The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England

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CHAPTER 8

The Senses and Human Nature in a Political Reading of Paradise Lost

Jens Martin Gurr

Milton, so far as I know, is the first to turn to the story of the Fall to explain the failure of a revolution.¹

Introduction

Let us begin with what seems a politically inconspicuous passage on the five senses. Here is Adam, lecturing Eve on reason, fancy and the senses:

But know that in the soul
Are many lesser faculties that serve
Reason as chief, among these fancy next
Her office holds; of all external things,
Which the five watchful senses represent,
She forms imaginations, airy shapes,
Which reason joining or disjoining, frames
All what we affirm or what deny, and call
Our knowledge or opinion [...]²

What we find here is a rather standard early modern understanding of the relationship between reason, fancy and the senses.³ But what is illuminating is the way in which this discussion is metaphorically politcized by means of the body politic analogy: the relations among the inner faculties, as so often in Milton, are rendered in the political terminology of rule, domination and

subservience. This conflation of mental and political hierarchies, this politicization of the senses, I will argue, is central to an understanding of Milton's anthropology and its role in a political reading of *Paradise Lost*. I here follow Walker, who has argued that, 'it is...strong agreement that a view on this issue is a major premise in republican argumentation about politics'. Walker compares Milton's views to the tradition of republican thought (Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli) and adds to a number of the key passages from *Paradise Lost* that I also discuss, but the importance of Milton's anthropological convictions and his image of human nature for a reading of the epic in the light of the English Revolution remains to be established.

While there are by now immemorable readings of Milton's politics in *Paradise Lost* on the one hand and, on the other, a number of recent contributions on the senses in the poem, the connection between the senses and the politics of *Paradise Lost* has remained largely unexplored. What I hope to do here is to add to the debate about a political reading of *Paradise Lost* by looking at the role of the senses and the assessment of human nature developed in the text.

I will argue that the key to a political reading lies in an anthropological discussion in which Milton breaks loose from the moorings of his earlier optimism and sets out on a probing exploration of the problems at the heart of any liberalism. This exploration will be shown to revolve around the problematic nature of the senses and their relationship to reason. More specifically, I will argue that the senses are politicized by means of the body politic analogy: the internal hierarchies of reason, senses and passions are rendered with remarkable consistency in the *political* terminology of domination and subservience.

4 Cf. also *Paradise Lost*, vi, vii, viii, xix, xvi, xxv, xxi (Raphael, admonishes Adam to 'govern well thy appetite' and to 'take heed lest Passion wary'). I do not wish to do what Milton did not do (see Footnote 5). For these passages cf. also Walker W., "Human Nature in Republican Tradition and *Paradise Lost*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 10, 1 (2004) 63-94. 5 Walker, "Human Nature in Republican Tradition and *Paradise Lost*", § 31, emphasis added.


I take my cues from interpretations such as those developed by Christopher Hill and Andrew Minser, who both read *Paradise Lost* (like *Paradise Regained* and *Sonsen Agonistes*) as centrally concerned with the sense of utter defeat of the revolutionary cause after the Restoration of 1660. But what I wish to highlight is the role of Milton's anthropology and particularly his vision of the senses and their relationship to reason in such a political reading, I especially concur with Hill's reading on many points; however, though he argues that 'the Revolution had utterly failed... because the men were not great enough for the Cause', I regard Milton's critique of Cromwell in *Paradise Lost* as far more devastating than Hill and, more importantly, I believe that Milton's anthropological views, as they become explicit especially in some of his later prose works and as they are developed in the *Adam and Eve* relationship, are far more central to a reading of the political subtext of *Paradise Lost* than they are in previous accounts of the poem.

Rather than being an apology for the Revolution, as the classic 'left-wing Satanist' reading maintains, *Paradise Lost* is the account of the failure of a revolution: both in the English Revolution and in Milton's epic, political idealism clashes with anthropological realities. First, however, we briefly need to consider Milton's view of Cromwell and of the revolutionary leaders generally as providing one side of his account.

