Lessons for the Christian Pedagogue: *Paradise Regained* and Milton's Rejection of the Renaissance Humanist Tradition

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Paradise Regained and Milton's Rejection of the Renaissance Humanist Tradition

By Daniel L. Wright

Of his two great epics of salvation history, it may be that Milton's Paradise Regained is justly overshadowed by the artistic symmetry and lyrical facility of Paradise Lost, but it may be, too, that for all its considered weaknesses, Paradise Regained may suggest as much or more to us which is of use in understanding something of Milton's pedagogical theory during his later years than does Paradise Lost. As Howard Schultz has remarked, Milton joins with Saint Paul in denouncing the pursuit of "unsanctified learning" in both Paradise Regained and Paradise Lost "where the bare letter of his paraphrase speaks against historical Hellenism" (84).

That a rhetorical assault on "historical Hellenism" could in any way form a perspective by which one might discover the guiding principle of later Miltonic pedagogy requires recognition that to the typical seventeenth-century Renaissance humanist, all knowledge of classical origin was rather indiscriminantly revered and regarded as authoritative for a variety of disciplines. In the seventeenth century, as in the centuries preceding it, the influence of ancient Greek and Roman cultures shaped European and even religious metaphor. Milton, steeped in this educational cauldron of Hellenistic and Imperial Roman tradition, acquired a familiarity with the classical tradition which so closely compounded with his theological disposition, however, that the relationship can only be called intimate. Milton's acquaintance with the classics and the Scriptures, as well as his knowledge of the worlds in which they were produced, penetrate and inform his prose and poetry and, it would appear, form, in his early work, the normative basis for Milton's discernment of what is the "good"—as opposed to what is merely "true." Such a conclusion is especially well-attested when we recall that Milton judged the acceptance of Copernican astronomy and Newtonian physics as "true in fact," but less than "good," because these new disciplines did not as readily accommodate themselves to the hierarchial universe of Ptolemaic cosmology which, to Milton, better supported traditional Christian concepts about the universe and its relationship to God.

Milton was also aware that the fathers and doctors of both the Eastern and Western Churches had educated themselves in the works of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans, Sophists, et al. As Martin Larson has observed, the patricians "were deeply versed in, and much influenced by, pagan philosophers . . . . They [the pagans] are frequently invoked, and their ideas in regard to morality and free will were repeated in almost their exact words" (35). Milton, as a heterodox Christian, was, of course, by no means a "father of the Church," nor did he agree in all points with those so regarded, but he still inherited the same philosophical tradition as his more catholic forebears and utilized it in the formation of his own argumentative method. One has only to examine Milton's appropriation of classical rhetorical method (exordium, propositio, narratio, confirmatio, refutatio, and peroratio) in his Areopagitica or look at the Stoic reservation of his sonnet, "When I Consider How My Light is Spent," to find confirmation of this observation. Such examples conclusively reveal the extent to which Milton was guided and influenced by classical
models and methods which, because they preceded or were ignorant of Christianity, were divorced from Christianity. Yet, it is also clear from Milton’s work that he sought, at least at first, a means by which Christianity and pagan wisdom might by harmonized. As William Riley Parker has noted, in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton adopted the dramatic form of the Athenians as a vehicle for narrating his story of Samson, a pre-Christian hero of the faith whom he crafted as a type of Christ (33ff). And, as Matthew Arnold declared of the evident tension between Milton’s theological temperament and his indebtedness to the classical tradition so revered by Renaissance man, “Milton was a humanist, but the Puritan temper mastered him” (qtd. in Fussel 3).

Milton could not utterly disparage the heritage of Renaissance humanism, however— at least not in his early life. Truth, after all, to him, was truth, regardless of who spoke it—pagan philosopher, Jacobean dramatist, or English Puritan. For early Milton, as with Bacon, “there [was] no doctrine of the double truth. A proposition [could not] be true in divinity and false in philosophy” (Schultz 35). Consequently, Milton could acknowledge his indebtedness to secular learning, but according to Larson, this acknowledgment in youth did not preclude his ultimate rejection of the values of Renaissance method and ideals, nor did it compromise his later zeal which disparaged education and learning unfounded in Christian revelation:

> The evolution of Milton’s thought was, first, one of progression toward greater seriousness and profundity; and, second, a movement away from almost pure Renaissance Hellenism... toward the highest ideals and philosophy which Christianity is capable of exhibiting... The development of Milton’s thought indicates a highly qualified movement toward self-abnegation and surrender to the unseen. (162-63)

Milton then, unlike Donne, could not “exonerate secular learning entirely” (Schultz 20); learning, according to the later Milton, was properly founded in God’s revealed truth in the Bible or it was not learning at all. This devotion to revealed truth in the Scriptures, as exclusively authoritative and normative (“... he who receives / Light from above... No other doctrine needs...”) (Paradise Regained IV, 288-90) has prompted Howard Schultz to remark that, in this final disregard for knowledge which does not proceed directly from the Scriptures, “Milton strayed perhaps further from Protestant tradition than from the Bible” (119).

