

## About This Volume

---

Robert C. Evans

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is one of the most famous and most widely respected poems ever written. Some critics consider it perhaps the greatest single poem in the English language. Certainly the text seems especially remarkable when one considers that it was composed ("dictated" would be a more accurate term) by an aging blind man entering the sunset of his life. That life—like the lives of so many other Britons—had been thrown into turmoil by the English Civil Wars (there were actually two of them—1642-46 and 1648-49). These conflicts pitted supporters of King Charles I against the supporters of Parliament. In the end, Charles lost both the armed conflict and his head: he is the first and only monarch in the whole history of England to be put on trial for treason, found guilty (naturally, since his opponents were in charge of the trial), and executed. The story goes that when his blood-spurting head was held up for the assembled crowd to see, they let out a deep groan despite their contempt for Charles. They could hardly believe what had just happened, even though most of them thought Charles deserved to die. Certainly Milton did, and he spent the next decade or so of his life defending the "revolution" against critics foreign and domestic. By early 1652, however, he had gone completely blind (God's judgment, Royalists thought) and by 1660 the revolutionary party was over: Charles's son returned to the throne as Charles II, and the life of Milton—a leading "regicide" or defender of king-killing—was in real danger. Fortunately for English literature, Milton was allowed to live out his old age (mostly) in peace. By 1667 he had published the first edition of *Paradise Lost*; by 1674 a second had appeared; by late in 1674 Milton was dead. He had, however, left behind one of the most admired and influential poems ever put to paper. That poem is the subject of this book.

Like all the volumes in the Critical Insights series, this one is divided into distinct sections. The first opens with a sort of "flagship"

essay by Dennis Danielson, one of the world's most respected "Miltonists." Danielson's essay—"Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Epic Lessons in How to Avoid Idolatry"—argues that there "is no more fundamental biblical imperative than that of avoiding idolatry. St. Paul, recalling the first commandment—"Thou shalt have no other gods . . ." (Ex. 20:3)—centrally links human unrighteousness with humans' worshipping and serving 'the creature more than the Creator' (Rom. 1:25). Milton's *Paradise Lost*," Danielson contends, "offers powerful glimpses of idolatry's operations and effects—psychological, theological, and cosmological." His essay is then followed by a brief biography of the poet.

The volume's next major section, devoted to critical contexts, looks at *Paradise Lost* from a number of deliberately diverse perspectives. Brett Hudson, for example, takes a historical approach in his essay on "The Early Modern Prison in Milton's *Paradise Lost*." ("Early modern" is the term historians prefer for what is sometimes also called "The Renaissance.") In Milton's epic, Hudson contends, "Hell does not . . . function solely as a site of physical torture or as a site of psychological control." Instead, "Milton's Hell, with its torture and leisure, its changeable yet obstinate inmates, and its permeable walls and flawed jailors resembles neither the feudal dungeon nor the modern penitentiary." Rather, it most resembles "the early modern prison," whose nature and routines Hudson memorably describes.

Hudson's essay is followed by a deliberately and unusually lengthy survey, by Robert Evans, of "Editors' Introductions to *Paradise Lost* from 1950 to 2007." As the cut-off date suggests, this essay could easily have been longer than it already is (it is one part of a larger project). The survey is designed to give readers a comprehensive overview of "key insights from some of the best scholarship" on Milton's poem by people who have often devoted a lifetime to studying it. Evans's piece is followed by a critical lens essay (intended to look at the poem from one kind of critical vantage point) titled "Fall into Pain: *Paradise Lost* as a Narrative of Trauma," by the noted English author Nicolas Tredell. Tredell suggests that Milton's epic is in many ways a "trauma narrative."

It is certainly that for Adam and Eve, and it is also that for their descendants as well. Such narratives, Tredell writes, “even when their protagonists die, hold out the possibility of hope, of restoration, of regaining lost eminence, for others if not for themselves.” But he adds that the “historical and biographical contexts of *Paradise Lost* also make it a trauma narrative. This essay,” he promises, “will trace the representation of trauma and potential recovery in Milton’s epic, considering its historical and biographical allusions and then the representation of trauma as symbolized and suffered by Satan, Adam and Eve.”

Finally, this section closes with an essay rooted in the method of comparison and contrast. Warren Tormey, in a piece titled “‘Eden rais’d in the wast Wilderness’: Post-Postlapsarian Landscapes in *Paradise Regain’d*,” compares and contrasts various writings by Milton (including *Paradise Lost*) with numerous other texts of the poet’s era. According to Tormey, “Milton’s interest in redeeming mankind often involved a literal interest in redeeming the earth itself. Both interests,” Tormey contends, “are relevant to practical ideas of landscape reclamation that circulated throughout the Interregnum and into the Restoration.” But Milton, he notes, “was hardly unique in his desire to see the earth transformed. Instead, he was part of a much larger conversation involving many other voices.”

