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“FEAR OF CHANGE PERPLEXES MONARCHS”: MILTON’S READERS AND THE SIGN OF THE ECLIPSE

La comparaison de l’éclipse dans le premier livre du *Paradis perdu* de John Milton figure une écriture difficile à déchiffrer. En outre, cette image a presque provoqué l’interdiction du poème en raison de ses implications politiques anti-monarchistes. Si l’on ajoute que c’est Satan, archétype de la subversion de toute certitude, auquel se réfère la comparaison, on réalise pourquoi des générations de lecteurs ont lu différemment une image qui rend perplexes même les rois.

Major literary texts, rather like the Classical Chinese Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, attract and become the property of the layers of commentary they provoke or require. This accumulated series of writings becomes not merely a record of how a text is received but itself affects and belongs to what the total text consists of. It becomes part of the writing, not merely of the reading. A literary text is not a fact but an event¹—and one which is still happening. This *Rezeptionsästhetik* becomes especially interesting when the writer in question has subversive political views. Readers espouse, display or protect themselves from the politics and so rewrite the text. One of the more revealing examples of this process of celebratory or evasive rewriting is the work of John Milton (1608-1674).

Paradise Lost is one of the few (the only?) masterpieces of world literature written by a poet who was, or had recently been, an active and leading revolutionary, committed to a radical political cause—the overthrow of the English monarchy and the

1. Hans Robert JAUSS, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 32.

established church. One result has been that, even though many of his readers soon turned him into the Christian Virgil, and then into the great poet of the sublime, Milton's politics have continued to colour his reputation, whatever political causes his readers have themselves espoused. There has, for example, been a Whig or progressive view of Milton as incorruptible statesman-poet, and this tradition played a certain role in both American and French revolutions: Thomas Jefferson frequently quoted Milton in his commonplace-books, and Mirabeau's translation of *Areopagitica* went through four editions from 1788 to 1792.² William Godwin praised "the great energies" of the archetypal revolutionary, Satan, energies that flow from "a powerful sense of fitness and justice" and William Blake famously described Milton as "of the devil's party",³ a phrase that was occasionally used at the same period to refer to republicans. Conservative readers have usually reacted differently: often they have admired the poem but denounced the man for "an acrimonious and surly republican" (Samuel Johnson in his *Life of Milton* of 1779). One early reader, Thomas Yalden (1698), shows plainly the two sides of this divided response:

These sacred lines with wonder we peruse,
And praise the flights of a seraphic muse,
Till thy seditious prose provokes our rage,
And soils the beauties of thy brightest page.⁴

This separation of poem and politics was a common way of dealing with the problem. Still other readers have tried to change the meanings, or have preferred to bury Milton's politics under talk of his sublimity, his organ music, or his blindness.

I have chosen a key passage in the first book of *Paradise Lost* to illustrate the variety of readings, some of which avoid and some of which realign or praise the implied politics of the poem. In fact this passage was so controversial that it apparently made Charles II's censor contemplate suppressing the whole poem.

2. George SENSABAUGH, *That Great Whig Milton*, Stanford University Press, 1952.

3. See *Milton: the Critical Heritage 1702-1801*, ed. John Shawcross, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 372-73, and *The Romantics on Milton*, ed. Joseph Wittreich, Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Press, 1970, p. 35.

4. Quoted by Tony DAVIES in his "Introduction" to *John Milton: Selected Shorter Poems and Prose*, London: Routledge, 1988, p.14.

What makes it especially interesting is that it is itself a figure of writing within the text: it compares Satan to an omen, an eclipse, and requires that omen, like Satan himself, to be interpreted. As we shall see, readers do not agree on what the writing means. Once we have looked at a few of the many comments it has provoked, we shall reread the passage in the light of some contemporary editions and commentaries—and the uncertain politics of its main figure, Satan.

