton “Greenly,” theirs is an effort to recognize and repeat the poet’s call to regain lost place. This is not merely the calling of those who would explicate Milton’s works, but a call to anyone sympathetic to the Earth’s places.