

# IO

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## Imagining Eden

In his waking words to Eve after their first bout of postlapsarian lovemaking, Adam recognizes the drastic change in human knowing that has befallen them with their tasting of the prohibited Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge:

our eyes  
Opened we find indeed, and find we know  
Both good and evil, good lost, and evil got,  
Bad fruit of knowledge, if this be to know,  
Which leaves us naked thus, of honor void,  
Of innocence, of faith, of purity... (9.1070–75)

Eden seems irrecoverable after the Fall, but the good that it represents is not. Milton acknowledged this paradox of postlapsarian knowledge in his early pamphlet *Areopagitica*:

Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of the good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned, that those confused seeds which were imposed on Psyche as an incessant labor to cull out and sort asunder, were not more intermixed. It was out of the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good by evil. (MLM 938–9)

Milton's prescription in *Areopagitica* for living out the ethical challenges of discernment in a fallen world of intermingled good and evil "resemblances" is not to retreat from but to enter into those challenges: "Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary" (939). The reading of *Paradise Lost* is such a trial. It entails a hard series of acts of discernment, at the heart of which we discover the flickering idea and real hope of a return to a good and delightful human condition, for which everything in

us still yearns, in spite of everything that appears to stand between us and its realization.

The tragic narrative of *Paradise Lost* acknowledges that the Fall has exiled us from the original form of that hope, a garden space of boundless fruitfulness and joy, which is washed out and lost at sea with the Flood (11.829–34). But the poem also gives us glimpses and tastes of the many ways in which we can still apprehend and aspire to the paradisaical life. The archangel Michael explains to Adam near the end of the poem that this blessing will be present in the inward experience of grace: “then wilt thou not be loath/ To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess/ A paradise within thee, happier far” (12.585–87). We discover that “paradise within” through the reordering of our relations to one another and the world. “[A]dd/ Deeds to thy knowledge answerable,” he says. “Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love” (12.581–83). Michael seems to distinguish the “paradise within,” a subjective sense of security, sustained by faith and love, from the earthly Paradise forever lost. But his comparison sets them in suggestive relation to one another as much as it sets them apart.

Michael’s “paradise within” climaxes a series of analogies in the poem. Indeed, the unfallen Eden seems itself to be a state of felicitous analogies (Swaim 168–75). For example, Eve exercises a capacity for making analogies when she describes to Adam her first moments of waking consciousness. She finds herself drawn by water sounds to a lake into which she gazes, and she discovers there a pure expanse that resembles Heaven and “seem[s] another sky” (4.456–59). She intuitively joins Heaven and Earth in her analogy, and learns something about each of them in the process. Then she discovers, and plays peekaboo with, a mirror image of herself (4.460–65). A voice, presumably the Creator’s, interrupts her potentially narcissistic reverie and, enriching the analogical process, promises: “follow me,/ And I will bring thee where no shadow stays/ Thy coming, and thy soft imbraces, he/ Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy/ Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear/ Multitudes like thyself, and thence be called/ Mother of human Race” (4.469–74). This suggests that knowledge and identity in Eden are fashioned analogically: Eve will be related to both her partner and her children by image and similitude. Later, Raphael will alert them to the necessity as well as the uncertainty of analogy between things knowable on Earth and otherwise unknowable of Heaven. As a preface to his brief epic of the War in Heaven, he explains,

what surmounts the reach  
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,  
By likening spiritual to corporal forms,  
As may express them best, though what if earth



recognition of the realizable possibilities of a condition of wholeness and delight that is lost to Satan. As he describes Eden and provides us imaginative entry into it, Milton deploys a twofold rhetorical and representational strategy. He immerses us in a deep dream of realizable pleasure, but he also alerts us to, and disarms us of, our ingrained suspicions and refusals of it. He makes us face how we assume, like the fallen Satan does, that it's too good to be true, and look for flaws in the original design, both of the Garden's landscape and of its human occupants. The poet seems to provide "ah ha!" moments to encourage such suspicions. But whenever ambiguity of language or episode seems to alert us to potential flaws in the paradisaical state, the larger design of such passages challenges us to acknowledge and bracket our suspicions, and to consider how the potential "flaw" we think we have found discovers its place in a more complex verbal and natural economy.