'One Shall Rise / Or Proud Ambitious Heart': Milton's View of the Revolutionary Leaders

A number of more recent commentators have used both Milton's prose and his oblique but striking allusions in *Paradise Lost* as well as *Paradise Regained* to argue that the poet was far more critical of Cromwell than has been generally acknowledged, especially by previous adherents to a political reading of *Paradise Lost*. I have already discussed this at some length...
elsewhere. As an example, let us take a passage from the History of Britain, begun in 1647 but not published until 1671. Here we find fairly drastic criticism of the revolutionary leaders who have proven to be 'unfit':

Thus they who of late were extoll'd as our greatest Deliverers, and had the People wholly at their Devotion, by so discharging their Trust as we see, did not only weaken and unfit themselves to be dispensers of what Liberty they pretended, but unfitted also to the People, now grown worse and more disorderate, to receive or to digest any Liberty at all.

The most astonishing reference to Cromwell, however, is the following passage from the Archangel Michael's account to Adam of the future of mankind in book xii of Paradise Lost, a passage which (if it is read politically at all) is commonly taken to refer to Charles I:

[...] one shall rise
Of proud ambitious heart, who not content
With fair equality, fraternal state,


For an overview of key readings, cf. my earlier essay, on which my discussion in this essay is based: "When Upstart Passions Catch the Government: Political and Mental Hierarchies in Paradise Lost", in Gurr, The Human Soul as Battleground: Variations on Dualism and the Self in English Literature (Heidelberg: 2003) 81–103.


Given Milton's repeated reference to Cromwell's ambition, and given Cromwell's constant invocation of divine authority – worthy of a Stuart monarch –, the implication leads to Cromwell. In addition, the arrogation of dominion over one's 'brethren' is much more resonant when interpreted as a reference to a Puritan republican as rules over his brethren than to a Stuart monarch.

When, despite his overly positive assessment of Milton's view of Cromwell and the Revolution, Hill states that '[...] name for its failure, in Milton's eyes, rested with its leaders', this is no doubt partly true. But if we take Paradise Lost seriously as containing Milton's account of a failed Revolution, it also has another story to tell. A further problem contributing to the failure of the Revolution, I contend, is a much more profound anthropological one.

'By Nature Slaves, and Arrant Beasts': The Senses, Licence and Liberty in Milton's View of the 'People' in his Prose Works

The ideal form of government – and the one that would allow for the maximum degree of freedom –, Milton claims in the "Readie and Easie Way to
Establish a Free Commonwealth", would be a republic "where no single person, but reason only sways." 19 Barbara Kierie Lewalski summarizes Milton’s view on the subject as follows:

Like others in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli, [Milton] believed that kinds of government – monarchy, aristocracy, democracy – must conform to the nature of the people, and that people get the government they deserve and are fit for. [...] [Monarchy] is a debased form of government only suited to a servile, debased people. Properly, government should be shared among the large body of worthy citizens who are virtuous and love liberty [...] .16

This interdependence of the citizens’ individual reason and virtue on the one hand and the freedom a nation is capable of attaining and maintaining on the other hand, is indeed fundamental also to Paradise Lost.17 The possibility of freedom, Milton argues in both his prose and his poetry, depends on the ability of the people to be reasonable, to control their senses and restrain their passions: ‘Liberty hath a sharp and double edge, fit only to be handled by Just and Vertuous Men, to bad and dissolute, it becomes a mischief unwieldy [sic] in their own hands.’18 It seems, however, that as the 1650s wore on, Milton progressively lost faith in the moral and intellectual capabilities of his compatriots. This is what we need to study now, first in the prose works, then in Paradise Lost.