The passage provides two epic similes, one brief, one *à queue longue* to describe Satan, the rebel angel. It occurs soon after his revival in Hell near the beginning of the poem when he begins to rally his troops, the other fallen angels. These angels respectfully observe

Their dread commander: he above the rest
 In shape and gesture proudly eminent
 Stood like a tower; his form had not yet lost
 All her original brightness, nor appeared
 Less than archangel ruined, and the excess
 Of glory obscured: as when the sun new risen
 Looks through the horizontal misty air
 Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon
 In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
 On half the nations, and with fear of change
 Perplexes monarchs. Darkened so, yet shone
 Above them all the archangel.⁵

I refrain from any extended comment on the text for the moment, since I want to use other readers to explore its meanings, but two points need to be made immediately. First, the long epic simile is characteristically Miltonic in that it contains the crucial little word “or”, which is to say that it provides a choice as to how we are to imagine the central figure of Satan as sun, either in the early morning mist or when partially eclipsed by the moon. Second, the effect of the second alternative, the eclipse, is to make those who would read it as a sign or an omen afraid and, rather oddly and perhaps surprisingly, *perplexed*.

The significance of this image was soon perceived. John Toland (1670-1722), an early biographer of Milton, commented: “I must not forget that we had like to be eternally depriv’d of

5. *Paradise Lost*, I, 589-600. All quotations are taken from the Longman edition, edited by Alastair Fowler, 1968.

this Treasure by the Ignorance or Malice of the Licenser; who among other frivolous Exceptions would needs suppress the whole Poem for imaginary Treason in the[se] ... lines" (594-99).⁶ This is the only reference (and thus the source of all the subsequent allusions) to this problem with Thomas Tompkins, the official Censor, but we have no reason to believe it is not true. For Tompkins, the text was manifestly subversive. For Toland, however, a man of more liberal cast, the treason was "imaginary". Yet Toland knew quite well that Milton had advocated and defended the execution of Charles I before the scandalized and frightened disapproval of all the crowned heads of Europe.

Thomas Newton (1704-82), editor of an important 18th century edition (1749), still recorded the alleged politics of the quoted part, but wavered in his own allegiance: "It is said that this whole noble poem was in danger of being suppressed by the Licenser on account of this simile, as if it contained some latent treason in it..., but it is saying little more than poets have said under the most absolute monarchies, as Virgil *Georgics*. I.464". It was common by now to link Milton and Virgil, but Newton's proposed parallel provides a very significant allusion. Turning Milton into the Christian Virgil did not necessarily suppress the politics. The Virgilian passage is a famous digression in the *Georgics*, in which Virgil first insists on the power of the sun to give accurate signs:

sol tibi signa dabit. solem quis dicere falsum
audeat? ille etiam caecos instare tumultus
saepe monet fraudemque et operta tumescere bella.

— and then launches on a long description of the unnatural events that accompanied the assassination of Julius Caesar, beginning:

ille etiam extincto miseratus Caesare Romam,
cum caput obscura nitidum ferrugine textit
impiaque aeternam timuerunt saecula noctem.⁷

6. *The Early Lives of Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire, London: Constable, 1932), p. x.

7. *Georgics* I. 464-68. "... the sun will give you signs. Who dare say the sun is false? He it is who often warns that dark rebellions are threatening, and that treachery and secret wars are on the increase. He it was who had pity on Rome when Caesar's light was put out, and hid his glory in dusky gloom and an impious age feared everlasting night." (My translation).

The extended description refers to animal omens, beasts talking, wolves howling, ghosts in the streets at twilight, volcanos erupting and other celestial portents, including an awful voice. It was picked up and modified by Ovid (*Metamorphoses* xv 783-98), and by Shakespeare in both *Julius Caesar* I.iii.5-28, II.ii.14-24 and *Hamlet* I.i.113-21.⁸ So Milton here alludes to one of the most significant of all historical acts of rebellion and more especially, the murder of a tyrant. On this reading, the censor was right to be worried about the implications of the passage, and Newton wrong to minimize them by referring to Virgil. The Virgilian original brings out even more clearly that the Satanic omen is to be read by those who observe it: in Milton, however, the written sign offers no clarity, only fear, and what is more, it perplexes. Both poets connect the natural sign with political events, but Milton's, perhaps in deference to the censor, is much briefer and more allusive, and more ambiguous.

