

Compass, Centre and Circumscription: Some Themes in *Paradise Lost* Books VII and VIII

- Ronald Hall

My theme is human limitation. It's perhaps appropriately in keeping with that theme that I want to begin very simply, even naively, with some homespun philosophy which I like to share with my students when beginning to teach *Paradise Lost*.

Like many people who greatly admire Milton, I differ from him in many aspects of belief. I generally call myself a Christian - of a sort - but if I had expressed all my views openly a few centuries ago, I might well have been burnt by Catholics *or* Protestants - and who knows whether Milton himself mightn't have approved?

Milton believed in the divinely-inspired literal truth of Scripture. I don't: I believe, like many if not most Christians of today, that a large part of it consists of myths and legends of profound moral and spiritual significance. John Milton believed in literal devils, a literal Hell, and eternal damnation. I don't. Milton, not because he was a misogynist but because he was a man of his time, believed that woman was created slightly - but crucially - inferior to man in the hierarchical scheme of creation. I don't. But I believe that the history of civilization, of religion, and of Christianity itself has to be seen to some extent in evolutionary terms. The three great sources of what we call Western civilization - the Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures - accepted on the whole the inferior status of women, the institution of slavery, and the necessity and rightness of warfare. And in 2000 years of Christianity we have made remarkably little headway on these issues - thanks partly, no doubt, to various corruptions and distortions of Christianity, and to the awful fallibility of human nature itself.

Despite all this, Milton and I have long been able to share a number of beliefs which (ignoring for the present the figure of Christ) I like to express in as *untheological* language as possible. First is the belief that humanity is created - that is, that there is some power in the universe superior to ours, and on which we are in some sense dependent. Second is the belief that we humans are "fallen", i.e. imperfect - the terms implying a falling short of an imaginable ideal; that is to say, the belief that evil is not just an illusion (and even if you could demonstrate that it *was* just an illusion, I would have to insist in contradiction that the illusion *itself* must be some sort of evil, and that therefore evil exists after all). Third is the belief that, whatever the mysterious origin and nature of evil may be, we humans are not entirely passive victims of it: we are able to make real choices, not illusory ones, even though the *range* of our choice is often limited. We are, to at least that extent, free. Setting aside all philosophical debates on the matter,

for practical purposes we must accept the paradox that we simply *aren't* free to disbelieve in our own freedom of choice.

These three basic beliefs, then, are that we are created, that we are fallen or imperfect, and that we are in some measure free to make choices; or, to put it in other terms, that we are limited in power, that we are not what we should be, and that we are not *completely* limited in power.

To these it is necessary, before continuing, to add a fourth basic belief: that the world in which we live has much that is good, beautiful and satisfying, as well as much that is evil, ugly and frustrating: or to put it in Milton's and the Bible's terms, that the world was created *good* - not evil or indifferent - that it is meant in some sense *to* be good, not evil or indifferent; and that the concept "good" is a valid and absolute one, not simply a matter of anthropological relativity or a linguistic trick.

From these four basic premisses, certain corollaries seem to follow. Are we masters of ourselves? Yes, in being free to make choices. No, in being limited in power and imperfect in action. We are free, but we are creatures; or, we are creatures, but we are free.

As free creatures, what are our appropriate responses to the rest of creation around us? They are: firstly, a sense of *wonder* at the forces behind creation (and where the idea of a Creator is entertained, the word for this wonder is worship). Secondly, a sense of *relationship* with the rest of creation, since we are a part of it. Thirdly, a sense of *responsibility* towards the rest of creation, since we can affect it for better or for worse. Responses, then, of wonder, of relationship and of responsibility. And a convenient word for all three of these taken together, is the word *love*.

Consider their opposites. The opposite of a sense of wonder is a sense of self-sufficiency; the opposite of a sense of relationship is either a sense of alienation or a sense of possessiveness. And the opposite of a sense of responsibility is a sense of unlimited power to exploit as we please whatever is available to us.

