

Of the Beginning of Milton's *Paradise Lost* Write: A Grammar

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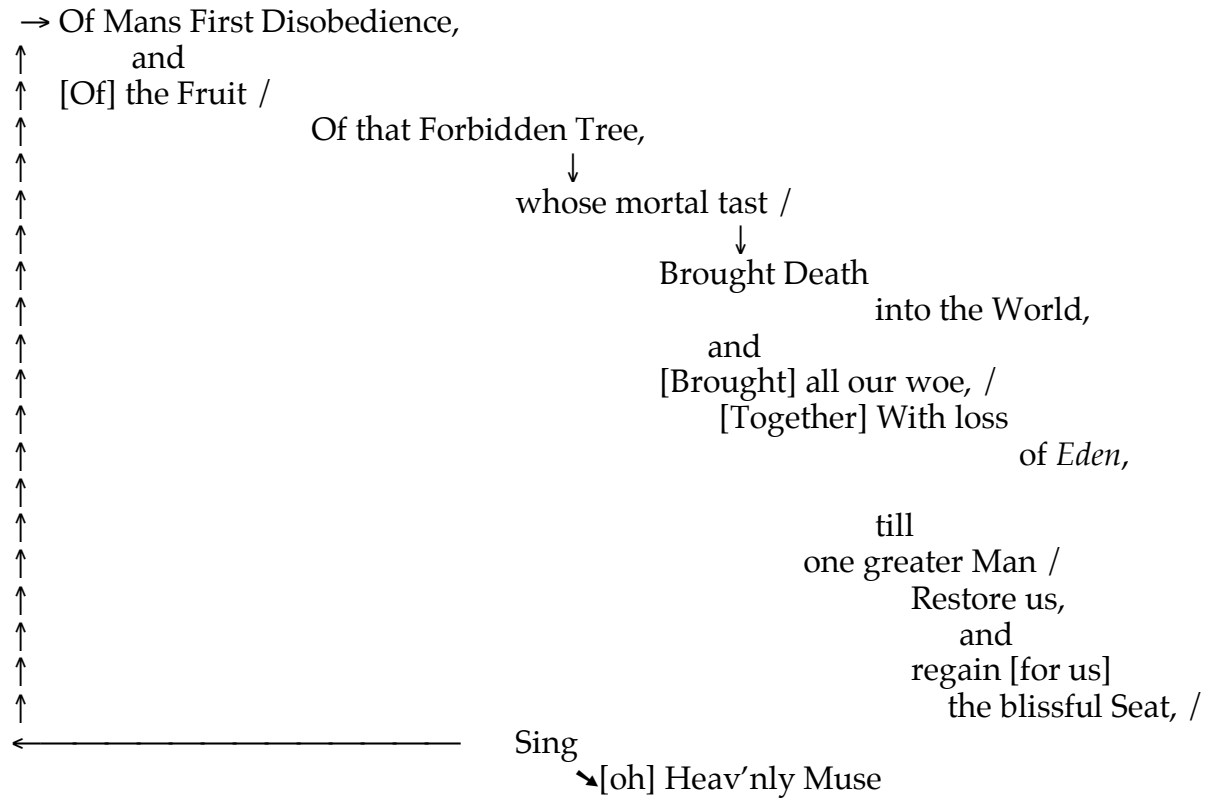
Milton was not one to doubt his own artistry.¹ He was the consummate crafter of verse, perhaps the most paradigmatically deliberate of all English poets. Each word, each structure, each syntactic unit is placed where it is for a calculated purpose. In addition, this cannily crafted verse is shaped with an overarching eloquence that integrates powerfully and resonantly the classical and the contemporary, the academic and the colloquial. This is a gift that Milton shares with Shakespeare. Both writers glide effortlessly from the polysyllabically Latinate to the monosyllabically English, and they do so within a seamless organic whole that seems both apt and natural throughout.

The way that Milton introduces the subject of *Paradise Lost*² in its first five and a half lines is a rich and exemplary specimen of his technique. These lines deserve to be studied with great care, with a thoroughness that should be legislative for the care and thoroughness that need to be applied to the epic as a whole.