Henry J. Todd (1764-1845) in his splendid variorum edition (1801), no longer referred to the story of the censor or to the Virgilian allusion. He was writing soon after the French Revolution, at a time when England led the conservative forces of Europe against the revolutionaries. Instead he says "we may refer... the simile of Milton to a very fine one of somewhat the same kind in Shakespeare," and quotes *Richard II*, III.iii.62-67:

See, see King Richard doth himself appear
As doth the blushing, discontented sun
From out the fiery portal of the east,
When he perceives the envious clouds are bent
To dim his glory and to stain the track
Of his bright passage to the occident.

At first it would seem that the immediate political impact of the text has been buried and, through the substitution of the Shakespeare for the Virgil parallel, it has been nationalized. Milton the dissenter has been subtly co-opted into the unified idea of English culture. That may well have been the intention, as the language of aesthetic appreciation ("a very fine one... in Shakespeare") implies, yet if one follows up the allusion, we

8. Milton may have had the *Hamlet* passage in mind here also, since it refers to "Disasters in the sun" (line 121): both Shakespeare and Milton would have been aware of the etymology, *dis+astrum* = unfavourable aspect of a star.

find that political rebellion, and of a highly threatening sort, still hangs about the annotation. King Richard II was, of course, overthrown by Bolingbroke the usurper. A special performance of the play was put on by Shakespeare's company on the eve of the Essex rebellion in 1601, although the players were subsequently cleared of any complicity. We know that Queen Elizabeth I understood the implications and identified with Richard: the deposition scene of the play was censored and never printed during the lifetime of the monarch.

Aesthetic but not political comparison with Shakespeare was soon a staple of romantic readings of Milton,⁹ and Hazlitt explored the comparison with *Richard II* further in the third of his series of *Lectures on the English Poets*, entitled "On Shakespeare and Milton" (1818). The passage is part of an extensive argument about the difference between drama and epic.

The objects of dramatic poetry affect us by sympathy, by their nearness to ourselves, as they take us by surprise or force us upon action, ...; the objects of epic poetry affect us through the medium of the imagination, by magnitude and distance, by their permanence and universality. The one fills us with terror and pity, the other with admiration and delight.

This contrast between dramatic and epic or heroic poetry is a staple of eighteenth century criticism, and its terms go back to Aristotle. Yet, Hazlitt goes on, though the two genres are quite different in theory, in practice they approximate and strengthen one another, at least in their "perfection" (i.e. Shakespeare and Milton):

When Richard II calls for the looking-glass to contemplate his faded majesty in it, and bursts into that affecting exclamation: "O that I were a mockery-king of snow, to melt away before the sun of Bolingbroke," we have here the utmost force of human passion, combined with the ideas of fallen splendour and regal power. When Milton says of Satan: "His form had not yet lost," etc., the mixture of beauty, of grandeur, and pathos, from the sense of irreparable loss, of never-ending, unavailing regret, is perfect.

And indeed these lines were frequently quoted by the romantics as instances of the Miltonic sublime, whether the writers were

9. See the excellent recent discussion by Lucy NEWLYN, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 59.

themselves conservative or progressive.¹⁰ Burke had found them confused and obscure, fitting his idea of the sublime, Wordsworth said that when he read these lines “he felt a certain faintness come over his mind from the sense of beauty and grandeur”, while Hazlitt reporting the comment saw “no extravagance in it but the utmost truth of feeling”. The comparison of the two great national poets no longer makes any explicit reference to the politics of the image, only to its “sublimity”. The canonization of Milton, especially of *Paradise Lost*, has led to the tacit suppression of the links with Milton’s revolutionary prose.¹¹

Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges (1762-1837), editor of a popular Victorian edition of Milton (1835), made no reference at all outside the text, merely emoting that: “Few poetical passages can be finer than this, or more beautifully expressed. The precision with which the image is delineated is incomparable”. Thus the text has been completely aestheticized and any political meaning suppressed. This was the period when the idea of English literature was beginning to emerge as a separate and authentic subject of study, suitable as a substitute for the Classics in the formation of young and vulnerable minds.