Now begins the critical readings section—the longest in the book and one intended to present a deliberately diverse range of responses to *Paradise Lost*. This section begins with another “flagship” piece by another eminent “Miltonist.” Peter C. Herman, in a “self-interview” titled “Milton and Me: The Genesis of The New Milton Criticism,” accessibly recounts how he not only came to love *Paradise Lost* but also how he helped change some of the basic ways in which the poem is interpreted. Fundamentally, Herman maintains that “incertitude (Milton gives us choices between reasonable alternatives but no way to choose between them) is absolutely central” to this epic.

In two related essays, the Hungarian scholar Miklós Péti considers the remarkable fact that *Paradise Lost* is a “Dictated Text”—one that involved “the troublesome process of dictating,

occasionally letter by letter, followed by probably endless sessions of revision and correction till the text became ready for print”—a work that “contains roughly 80,000 words (about 400,000 characters).” As Péti remarks, “the dictation and correction of such a text, even if it were not a high-quality literary work of art, would be an enormous and exhausting task for anyone, let alone a blind author of advanced age.” His first essay looks at this issue from a theoretical perspective; the second essay examines it in more practical terms, paying special attention to such matters as the poem’s speeches, repetitions, choices and (self-corrections), digressions, and catalogues.

In another pair of related essays, Jeremy Larson deals with the important Miltonic issues of courage and temperance. In “Revealing True Warfare: Courage and Its Deceptive Appearance,” Larson tries to “determine what Milton’s purpose may have been in arranging *Paradise Lost* with a war episode at its center.” He suggests that the angel Raphael (narrator of that war’s history) “shows Adam the nature of true courage” by emphasizing that such bravery “is necessarily inseparable from one’s obedience to divine commands. Raphael’s narrative, therefore,” Larson concludes, “is paradoxical in that he teaches Adam peaceful obedience through a war story.”

In a second and especially intriguing piece, Larson considers the issues of “Temperance and the *Felix Culpa* in *Paradise Lost*.” The idea of “*felix culpa*”—the so-called “fortunate fall”—is an old one in Milton studies. Most critics now agree that Milton himself did not believe that the fall was fortunate in any immediate or defensible sense. Then why, Larson asks, does Adam seem to imply, in Book 12, that it may have been? Larson offers an interesting explanation: “by analyzing the rhetorical arrangement surrounding Adam’s statement in Book 12, we can see that the overwhelming majority of Adam’s statements after the Fall are marked by intemperance.” According to Larson, “Milton’s rhetorical arrangement of narrative events in Books 10 through 12” suggests that “Adam’s affirmation of the *felix culpa* is in fact evidence of his depravity,” or at least of his failure to reason properly.

Nicolas Tredell now returns in an essay entitled “Access Denied: Gates and Interdictions in *Paradise Lost*.” Tredell notes that

gates, “closed and open, infernal and celestial, feature prominently” in Milton’s epic “both before and after the Fall; and their presence in both zones suggests that prelapsarian innocence is always fragile, always potentially corruptible—but that there are, also, debates over what constitutes corruption.” Tredell explores “the images of gates and interdictions in Milton’s epic poem, considering those its main characters confront, those its narrative and poetic techniques present to the reader, and the ultimate interdiction whose transgression triggers the ongoing human story.”

In another provocative essay—“Angelic Intelligence and Human Culpability in *Paradise Lost*”—Evan LaBuzetta contends that “most critics who have written about the angels in *Paradise Lost* share a largely unexamined assumption about the intellectual powers of those angels and how they relate to Adam and Eve. To put it crudely,” he continues, “critics have assumed that the angels are intellectually superior to Adam and Eve, even before the Fall.” In contrast, LaBuzetta “would like to question that assumption and suggest that the human characters in *Paradise Lost* have several intellectual advantages over the angels. If true, this intellectual disparity has consequences for our reading of human culpability in the poem.”

Next, a trio of related pieces explore Erin Shields’s recent retelling of the story of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in a play of her own by that title. The play, which premiered in late 2018 at Canada’s famous Stratford Festival, provoked much enthusiasm. Shields, in an interview, answers many questions about her work and the poem that inspired it. She says, for instance, that “Milton’s male protagonist, Satan, appeared to me as a woman. Satan rebels against God, is punished for her revolt, and devises a masterful plot of revenge. She is active but also contemplative; selfish, but desperate for love; relatable but also bulging with incomprehensible evil. In short,” Shields concludes, “Satan is a complicated, irresistible protagonist, and I wanted to explore that journey from a perspective closest to my own.” Her interview is full of many other fascinating insights into a play that may, if widely read and performed, help broaden and deepen interest in Milton’s epic.