For instance, we may suspect that the "crisped brooks" of the Edenic meadows, "Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,/ With *mazy error* under pendant shades" (4.237–39; my emphasis; viz. Fish 135–6), hint at flaws in the design of the paradisaical water system. But what first might appear as errancy in this description looks quite different in the larger ecology of the sentence in which it takes its course:

But rather to tell how, if art could tell,  
How from that sapphire fount the crisped brooks,  
Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,  
With *mazy error* under pendant shades  
Ran nectar, visiting each plant, and fed  
Flowers worthy of paradise which not nice art  
In beds and curious knots, but nature boon  
Poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain,  
Both where the morning sun first warmly smote  
The open field, and where the unpierced shade  
Imbrowned the noontide bow'rs... (4.236–46; my emphasis)

In this context, we can see how the seemingly aimless "mazy error" of the brooks actually serves the nutritive function of a complex environmental dynamic that integrates several specific ecosystems and feeds flora of all kinds, from the "pendant shades" of the forest edge and glades, to meadow flowers of the open field, to the massy tree-sentinels of the climax forest that impenetrably shades the "noontide bowers."

Twice in this passage, Milton confesses the inadequacy of art even to represent, much less to improve upon, this profuse, dynamic, and unpolluted system of mutually nourishing elements and life forms. Here he is playing on the important Renaissance *topos* of nature and art. He seems to be claiming that art, at its best, whether as poetic representation, as in

this poem, or as the human shaping of landscape, follows nature, respects its rhythms and designs, and the integrity of its multitudinous forms. Yet the poem cannot be anything but artful, and the poet calls attention to its supreme artfulness even as he expresses aesthetic modesty about art's limits. Milton thus shows how the artist's work contributes the human part to the reciprocities that make the Edenic ecosystem so dynamic. The passage we are reading begins with bejewelled landscape elements that seem very beautiful but highly artificial. "Sapphire fount," "crisped brooks," "orient pearl," "sands of gold:" these noun phrases share the otherworldly rhetoric by which Milton elsewhere tries to evoke the landscapes of Heaven. Perhaps he wants to remind his readers of the otherness of this terrestrial paradise in its as yet unspoiled state. Yet in the course of the clause, this stylized and seemingly static vision of nature dissolves into dynamic nutritive flow, and to an aesthetic that prefigures Romantic naturalism. "Hill and dale and plain," "open field" and "noontide bowers" (and, if we read forward, "lawns, or level downs," "palmy hillock," "irriguous valley," "umbrageous grots and caves/ Of cool recess"): these phrases represent a Wordsworthian nature that we can recognize, for it seems very much like ours. The clause itself is not set off and self-enclosed, but embedded in a spectacularly long complex compound sentence of forty-one lines (4.223–63), all of whose topographical particularities are woven together by the description of the water flow. The sentence surges and meanders, reproducing the flow of the complex water system Milton is describing in the very course and pulse of his syntax. He thus indicates the mutual, eco-linguistic dissolve of the work of artistic representation into the world it tries to evoke, and the emergence of that world, now beheld, as only art can reveal it, in both its dynamism and its design.

The fecund wildness of this space impresses itself upon the archangel Raphael as he takes his first steps on Earth, striding through the "spicy forest" to meet and forewarn Adam and Eve of Satan's dangerous presence in their Garden home:

[he] now is come  
 Into the blissful field, through groves of myrrh,  
 And flowering odors, cassia, nard, and balm;  
 A wilderness of sweets; for nature here  
 Wantoned as in her prime, and played at will  
 Her virgin fancies, pouring forth more sweet,  
 Wild above rule or art, enormous bliss. (5.291–97)

