

English 125: Major English Poets
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Ann Atura

Want, Need, and Reason: Milton and Cause

by Ann Atura

People desire what is desirable. Yet they don't necessarily pursue it. Whether because of self-destructive compulsion, ethical confusion, faulty foresight, or overweening malice, the ostensible reason for choice is not always Reason. Yet any action taken implies an internal impetus; personal reason, we might say, or simply *reasons*, function as the unconscious arbiter between conscious options, and thus "reason also is choice" (3:108), But which came first: reasons or Reason? Perhaps in defiance of popular offhand philosophy, *Paradise Lost* supports the former; reasons are Reason before evil. Milton explains in the *Aeropagitica* that "reason is but choosing;" therefore the reasons that inspired prelapsarian choice had no necessary connection with logic. But the Fall precipitates a meta-realization of external standards of desire. The pure, uncomplicated wants and joys of the first couple transmute into dangerous labyrinths of conflicting "needs." Thus, Adam and Eve bear their first true burden. It isn't the case that they didn't judge before the fall, but rather that they weren't conscious of choice as separable from action writ large – that is to say, they weren't aware of judgment. They were immune to the vicissitudes of self-consciousness. The very *concept* of measuring an activity up to an outside standard was absent before the Disobedience. Now, the external standard (our knowledge of Good and Evil) intellectually alienates reason from choice and makes mortal decisions deliberate in a new and dangerous way.

Milton takes the thought a step further: modern humans must confront their self-consciousness as an integral part of what it means to be moral, because it has become an integral part of what it means to be human. We identify with our internal monologues, and they're precisely the problem. Internal monologues precipitate the treacherously self-aware methods and layers of self-judgment, which proceed to war with one another without any means of truce, lacking as they do precepts to which they appeal (they *are* precepts). We cannot, however, discard these categories, these modes of thought, these values; once visible, they're relevant. To judge without a standard is folly; to have a standard and ignore judgment is evil. Consciousness is here to stay. Thus, the meta-realization of ethics as something external to one's essence characterizes man's transition from fallible creature to fallen creature. Reason existed before the fall; sex existed; obedience and disobedience, hierarchy and insubordination, doubt and hope filled Edenic days. What was lacking was the sense that any of things reflected a willingness or unwillingness to do what one is internally compelled to do – that is to say, the sense that they had to do with being “moral,” to living up to one's own morality and believing in its soundness.

Let's first examine Milton's predilection for associating estranged reason with evil. We learn from the outset that the recalcitrant devils' primary fault is their separation of the extant order of things from what they deem to be the natural order of things. Take, for example, the devils' condemnation of G-d in the first chapter: he is “upheld by old repute, consent, or custom” (1.639-40). As readers we are cognizant of the fact that this cannot possibly be the case. While G-d may indeed be reputable and customary, he isn't exclusively, *merely* so, as he is by definition the best man for the job. Yet the rebels find a circuitous explanation for the phenomena of their world, inferring sin and malice where none exists. These delusional objections, while tempting, leave everyone unhappy. Satan acknowledges that in rebelling he

butts against his natural will: “Honor and empire with revenge enlarged / By conquering this new world, compels me now / To do what else, though damned, I should abhor” (4:390-2). The ambiguity of “though” encourages us to recognize the general ambiguity of contingent statements. Contingencies are a definitive product of an alienation of reason from self, of the kind of thought that must consider what is *not* the case in order to determine what *is*. If “though” means “even given that I am,” there seems to be nothing at all holding the devil back from changing his mind, even as he speaks; if it stands in for “if I weren’t,” the statement is mopey and aimless from the outset. Perhaps the point is that neither Satan nor we as readers can verify conditional claims, as they require one to mystical understanding oneself through eyes that are by definition unknowable to you. Safer, certainly, to say what one “should” do without the preamble; yet conditional statements are at the heart of conscious judgment, together with the suspicion thereof.