Milton’s progression from the Renaissance humanist to Puritan zealot (“Alas! what can they [pagan philosophers] teach, and not mislead;.../.../.../...Who therefore seeks in these/True wisdom, finds her not, or by delusion / Far worse, her false resemblance only meets. ...”) (Paradise Regained IV, 309, 318-20) is perhaps not best illustrated by Paradise Regained, but Paradise Regained—perhaps more than any other work of Miltonic verse—best articulates the writer’s conviction, expressed in *De Doctrina Christiana*, that “obedience and love are always the best guides to knowledge” (Book I, Chapter I). It is, for example, in Paradise Regained that Christ is presented principally as a “second Adam,” a man who, unlike the original Adam, does follow the precepts of love and obedience; consequently, he is wise, and it is through the wisdom of this Christ, this second Adam of Paradise Regained, that Milton speaks. Milton identifies himself closely with this image of Christ, primarily because this Christ is the perfect type of the individual who chooses wisely, and for Milton, the choice for wisdom is humanity’s supreme possibility and sign that we are created in *imago Dei*. Christ, therefore, as the perfect wise man, the perfect representative of God in his wisdom, love, and obedience, for God (whom Milton, of course, would never confuse with Christ) is himself obedient to his own promises, as he binds himself by covenant with his creation in order that, among his creation, perfect trust in Him may prevail; subsequently, for Milton, it should be to live in *imitatio Christi*, to be like Christ that all persons who would be wise ought to aspire.

Consistent with this belief, then, is Milton’s
depiction, in *Paradise Regained*, of Christ's encounter with Satan in the wilderness: he is an "argumentative Christ" (Schultz 222), a Miltonic orator in the wasteland who summons people to him not only that he may be seen but understood. Such understanding cannot be accomplished without the light of divine wisdom, however—wisdom which, as Bishop Hall has said of Milton's convictions, cannot be imparted by the tradition of "Athens . . . but [only] by Jerusalem" (qtd. in Schultz 89).

Martin Larson makes particular note of Milton's diminished attention to the wisdom of the ancients in Milton's later work and observes his otherwise rather considerable exaltation of distinctively Christian wisdom:

*In Paradise Regained*, we find . . . very little mythological allusion or pagan imagery. . . . The interest is far more in theology than metaphysics. All pagan learning and philosophy are condemned, even when the argument is drawn from such sources. The attention is centered upon human temptation and the purpose of Christ in the world. (173)

In *Paradise Regained*, it is this worldly wisdom which Satan relies upon in his attempt to seduce Christ with offers of temporal power in exchange for displaced devotion, but it is the demonic character of such temptations which Christ's superior wisdom penetrates and exposes, therein confirming Satan's warranted apprehension of the young Christ, which he expresses in Book I:

> His birth to our just fear gave no small cause,  
> But his growth now to youth's full flower,  
> displaying  
> All virtue, grace and wisdom to achieve  
> Things highest, greatest, multiplies my fear . . . (65-68)

Therefore, according to Milton, the worthiness of instruction and guidance, in order to form right reason in the pupil, would necessarily be determined by the teacher's faithfulness in presenting the whole truth of Christ to his students. For Milton, the wise teacher, like the Wise Teacher, would nurture his intellect in the sources of revealed truth, applying this holy wisdom to his instruction in such a manner as to leave no ambiguities regarding the measure of his commitment to right reason and right religion. All reliance upon wisdom which proceeded exclusively from pagan sources would be shunned as insufficient at least and evil at most. As Larson summarizes of the later Milton's posture on classical authority, "Nothing is to be accepted simply because it was believed in the past" (83); all is to be believed which proceeds from the mind and will of God which are manifest in revealed Truth. Hence, Milton would doubtless argue that the goal of the teacher is to fashion his mind in holy conformity with that of his Creator—a mind which, like that of Christ's in *Paradise Regained*, would not be informed by the misguided fancies and uncertain speculations of men. Education, for Milton, as would all the responsibilities of life, be fully in the service of Christ and his Church.

What, then, can we conclude about Milton's approach to his era and its increasingly humanistic spirit which challenged the presumptions of a more theocentric time? We can declare with confidence that Milton's methods of exposition, argument, and persuasion were characteristic of his age, but his attitude was diametrically opposed to it (Larson 247). Milton, as a poet and pedagogue of intense, Puritanical conviction, dared not compromise that which he perceived to be divine truth by mingling revelation with the worldly wisdom that he, like Saint Paul, believed to be the mere folly of men.

**Works Cited**