In an essay titled, “Erin Shields’s *Paradise Lost*: Its Success as a Work of Art,” Robert Evans makes a case for the effectiveness of Shields’s drama as a piece of literature in its own right. He explains that his main purpose “is to examine Shields’s play, especially its first half, in some detail—to assess the work’s strengths and occasional weaknesses; to suggest some of the reasons it is often truly thought-provoking; to defend it from charges of being simply a cheap, shallow burlesque of Milton’s poem; and to examine how and why it might profitably be used to help introduce ‘regular’ readers to *Paradise Lost* itself.” Finally, in a third essay on the Shields play, Grace Meadows offers a “Survey of Reviews” of the premiere staging. She notes that “Shields’s work was very well received by audiences (the shows quickly sold out) and was also extremely well reviewed by critics. In fact,” she reports, “some reviewers considered Shields’s play the finest single work staged at the Stratford Festival in all of 2018, besting dramas by many better-known playwrights, such as Shakespeare.” She suggests that there “is every reason to hope and expect” that Shields’s *Paradise Lost* “will be produced elsewhere after its highly successful run in Stratford.”

The critical readings section closes with another essay by Robert Evans. Here again he is concerned with the issue of “Broadening Milton’s Audience through Art and Adaptation,” this time by focusing on the work of the French artist *Alexandré Cabanel* (1823-1889) and a recent American writer named *Tam Mossman* (exact dates unknown). Evans examines a series of stunning but little-known paintings by Cabanel inspired by *Paradise Lost*. He situates Cabanel’s work within the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French illustrations of Milton and contends that Cabanel’s work is unusually effective. He also tries “to alert Miltonists and potential Miltonists to a much more recent and quite intriguing work: an anonymous re-writing of *Paradise Lost* by a little-known, recently deceased American author” apparently named *Tam Mossman*. Mossman’s dramatization of Milton’s poem differs radically from the one by Shields but is, Evans argues, striking in its own ways and for its own reasons.

The final section of the present volume closes with several features common to all books in the Critical Insights series: a chronology of Milton's life, a listing of his works, a secondary bibliography, notes about the editor and contributors, and a comprehensive index.

# Milton and Me: The Genesis of the New Milton Criticism

---

Peter C. Herman

Editor's note: Peter C. Herman, a leading figure in Milton studies, explains how and why he first became interested in *Paradise Lost*, some of the results of that interest, and some reasons why others, too, might want to explore Milton's poem.

## How did you first come to be interested in Milton?

This is a long story, and one intertwined with my own epic quest to find a tenure-track position.

### Phase 1

To begin, I never took a class on Milton as either an undergraduate or a graduate student (which will be important shortly). My interests, and those of the professors who liked me, were predominantly in the sixteenth century, so that's where I focused my attention. Nonetheless, come dissertation time, I realized that the story of Renaissance attacks on poetry had to include Milton, so I sat in on Margaret Ferguson's Milton seminar. But I did not officially participate; meaning, I did not have to write a paper for her, so I never had to engage with Milton criticism, or, really, with *Paradise Lost*. I restricted myself to writing on Milton's earlier poetry for two reasons. First, that's where Milton overtly talks about the problems facing poetry, especially in "Ad Patrem," his verse letter to his father, John Milton, Sr., the companion poems "L'Allegro/Il Penseroso," and *Lycidas*, which pretty much tells you why Milton will give up poetry for prose for the next twenty years or so. After asking "What boots it with incessant care / To tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade / And strictly meditate the thankless muse" (64-66), meaning, why am I killing myself trying to become a poet? Maybe I should do "as others use, / To sport with Ameryllis in the shade," that is,, enjoy life. Milton goes through answer after answer,

finding each one unsatisfactory.<sup>1</sup> Then the English civil wars begin, and as Milton says in the biographical digression in *The Reason of Church Government*, “Time serves not now” (840). While I turned the chapter from my dissertation on Milton and the Muse-haters into one of my first published essays, I could not say that I loved Milton’s works, or that I was planning on focusing on Milton for the rest of my career.