In Eikonoklastes, his 1659 defence of the regicide, Milton expressed his disgust at the popular reception of the intolerantly royalist Eikon Basilike. He here speaks of the people as an ‘inconstant, irrational and Image-doting rabble’ and ‘a credulous and hapless herd [...]’ enchanted with these popular institutes of Tyranny’ and denounces his countrymen as ‘by nature slaves, and arrant beasts; not fit for that liberty which they cry’d out and bellow’d for, but fitter to be led back again into th’old servitude, like a sort of clamouring & fighting brutes.’19 In the ‘Defence of the People of England’ of February 1659, he laments the ‘stubborn struggles of the wicked citizens’ and complains that kings were able to ‘shelter [...] themselves behind the blind superstitions of the mob’.20 In one of the more striking of his vulgophilic outbursts he rails: ‘what a miserable, credulous, deluded thing that creature is, which is call’d “the Vulgar” to whom he ascribes a besotted and degenerate baseness of spirit.’21 In the ‘The Readie and Easye Way’, his last fierce and desperate argument against the Restoration during the last chaotic weeks of the Commonwealth, he advocated restricted franchise and an oligarchy to keep the mob in check.22

Hill rightly argues that ‘[F]or Milton liberty is licence, tending to anarchy, unless it is tempered by a recognition of God’s purposes.’23 And his belief in the reason of the populace to acknowledge and follow just these ‘God’s purposes’ seems to have been limited to begin with and to have waned entirely as the 1650s wore on. Trubowitz even goes so far as to argue that ‘Milton’s later writings are marked by a profound contempt for the English people.’24 Let us turn to Paradise Lost and a reading of Milton’s assessment of the ‘licence and liberty problem’ and the hierarchy of the faculties.

For Understanding Ruled Not: The Politics of Edenic Hierarchies

This is not the place to attempt to add to centuries and libraries of discussion about Milton’s account of Adam’s and Eve’s relationship and of the fall itself. I am only concerned here with Milton’s discussion of the proper relationship of the faculties, particularly of the senses and passions as opposed to reason, insofar as that is relevant to a political reading.

In the very first view we get of Adam and Eve in book iv, there seems to be a distinction in the attribution of the faculties of mind and body to Adam and Eve respectively:

16 Lewalski, "Milton’s Politics" 245ff. cf. also 247 et passim for the correspondence between inner liberty and political liberty; for the connection between individual and state, cf. also Warden, Literature and Politics in Cromwell’s England 326f., 332 et passim.
17 Cf. for example Milton, Paradise Lost vi, 766; ix, 354ff; xii, 87ff.
21 Milton, "Eikonoklastes" 456, 344.
22 Milton, "Readie and Easye Way" 45ff.
23 Hill, Milton and the English Revolution 49ff.
For contemplation he and valor formed,  
For softness she and sweet attractive grace,  
He for God only, she for God in him.  

This distinction is confirmed by Eve in her account of her first encounter with Adam just after her creation and after she has seen her own reflection in the pond. She too affirms the superiority of ‘wisdom’ over ‘beauty’:

I yielded, and from that time see  
How beauty is excelled by manly grace  
And wisdom, which alone is truly fair.  

Though this seemingly simple and traditional conception of gender hierarchies, to be sure, is complicated and undermined in numerous ways, Eve here affirms what is discursively explicit throughout much of Paradise Lost, namely male superiority through superior intellect. But although Adam tells Raphael

For well I understand in the prime end  
Of Nature her tre'rerior, in the mind  
And inward faculties [. . .].

he is not able to maintain his superiority in the face of ‘her loveliness’. Passion interferes and subjects ‘all higher knowledge’ to its rule. This is again made plain in the Archangel Raphael’s admonitions not to confuse ‘love’ with ‘subjection’ in moments of passionate ‘transports’:

For what adm'is't thou so, what transports thee so,  
An outside? Fair no doubt, and worthy well  
Thy cherishing, thy honouring and thy love,  
Not thy subjection [. . .].

25 Milton, Paradise Lost IV, 597–599.  
26 Milton, Paradise Lost IV, 489ff.  
28 Milton, Paradise Lost VIII, 540ff.  
29 Milton, Paradise Lost VIII, 547.  
30 Milton, Paradise Lost VIII, 552.  
31 Milton, Paradise Lost VIII, 567–570.

Raphael exhorts him not to allow sexuality — shared by ‘cattle and each beast’ — to ‘subdue’ his soul; sexuality is here tellingly referred to as the ‘sense of touch’:

But if the sense of touch whereby mankind  
Is propagated seem such dear delight  
Beyond all other, think the same vouchsafed  
To cattle and each beast, which would not be  
To them made common and divulged, if aught  
Therein enjoyed were worthy to subdue  
The soul of man, and passion in him move.