The structure of the opening is this:

¹ See R. Zaslavsky, "Peter and the Wolf: A Reading of Milton's *Lycidas*" (www.doczonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/lycidas_alt.pdf).

² The text used in this discussion is John Milton, *Paradise Lost* [1674 edition], ed. Roy Flannagan (Prentice-Hall, 1993).



The poem begins with a simple and direct four-word phrase, “Of Mans First Disobedience” (three monosyllables followed by a common polysyllable [four syllables]). Then the content of the phrase is elaborated, modified, and qualified in a five-line cascade that is built with subordinate clauses, conjunctions, and prepositional phrases. The entire cascade is the object of the first word of the sixth line, the imperative “Sing.” This is a boldly protracted reversal of normal English word order, but it has the advantage of placing the grammatical object—which is of primary importance because it is the theme of the poem as a whole—first.

This reversal has the added advantage of allowing the verb “Sing” to ring out with powerful emphasis, an emphasis that is strengthened by its being the first syllable of the spondee that begins the sixth line, the first non-iambic foot in the poem.

The initial statement of the subject of the poem is “Mans First Disobedience.” The order of the words is significant. “Mans” coming first thrusts forth and highlights the poem’s essential subject, namely humanity, humans as humans. What especially characterizes humans as humans is their tendency to resist being told what to do: what characterizes them essentially is their “Disobedience.” The interposition of the ordinal adjective “First” underscores its essentiality by indicating that the act of disobedience that will be sung in the poem was not a singular, unique phenomenon, but rather it initiated a series of disobediences of which it was the primal (first) instance. Not only does this suggest that what makes humans truly human is their tendency to disobey, but also it invites the reader to think through what is required for there to be disobedience.

Such ratiocination reveals that the possibility of disobedience can exist only where the free ability to choose one or the other of at least two alternatives exists. Only those who are free can disobey. In other words, for obedience to be meaningful, it must be free obedience. If one obeys because one cannot disobey, there is neither freedom nor meaningfulness in the obedience. Only if one is free to choose between obeying and disobeying is the obedience or disobedience meaningful (and hence, laudatory or culpatory).

Therefore, the first phrase of the poem already indicates that the problem of human freedom is going to be central to the story that is about to be narrated.³

So much is implied in the thematic statement “Mans First Disobedience.”

³ One might even suspect that the heavenly or infernal beings who play a role will be, in at least some sense, projections of the human condition and the human dilemma in that condition. Cf. Flannagan’s citing of Neil Forsyth’s claim that “another possible serious pun is “of man’s first Dis,” Dis being one of the Latin names for Hades” (Book I, note 33).

The Miltonic narrator adds to this “the Fruit” of what humans have done in their disobedience. For an instant, before one enjambs into the second line, one wonders whether disobeying can be good or beneficial. That wondering is based on the meaning of “fruit” as “positive, profitable consequences enjoyed because of what one does,” as in the expression “the fruit of one’s labors.”

Only when one enjambs into the second line does one come to see the fruit as literal fruit on a tree (“Of that Forbidden Tree”). Then one notices that while “Fruit” is unmodified, “Tree” is not. “Tree” is doubly modified by the descriptive adjective “Forbidden” and the demonstrative adjective “that.” Therefore, this is no ordinary tree: it is that [well-known] tree, the forbidden tree, that [well known] forbidden tree.

The adjective “Forbidden” indicates and specifies the character of the human disobedience: it is not the doing of something other than what one was ordered to do, but rather it is the doing of something that one was ordered pointedly *not* to do. In addition, the alliteration of “First...Fruit...Forbidden” suggests that what is first for humans, what is essential to humans as humans, is their attitude toward what is forbidden and their expectation to profit from what is forbidden.

Furthermore, the paradoxical notion that a tree may be forbidden while its fruit is not forbidden adumbrates the notion of the Fortunate Fall.

The relative pronoun “whose” introduces a long subordinate clause series—immediately subordinate to the word “Fruit”—and that clause series culminates in the first main clause verb of the poem, the imperative “Sing.” However, the relative pronoun’s antecedent could be construed also to be “Disobedience.”