This series of comments on the passage gives the impression that the text was gradually shorn, like the sun of its beams, of subversiveness and so became acceptable to wider and wider circles of middle-class readers. This may indeed be so—it is the burden of a Japanese scholar’s recent argument from which I have borrowed some of these comments¹²—but we should beware of too rigid and linear a sense of how history develops. Suppression of politically subversive ideas may be part of the

10. Joseph Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton*, p. 151.

11. Joseph WITTRICH, *Feminist Milton*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 5, follows Christopher HILL, *Milton and the English Revolution*, London: Faber, 1977, p. 391, in suggesting there was a tacit agreement among Milton’s contemporaries to subordinate the poem’s politics to its religion: they cite Marvell’s dedicatory poem added to the second edition and H. L. Bentham’s comments on hearing Milton’s friend Theodore Haak read his German translation, 1686-7.

12. Katsushiro ENGETSU, “Monarchy and Patriarchy in Paradise—Milton’s *Paradise Lost* Toward Locke’s Two Treatises of Government”, *Studies in English Literature: English Number 1993*, Tokyo: The English Literary Society of Japan, p. 15-31.

long process of domestication or emasculation of literary texts to suit the drawing room, and then the classroom, but some important exceptions stand out.

In a debate over the poem's politics in the pages of the *London Chronicle* (1763-4), for example, both sides used Satan as a spokesman for the opposition. From the Tories, we hear that Milton must have changed his political views by the time he wrote the poem: "How could he better refute the good old cause he was such a partisan of and such an advocate for than by making the rebellion in the poem resemble it, and giving the same characteristics to the apostate angels as were applicable to his rebel brethren?" The other side, the Whigs, made an opposite but parallel argument: "The Tory plan, where man assumes a right of dominion over man, was nearer related to Satan's aim of setting himself up over his peers".¹³ Other eighteenth century writers also saw Milton's politics in their own perspective. Dr. Johnson's views (1779) are well known: he put Satan and Milton together, so that Milton was an "acrimonious and surly republican", fired by envy, "sullen desire of independence" and "pride disdainful of superiority". The politics of the poem were obvious to many readers, and usually, as in our key passage, associated with interpreting Satan.

This was especially true among the romantics, who tended to appropriate Satan as a republican hero. Among these the most perceptive comment on our passage is by Keats. In his copy of *Paradise Lost*, which he was reading again and annotating around 1818, he made the following comment:

How noble and collected an indignation against Kings—"and for fear of change perplexes monarches, &". His very wishing should have had power to pull that feeble animal Charles from his bloody throne. "The evil days" had come to him—he hit the new System of things a mighty mental blow.¹⁴

The politics of the passage is no secret to Keats, who glories in its anti-monarchist leanings. Indeed he makes it far more direct and explicit than any other reader: had Milton himself been so explicit, the censor would have had no choice but to cut or suppress.

13. Both cited in Jackie DISALVO, *War of Titans: Blake's Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983, p. 36.

14. Wittreich, *Romantics on Milton*, p. 556. The quotation "the evil days" is from *Paradise Lost*, VII, 25-6.

In the annotations of contemporary editors, those who prepare the text to be read in modern universities, we find a similar disagreement about the politics, and so about the meaning of the simile. We shall take the texts we commonly refer to as "Hughes" and "Fowler", the two heavily and splendidly annotated editions of reference for American or English students, together with the very recent "Flannagan". All make reference to the interest of the censor, but they all differ in their reading of the image. No-one mentions Virgil as a sub-text at this point. Hughes (1957) is the only one to retain the possible allusion to Shakespeare; indeed he leads with this and only then mentions that the "censor is said to have objected to these lines as a veiled threat to the king".¹⁵ He also suggests, rather too eagerly, that the simile foreshadows Satan's final defeat, just as the eclipse in XI. 181-84 adumbrates the effect of man's sin on the world, lines which I here quote:

Nature first gave signs, impressed
On bird, beast, air, air suddenly eclipsed
After short blush of morn.