Commenting on Adam’s preoccupation with touch and its impact on gender hierarchies, Rogers incisively argues that ‘touch is that sensation that compels Adam to forget the divine marriage commandment, the arbitrary decree by which he was appointed Eve’s superior’. Deploying the classic Platonic and Neoplatonic image of the gradatio amoris, God’s messenger then again draws the sharp distinction between laudable ‘love’ as associated with ‘reason’ and contemptible ‘passion’ as associated with the senses and the body, and holds out the prospect of an ascension to an angelic state of ‘heavenly love’ as opposed to a debasing state of being ‘sunk in carnal pleasure’:

In loving thou dost well, in Passion not,  
Wherein true love consists not; love refines  
The thoughts, and heart enlarges, hath his seat  
In reason, and is judicious, is the scale  
By which to heavenly love thou mayst ascend,  
Not sunk in carnal pleasure [. . .].

In a 2012 article in ELH Mosherks perceptively comments on this passage by taking his cue from Barbara Lewalski, who has pointed out the role of Piccino’s Commentary on Plato’s Symposium as a source here. Piccino consistently refers

34 Milton, Paradise Lost VIII, 588ff.
to touch as the most problematic sense. Here Moshenska’s observation is highly significant:

The fact that Adam’s touching of Eve proceeds directly from sight — ‘transported I behold / Transported touch’ — is also perturbing on Ficinian terms: beholding is supposed to lead upward, to rational contemplation. In the sixth speech of Ficino’s Commentary, Tomasso Benci claims that ‘every love begins with sight. But the love of the contemplative man ascends from sight to intellect. That of the voluptuous man descends from sight to touch’ (Ficino 193).36

Moshenska persuasively, I think, argues that Milton infinitely complicates the assessment and evaluation of ‘touch’ — neither is it predominantly sexual nor is sex imagined to be excluded at all: Sexual touch is included without being either effaced or over-emphasized: like other acts of touch, it simply takes its place within the thousand decencies of shared Edenic life without being granted special precedence.35 Given this insight, it is hard to see why Moshenska then sees a contradiction in Raphael’s account: ‘Even though Raphael has already stated that the angels share in all of the human senses, it seems almost incomprehensible, after he has so sternly objected to human touch, that angels could partake in it at all’.38 The point, however, is not that Raphael admonishes Adam not to have sex. It is important to note that this is no simple dismissal of the sense of touch as inherently ‘base’ or ‘primitive’; in the logic of the epic, there is nothing per se problematic in the senses and their use, even their enjoyment: angels as well as humans ‘both contain / Within them every lower faculty / Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste’.39 Moreover, as the discussion of angelic love life in book VIII makes clear, sex itself is perfectly innocent if balanced by intellectual pursuits. Thus, there is nothing wrong with the sense of touch in itself (or with sexual pleasure, even in prelapsarian Eden40); touch only becomes problematic when the senses overpower reason.

Given the centrality of reason to liberty in Milton’s politics and theology, it is surprising, I believe, that Moshenska, like many other critics commenting on Milton’s discussion of the senses, does not comment on the political implications of these anthropological discussions. Curiosity, passion, envy, hate: according to Milton in De Doctrina Christiana as well as in Paradise Lost, all factors in the Fall of Satan as well as Adam and Eve are sinful in that they are departures from reason.43 As far as the anthropological implications of the Fall are concerned, Christopher Ricks has argued that Milton sought to dissolve the dichotomy between body and spirit.44 However, I have been arguing that Milton very firmly upholds the dichotomy: he merely dissolves the clear attribution of body to Eve and spirit to Adam. But although Paradise Lost undermines a one-to-one correspondence of Adam with reason and Eve with body, Milton’s frequent stress on her beauty and his capacity for contemplation at least echo the traditional allegorical readings of the Fall, as A.B. Chambers has shown in an overview of Milton’s sources and his reliance mainly on the reading of St Augustine.45 One such allegorical reading was known to him in the form of Thomas Aquinas’s summary of St Augustine, a reading ultimately going back to Philo Juwaeus:

