

Milton and the Romantics – Frankenstein and Paradise Lost

Dr Malcolm Hebron explores not only how Mary Shelley's work answers back to Milton's epic poem but also the significance of Paradise Lost to the whole Romantic movement.

In Chapter 15 of Frankenstein, the Creature recounts how, while foraging in the woods, he finds a satchel belonging to his creator. In the satchel are three books: Goethe's romantic novel The Sorrows of Young Werther, the Lives (biographies of figures in the ancient world) by the classical writer Plutarch, and Paradise Lost by the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton. Fascinated, the Creature settles down to read them.

The books are carefully chosen by Shelley to depict the development of the Creature's mind. Reading Werther, he feels pity for the tragic young lover, a reaction which shows he is capable of sympathy. From Plutarch he learns about the human capacity for great deeds of goodness or destruction. The novel here seems to be saying that these qualities are basic to the human condition. It is his later experience which will corrupt this empathy and moral clarity.

But it is Paradise Lost which makes the strongest impression. Rather improbably, given his elementary grasp of English, the Creature devours this 10,565-line epic, with its vast sentences and huge vocabulary. Knowing nothing of its origin, he reads the poem as fact, not fiction, and responds to its story with romantic emotions:

It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with creatures was capable of exciting.

A creature – in the sense of a created being – himself, he identifies first with Adam, but, reflecting on the differences between himself and the first man, he comes to see himself as more like Satan, cast out and despised by a tyrannical Creator-God:

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from, beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.

A fourth text in the satchel affects him profoundly: this is Frankenstein's notebook, from which the Creature learns that his maker, instead of loving him, feels only disgust. Later he confronts Victor with

his lack of any paternal care:

'Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? [...] Satan had his companions, fellow-devils [...] but I am solitary and detested.'

Again he looks at Adam and Satan as the two possible models on which to base his identity:

'I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed.'

Just as Satan's natural element is infernal fire, the Creature turns to fire to have his vengeance on the De Laceys:

'I, like the archfiend, bore a Hell within me; and, finding myself unsympathised with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin.'

This is exactly what motivates Satan, who finds himself cast out from Heaven and decides to take his vengeance by destroying God's new creation, Man and the earth he inhabits. The Creature internalises Satan, and starts to sound like him:

Evil thenceforth became my good

he explains, echoing Satan's

*all Good to me is lost;
Evil be thou my Good.
IV.109-110*

The significance of Paradise Lost to Frankenstein is underlined on the title page, where we hear the Creature speak through the words of Milton's Adam, lamenting his fallen condition and reproaching his maker for creating him in the first place:

*Did I request thee, maker, from my clay
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From Darkness to promote me?
X.743-5*

With its themes of creation, knowledge, and evil, Frankenstein is a meditation or variation on the earlier epic, one creative work answering another.

Milton's influence on the Romantics

Mary Shelley was not the only writer of this period to turn to Milton for inspiration: the blind Puritan poet looms over the whole Romantic movement, like a statue on a pedestal. In his lifetime, Milton (1608-74) was a poet and scholar, who energetically supported Cromwell's Republican government after the Civil Wars ended with the execution of Charles I. *Paradise Lost* tells the story of the Creation of Adam and Eve and their Fall, after they are tempted by Satan (in the form of the serpent) to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Milton pairs this story with the non-biblical one of the war of Satan and his rebel angels against God, their inevitable defeat, damnation in Hell and plans for revenge. The whole story is delivered with the trappings of classical epic – great battles, councils of the Gods, lofty passages and cosmic actions. Less read today – but hugely important in their time – are Milton's prose writings, which include *Areopagitica* (1644), a defence of free speech, and political pamphlets like *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) and *A Defence of the People of England* (1652) in which he defended the right of the English to execute their monarch.

Blake and Wordsworth

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Milton's reputation as a poet was so high that *Paradise Lost* was regarded as a worthy successor to the classical epics of Homer and Virgil. With his learned, Latinate diction, grand themes and magnificent imagery and musical effects, Milton was the model of the sublime poetic style. To the radical writers of the Romantic period he was also an inspirational defender of freedom, rebelling against the absolute monarchy of Charles I. In the period of the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789), Milton was turned to as a prophetic voice and an ally in the fight against tyranny. William Blake genuinely believed that Milton spoke to him in visions and wrote a long poem, *Milton*, based on his own imaginative notion of the poet as seer and guide. He also produced numerous illustrations of Milton's epic. It was Blake who first saw Satan as the real hero of the epic – a revolutionary and rebel, rising up against a remote and despotic king – asserting that Milton was 'of the Devil's party'. This theme of independence and defiance was a clarion call to radicals, at a time when the state was busy repressing any sign of sympathy with the French revolutionaries. William Wordsworth invoked Milton in the sonnet 'London', one of a series of 'Sonnets dedicated to liberty' (1802), revering him not just as a writer but also as the embodiment of a higher, more heroic way of life:

*Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:*

*Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.*

Wordsworth knew Milton's poetry intimately and imitated it in his long philosophical poem *The Excursion*. His other long poem, *The Prelude*, which describes his own early years in the Lake District and development as a poet, is a kind of response to *Paradise Lost*, reversing the Fall and reconnecting man to his lost paradise in the natural world.

Keats and Shelley

Among the next generation of Romantics, Keats found in Milton a serious philosophical voice, and drew on the subject matter and supernatural imagery of gods and temples. His closest imitation of Milton is the long, unfinished poem 'Hyperion', but traces of the older poet can be found across Keats's writings. In fact, several of the things we think of as vaguely 'poetic' in older verse, such as adjectives following nouns ('rushes green') or the verb being pushed to the end of the sentence ('the heavy body wound') owe a good deal to the influence of Milton, who was in turn imitating the language of the Latin epic poet Virgil. Percy Bysshe Shelley, husband of Mary, clearly saw Milton as a freedom fighter, declaring in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821) that

the sacred Milton was [...] a republican and a bold enquirer into morals and religion.

His own verse drama *Prometheus Unbound* revisits the themes of *Paradise Lost*: in it, the Titan Prometheus steals fire from Zeus to give to mankind and is punished: tyranny, rebellion, and the pursuit of knowledge and science are the common themes.

Creation and Corruption

Frankenstein, then, draws on a deep Romantic engagement with Milton (and draws also on Percy Shelley's interest in science and alchemy: his contribution to the novel is a subject of scholarly debate). It takes place in a world where Milton's Satan has a deep, corrupting presence. Dr Frankenstein himself is a fallen creature, pursuing forbidden knowledge in the form of the alchemists he reads in defiance of scientific convention and renouncing his better nature. Like Milton's epic, *Frankenstein* is at once fascinated by creation, both artistic and scientific, and at the same time preoccupied by its possible destructive consequences. It is also deeply alive to the power of the written word. When we share the Creature's reading in the woods, we are reminded of the sheer excitement of reading itself:

Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?

Not a bad set of questions to bring to a book

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