In contrast to our first approach to Eden, accompanying the fallen Satan, in this passage we share the first impressions of Raphael, in his own unfallen beauty, amazed at a green and burgeoning environment quite different from,

but no less beautiful than, the celestial one that he calls home. Here again Milton plays on the art and nature *topos*. Yet the texture and effect of this sentence is quite different. Whereas the riverine sentence, like its subject, flowed through integrated, contiguous, yet self-contained, ecosystems, this sentence evokes both density and the uncontainable outbursting of vegetative energy. The flora intimate the fragrant delights of the Bible's Song of Songs, yet the sensations that this "wilderness of sweets" evokes are not merely literary, but visual, tactile, and olfactory, as the sentence – burgeoning and branching with its flexible, loosely joined phrases and clauses, its propulsive reiterations and alliterations, its lip-pursing semi-vowels and open vowels – enacts what it describes. "Wild above rule or art," the sentence bursts free of the neoclassical poetic standards of proportion, tact, and reasonableness, that were being formalized by Milton's contemporaries in England's Restoration period. It throbs instead with the generative pulse of life that God in the Bible ordained and sanctified with the reiterated imperative, "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:22, 28). Here again, Milton seems to favor natural spontaneity, energy, and flexibility over the ordering and containing patterns of art (4.241). But he renders this sense of naturalistic respect, indeed awe, through an art that seems to go beyond its own rules, to suggest that in the poem, ecological vision and poetic vision are so reciprocal to one another that they can't be disentangled.

The passage seems to point us in two directions: first, to the origins of this "Wilderness of sweets," and of all of nature, terrestrial and cosmic, in Chaos, the "wild abyss" (2.217) of warring elements, its inexhaustible supply of raw materials ever open and subject to the Creator's intentions; and second, to the analogous transformation of portions of the "wilderness of sweets," of Eden's first growth forest, into a garden space cultivated by the humans to whom God has assigned the "dominion," and with it the responsibility, of earth-care. In Raphael's epic account of the Creation of the Universe, God the Father assigns the joyful labor of Creation, the separation and transformation of portions of Chaos, into the lightsome and fertile orders of nature (7.162–632), to the "begotten Son" (163) whom he praises as "My word, my wisdom, and effectual might" (3.170). In turn he places in the hands of his terrestrial son and daughter, Adam and Eve, also namers and creators by the word, the "pleasant labor" (4.624) of husbandry, of transforming portions of the wilderness of Eden into a Garden even more beautiful, efficiently fruitful, and pleasant.

Milton indicates in several ways that it is the human presence that makes the Garden of Eden what it is, the "crown" (4.133) of terrestrial creation. Although Milton overlays his dynamic and naturalized garden with images and evocations of more stylized, static eternal gardens, principally drawn

from classical mythology and literature, and from Dante's *Purgatorio*, Milton's Garden is a working garden of this Earth. Its vegetative fecundity requires care and cultivation, which is the distinctly human opportunity provided by God to Adam and Eve, and a sign of their God-instilled sense of ethical responsibility toward, and delight in, their environment. In the first exchange between the human couple that Satan overhears in his shape-shifting concealment, Adam declares to Eve that the Creator requires nothing of them other than respecting his "one easy prohibition" (4.433) against tasting the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, "The only sign of our obedience left/ Among so many signs of power and rule/ Confer'd upon us, and dominion giv'n/ Over all other creatures that possess/ Earth, air, and sea" (4.428–32). Adam ends this speech to Eve by celebrating "our delightful task/ To prune these growing plants, and tend these flowers,/ which were it toilsome, yet with thee were sweet" (4.436–39).

This moment is quietly startling. Most readers of the biblical account of Eden, from patristic and medieval interpreters to the present, have presumed that Adam and Eve had nothing to do in the unfallen Garden other than pleasure themselves, as if the Garden were the original Club Med, a perfectly groomed and God-manicured leisure resort for consenting adults. Milton dignifies the original humans by showing them discovering for themselves "delightful" work to do, in extending the Creator's impulse toward order, beauty, and fertility through the arts of gardening. This shaping project is one that Adam and Eve are working out for themselves, evidence of their creative and ethical autonomy. God has not assigned to them compulsory labor, nor has he provided a gardening guide or set of tools. He has left them to figure out what it means to exercise "dominion" in their particular domain of the created order, and they have decided that the transformation of some portions of the "wilderness of sweets" into a sustainable garden would be good work to do. They exercise human "dominion" not as domination and exploitation of other creatures, but as nurturing and shaping the network of creaturely interdependencies, of which humans are a uniquely self-conscious and intentional part.