Since the antecedent is characterized by its “mortal tast,” the Miltonic narrator is attributing that “mortal tast” simultaneously to the fruit and to the act of disobedience that it occasioned. This attribution is strengthened by the double meaning of the phrase

“mortal tast.” It can mean (1) flavor that causes death; (2) tasting (taking a taste) that causes death. This suggests that even before one bites the fruit, the mere movement toward the fruit to taste it, the taking it to taste, is already a fatal act of disobedience.

In either case, the fruit’s having a mortal taste would lead one to conclude that anyone who tastes the taste of the fruit will die immediately, on the spot, instanter. Such a conclusion would be bolstered if one remembered the Biblical account, according to which God said, “in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:17/KJV). The Hebrew, with which Milton was familiar, is even more emphatic, an emphasis that the KJV translators tried to convey with the word “surely,” which is meant to translate the infinitive “to die” (מוֹת) that precedes the conjugated form of the same verb, “thou shalt die” (תָּמוּת).⁴ This judgment is not fulfilled in the Bible, which is why the Miltonic narrator now has to add “Brought Death into the World.” This crucial qualification reorients the account toward what actually ensued: the act did not lead to the immediate death of the actors, but rather it introduced mortality into the world. As a result of the disobedience, all humans do not die, but all things become subject to death. This implies that prior to the Fall, humans (at least, Adam and Eve and their progeny) were immortal.⁵ The loss of this immortality is a high price to pay for the desire to possess ethical knowledge.

However, it is not the only price. An additional price is “all our woe.” Although the price of mortality was imposed on the whole world, this additional price was restricted to humans: it is ours. Therefore, the surcharge for disobeying and tasting the taste of the

⁴ Cf. *The Five Books of Moses*, a translation with commentary by Robert Alter (NY, Norton, 2004), note ad Genesis 2:7: “The form of the Hebrew...is what grammarians call the infinitive absolute: the infinitive immediately followed by a conjugated form of the same verb. The general effect of this repetition is to add emphasis to the verb....” In *The Five Books of Moses*, a new translation with introductions, commentary, and notes by Everett Fox (NY, Schocken, 1995), Fox translates this “you must die, yes die.”

⁵ Presumably this is the benefit from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life.

fruit of the forbidden tree is the pain, sadness, and grief that characterize human life today.

The alliteration of “World” and “woe” reminds one that just as the sound “wo” is only part of the sound “world,” so too our condition is our unique part of the condition of the world as a whole.

In addition, there is—it is reasonable to presume—a pun on “woe” and “wooe,” two words that would have been pronounced virtually identically in the seventeenth century. This pun suggests that the act of disobedience that brought woe into our world also brought wooing into our world. In other words, the first disobedience brought into our world sexuality and all that sexuality implies.

Therefore, the act of disobedience eventuated in mortality, pain, and sexuality.

However, there is one additional price to pay. That final price is the “loss of *Eden*.” Although this could be read as a relatively minor, even casual, footnote (Cf. *PL*, Flannagan’s note ad loc.), that would be a misreading, because this phrase is a recasting of the title of the poem, a recasting that echoes back to that title. In so doing, it and “Mans First Disobedience” become powerful bookends, as it were, for the Miltonic narrator’s first major statement (lines 1-4a): each is a mirror image of the other. In some sense, then, the “loss of *Eden*” is the highest price to pay. After all, the loss of Eden is the loss of innocence, the loss of perfection, the loss of God’s grace. This is indeed the chief of our woes in the world.

At this point, the reader has been showered with a devastating set of consequences, consequences so crushing that one is taken to the edge of despair for humanity.

The Miltonic narrator immediately throws the reader a lifeline of hope that is signaled by the word “till,” which connotes that there will be an end to the abyss into which humans have thrust themselves.