That changed when, several years later, I was asked to teach a full course on Milton. Now I had to help students read and make sense of *Paradise Lost*, and so I had to read and make sense of it myself. The summer before I taught this class, I took an old edition of Milton’s epic, one without notes, with me to a friend’s house on Monhegan Island, Maine. There, sitting on a cliff next to the ocean, I read *Paradise Lost* from beginning to end for the first time. The sound of the wind and waves became the sound of Milton’s verse, and Milton’s verse became the sound of the ocean. There and then, I fell in love with this magnificent poem.

## Phase 2

But falling in love did not mean falling in step with mainstream Milton criticism, and now the second phase of what I would eventually call (with Joseph Wittreich, Elizabeth Sauer, and Michael Bryson) the New Milton Criticism begins.

As I was prepping Book 1 for class, trying to come up with something sensible to say, I relied on the notes of my edition (by Merritt Hughes, the standard one at the time) to explain the mythological references. Now, in the first epic simile, which starts off describing Satan’s size and then segues into the story of the pilot “of some small night-foundered skiff” (1.204) who fixes his anchor on a whale, mistaking it for an island, Milton compares Satan to “Briareos, or Typhon” (1.199). But I noticed something strange. Hughes describes Briareos as “helping to defeat his brother Titans.” That’s odd, I remember thinking. So Briareos is a good guy, whereas the other Titan, Typhon, is a bad guy. That doesn’t make sense. Why would Milton compare Satan to a good guy Titan? There are twelve of them. Why choose Briareos? After doing some further digging

in the mythographic manuals (helpfully reprinted by Garland Press), I discovered that there are two interpretations of Briareos. One tradition, starting with Homer, says he's a good guy; another tradition, starting with Hesiod, says he's a bad guy. But only Hughes mentions the former tradition. All the other editions I consulted, such as Alastair Fowler's, gloss Briareos as an unqualified bad guy. Most of Milton's editors, in other words, *repress* one part of the tradition. Puzzling. Why would they do that?

Then I noticed something else: Milton wraps the unresolved contradiction in the allusion (the comparison of Satan to Briareos *or* Typhon, a choice between two opposites) within a simile that is similarly unresolved. The Briareos-Typhon comparison ends with the famous allusion to a pilot who confuses a sleeping whale for an island. But what happens? In the sources for this story, the whale dives, taking the pilot with him. But Milton changes the story, so that the simile ends with the pilot stuck next to the whale "while night / Invests the sea, and wished morn delays" (1.207-08). In other words, Milton takes a story whose ending is certain, and changes it so that the ending is uncertain. Does the whale wake up, dive, and drown the pilot? Or does the pilot wake up first, raise anchor, and sail safely away? We don't know, because Milton does not tell us.

Nor is this the only such example. Milton compares Satan's shield to the moon as viewed through Galileo's telescope (1.288); Hell to the lovely Italian valley, Vallombrosa (1.308); and Satan to Turnus (4.1015), whose betrothed Aeneas has to steal in order for Rome to exist, and who is killed by "pius Aeneas" after he surrenders. A victim, in other words, of civilization. There are many others.

All of these (and more) have been noted by Miltonists for ages, yet almost nobody had taken the next step and argued that incertitude is a constituent element of the poem, not an aberration to be explained away. How did I come up with this idea? In short, because at the time, I felt that I was in a similar position to Milton. I was at the end of a five-year contract, and I had yet to find a tenure-track job. It was the end of the line for me. Either I get a tenure-track job, or I was out. Since the chances of my getting such a position were, let us say, small, I believed that everything I had worked for

my entire life was for naught, which gave me an inkling of how I imagine Milton must have felt after the Restoration. My personal circumstances shaped how I interpreted the poem, or allowed me to see something in the poem that was always there, but for reasons I will get to below, occluded. Either way, when I wrote, “Milton created a text in which he inscribes the terrible oscillation between assertions and subversions of principle that ensue when everything has unraveled and one is left trying to make sense of them,” I had my own situation in mind as much, if not more, than Milton’s.

I packed all my insights into an article, and in a kind of Hail-Mary move, I sent it to *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, because John Rumrich, one of the few who thought differently about Milton, was the editor. He quickly accepted it. I thought the piece would be a fitting end to my career.

But I was wrong about my academic prospects: I got a job that year. Through an immense stroke of good fortune, I was offered and accepted in a nanosecond a tenure-track position at San Diego State University (where I’ve happily taught for the last twenty years). But back to Milton and phase 3 of the New Milton Criticism’s genesis.