In *Paradise Lost* legalistic judgment surfaces even before religious judgment does: in the realm of devils, Beelzebub congratulates the devils’ decision to infiltrate the new world with the words, “Well have ye judged, well ended long debate” (2.390). We may wonder what this has to do with the emergence of consciousness; this scene is conceived as a parliamentary debate that puts no ostensible stock in the identity of the judge. But the pretense of the situation melts away with Milton’s scathing commentary. The hollow nature of “open forum” is totally transparent: the devil is described as “above his fellows, with monarchal pride conscious of highest worth” (2.429). Then parliamentary discourse, too, fails to escape our injection of ourselves into our arguments. What’s more, when Satan speaks, the double-entendre suggests that Reason acts as a proxy for the void: “With reason hath deep silence and demure seized us” (2:431-2). With reason as his loom Satan weaves his ludicrous soliloquies and emerges with a tapestry of crossed

reasons; and yet this is not true knowledge. The honest, obvious truth is Satan's unforgivable persistence in sin. Indeed, Satan has to surrender when dealt straightforward blows by angels, who know that he knows better. He walks away from a fight when Gabriel says, uncharacteristically simply, "Satan, I know thy strength, and thou know'st mine" (4:1005).

Contrast the diabolical propensity to condemn and spite G-d to Satan's intuitive judgment, which he maintains despite his perversion. Milton describes his first impression of Adam and Eve as individuals as follows: "Godlike erect, with native honor clad / In naked majesty, seemed lords of all, / And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine / The image of their glorious maker shone" (4:289-92). Seeming often has a negative connotation in the postlapsarian world, in which not only the threat of temptation but the reality of deception is something that must be dealt with. But here we find that appearance is a crucial tool in evaluating Adam and Eve's innocence. The devil judges aright: by extension, Milton suggests, naïve belief in seeming remains in us all. We are naturally trusting. Satan's jerk reaction to the two creatures as "worthy" inculpates him all over again: deep down inside, he knows better than to hate them. Even *Satan's* pre-judgment – his instinct – is sacred. A value on the seeming in Eden crops up elsewhere: the distinction between the sexes, later deemed unjust and made problematic because of that conscious judgment, is nevertheless sacred before the Fall. Inequality is acknowledged to be exactly what it is and not condemned for it: the two were "Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed" (4:296). No judgment is attached to the fact; neither is the state different from the appearance.

Contained in the first speech we hear from Adam is, in fact, a command to keep judgment in check: "Let us not think hard / One easy prohibition" (4.431-2). The enjambment suggests it is thinking "hard" – that is, with effort and duration – that is condemned in general. Surely this is

associated with Raphael's fear of scientific knowledge in man. He tells Adam, "Knowledge is as food, and needs no less / Her temperance over appetite, to know / In measure what the mind may well contain" (7:126-8). This sets up an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, we learn that factual knowledge is, like food, absolutely necessary, the impetus for our action. On the other, we learn that too much of it will poison our judgment. Of course, this implies that Reason in the abstract is not Adam's primary mode of thought; a posteriori knowledge cannot affect the a priori, so if Adam were appealing to principles his judgment would remain unaffected by a "surfeit" of fact. So, according to Milton, judgment is a synthesis of actual things we know, not an abstracted ability to see Truth through philosophy. By extension, there truly is a way in which we can think too hard – by incorporating too many facts (or irrelevant or incorrect facts) we will arrive at false conclusions despite our best intentions. We can never be truly trusted in choosing what facts are appropriate to learn. This is not much of an issue in Eden, where Adam can hardly choose what he knows, informed as he is by angels. But distrust of fact, when it emerges, distinctly separates thought from self; we imagine that our self-conception is rooted in a priori concepts, not in a posteriori judgments (cognitive science aside), and this naturally arises once Adam and Eve realize their potential for choosing the factually unfavorable.

Perhaps, though, it is possible to make factual decisions without claiming that those decisions reflect a compelling concept. Thought itself – intellectual independence – is by no means evil in Eden. There is a prelapsarian capacity for knowledge that is laudable and shameless. But it doesn't pretend to synthesize what is, in fact, incapable of synthesis. Rather, to describe the perfection of Adam's (masculine) intellect, Milton deftly chooses "contemplation" (4:297). The word comes from Old French for "the act of looking at," and, further back, from "to mark out a space for observation." Adam, therefore, doesn't engage in the reason that can yield

the ugly incestuous relationships whereby Sin and Death are formed. Instead, he is capable of the kind that is rooted, first and foremost, in the observation of reality and, therefore, in his immediate reaction thereto. He is famously capable of understanding the wisdom of obeying his G-d: he is advised to “know to know no more” (4.775). This kind of *seeing* is healthy. When Raphael reveals truth to Adam, Adam isn’t polluted; Milton refers to the exchange as “Venial discourse unblamed” (9:5). Note, however, that Milton reiterates the innocence of the interchange: it is both “venial” *and* “unblamed.” Milton drives home the descriptor because he understands it to be ill-fitting to postlapsarian consciousness. In any case, it seems that Adam is capable of absorbing information without coming to make existential judgments about it, except insofar as it is necessary excellent because derived from the choices of the Almighty G-d.