We think too small, if we imagine Adam and Eve's gardening as the weekend upkeep of a suburban vegetable or flower garden, rather than the immense georgic project of turning wilderness into a sustainable and habitable environment (Lewalski 1971; Hiltner 2003). Adam hints at how overwhelming this task must seem, when he expresses some discouragement about the job they have before themselves:

With first approach of light, we must be risen,  
And at our pleasant labor, to reform  
Yon flowery arbors, yonder allies green,

Our walk at noon, with branches overgrown,  
 That mock our scant manuring, and require  
 More hands than ours to lop their wanton growth:  
 Those blossoms also, and those dropping gums,  
 That lie bestrown unsightly and unsmooth,  
 Ask riddance, if we mean to tread with ease;  
 Meanwhile, as nature wills, night bids us rest. (4.624–33)

This sounds familiar to postlapsarian readers trying to get to sleep early while already anxious about their next days' workloads. In his phrases expressing irritation and complaint, we can sense Adam's mood souring. The erotic anticipation of the night's pleasures with Eve dissipates in the monitory shrug of the curt final clause, which might be paraphrased, "Come on, honey, we've got a lot of work to do tomorrow, so let's try to get a good night's sleep."

Eve's response, however, wonderfully interrupts and transforms Adam's emerging gloom. First, she tactfully reminds him, in terms that initially may unsettle our modern assumptions about gender equality in marriage, that he is her superior, and that she delights in his authority over her: "God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more/ Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise" (4.637–38). Sincere as this expression of love is on Eve's part, it is also a good disarming tactic. Adam is bound to receive both the gesture of submission and the compliment, as he has earlier, "in delight/ Both of her beauty and submissive charms" (4.498–99). But there is more to Eve than ritual gestures of obeisance like this one indicate, and more to her effect on Adam. She spontaneously composes for him a rhapsodic love song that reveals her excitement about their life together (4.641–56). The opening nine lines enumerate the sensory and creaturely delights of Eden (4.641–49), and her closing sequence reiterates this catalog of delights in a suspenseful series of negations (650–55) decorously closing with a double negative that weaves all the wonders of Eden into the loving partnership of the pair to whom it has been entrusted: "... Nor grateful evening mild, nor silent night/ With this her solemn bird, nor walk by moon,/ Or glittering starlight without thee is sweet" (4.650–56). Adam has stressed the work ethic by which they are learning to organize and inform their lives, but Eve reminds him of the sweetness of Eden, and of how it is in the mutual partnership of their love for one another that these Edenic blessings have their fulfillment.

Milton periodically genders their contributions to this partnership in ways that seem to privilege Adam. But when Milton dramatizes the lovers engaging with each other, the process of relationship complicates gendered character design and nominal male hierarchy. From our first view of them, Eve and Adam are works in progress, as is their relationship. They learn and

grow from one another, discovering who they are in the give-and-take of committed relationship. We see this process of self-giving, mutual enlargement, and transformation in virtually every exchange between Adam and Eve in the middle books of the epic. Thus, the self-appointed labor of cultivating the Garden is analogous with and integral to the ongoing project of cultivating their relationship (Lewalski 1971). There is nothing, indeed, that Adam and Eve can't think and talk about, in shaping their relationships to one another, to their world, and to their Creator. In his treatment of the accelerating growth curve of their knowledge, Milton challenges another traditional and still widely held assumption about the original Garden state of humanity: that knowledge itself is forbidden, and that Edenic bliss is founded on ignorance. Milton represents the Garden as a challenging domain for significant choices, and shows how those choices are informed by dynamic and ever-unfolding thought – thought that is formed in “sweet converse” (9.909).