In every sin we discover the same order as in the first temptation. For, according to Augustine, the temptation begins with concupiscence of sin by the sensuality, signified by the serpent; reaches to the lower reason by pleasure, signified by the woman; and extends to the higher reason by consent to the sin, signified by the man.45

However, whether it is passion, pity, or luxuriosity that causes Adam’s Fall (as commentators in the considerable critical debate over the question have variously maintained), Dickhoff rightly remarks that the dialogue with Raphael foreshadows Adam’s Fall and its cause: an insufficient use of reason in which the senses and the passions they induce are not suitably subjected.46 Raphael’s

39 Milton, Paradise Lost V, 469–471. For a detailed discussion of the distinction between the angelic and the human sense of vision (both physical sight and spiritual insight), cf. Gabe’s essay in this volume.
40 Milton, Paradise Lost VIII, 688–689.
42 Cf. book 1, chapter 21 of De Doctrina Christiana.
earlier admonitions are then closely echoed in the Son's reproaches to Adam after the Fall:

Was she thy God, that her thou didst obey
Before his voice, or was she made thy guide,
Superior, or but equal, to that her
Thou didst resign thy manhood and the place
Wherein God set thee above her […]
[…] whose perfection far excelled
Hers in all real dignity? Adorned
She was indeed, and lovely to attract
Thy love, not thy subjection, and her gifts
Were such as under government well seemed,
Unseemly to bear rule, which was thy part
And person hadst thou known thyself aright.47

In the post-lapsarian state of Adam and Eve, the subjection of passion and the senses to reason is yet once more brought home as having been the central sin and fault. The inversion of the classic Platonic hierarchy of the faculties is here again tellingly depicted in a blend of political and psychological terms:

For understanding ruled not, and the will
Heard not her lore, both in subjection now
To sensual appetite, who from beneath
Usurping over sovereign reason claimed
Superior sway.48

Conclusion: The Senses, 'the People' and the Politics of Paradise Lost

The anthropology developed in the relationship of Adam and Eve, I would argue, can be read as an expression of Milton's exasperation at the lack of reason and understanding in the populace. The course of the Revolution, it seems, led Milton to shed much of his earlier faith in reason — or more precisely, in the capacity of the majority of his countrymen to use theirs.

47 Milton, Paradise Lost IX, 145–156.
48 Milton, Paradise Lost XII, 1127–1130.

While it may well be true that Milton's hope in the 1640s for a divinely inspired purging of England by a revolution that would initiate a rule of the saints did not lead him to believe with Hobbes that a revolution must necessarily result in anarchy and the loss of freedom,49 the anthropology implicit in the Adam and Eve relationship and explicit in the passages from his later prose works discussed above show that this is precisely what he did believe later on. This, Paradise Lost implies, lay at the heart of the failed Revolution: Milton's anthropological realism is at odds with his political idealism. 'Blame for failure lies not in the aims — which were God's, and remain right — but in the English people […]. Political failure was ultimately moral failure.'50

What becomes evident in Paradise Lost is not so much just a partisan's disappointment in the collapse of the English Revolution, but a more fundamental insight into the ambitious and unreasonable side of human nature, much as that may have been the cause of Cromwell's disappointment of expectations and of the inability of his countrymen to handle the 'sharp and double edge' of 'Liberty'.51

Milton's judgement on the failure of the Revolution in terms of the 'avarice' and 'ambition' of political leaders is to be seen in his assessment of Cromwell: explicitly, if in diplomatically subdued form, in his earlier poetry and prose; implicitly, but even more forcefully, in Paradise Lost (and Paradise Regained, for that matter). Anthropologically and with reference to his general understanding of man's rational and moral capabilities, the failure of the Revolution is dramatized in Adam and Eve, the people. The following passage, which Milner calls 'almost certainly one of the most important in the poem,'52 uses the analogy of the body and the state to blend subtly the political and anthropological judgements on the 'upstart passions' usurping the government from 'reason,' resulting in the loss of freedom:

Since thy original lapse, true liberty
Is lost, which always with right reason dwells
Twinned, and from her hath no dividual being:
Reason in man obscured, or not obeyed,
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart passions catch the government

50 Hill, Milton and the English Revolution 306.
52 Milton, John Milton and the English Revolution 165.
From reason, and to servitude reduce
Man till then free. Therefore since he permits
Within himself unworthy powers to reign
Over free reason, God, in judgement just,
Subjects him from without to violent lords:
Who oft as undeservely enthral
His outward freedom: tyranny must be,
Though to the tyrant thereby no excuse.
Yet sometimes nations will decline so low
From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong,
But justice, and some fatal curse annexed
Deprives them of their outward liberty,
Their inward lost [...].53

Milner reads this passage as follows:

the responsibility for the Restoration rests neither with the Stuarts nor with those independents who had failed to provide adequate political guarantees against the possibility of a Restoration, but rather with that English nation which had declined so low from virtue that it no longer deserved any fate other than that of tyranny.54

Moreover, the passage closely corresponds to one in the "Second Defence of the English People" of 1654 highlighting a nation's ability to 'rule and govern itself' rather than giving in to 'its own lusts', a precondition for any form of political liberty: 'By the customary judgement and, so to speak, just retaliation of God, it happens that a nation which cannot rule and govern itself, but has delivered itself into slavery to its own lusts, is enslaved also to other masters whom it does not choose'.55

54 Milner, John Milton and the English Revolution 164-165. cf. also Lewalski, "Milton's Politics" 248, who argues that this passage 'accounts for the Stuart Restoration and for absolute monarchy wherever it exists: inner servility leads to deprivation of outward freedom [...] political liberty depends on inner liberty which is the product of reason and virtue' (248), cf. also Hill's brief if insightful comments, Hill, Milton and the English Revolution 55ff.
Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites [...]. Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters. 58

Unlikely allies that Burke and Milton seem to be, Milton, we may argue, would have fully subscribed to this view of the connection between people's ability to control their senses and rein in their passions on the one hand and the amount of freedom they merit on the other. What connects Milton to Burke, then, is the conflation of political and mental hierarchies: it is precisely in their inability to control the senses and the passions by subjecting them to reason that, according to this view, the majority of people reveal their inability to handle freedom. For Burke, this is the justification for a conservative ideology that does not trust people's reason: 'We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small.' 59 For Milton, this failure exemplified in Adam and Eve and their Fall explains the failure of the people in the English Revolution and thus the failure of the 'Good Old Cause'. Behind both Milton's and Burke's conceptions, of course, there lurks a far older tradition: their consistent conflation of political and psycho-physical hierarchies as well as the notion that the subordination of the senses to reason by analogy implies and calls for the subordination of the unreasonable herd of society to the wise and the good is indebted to a long tradition of thought in terms of the body politic that goes back at least to Plato's Phaedo, Republic, Phaedrus, and Timaeus. 60

To be sure, the reading experience of Paradise Lost in places appears to work against the arguments the text makes on a more discursive level: there


is surely an effect that might be called 'redemption through poetry', for instance as far as Eve is concerned, where the poetry goes against the grain of doctrine. 61 Discursively and as far as the dominant impression is concerned, however, Paradise Lost, it seems, develops an essentially pessimistic anthropology: Adam and Eve — and who are they but 'the people' in Eden — are unable responsibly to use their senses and to control the passions by means of reason. The consistent conflation of mental and political hierarchies then serves to establish a connection between a hierarchy of the senses and political systems, with republicanism requiring an ability to control the senses. If, as I think we must, we read Paradise Lost politically as a coded account of the failure of the English Revolution, then Milton's views on the failure of 'the people' during the English Revolution, their inability to handle liberty and subject their senses to the control of reason is staged in the account of the Fall of Adam and Eve and their inability to do the same. 62

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62 This essay draws on my earlier attempt at coming to terms with the conflation of the inner faculties with political hierarchies in Paradise Lost, cf. Gurr, 'Political and Mental Hierarchies in Paradise Lost'.


Lewalski B.K., Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms (Princeton: 1985).