Purity of thought (not acumen) is apparent in Eve’s early pronouncements, too. She says, “I chiefly, who enjoy / So far the happier lot, enjoying thee . . . while thou / Like consort to thyself canst no where find” (4:444-8). She does not attempt to consider herself objectively so as to weigh the possibility that *she* is a superior consort than is Adam. Her naiveté in perceiving herself indicates a larger unwillingness to imagine the unimaginable through employing the hypothetical projections necessary for intellectual judgment. Neither is she ashamed to acknowledge that her judgment of beauty is visceral. She unhesitatingly offers her earlier perception of Adam (as opposed to her own image) as follows: “yet methought less fair, / Less winning soft, less amiably mild, / Than that smooth watery image” (4:478-80). Eve’s first acts are narcissistic and ignorant of the beauty of wisdom; yet though they demonstrate a preference, they do not demonstrate judgment by conscious principle. These fleeting thoughts are, as Eve acknowledges, unadorned inclinations, primal reflexes. Yet this same naked inclination leads Eve to “yield” to Adam’s hand; Milton suggests that humans are balanced so as to allow

contradictory impulses to lead to happiness, so long as we do not allow them to multiply and distort one another. In Eden, Eve “half embracing leaned” (4:494), with “coy submission, modest pride, / And sweet, reluctant, amorous delay” (4.310-1). Emotions and meanings were as abundant and distinct as they are now, but their contradiction was not found to be problematic.

Angels, we learn – or at least the ones that are still on the wagon – use an instantaneous reason that does not allow for convolution: “The soul / Reason receives, and reason is her being, / Discursive or intuitive: discourse / Is ofttest yours, the latter most is ours” (5:486-8). This intuition isn’t less heavenly because of what we might consider its shallowness of conscious support; on the contrary, it avoids the deceptive self-evaluation whereby we forget that, after all, both sides of the argument are fabricated by the decision-maker. As we have seen, choice is not the same as judgment. Choice does not necessarily require trial. Only in the case of a jury to be informed – that is, in the case of a duality of internal monologue and an imagined, soul-like audience – must trial take place. When men are tried – either for a crime or in the context of general temptation – it is for the sake of their own self-understanding; G-d already knows who is capable of morality, who has committed what crime, and who is capable of and active in self-censure. But internally we have no situation against which to try ourselves; the lawyering soliloquist, our “conscience,” is coincident with the individual being informed of potential depravity, our id. We are reminded of the devils, who must hold parliamentary debate in order to convince one another of their own rectitude, despite the utter void of facts to be disseminated (the situation, no doubt, is eternally clear).

With the fall we lay the foundations of the literal and internal courtroom, distinct from the world in which decisions are made; with the possibility of sin emerges a self-consciousness that is a galaxy unto itself. Milton repeatedly brings this level of meta-examination to our

attention. Before the Fall the already-sullied Satan refers to “the happier Eden” of “one another’s arms” (4:505) because he is conscious of activities and mental states as distinguishable from the whole of reality, immediately perceived. Milton echoes this recognition of layers of worlds associated with the Fall. In describing the “tragic” disobedience Milton refers to “judgment given / That brought into this world a world of woe” (9.10-11). Ostensibly, of course, “judgment” refers to Heaven’s condemnation of mankind’s sin and subsequent exile of the couple into the outside world – our world. Yet it is interesting that Milton depicts Eden as squeezed aside, not replaced, by this second world. By extension, it seems, we retain the ability to access Eden, distinct from the world of woe. It’s easy to draw a connection between this and the creation of self-consciousness; it brings into our psyche a world of consciousness (self-criticism) that purports to comprise the self, despite the obvious persistence of intuition. In a parallel line of thought, we are reminded of the second world of senses, conceived of as alienated from the objects that excite them. This, too, creates a false sense of interiority. The result is clear: as Abdiel explains to Satan regarding his internal division into conceptualized master and slave, “Thy self [is] not free, but to thy self enthralled” (6:181).