Fowler (1968) also refers to these lines, and adds the lines (XI. 203-7) in which Adam interprets these "signs" as a bad omen¹⁶ (I begin the quotation at line 193):

O Eve, some further change awaits us nigh,
Which heaven by these mute signs in nature shows
Forerunners of his purpose ...
... Why in the east
Darkness ere day's mid-course, and morning light
More orient in yon western cloud that draws
O'er the blue firmament a radiant white
And slow descends, with something heavenly fraught.

(The contrasting morning light here is the sign of the advancing band of angels accompanying Michael on his mission to announce the dark future to Adam. The angels are going to drive Adam and Eve out of Paradise at the end.)

Both Hughes and Fowler see this later "eclipse" as solar, and they may be right even though the language could apply merely

15. Merritt Y. HUGHES, *John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose*, New York: Odyssey Press, 1957, p. 226-7.

16. Alastair FOWLER, *Milton: Paradise Lost*, London: Longman, 1971, p. 79.

to a sudden change of weather. But Fowler sees it differently from Hughes. It is one of the signs perceived by Adam and Eve, and therefore *read* by them. These are not merely signs of the blight beginning to fall on nature, already perceptible to Adam in the previous Book, but specifically ill omens. Again we may think of these signs as a kind of writing by god or "heaven" within the text: in the first case the readers were monarchs, here they are Adam and Eve.

Fowler also sees the parallel with Book I rather differently from Hughes. The "disastrous twilight" eclipse of Book I Fowler reads not as adumbrating Satan's defeat but as

ironically double edged; for the ominous solar eclipse presages not only disaster for creation, but also the doom of the Godlike ruler for whom the sun was a traditional symbol. (Thus Charles II's Licensor for the Press is said by Toland to have regarded these lines as politically subversive.)

Not Satan, then, but all creation is threatened by the omen: for Fowler the eclipse is a sign of Satan's power, and of his ultimate success. This is an important and characteristic difference from Hughes. And since Fowler was writing in the sixties, the political reading reasserts itself, not simply as something reported by Toland but as actively at work in the image—note the force of Fowler's "thus" to open his parenthesis. The Censor or Licensor was a good reader, after all. Hence the simile has to be "ironically double-edged": the sun represents not only doomed creation but also monarchy.¹⁷

Yet there are, it would seem, ironies within ironies in the passage, since if Milton was indeed allowing this second meaning of the simile, the eclipse of monarchy, to glimmer behind the main meaning, like one of Geoffrey Hartman's examples of Milton's counterplot¹⁸, he let it stand even when the hated monarchy had been restored. The complexity of the simile has now become

17. See Joan BENNETT, *Reviving Liberty*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 36-39.

18. In this now classic essay, "Milton's Counterplot", *English Literary History*, XXV, 1958, 1-12, Hartmann argues that several passages, including similes, in the first books of the poem, have a double meaning, a plot and a counterplot: while doom may be the dominant meaning of an image, the smooth silken qualities of the language suggest another more hopeful connotation and point to another, happier outcome. For example, Satan is both magnified and diminished by the comparison between his shield and a planet seen through Galileo's telescope.

such that the monarch who reads himself into the omen has every reason to be perplexed.

The simile now points in at least two different directions at once, towards monarchy (doomed, restored or still doomed?) and towards nature. Perhaps we have here a case of the dilemma contemporary critics such as Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller call "undecidability". Similes are read by aligning their contents with what lies outside them in the text, yet here, as often, that alignment is not clear and depends on how far one is willing to go. One could sort Fowler's two putative references for the simile from each other on a time-scale: the doom of nature points to the Fall itself, soon to be achieved by Satan's impact on mankind, whereas the end of monarchy points both to Milton's time and to a more successful revolution at some point in the future, or at the end of time. Yet both meanings are present together, like Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit,¹⁹ and render the image uncertain; at the very least an alert reader must pause, reflect, distance himself, ponder the meaning yet again of this disturbing Satan figure, and find his own way. And what gives the image its full value in this way is that Fowler has restored the impact of the politics to the text.

