# Milton on the Fall

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**By Matthew Claridge–**

I finally finished John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*and *Paradise Regained*. I’ve started and stopped it several times over the years. Obviously, it’s a difficult read and there’s always more “urgent” reading to be done. Though difficult to plow through in some respects, in other ways it’s a profoundly pleasurable experience. The picture Milton paints of the primordial world is, like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, simply a supreme feat of imagination. His portraits of Hell, Chaos, the Cosmos, Heaven, and Earth leave Modern science fiction and Hollywood pyrotechnics in the dust for sheer novelty and descriptive power. Moreover, despite all the cumbersome classical allusions and contorted syntax, there is almost no other piece of literature more fun to read out loud. No matter how good other epic poems may be, this one was written *for English*. It is meant to sound great and majestic as it rolls off the tongue. Finally, it’s a manly poem both in its composition and its theology. Milton’s angels are not Raphaelite cherubs of chubby cuteness and down-feather wings. They are a frightening, supernatural Marines corp. Milton’s Trinity[[1]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/ZFRdLn#_ftn1) is not the perichoretic “ring-around-the-rosy” love-triangle of Modern theology, but the sovereign council of royal state, royal mien, and royal pleasures.[[2]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/ZFRdLn#_ftn2) Milton’s Adam and Eve are not naked babes locked in adult bodies, but imposing gestalt beings of mature taste, intelligence, and vocation. This is not a Thomas Kinkade vision of Christianity.

Anyone reading *Paradise Lost* simply must read C.S. Lewis’ [*Preface*](https://www.amazon.com/Preface-Paradise-Lost-C-S-Lewis/dp/0195003454/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1335461456&sr=8-1). Scratch that. Anyone who wants to read at all must read C.S. Lewis’ *Preface*. It’s not simply a preface to *Paradise Lost*; it is a preface to reading. I read it over a decade ago, and it still has an impact. The first half of the *Preface*develops the importance of “genre” and the way literary “form” impacts the way we feel and experience a text. It’s Speech-Act theory before it had a name. My own experience of reading Lewis’ *Preface* did for my view of literature what Francis Schaeffer’s *How Then Shall We Live* did for my view of history. It provided a coherence, logic, and theological center to the flotsam and jetsam factoids of “social science” and “language arts” I received at the hands of public education.

When Lewis gets around to analyzing the details of *Paradise Lost*, the treatment is more spiritually and theologically edifying than one would think allowable for a piece of literary criticism. It’s a wonderful, unique, and perfect union of theory and practice. Let me take one example. Evangelical Christians who have heard anything about Milton’s *Paradise Lost* have probably heard that his treatment of the Fall is problematic. As it goes in the telling, Eve offers the fruit to Adam out of love for him and Adam partakes out of love for Eve. Their decision to eat the fruit thus becomes a supreme act of self-sacrifice for the sake of the other and not a heinous, conniving act of rebellion and spite. Lewis puts this to rights, I believe. In fact, the fall of the human pair is far more biblically sound and devilishly complex than at first appears. Lewis’ description of Eve’s fall is at once theologically acute and personally convicting:

 The result of her fall began at once. She thinks that earth is a long way from Heaven and God may not have seen her ([Book ix], 822-26); the doom of Nonsense is already at work. Next she decides that she will not tell Adam about the fruit. She will exploit her secret to become his equal—or no, better still, his superior (817-25). The rebel is already aiming at tyranny. But presently she remembers that the fruit may, after all, be deadly. She decides that if she is to die, Adam must die with her; it is intolerable that he should be happy, and happy (who knows?) with another woman when she is gone. I am not sure that critics always notice the precise sin which Eve is now committing, yet there is no mystery about it. Its name in English is Murder. If the fruit is to produce deity Adam shall have none of it: she means to do a corner on divinity. But if it means death, then he must be made to eat it, in order that he may die—for that reason and no other, as her words make perfectly plain (826-30). And hardly has she made this resolve before she is congratulating herself upon it as a singular proof of the tenderness and magnanimity of her love (830-3).

If the precise movement of Eve’s mind at this point is not always noticed, that is because Milton’s truth to nature is here almost too great, and the reader is involved in the same illusion as Eve herself. The whole thing is so quick, each new element of folly, malice, and corruption enters so unobtrusively, so naturally, that it is hard to realize we have been watching the genesis of murder. We expect something more like Lady Macbeth’s “unsex me here.” But Lady Macbeth speaks thus after the intention of murder has already been fully formed in her mind. Milton is going closer to the actual moment of decision. Thus, and not otherwise does the mind turn to embrace evil … If you or I, reader, ever commit a great crime, be sure we shall feel very much more like Eve than like Iago. (125-6)

The same self-deception obtains in Adam’s case:

 His sin is, of course, intended to be a less ignoble sin than hers. Its half-nobility is, perhaps, emphasized by the fact that he does not argue about it. He is at that moment when a man’s only answer to all that would restrain him is: ‘I don’t care.’ That moment when we resolve to treat some lower or partial value as an absolute—loyalty to a party or a family, faith to a lover, the customs of good fellowship, the honour of our profession, or the claims of science. If the reader finds it hard to look upon Adam’s action as a sin at all, that is because he is not really granting Milton’s premises. If conjugal love were the highest value in Adam’s world, then of course his resolve would have been the correct one. But if there are things that have an even higher claim on a man, if the universe is imagined to be such that, when the pinch comes, a man ought to reject wife and mother and his own life also, then the case is altered and then Adam can do no good to Eve (as, in fact, he does not good) by becoming her accomplice. (126-7)

Lewis’ analysis is not unlike a comment that’s been made about Michael Ward’s analysis of Lewis’ own Narnian chronicles: “if he’s wrong, his error is cogent.” Lewis is spot on. Carried along by the rationalizations of Adam and Eve, one draws exactly the same conclusion they do: what a beautiful act of self-less love! Oh, “the heart isdeceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”

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