The two worlds of conscious and subconscious entangle. Even as devils are anxious to make judgment calls that go against their intuition, they are convinced of a union between choice and thought that drags one into the other in an unholy, mystical way. Satan says, “who can think submission?” (1.661). This is a way of conveying, of course, that submission is an improper *choice* or *judgment*, but this distinction apparently eludes the devil. The same is found in Eve’s sinful thinking. We obtain a foretaste of this mode of sin through her description of her almost condemning dream: “the pleasant savory smell / So quick’nd appetite, that I, methought, / Could not but taste” (5.84-6). Does she mean to say that she was so conscious of the apple that she was

almost able to taste it? Or rather that she couldn't help but do so? Clearly, the two are related; but one is sinful in thought but not in nature, and the other the converse. This perversion of thought comes to fruition in Eve's final, sinful declaration that Adam's living with another woman without her is "a death to think" (9:830). To consider a possibility is not to experience it. But to believe that that is the case is also to make choices that render the former belief true. These are the perversions and convoluted thoughts that work the well-intentioned theologian into a self-vindicating Satan.

It's important to notice that G-d, while a creature of judgment in the sense of meting out justice, does not go through a process of judgment. G-d, in one of his less cushioned sentences, says, "So man, as is most just, shall satisfy for man, be judged and die, and dying rise" (3:294-6). Man's being judged and dying are identical to G-d, for whom judgment is synonymous with action (his will is reality). Yet human judgment is a different animal. For humans, judgment transpires according to a system of rules that they must account for; this system of rules is ambiguous. For G-d, the rules are apparent: they are He. ("That far be from thee, Father, who art Judge / Of all things made, and judgest only right" [3:154-5].) But for humans, it is in works of art and other closed systems that the rules are best decided upon. It can hardly be thought a coincidence that Milton points out the role of choice in literature as analogous to choice in deed. G-d says men are "Authors to themselves in all / Both what they judge and what they choose" (3:122-3). Undoubtedly the primary meaning of "author" wasn't literary; but surely Milton would have been conscious of the word's connotation, appearing as it does in a published book. Here, again, the problem of choice and judgment reemerges, yet here it is turned on its head: choice and judgment are dissociated. G-d therefore tells us that judgment – the temporal arrival

at a decision – is not the divine idea of true choice. The author in them shows what they judge; yet choice, literal action, is left to their unmediated selves.

By no means are we to pretend that we can revert to a system in which we are unconscious of our capacity for self-reflection. Even the act of denial would be a demonstration of the persistent fact of our ego. Luckily, works like the poem itself are tailored to our present reality. As we know, Milton proclaims that he writes so as to “justify the ways of G-d to men” (1:26). This implies that we are actively judging G-d as he has us, and that thought can affect that judgment. Milton thus realizes that the capacity for judgment is embedded in our way of life, and that any return to G-d must be cognizant of judgment and use it to its advantage. Besides, no longer are looks an accurate indicator of truth. Milton tells us of Adam and Eve that after the fall, “Love was not in their looks, either to God / Or to each other” (10:111-2), yet we know they still love one another, if in a new, incomplete way. Expression, now, is in disarray; it must be consciously righted.

As is often the case in works of art, the artist (Milton) refers to his art as the way through which self-consciousness can turn itself back into a force of good, capable of reuniting with the undistorted (and virtuous) will. The first book of *Paradise Lost* ends with a massive cymbal crash: “The great consult began” (1.799). Which great consult? Ostensibly Milton refers to the parliamentary proceedings between the devils, but the placement of the proclamation suggests he may also refer to the consult that transpires in the book itself. Clearly, the poem is an exercise in precisely the kind of extrapolation that can easily veer off the track of virtue and steer us into the Abyss of sin: the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Yet, just as Milton believes that consults are, in modern reality, commendable, while in the heavenly realm they are farcical and tautologically ridiculous, so does the method of thought exercised by the devil work to our

advantage in situations in which we're deciphering the best course of action, rather than whether to choose the very thing that defines the best choice. Art is not synonymous with simple truth, because that is intuitive, before words entirely. Yet at least it can convene with truth, as we might convene with G-d in church; Milton describes his muse as something acquainted with wisdom though not synonymous with it. He writes, "Thou [muse] with Eternal Wisdom didst converse, / Wisdom thy sister" (7:9).