Now in *Paradise Lost*, in falling, both humankind and the rebel angels move *from* a sense of wonder *to* a sense of self-sufficiency; from a sense of relationship to a sense of either alienation or possessiveness; and from a sense of responsibility to a sense of unlimited power to exploit as they please. They therefore move also from a sense of freedom to one of restraint; from a sense of union to one of alienation; and from a sense of love to one of hatred.

Yet from the start they are obliged to obey the Creator, while left free to disobey. How can we possibly reconcile freedom with obedience? Sullen submission to "law" asserts obedience at the expense of freedom; self-willed behaviour asserts freedom at the expense of obedience. Ultimately - as Raphael points out to Adam in Book V - the only way of reconciling freedom with obedience is through love: love is the essential nexus between the two; and love means maintaining an attitude of wonder, relationship and responsibility instead of grasping at self-sufficiency, possessiveness and power. The central subject of *Paradise Lost* is love. As Raphael says to Adam (V.535-40):

Myself and all th' Angelic Host that stand
In sight of God enthron'd, our happy state
Hold, as you yours, while our obedience holds;
On other surety none; freely we serve,
Because we freely love, as in our will
To love or not; in this we stand or fall

In Milton's scheme of things, love is bound up with what he calls 'right reason'. Reason is the capacity to choose, and right reason is the capacity to choose rightly, which means choosing to *maintain* the attitude of wonder, relationship and responsibility towards the creation and therefore towards the Creator; not to do so amounts to making nonsense of the creation itself, including one's own creation.

As fallen humans we don't, of course, share the position of either Raphael or the unfallen Adam who listens to him in Book V. Nevertheless I think these remarks are relevant to what I want to add about Milton's images of creation.

The four central books of Milton's epic, covering the visit of Raphael to Adam, deal with the beginnings of the angelic rebellion in heaven (V), its consequences in celestial war and the expulsion of the rebels (VI), the creation of the universe (VII), and the nature of the universe and the creation of man, woman, and earthly love and order (VIII). As has often been pointed out, it is important for us always to remember not simply that the angel is speaking but that Adam is listening, and that we are being invited to perform the imaginative task of hearing through his (as yet unfallen) ears. The method is dramatic and the purpose theological: Adam is a figure of man receiving divine revelation, with Raphael considerately 'lik'ning spiritual to corporeal forms' (V.573) in order to help him - and, of course, us.

After hearing the account of the expulsion from heaven, Adam is, with perfectly acceptable curiosity, 'Led on, yet sinless, with desire to know' (VII.61) the details of the origin and meaning of the world. This introduces two books of celebration - celebration of creation, harmony, love and order - following the two books of dire warning that have just been completed in V and VI.

The creation narrative begins with the famous "withdrawal" of the Father as he hands over to the Son the business of creation: 'I uncircumscrib'd myself retire' (VII.170). Setting aside the debates about the so-called "retraction theory" of creation, or whether or not matter itself is derived from the substance of the godhead, all I want to emphasise at this point is the word 'uncircumscribed', implying "without limit". What happens soon after this is that the creating Son, the second person of the Trinity, *circumscribes* the universe in order to create it (lines 224-231):

Then stay'd the fervid Wheels, and in his hand
He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
In God's Eternal store, to circumscribe
This Universe, and all created things:
One foot he centred, and the other turn'd

Round through the vast profundity obscure,
And said, Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be thy just Circumference, O World.

Here I think we must put aside all Blakean illustrations, interpretations and reservations, and simply focus on Milton's words. The passage I have just quoted comes a few lines after the mention of heaven's gates opening in orderly arcs on their golden hinges (205-7), and in contrast the surging waves of Chaos appearing, as though in defiance of order, to 'mix the Pole' with the 'Centre' - a striking simile placed (and surely deliberately) shortly before centres and poles come into existence for the first time.

