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reads

The Romantic Legacy of Paradise Lost: Reading against the Grain

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by Jonathon Shears

I HAVE AN UNSETTLING NOTION that Jonathon Shears's relatively recent study on Milton and the Romantics may slip under the radar of Romanticists and Miltonists alike. This would be a crying shame, first, because Shears's work on the troubled relationship between Milton and the Romantics could justifiably and proudly claim to stand on a bookshelf shoulder to shoulder with the scholarship of Joseph Wittreich, Leslie Brisman, and Lucy Newlyn and, second, because a monograph of this nature has been long overdue. As Shears himself queries from the outset, "It seems curious that in the last decade no one has written at length on such a pervasive subject" (1). Shears's bold study more than makes up for the delay.

At first sight Shears seems to be adopting a Bloomian approach to his subject in arguing for "the Romantic reading of *Paradise Lost* as a *mis*reading—an unsystematic imposition of meaning on to Milton's text" (6). But look again. For Shears, the Romantics' misreading of Milton is not merely "fragmentary" (8), the privileging of parts over wholes; these partial readings, Shears argues, fracture the moral as well as the aesthetic coherence of Milton's long epic. By giving, in different ways, various portions of *Paradise Lost* precedence, whether those portions are characters or epiphanies or diegetical moments, the Romantics undermine the solid foundation of Milton's project as epic, as narrative, and as argument. In order to be able to proceed upon this premise, Shears first has to make a case for reclaiming that old bugbear authorial intention, but he does so with admirable flair in his opening chapters. Borrowing the term from Charles Lamb's essay "Reading Against the Grain," Shears argues that *Paradise Lost* has a moral or ethical grain and that Romantic ideology, much like post-Romantic ideology, has, for the most part, committed itself to reading against the grain of Milton's poetry. The affinity Shears draws between Romantic and modern hermeneutics is the culminating and perhaps the most provocative aspect of his study—but I am getting ahead of myself.

The range of Shears's analysis is considerable, covering, in six discrete chapters, the modes by which each of the "Big Six" read against the grain of Milton's epic vision. Before tackling each of the "Big Six," Shears carefully maps out how eighteenth-century precursor poets and philosophers, notably Dryden and Burke, helped to influence and shape the Romantics' critical reception of Milton's poetry. Burke's identification of the Sublime with "Promethean and Satanic grandeur" (36), as well as conflating Satan and the reader, has the added, unfortunate consequence of disjoining the aesthetic and moral interests of *Paradise Lost*. Shears shows how Dryden's rewriting of *Paradise Lost* as *The State of Innocence* is not only a political restatement through its curtailment and cramping of Milton's "free" blank verse in heroic rhyme,

but also a tragic, fatalistic rereading of the Fall that runs against Milton's epic grain. Both Burke and Dryden's misreadings are acts that the Romantics will follow.

In his third chapter on William Blake, Shears demonstrates how Blake's assertion that "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's" is a cry for independence from "the oppressive connectives of logic and reason" (74), but his yearning for self-authorship expressed through his poetry and his mythopoesis constitute no less than a fundamental break with "the traditional connectives that sustain narrative and epic" (76). Blake's overthrowing of the moral categories of Milton's God and his Satan, his endeavor to be autonomous of the Miltonic conceptualizations of good and evil, his emphasis upon the prophetic character rather than the epic mode of Milton's narrative, and the polysemous, associative, "accretive" (63) nature of Blake's use of poetic language in *Milton* and other visionary poems are all, Shears maintains, strong indications that Blake's successors are as much post-structuralist thinkers as subsequent Romantic poets.

The unavoidable focus of contact between Wordsworth and Milton is the connection between *The Prelude* and *Paradise Lost*. Where Blake's accommodation of Milton reveals how Blake transforms narrative into an act of interpretation, offering multiple readings of a single moment, Wordsworth's "spots of time" "accrue value not through their moral purport or the significance of their position in a narrative [. . .], but because of the intensity in which they were first experienced and subsequently retold" (92). Shears mines one such spot of time, the episode with the discharged soldier, to illustrate how, through allusion to *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth privileges epiphanic moments over the linearity of "action, succession, and consequence" (94) of epic narrative, the formal principles that invest Milton's epic with its full meaning. The early Coleridge, while admiring Milton's consistent subjectivity—"himself before himself in every thing [*sic*] he writes"—nevertheless seeks to splice the theological and poetic purposes of the blind bard. The inevitable Romantic inward turn, and the young Coleridge's resistance to a unified mythology, a workable symbolic order, or a system of doctrine that Milton enjoyed, may go some way to explaining the inchoate metaphoricity of the *Ancient Mariner*, that "work of such pure Imagination." Seen in this light, the *Ancient Mariner* becomes a poem where, for the Mariner as narrator, "identity and purpose is only discovered in the habit of becoming an 'obsessive talker' not an obsessive believer" (110) and "Kubla Khan" "is a record of imaginative gain realized through interpretative loss" (115).

