

***Paradise Lost* (1667)**

In the year 1660 life in the United Kingdom changed forever with the Restoration of the monarchy and episcopacy after the divisive period of the Civil Wars; and one man, the poet John Milton (famous, but now blind), was neither happy nor safe. For Milton had been an ardent opponent of monarchy and had campaigned fearlessly for the republican cause, and now that the republican experiment had conclusively failed he was a marked man, on Charles II's hit list of public enemies.

But the new king showed clemency and Milton, although imprisoned for a spell, was allowed to live. And so it was that, in 1667, just seven years after the Restoration, Milton was able to put his life's masterwork through the presses.

This work is *Paradise Lost*—an epic, dazzling poem in twelve books in which Milton sets out to examine the greatest questions of his age:

- What is good, and what is evil? And if God is truly omnipotent, as Christians have always claimed, why do suffering and evil appear to thrive?
- What is the nature of political authority and when can rebellion be justified? When is opposition to authority a duty?
- Most importantly for each one of us, every day of our lives, he asks: what is the impact of our personal moral decisions? how responsible are we for the choices we make?

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a huge cathedral of a poem—colossal in scale, sonorous and echoing; to those who enter it, perhaps daunting, but yet it is at the same time careful, crafted, and polished with detailed ornamentation. Not a single surface is there that does not reflect the light; not a single line that does not repay close scrutiny. The poem is splendid: it is vast in its imaginative range and grand in its language (indeed, it is written in a style deliberately evocative of the rhythms of the English bible), but it is homely and, in its focus on issues of freedom and choice, it is relevant to each one of us, here.

In writing the poem Milton was setting out to complete the journey of English literature: there would be no more literature because there would be nothing left to say. The poem has had its detractors, it is true, but it permanently altered the direction of English literature; its influence is incalculable and it has been rewritten in each generation: it is Mary Shelley's Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, and those of you who have read Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy have, perhaps without realizing it, encountered an atheist retelling of the poem.

The beating heart of the poem is the character of Satan—Milton's damaged and complex antihero—angry, envious, glamorous, seductive, nervous, republican, ambitious, and deeply deluded. Satan who, having taken on the Almighty and his angelic legions in battle and having been comprehensively crushed, staggers to his feet at the start of Book One, dusts himself off, and seeks to launch another doomed campaign.

And today why am I standing here before you telling you about this genius of a writer, this masterpiece of a text?

As part of our ongoing programme of events in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Spawforth Library this term and next, many members of the Common Room and some Upper Sixth will be reading *Paradise Lost* in the Library tomorrow, beginning at 7.00a.m., and reading the entire epic in relay during the course of the day. This is to be 'Merchiston's Milton Marathon' and you are all more than welcome to come to the library to listen for as much time as you can spare. If you come early we will offer you, as the Calendar promises, 'Sausages and Satan': but be warned, for, although the sausages are optional, the Satan is *not*.

We may succeed in our attempt—I hope that we do—but more important by far is the fact that I hope I have introduced you this morning to Milton's wonderful, mesmerizing poem. Read it before you die, for you have one of the most exciting experiences of life in store: read properly, Milton's *Paradise Lost* will change you. Permanently.

Nigel Mortimer