The book of *Proverbs* (8.27) is cited in connection with the tradition of the compasses: 'When he prepared the heavens, I [Wisdom] was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth'. In tradition 'compass' meaning simply circle apparently came to be seen as a pair of compasses for *drawing* a circle (Hughes note *ad loc.*) and the tradition of this acquired meaning certainly suits Milton's idea of creation, helping to justify and make more physically vivid to our imagination the notion of circumscribing, meaning simultaneously "drawing a perfect circle" and "setting a limit to". This means that the moment of initial creation (in this case even before that of light) is a moment of creating *both* perfection *and* limitation. What is circumscribed (line 227) is 'This Universe, and all created things': the two halves of the line are simultaneously synonymous - the universe *being* all created things - and in a relationship of containment - the universe *containing* all created things. Either way, both it and everything which is about to be created in it (and that includes humanity) is perfect - as the circle or sphere suggests - *and limited* - as the word 'circumscribe' itself suggests. The Oxford dictionary gives both meanings as going back beyond Milton into the sixteenth century, and surprisingly dates the *more* metaphorical and *less* mathematical meaning as the earlier, namely 'To mark out the limits of; to confine ... to hem in, restrain ...'.

If Milton's lines are meaning what they seem quite simply to be saying, he is making a theological point of considerable importance: namely, that the perfection in which we were created in no way implied lack of limits, that indeed it was - as one and the same word suggests - intimately *connected with* the idea of limitation. It is customary to talk of circles or spheres as symbols of perfection *and* of eternity or infinity - and hence by association of *limitlessness*; it seems less customary to think of them as symbols of limitation, of boundaries and restraints - and yet that is precisely what I believe Milton has in mind here, as his words so clearly seem to say (line 230): 'Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds'.

If the word 'circumscribe' is here a kind of sublime pun, so too perhaps is the word 'compass' or 'compasses', since it implies (again going back in each case to the sixteenth century) both an enclosing limit *and* the range or reach of something, suggesting simultaneously an extent of possibilities and the limits of those possibilities. When the creating Son centres one foot and turns the other, he himself of course occupies both the central position and the circumference he is describing. (And the line (229) that traces this vast movement of arc closing

into circle is, incidentally, one of the most haunting suggestive assonantal lines in Milton: I refer to the kind of assonance which instead of repeating the same vowel runs through the entire gamut of *different* vowels, enacting in aural suggestion the vast sweep of the compass-leg, which - through preparatory enjambment - 'turn'd / Round through the vast profundity obscure'.)

The moment in which the universe is created perfect is also the moment in which it is created limited; and the same goes for everything it contains, including humanity in its perfect and unfallen state. To be perfect and unfallen does not mean to be unlimited; this is surely one of the essential components of Raphael's theologically instructive visit to Adam; it is also, as a matter of fact, the lesson the as yet unfallen Eve fails to learn when she complains of 'our condition, thus to dwell / In narrow circuit strait'n'd by a Foe' (IX.322-3); it is interesting that her complaint of limitation uses another term of circularity, namely 'circuit'. (Her complaint doesn't make her fallen, as some readers seem to believe; nothing can make her fallen except eating the forbidden fruit. But it is true, I think, that Milton keeps Eve *theologically* unfallen while preparing us *dramatically and psychologically* for the possibility of her fall: rather as Marlowe until the final hour keeps Faustus theologically capable of repentance while yet convincing us that he is dramatically and psychologically incapable of it.)

Adam's reply to Eve's complaint is that God's 'creating hand / Nothing imperfect or deficient left / Of all that he Created, much less Man' (lines 344-6): endorsing the notion that perfection and limitation are absolutely compatible with each other. Humanity is "circumscribed" before the Fall, and circumscription does not negate perfection. Everything was created good, and everything was created with its own limits, including Earth which 'self-balanct on her Centre hung' (VII.242). The circumscription of the whole of creation is also, of course, in direct contrast to God himself who earlier described himself as 'uncircumscribed' even in his "withdrawal" for the sake of creation.

Raphael, having completed his splendid account of the creation, ends Book VII by inviting further inquiries from Adam (lines 639-40): 'If else thou seek'st / Aught, not surpassing human measure, say'. It is noteworthy - and surely not accidental - that the "creation book" of the epic ends very deliberately on a line drawing attention to human measure - that is, limitation; and that this does not negate the notion that God saw his handiwork and saw it was good.