### Phase 3

After a time (I forget the exact chronology), I decided that I would return to writing on Milton and try to come up with an article on Milton’s politics. Now, I had never really paid much attention before to the question of the Son’s elevation. But when I started reading around, I noticed that some critics said that it happens in Book 3; others said Book 5. A few talked about the elevation by combining quotes from both books. I then had a brainstorm: Milton gives us *two* elevations. There’s enough in common between Books 3 and 5 to indicate that Milton is talking about the same event: both contain a nearly identical address to “Thrones, Princedoms, Powers Dominions” (3.320) / “Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers” (5.601); in both God tells the assembled that the Son has been elevated to co-ruler in Heaven (3.317; 5.606), and that everyone should now “bow” to the Son (3.321; 5.607). But the reactions and the tone are entirely different. In Book 3, God ends by enjoining

the angels to “[a]dore him, who to compass all this dies, / Adore the Son, and honor him as me” (3.341-43). Which is exactly what happens: the angels break into song and go wild abasing themselves: “Towards either throne they bow, and to the ground / With solemn adoration down they cast / their crowns” (3.350-353; when I teach this passage, I always compare it to the presentation of Simba in the Disney film, *The Lion King*). In Book 5, God ends with a threat (“him who disobeys / Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day / Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls / Into utter darkness, deep engulfed, his place / Ordained without redemption, without end” [5.611-615]), and the response is distinctly muted: “So spake th’Omnipotent, and with his words / All seemed well pleased, all seemed, but were not all” (5.616-617).

So which is it? Was the Son elevated before the creation of the world (Book 5) or after (Book 3)? Were the angels overjoyed (Book 3), or merely “well pleased” (Book 5)? Does God end with a celebration (Book 3) or a threat (Book 5)? There’s no way to tell, as Milton gives us both, yet declines to indicate which one is right.

I then understood the crucial importance of the little word separating Typhon from Briareos in Book 1: “*or*.” Milton, I realized, was giving the reader a choice between opposites without indicating which one we are supposed to privilege, and this pattern occurs throughout *Paradise Lost*: we have two elevations, two narrators (the Muse and Raphael), two versions of Adam and Eve’s first meeting, etc. I then looked up “or” in a concordance to *Paradise Lost*, discovering that it’s the eighth most common word in the poem, surpassing even “all” in the number of times Milton uses it. So, gathering everything together, I did what we all do at this point: I wrote an article on the importance of “or” in *Paradise Lost*, and how the resulting incertitude (Milton gives us choices between reasonable alternatives but no way to choose between them) is absolutely central to Milton’s epic. I sent it to *Milton Studies*, which brings us to the next development.

## About the Editor

---

**Robert C. Evans** is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he has taught since 1982. In 1984 he received his Ph.D. from Princeton University, where he held Weaver and Whiting fellowships as well as a University fellowship. In later years his research was supported by fellowships from the Newberry Library (twice), the American Council of Learned Societies, the Folger Shakespeare Library (twice), the Mellon Foundation, the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1982 he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and in 1989 was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

He is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition* and is the author or editor of over fifty books (on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature). He is also the author of roughly four hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## Contributors

---

**Dennis Danielson** is professor emeritus of English at the University of British Columbia. His interests are in Milton and the history of ideas, especially cosmology. His articles have appeared in *Mind*, *Milton Studies*, *ELH*, *JEGP*, *Nature*, *American Journal of Physics*, *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, *American Scientist*, and *Scientific American*. His books include *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (1982), *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (1989, 1999), *The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining the Universe from Heraclitus to Hawking* (2000), *The First Copernican: Georg Joachim Rheticus and the Rise of the Copernican Revolution* (2006), *Paradise Lost and the Cosmological Revolution* (2014), and *The Tao of Right and Wrong* (2018). He was the 2011 recipient of the Konrad Adenauer Research Prize from Germany's Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

**Peter C. Herman** teaches at San Diego State University. His recent books include the collection *Critical Contexts: Literature and Terrorism*, and *Literature and Terrorism from the Gunpowder Plot to 9/11: Representing the Unspeakable* (forthcoming from Routledge), and *Destabilizing Milton: "Paradise Lost" and the Poetics of Incertitude*. He is also the editor, with Elizabeth Sauer, of *The New Milton Criticism* as well the MLA Approaches to Teaching volumes on *Paradise Lost* (2nd ed.) and Milton's shorter poetry and prose.

**Brett A. Hudson** is a lecturer of English at Middle Tennessee State University. His research is on early modern prison literature, seventeenth-century religious nonconformity, and the reception John Milton's lyric poetry. His recent publications focus on the literary responses to seventeenth-century England's penal codes and criminal justice system as well as incarceration and debt. He currently teaches first-year writing and second-year literature courses, including Prison Literature from the Apostle Paul to the 21st-Century Convict. He has also participated as a volunteer in Great Books in Middle Tennessee Prisons, a prison rehabilitation and outreach program.