And what then if we add the pun on sun-Son? The rise of the Son means the eclipse of Satan-sun, this Satan who had wanted to be the favoured Son. That is indeed the chronological starting point, a highly original, psychologically appealing and explicitly political one,²⁰ of Milton's poem: Satan's original rebellion in Book V results from jealousy of the new Son's "begetting"²¹ this

19. See *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 194. This is the best known of several such images in Gestalt thinking; the vase which is also two faces is widely referred to also. Each image has two different interpretations, only one of which can be seen at any one moment. The idea is well used by Lucy Newlyn, p. 66-68.

20. In Alan S. GILBERT's view Milton's was the only version of the story which located the origin of the conflict at this point: "The Theological Basis of Satan's Rebellion and the Function of Abdiel in *Paradise Lost*," *Modern Philology*, XL (1942), p. 20-39.

21. On the complications of this word, which is normally taken to refer to the exaltation of the Son, not his begetting in any literal sense, see Fowler's and Flannagan's notes and my "The Devil in Milton", *Etudes de Lettres*, 2 (1989), p. 81. Much hangs on the double meaning of this word, and I think Milton (and his God) was being deliberately obscure. The word also links the story with the myth preserved in the Qur'an, that Satan refused to worship the newly created

day. Something like this is Flannagan's (1993) important contribution to the reading of the simile. Like the sun, he writes, the tower in the earlier simile was a common symbol for Christ, and so both tower and sun point to Satan's nobility "even though he is a ruined archangel and an eclipsed sun (the fallen morning star)". Thus Satan is both magnified and diminished by the simile. Flannagan goes on that the lines "may have been considered politically subversive" and cites the familiar reference from Toland's biography, but without making the politics as active as Fowler had.

I think we might extend Flannagan's idea by remembering two features of the poem. One, there is a standard opposition, theologically speaking, between sun and Son: Christians are enjoined to worship not nature but the God of nature. The opposition is clear in, for example, the paired openings of Books III and IV, the Miltonic narrator's invocation to "Holy Light, offspring of Heaven's first-born" (the Son) and Satan's address to the sun on Mt. Niphates. Two, and this makes the burden of the simile even more complex, in that famous address, Satan says to the sun: "How I hate thy beams". Obviously the relationship between Satan and sun is not exhausted by the first explicit reference to it in the eclipse simile, and it does not remain static, or even stable. Yet it is worth noting that, when Satan begins the address to the sun, the time is noon and this is expressed by relating sun and tower again. Furthermore, the point of Satan's hatred for the sun is that it reminds him of the glory he lost, just as in the eclipse simile:

Sometimes towards Eden which now in his view
 Lay pleasant, his grieved looks he fixes sad,
 Sometimes towards heaven and the *full-blazing sun*,
 Which now sat high in his *meridian tower*:
 Then much revolving, thus in sighs began.
 O thou that with surpassing *glory* crowned
 Lookst from thy sole dominion like the God
 Of this new world; at whose sight all the stars
 Hide their diminished heads; to thee I call,
 But with no friendly voice, and add thy name

Adam: 7.11-24, etc. See my *The Old Enemy*, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 237-44.

O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
That bring to my remembrance from what state
I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere.²²

It is the discrepancy between sun and Satan that calls forth this speech, more clearly than in the simile. In Satan's jealousy, we can read the plot of the poem as a whole, Satan's desire to replace the sun as the god of this new world.

These various pairs, echoes and parallels point also to the major thematic and political opposition in the poem, that between Son and Satan, each of whom is dignified many times by the royal title of king. But we will not understand that opposition if we do not see how it is at work in the sun-Son pun, and therefore in the eclipse simile also. For the full complexity of the sun-Son idea, as I have tried to show, is only clear once we see it against the backdrop of Milton's own politics and his distaste for monarchy. The restitution of the politics to Milton's poem by modern editors and commentators enriches the text and so poses the reader the kind of typical problem he must be willing to deal with at each point in his contact with Satan. The figure of Satan as sun is hard to decipher, as is often the case with the complex simile of epic tradition, and that difficulty is made explicit in our passage, since the omen written in the sky is not said to make monarchs tremble with fear of change, rather it perplexes them.

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22. IV. 27-38, italics added.