In answer to Raphael's invitation, Adam opens Book VIII by raising a problem that has called forth much learned commentary: the problem of the apparent wastefulness of creation and uselessness of the stars, except as beautiful lights for the earth - which in its turn might, he suggests, do better to move (in Copernican fashion) than to remain sedentary (in Ptolemaic fashion). Without being at all dismissive of the learned commentary, I intend here to ignore it in order to concentrate on my one theme - and that is of course a theological rather than an astronomical or cosmological one.

The first thing of interest to note about Adam's question is that he has already partly answered it himself, back in Book IV, and seems rather quaintly to have forgotten this when he raises it in Book VIII. In Book IV, at the end of her lovely

evening song, Eve asked him about the stars and what their use is when he and she are asleep (IV.657-8). He replies without hesitation or puzzlement (674-680):

These then, though unbeheld in deep of night,
Shine not in vain, nor think, though men were none,
That Heav'n would want spectators, God want praise;
Millions of spiritual Creatures walk the Earth
Unseen, both when we wake, and when we sleep:
All these with ceaseless praise his works behold
Both day and night

The essence of his answer is, of course, that the human perspective - even the perfect, unfallen human perspective - is far too limited for the order of created things to be determined by the limits of its experience. Although in Book VIII Adam is still unfallen, perhaps Milton is deliberately allowing him to ask the odd question which will prepare us dramatically for his capacity to fall.

Raphael's reply is very interesting. It is a long one, over a hundred lines, beginning with 'To ask or search I blame thee not' (65), and nearly ending with 'Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid' - which, baldly quoted in juxtaposition, sound a little contradictory. What I think his answer is really doing, though, is to reiterate and confirm the idea I have already expressed: that to be perfect is quite consistent with being limited. Despite the learned accounts of possible different cosmologies, whether Ptolemaic or Copernican, and despite the rather hedging series of "What if" propositions in Raphael's little astronomy lecture, the real issue is man's recognition of his own place in creation: 'That Man may know he dwells not in his own' (line 103). In other words, it is really less an astronomy lecture than a reminder of who we are.

As a reply to the implied question whether the universe is constructed on Ptolemy's or Copernicus's model, Raphael's account is uninformative. (We know that although the given universe of the poem is Ptolemaic, Milton himself really believed in the Copernican theory; but all this is immaterial to the present conversation between Adam and Raphael.) What matters is that Raphael places a guillotine on the discussion, incurring the wrath and indignation of a number of readers ever since. What I want to suggest is that his guillotine, properly speaking, is *not* an evasion or a loose end, nor is it a sign of Milton's losing interest in the subject. It is, rather, a highly significant thematic statement about human limitations and the asking of ultimate questions.

Modern man may well ask different ultimate questions about big bangs or perpetual-creation theories or expanding universes, but his intellectual inquiries must and will inevitably arrive at speculative uncertainties. (If I had been able, many years ago, to answer my young daughter's question, 'What's outside the universe?', she would have gone on to ask 'And what's outside that?' and so on *ad infinitum*, so I would not have been able to satisfy her.) Raphael's rather severe recommendation to 'Think only what concerns thee' (174) is not an injunction to embrace utilitarian notions of relevance; but it is a reminder of our limitations. Whatever the subject, we are bound to continue asking questions until the point