Sexuality seals and sanctifies the transformative reciprocities between Adam and Eve. One of Milton's most startling inventions in *Paradise Lost* is the fullness and frankness of their erotic delight. Traditional readings of the Creation and Fall in Genesis introduced suspicions of sexuality, and conditioned – and still condition – readers and interpreters of those narratives to presume that the tasting of the forbidden fruit was synonymous with the discovery of sexual desire: sexuality was accused as the cause as well as the immediate consequence of the Fall, the destroyer of innocence and the sign of its destruction. But Milton challenges this understanding by embodying the erotic promise of Edenic life embedded in the first two chapters of Genesis. Although the Genesis authors and editors are discreet about the erotics of unfallen Eden, Milton develops their cue that it is perhaps the greatest of Edenic blessings, a perfecting of human existence. Surprisingly, it is Satan, their voyeuristic stalker and would-be destroyer, who makes explicit the connection between environment and mind:

Sight-hateful, sight tormenting! Thus these two  
 Imparadised in one another's arms  
 The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill  
 Of bliss on bliss, while I to Hell am thrust,  
 Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,  
 Among our other torments not the least  
 Still unfulfilled with pain of longing pines... (4.505–11)

Satan is stunned into admission of truth in this moment, testifying that Edenic delight is consummated in the human embrace, which torments him into a deeper realization of his own alienation and despair, fueled by a desire that can only gratify itself by trying to destroy what has awakened it.

How, then, does the prohibited Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil figure in the dense organic, intellectual, and moral ecosystems that constitute Edenic existence? Overhearing Adam's explanation of the "One easy prohibition" among the "choice/ Unlimited of manifold delights" (4.433–35), Satan concludes that this is a sign of God's oppressive injustice: "knowledge forbidden?/ Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord/ Envy them that? .../ ... do they only stand/ By ignorance, is that their happy state,/ The proof of their obedience and their faith?" (4.513–20). Milton cannily lets Satan give voice to our own likely skeptical responses to the prohibition. Satan's response to Adam's explanation overlooks Adam's original understanding of the Fruit as a symbol, "the only sign of our obedience left/ Among so many signs of power and rule/ Conferred upon us" (4.428–30). As a "sign of obedience," the Fruit signifies that humans, sovereigns over all else in the world, are creatures like the other "living souls" (7.388, 451, 528) they share that world with. Their being is not "self-begot, self-raised/ By [their] own quickening power," as Satan deludes himself into claiming (5.860), but a gift. By abstaining from eating the Fruit, Eve and Adam signal their recognition of this gift, and of its Giver, which in turn orders all the relations of Eden rightly, investing the created goodness of the world with the distinctive ethical goodness of human intention. It follows from this recognition that nothing else need be forbidden, for the ordering of their relations to God rightly ensures that Adam and Eve would not take their dominion on Earth as a license for domination or exploitation, but as an opportunity for cultivation and creation.

How swiftly it all seems to collapse, this flourishing, self-sustaining vision of human and natural possibility that Milton evokes through more than five books of his twelve-book epic. The swiftness of their Fall seems to suggest Eve and Adam have not been as capable or prepared to confront temptation as Raphael had insisted: "stand fast; to stand or fall/ Free in thine own arbitrement it lies./ Perfect within, no outward aid require" (8.640–42). Eve's fall is an intellectual collapse, an apparent weakness in reasoning power that Satan spots and exploits; Adam's seems a consequence of excessive love, the emotional vulnerability for which Raphael had scolded him (8.588–94). But Milton makes us think twice about presuming previous flaws from the negative outcomes of decisions and actions. Eve has shown intelligence and resolve in persuading her husband to agree to the division of their labor (9.205–384). In response to Raphael, Adam has defended and refined his understanding of how human love is different from the "carnal pleasure" enjoyed by other creatures, a life-giving source of their "Union of mind," "one soul" (8.604). Milton's invocation to Book 9 frames its tragic action by contrasting the "tedious havoc" (9.30) of warrior-heroism celebrated in

traditional epics to “the better fortitude/ Of patience and heroic martyrdom/ Unsung” (9.31–33). “Patience and heroic martyrdom” will be necessary virtues in the postlapsarian world, as the archangel Michael instructs Adam in spiritual warfare. Milton’s foregrounding of these previously unsung virtues prior to their Fall anticipates where Eve and Adam go wrong: not through the inevitable consequence of some internal “flaw,” but through failures of patience and the capacity to love selflessly rather than possessively.