That termination of our woes in the world is represented by the promise of the appearance of “one greater Man.” It is miraculous that it will take only one human to repair the damage done by a multitude of humans engaging in a multiplicity of disobediences that generate a plenitude of woes. However, that one human is no ordinary human, but rather is a greater human. The force of the comparative adjective here tempts one to complete it in the usual way with “than,” which would suggest that this unnamed savior will be greater *than* human, greater than the first human Adam (which means “human” in Hebrew) and greater than all of us who are descended from Adam and who ‘enjoy’ the legacy of woe that his action has bequeathed us. The reader may divine that the referent of this greater than human savior is Jesus, yet here he is left as a nameless promise.

In addition, this greater than human savior will “Restore us,” i.e., replenish us spiritually. Furthermore, since “restore” derives from the Latin verb *restaurō* (to restore), which in turn has as its root the Greek word σταυρός (“cross”: cf. Matthew 27:40), it points to the price that this savior will have to pay to redeem us (namely, crucifixion), and that points to—without explicitly specifying—Jesus.

Not only will this savior “Restore us,” but also he will “regain [for us] the blissful Seat.” What “the blissful Seat” is, is not defined, but the repetition of the prefix “re-” (in “Restore” and “regain”) indicates that what this savior will bestow upon us is something that we once had but now have lost.⁶

Finally, the main clause verb, the imperative “Sing,” is uttered.

⁶ There may also be a pun on “seat” and “seed.” The “t” and “d” sounds are dentals that easily change into each other linguistically. This pun would imply that part of the restoration would be the eradication of the pain of generation (as in childbearing).

A reader who stopped at this word might think that he or she is the addressee who is being asked to join the Miltonic narrator as co-narrator. However, if that same reader is familiar with the poetic progenitors to this work, namely the ancient epic poets, he or he might recall that the second word of the *Iliad* is also the imperative “sing” (ᾄδε). Such a recollection leads the reader to infer that this poem is squarely in the ancient epic tradition, in which case the expectation is aroused that the addressee would be “goddess” (θεῖα: *Iliad* A. 1) or “Muse” (Μοῦσα: *Odyssey* A. 1; *Musa*: *Aeneid* I. 10). That expectation is met by the specification of the addressee as “Heav’nly Muse.”⁷

However, the ancient epic writers did not qualify the addressee with a modifying adjective. On the other hand, the Miltonic narrator qualifies the unnamed “Muse” with the adjective “Heav’nly.” That the Muse is unnamed is not surprising, but rather it is firmly in the ancient epic tradition. Nonetheless, the adjectival qualification is striking and surprising. The ancient Greek adjective “heavenly” was οὐράνια (*ourania*), which might call to mind the Greek muse Urania, the muse associated in late antiquity with astronomy. If it does, the reader will not be surprised when the Miltonic narrator gives the muse this name in the first line of Book VII. However, there the Miltonic narrator is careful to say that this muse is only homonymous with the muse of the same name in the ancient ennead. Rather the Miltonic narrator asserts that his Urania is the sister of Wisdom. Therefore, this muse is not the same as any of the ancient Muses, but rather it is a personal and idiosyncratic authorial fountainhead.

⁷ This is not the place to discuss the ambiguity of these invocations to the goddess/muse. In the *Iliad*, the goddess is presented as the source through the use of the imperative “sing” alone. However, in the *Odyssey*, the imperative addressed to the muse is coupled with a pronoun: “speak/tell in me” (μοι ἔννεπε). In the *Aeneid*, the verb “to sing” appears in the first line, but it is in the first person singular, present active tense form: “I sing” (*cano*). In the tenth line of the *Aeneid*, the muse is asked to help the Vergilian narrator to remember. The extent to which these divine addressees actually represent projections of the narrator’s psyche must be left open here.

Therefore, a unique and revolutionary poet invokes a unique and revolutionary muse. Only such a poet/muse would dare to craft a song that “pursues / Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime” (*PL* I. 15-16). One should not underestimate this claim. The Miltonic narrator is not shrinking from declaring that what he will write (sing) goes beyond *everything* that has been written before, beyond not only the ancient Greek and Roman epics, but beyond even what is written in the Bible. This is cosmic (uranian) self-confidence (hybris) of a very high order.