comes when - short of ceasing to be human - we *cannot* expect answers. Raphael's so-called guillotine is, then, the logical point to which the treatment of human knowledge has been moving; the astronomical or cosmological problem on which it comes down is merely the metaphorical equivalent of every question that leaves us with an awareness of our own finite nature. The perfect example of the infinite series is, of course, the question of the origin of evil, and I have no doubt that Milton was perfectly aware of the problem. What caused evil? The Fall. What caused the Fall? Satan and the result of his rebellion. And what caused his rebellion? His pride and jealousy. What caused them, and why was he free to *be* proud and jealous? If we go further back and answer that question, another one immediately takes its place (like the universes outside the universe) until we realise that we are, after all, thrown back *either* on faith that the universe makes sense *despite* our incapacity to comprehend it, *or* on despair of the universe because we can't comprehend it. There is no other choice, since either way we can't comprehend it and still be human, even if we were perfect humans. Whether or not we accept Milton's symbolic terms for representing this dilemma, the logical position remains the same, and I think it is this position that Raphael is enunciating when he ends his long speech. When he has finished (at line 179) we are immediately and quite *unironically* told that Adam, 'clear'd of doubt', replied to him. Whatever generations of puzzled readers may have done with Raphael's apparent hedging, Milton's Adam seems to have seen the point completely; and I believe that the point he sees is the one I have been trying to spell out in this paper: that recognition of his limitation does not call into doubt the perfection in which God created him.

Adam has no more problems with this question, and this is right and proper. When Milton prepares us again for his potential for falling, he does it not through questions about the orderly nature of the universe, but through questions about the orderly nature of human loving. Here again Raphael's reply has caused some worries to many a reader; but I am convinced that, as usual, Milton knew exactly what he was doing. When Adam chooses to sin - and it is a choice made with his eyes wide open - his choice is a most fascinating one. From one point of view, Adam chooses to fall for the noblest of all earthly motives, namely his love for Eve. But it is only the noblest motive available to him *other* than the love of God, which is a more-than-earthly motive, and is also available. Milton's point is quite clearly that no other motive than love of God is good enough. These are hard words but also logical ones. Eve, and Adam's own love for Eve, are both gifts of God; and to reject the giver in favour of the gift, or to make the giver subsidiary to the gift, becomes not simply disobedience but at the same time a form of cosmic absurdity. To use twentieth-century language, Adam makes an existential leap: but it is not a leap into faith, it is a leap into despair. Milton makes Adam's choice what the book of *Genesis* certainly doesn't: he makes it a deliberately suicidal one. The rejection of perfection and of limitation is also, paradoxically enough, a rejection of love and of Eve, of self and of life, of sense and of order. Nothing in the modern literature of the absurd can quite match it, in fact.

I find Milton's position - as I have tried to outline it here - very difficult to

accept emotionally, and constantly arousing a feeling of rebellion against it. Nevertheless, it seems to me a position which - given the few initial premisses outlined at the beginning of this paper - is logically remarkably strong and consistent within itself. When fallen humans recognise that even unfallen perfection is perfectly consistent with limitation, the rest must follow.

Abstract

Among the beliefs, feelings and values modern readers can share (despite many differences) with the Milton of *Paradise Lost* is a sense of “createdness” linking us to the created universe; it helps us to understand the notion that the only reconciling force between the conflicting claims of freedom and obedience is love. This notion leads on to a discussion of thematically significant images and ideas in Books VII and VIII of *Paradise Lost*, especially “circumscription” as it connotes both perfection and limitation. That he is created perfect and at the same time limited - and that these two attributes do not contradict each other - is part of what Adam learns from Raphael’s account of the Creation in Book VII and from his (often misread) cosmological conversation in Book VIII.

Opsomming

Die oortuigings, gevoelens en waardes wat moderne lesers (ondanks baie verskille) met die Milton van *Paradise Lost* kan deel, sluit onder andere ’n gevoel van “geskapeheid”, wat ons met die geskape heelal verbind, in; dit help ons begryp dat die enigste versoenende krag tussen die teenstrydige aansprake van vryheid en gehoorsaamheid, die liefde is. Hierdie gedagte gee aanleiding tot ’n bespreking van tematies belangrike beelde en idees in Boek VII en VIII van *Paradise Lost*, veral “omskrywing” in sy konnotasies van sowel volmaaktheid as beperking. Dat hy volmaak geskape is en terselfdertyd beperk - en dat hierdie twee eienskappe mekaar nie weerspreek nie - maak deel uit van wat Adam uit Rafael se verslag van die Skepping in Boek VII en uit sy (dikwels verkeerd gelese) kosmologiese gesprek in Boek VIII te wete kom.

References

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