In the devastating impact of this pair of human choices upon Eden itself, Milton shows how human fallenness first manifests itself in exploiting and destroying the natural world. Given that it’s not just an apple that she plucks, but the symbol of people’s right relations to one another, their environing world, and their Creator, Eve’s initial transgression sets in motion the sorry history of aggressive human despoliation of nature:

her rash hand in evil hour  
Forth reaching to the Fruit, she pluck’d, she eat:  
Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat  
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,  
That all was lost. (9.780–84)

Adam’s impulsive participation in Eve’s rash choice completes “the mortal Sin/ Original,” and the immediate response of all Creation is the “groan” of painfully permanent organic rupture between nature and her human caretakers (9.1000–04).

Earth trembl’d from her entrails, as again  
In pangs, and nature gave a second groan,  
Sky low’r’d, and muttering thunder, some sad drops  
Wept at completing of the mortal sin  
Original. (9.1000–04)

Perhaps there is a slightly hopeful suggestiveness in the birth pangs here, but poor Earth is bearing sin and death now, materializing the monstrous world of pain, death, and guilt, whose allegorical generation Sin recounted so vividly to her father Satan in Book 2 (2.777–89).

“All was lost” – yet was it? Eve’s last lines in the poem – the last human words spoken in Eden – revive and play on the word “all,” taking responsibility for the irreversible finality of her transgression, yet also intimating the regeneration of hope, and the will to realize that hope, of such a Garden as she and Adam must leave behind:

thou to mee  
Art *all* things under Heav’n, *all* places thou,  
Who for my willful crime art banisht hence.  
This further consolation yet secure

I carry hence; though *all* by mee is lost,  
 Such favor I unworthy am voutsaf't,  
 By mee the Promis'd Seed shall *all* restore.

(12.622–23; my emphasis)

In acknowledging the loss, and her responsibility for it, she paradoxically perceives the providential opportunity for restoration, through the exercise of the love toward others, and toward the world, that a regenerated faith in providence makes newly possible.

And so, although it seems that the Fall exiles us forever from the possibilities of full and integrated humanity enjoyed by our “Grand Parents” (1.29), Milton’s poem suggests that we can intimate, and enact, the paradisaical life for which humans were created, even in the painful and divisive conditions of the fallen world. The very fact of the poem itself, the visionary testimony of a blind and politically defeated but unbroken man, is evidence of this promissory opportunity. From the archaic text of Genesis, Milton recovers and revivifies the idea of a garden state that fosters work, knowledge, and love. His vision challenges his readers to take up the responsibility and hard work of shaping the fallen world we inhabit into a life-surround that is truly habitable and friendly to human works of creativity and sociability. Michael’s envisioning for Adam of a “Paradise within” (12.587) does not promise a private interior happiness, sequestered from the world, but a spiritual condition that is at once personal and political, lived out in the demanding exercise of freedom: we might yet be living in Eden, if we are willing to take the risk of understanding who we are meant to be. We know from the momentary fullness of our experiences of pleasure, discovery, justice, and love how near at hand that may be, even as it emerges from the daily knowledge of what human beings can be capable, desirous, and willing to do to one another, and to the world we share. We may find ourselves so moved by the reading of Eden in *Paradise Lost* as to live toward it, wherever we find ourselves in this fallen world. To try to do so would be to raise, as Milton puts it in his epic sequel, *Paradise Regained*, “Eden ... in the waste Wilderness” (*PR* 1.7).

## NOTES

- 1 Thanks to Clare Follmann, email to author, 9/24/2012.

*Further Reading*

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