

# Milton's *Primaeval Man*.

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"By steps we may ascend to God."

THE chief interest of our last study, that of Milton's Angels, lay in the fact of their resemblance to Man. This resemblance is the result not so much of poetical licence on the poet's part as of deliberate opinion. Milton endorses the tradition according to which Man was created to fill the "vacant room" caused by rebellion in the angelic ranks. The limitations to which he is subjected, the tests imposed upon him, are intended to prevent the recurrence of so great a catastrophe. This new Angel, the last-born and darling son of the Creator, is to be carefully trained and tested before entering upon his inheritance: he must serve as a probationer before being admitted to the full privileges of his order. Thus we find his limitations, his comparative ignorance and subjection, as much insisted on as his knowledge and freedom. He is represented, it is true, as not only innocent, but noble and majestic, replete with all natural goodness, wise with intuitive knowledge. He is also immortal, beautiful to look at, and knows, naturally, neither sickness nor pain. But if in these respects he is only "a little lower than the Angels," he is lower none the less, and that not only as the head of a lower creation, a distinct "species," but as occupying a lower step on the ladder which he must climb if he is to fulfil the law of his being. For Milton believes in evolution, if not in the modern sense of the word, still in a very real sense. To him all creation is an ascending scale of forms, closely linked, the lower forms sustaining the higher, and capable of eventual assimilation with them—

"Each in their several active spheres assigned  
Till body up to spirit work."<sup>1</sup>

His Paradise, like that of most modern theologians, is the home not of manhood, ideally considered, but of childhood. Milton's ideal Man—Man, as he was made capable of becoming—is not Adam, but rather Abdiel, in whom we find the fire and freedom, the tried courage, the conscious virtue which are so dear to the heart of the poet, but which weakness and inexperience make impossible to Adam. It is this tried virtue that gives the Angel his moral superiority. Milton is nowhere more eloquent than in the famous passage in which

<sup>1</sup> *Paradise Lost*, v. 477, 478.

he insists on the importance of such trial to moral growth:—

"I cannot praise an ignorant and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and seeks her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. . . . That which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue, therefore, which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure."<sup>2</sup>

It is true that he so far makes Adam an exception, as to suggest in his case the knowledge of good might have been acquired without the knowledge of evil:—

"Perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil—*i.e.* of knowing good by evil."<sup>3</sup>

But we need not suppose him to mean that even in unfallen man, good could have been developed without a struggle. On the contrary, the temptation to which Adam succumbs is a trial which must have lifted him higher if it had not worsted him. Had he resisted it, he and his race would doubtless have been strengthened and purified by successive probations, adapted to their increasing virtue. Men were to dwell on earth—

. . . "Till, by degrees of merit raised,  
They open to themselves at length the way  
Up hither, under long obedience tried,  
And earth be changed to heaven, and heaven to earth."<sup>4</sup>

Or, as Raphael puts it to Adam—

"Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,  
Improved by tract of time, and wing'd ascend  
Ethereal, as we; or may at choice  
Here or in heavenly Paradises dwell."<sup>5</sup>

Earth, in short, was to have been a sort of fore-court of heaven, itself becoming slowly "more refined, more spiritous and pure," as its inhabitants became more and more fitted, by continual practice, for the exercise of angelic functions.

One difficulty must beset all speculations on this subject, a difficulty familiar to us in connection

<sup>2</sup> *Areopagitica*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *P.L.* vii. 157-160.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* v. 497-500.

with the temptations of Christ. How are we to conceive of a sinless being—Adam, Abdiel, Christ—as tempted to evil at all? What is there on which temptation can lay hold? Milton feels the difficulty, and—as far, at least, as Adam is concerned—he meets it characteristically. He has recourse here as elsewhere to the arbitrary will of God. He separates God from goodness, and supports his view by a literal interpretation of the story of the apple. Man, he contends, could not have been tempted to sin, *as such*,—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life,"—for his inclinations were naturally holy; but he could be tempted to an act innocent in itself, yet involving the sin of disloyalty, as being arbitrarily forbidden:—

"It was necessary that something should be forbidden or commanded as a test of fidelity, and that an act in its own nature indifferent, in order that man's obedience might be thereby manifested. For since it was the disposition of man to do what was right, as being naturally good and holy, it was not necessary that he should be bound by the obligation of a covenant to perform that to which he was of himself inclined."<sup>1</sup>

And again—

"Seeing that man was made in the image of God, and had the whole law of nature so implanted and innate in him, that he needed no precept to enforce its observance, it follows that if he received any additional commands . . . these commands formed no part of the law of nature, which is sufficient of itself to teach whatever is agreeable to right reason—that is to say, whatever is intrinsically good. Such commands, therefore, must have been founded on what is called positive right, whereby God, or any one invested with lawful power, commands or forbids what is in itself neither good nor bad."<sup>2</sup>

If we are tempted to ask—Is not this to make God the Author of sin, nay, according to Milton, of the lifelong and eternal misery of millions? we are landed in the difficulties that confronted us in our first study; and, at least, we must allow that Milton's suggestion is an ingenious and consistent one.

The test, as we know, proves fatal. The "mortal taste" of "that forbidden tree" makes the starting-point of Milton's tragedy. By that first sin the easy way is barred, along which, by short and

<sup>1</sup> *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, chap. x. "Of the Special Government of Man."  
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

pleasant stages, Man might have passed to the Promised Land. He has to turn aside into the wilderness, and there, with painful steps, and by rough and circuitous paths, to find, if it may be, his original goal. He has lost all the equipments for his journey,—the immortality which he shared with the Angels, his natural rectitude, even the power of will, which left him free to stand or fall. The death which overtakes him affects soul and body alike, or rather—for Milton does not believe in "soul and body"—the entire man. There is no intangible spiritual existence, no Hades life, no Paradise of the spirit, while the body sleeps. The man dies absolutely, is non-existent, till he is re-created, for bane or bliss, on the day of resurrection." So, too, his will is hopelessly crippled, his inclinations hopelessly depraved, except as reinforced by miraculous aid,—the "grace" unneeded by the Angels,<sup>4</sup> as it was unneeded by unfallen man. And, at best, it is only a fragment of the millions doomed by his error whom Adam foresees as restored by One who

"Shall quell  
The adversary Serpent, and bring back  
Through the world's wilderness long—  
wandered man  
Safe to eternal Paradise of rest."<sup>3</sup>

The "greater part," so Milton assures us, are to perish by the way.

Milton's tragedy does not, as a rule, affect us much. This is perhaps because, while it has lost some of its hold on our belief, it has lost none on our memories. It has become less true to us, without ceasing to be trite. If we would realise its sadness, we must compel ourselves to see with Milton's eyes, to combine the poet's freshness of insight with the theologian's faith. We must imagine it true, not in substance only, but in detail; not as a mystery, but as a series of syllogisms, of which every conclusion must be pressed with a remorseless logic. Doing this, we may perhaps understand how the poet, when he cast about him for a tragedy that might best express the weariness and disappointment of his later life, rejected one by one the subjects that had suggested themselves to him during the years of waiting,<sup>6</sup> rejected even the *Christus Patiens*, to occupy himself with the saddest of all histories, the master-tragedy of the human race.

<sup>3</sup> *T.C.D.* chap. vii. "Of the Death of the Body."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* chap. ix. "Of the Special Government of Angels."

<sup>5</sup> *P.L.* xii. 311-314.

<sup>6</sup> See the list given by Garnett and other biographers.