Shears's nuanced understanding of the second-generation Romantics' misunderstanding of Milton contains its surprises. For example, Byron stands alone among the "Big Six" for his abiding interest in the narrative, argument, and primarily ethical thrust of Milton's epic. According to this account, Byron's numerous versions of Milton's Satan throughout his corpus—in *Lara*, *Manfred*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *The Corsair*, and *Marino Faliero*—display a

fascination for and an intensely moral engagement with the "ethical rather than imaginative transgression" that led Satan, Adam, and Eve into willing their respective falls. Byron's adaptations are not without mischief, for his discomfort about the ability of any creature to make moral judgements means that, even while he reacts to Milton's moral universe in his verse, ultimately "Byron expresses a world without a moral grain" (138). Shelley, for his part, is a disciple of Burke in his admiration of the "energy" and "magnificence" of Milton's Satan. In Shelley's poetry the conscious self-abstraction from narrative, the delineation of the process of the creating mind, Lucy Newlyn's epiphany, and Leslie Brisman's moments of suspended choice are realized at their imaginable limit. In *Prometheus Unbound* and "Mount Blanc" we witness Shelley's attempt to attain a pure aesthetic, blinding in its polysemy and, in the case of *Prometheus Unbound*, without referent, purpose, or argument. If Shelley takes second place for formally and substantively disfiguring Milton's verse, then Keats, in Shears's view, takes the prize. In his triumph of a chapter on Keats, Shears illustrates how Keats's attempt to move beyond the Miltonic absolutes of good and evil, to foster a purely aesthetic temperament, and to suspend "moral categories and decisions as an end in itself", most memorably in his formulation of Negative Capability, the relief of the "burden of the Mystery," becomes onerous and self-defeating. The gods and goddesses that haunt his *Hyperion* fragments attest, by Keats's use of Miltonic "stationing" and by the very incompletion of the works themselves, that his bid to escape Milton's narrative and argument ossified or froze his goal "to write the great post-Miltonic epic" (179). Shears aptly points out how Keats almost seems to profess his frustration from the midst of his vision in *The Fall of Hyperion*, "There is a curious masochism in the fact that Keats chooses Moneta or memory, when he desires to escape from the influence of Milton, and the pressures of Miltonic narrative" (176).

In his final chapter Shears plays his most important card, illustrating just how expansive and momentous his thesis is. He reveals how the "Romantic Legacy" of the title of his study perdures throughout the twentieth century, motivating and influencing modern reading strategies. The chapter moves through some of the classic readings of *Paradise Lost* from the past century—the New Critical methodology of F.R. Leavis, the "Satanist" school of A.J.A. Waldock and William Empson, the "corrective" reading of Stanley Fish, Harold Bloom's concern with the influence of Milton, that "Covering Cherub"—and, in each instance, ably establishes that Romantic reading practices abide. The result of the privileging of the part to the whole, of reading against the grain, is incompletion, if not partiality and fragmentariness. Such formal misreadings entail a chronic misalignment, a removal of what Shears variously terms "the eschatological" or "teleological imperative," and the immense pressure and aftershock of these fragmentary readings can be felt to this day. In this regard Shears's study is as much a clarion call to what can be restored to our reading of Milton's great epic as an elegy for what has been lost. It should

be noted that there is, at one point, a bit of muddle: Milton's archangel Michael is mistaken for the archangel Raphael on page 26 and, again, for the archangel Gabriel on page 53 (but, then, Milton's angels are composed of "liquid texture"!), but such trifles should not detract from the sheer force and value of Shears's argument. I would wager that *The Romantic Legacy of Paradise Lost* is, and will continue to be, an invaluable and necessary resource for students and scholars of Milton and the Romantics for years to come. I encourage you to take up and read.