The idea that art can serve as the salvation for the auto-suffocating soul is enforced by the recurrent theme of short and long. Clearly, the fallen activity of meta-thought and judgment is arduous. Take, for example, the evil consult: "Well have ye judg'd, well ended *long* debate" (2:390) (my emphasis). We also notice that thoughts in Eden are short in comparison with the long chains of reason that take their place in the Fallen world: "Enjoy . . . Short pleasures, for long woes are to succeed" (4.535), Satan warns. But what of sin – is it necessarily associated with convolution? Milton intentionally sends us mixed messages about the pathway to hell. Satan says, "Long is the way / And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light" (2:432-3), and while we may be inclined to distrust Satan, this particular statement strikes the reader as honest. Yet later Sin and Death pave the way to earth so as to facilitate mass transport between the two. And the reader will recall that Satan enters the garden of Eden by "Leap[ing] o'er the fence with ease into the fold" (4.187) – a calamitous sin committed with but a drop of effort. As we see, before tempting Eve, "Satan had journeyed on, pensive and slow" (4.173). Yet we also find that Adam and Eve, who are actively repenting, leave Eden "with wandering steps and slow" (12:649).

Can we say that slow steps are a sign of evil? Certainly not – the level of reticence, the distance between immediate thought and final choice, seems to fluctuate in response to the situation. No hard and fast rules remain regarding whether we ought over-think ourselves.

Ultimately, short and long represent the interests of both G-d and the devil. Sin can happen quickly, but it requires long consult first; grace is difficult, and yet instantaneously achieved. In our world, contemplation can lead to evil as it can to good; so, too, can our instinct lead us into sin, while it may as easily provide the easy, rational solution to a moral quandry. Adam confesses his sins with a combination of the two: “Whence Adam faltering long, thus answer'd brief” (10:115). While in an ideal context the “long” duration of self-reflection and -evaluation is unnecessarily, contemplation is preferable to a quick revelation of a false consciousness. If we must overthink things, better at least give our final answer than to give the multitude of answers through which we sort in the process of deciding, as does Satan; hyper-justification merely serves to legitimize any possible course of action.

Milton is fascinated with this reality of convolution as a road back to simplicity: he writes a terrifically long story in response to brief and mysterious lines from the bible (lines that are neither as voluminous nor as clear as the law-related minutiae that follow in Leviticus and Numbers). Art, through its torturous intricacies, can take us back to where we began, with pious instinct. Immediately after the fall, we find that uttering plans is now integral to righteousness. Adam sadly says, “What better can we do, then to the place / Repairing where he judg'd us, prostrate fall / Before him reverent, and there confess / Humbly our faults, and pardon beg, with tears / Watering the ground . . .” (10:1086-90). Reiterating precisely those words, Milton narrates the fallen couple goes on to do precisely that. What is the point of repeating Adam’s words? It seems that hearing it come self-consciously from an author’s voice is a kind of catharsis. We require not only the action but reflection on the action. G-d himself acknowledges that this is the case with his unusual repetition and nominalization of His commandments: G-d says of the sinners that he will “soften stony hearts / To pray, repent, and bring obedience due. / To prayer,

repentance, and obedience due, / Though but endeavored with sincere intent, / Mine ear shall not be slow” (188-193). This repetition is unnecessary in a prelapsarian world, in which there are no levels of perception for commandments to travel through. But G-d adapts, as does man: first he must command, then he can acknowledge the reception of it. First we, humans, can endure life; then we can reflect on it – and vice versa. Art is a necessary aid of mediation.

Perhaps this preoccupation with conscious judgment boils down to the Puritan fear of the voluntary: “[Grace] finds her way, / The speediest of thy winged messengers, / To visit all thy creatures, and to all / Comes unprevented, unimplor'd, unsought” (3:228-31). If the holiest of gifts must come unbidden, we surely won't prize our endless capacity for self-consciousness above all else. Yet while this “speediest” of “messengers” may be treasured for its majestic incomprehensibility, the length and hesitance of fallen life is exalted by the form of the poem itself. Milton seems to believe he inhabits an intermediate zone in which choosing is long anticipated but cognition of choice is immediate; art is long in form but intuitive in content. He writes that the “subject for heroic song / Pleased [him] long choosing, and beginning late” (9:24-5). But while he acknowledges the poem's intellectual toll on him, he also goes to great lengths to describe his muse as an entirely outside force that he needn't question, as an intuitive well: “My Celestial Patroness, who deigns / Her nightly visitation unimplored, / And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires / Easy my unpremeditated verse” (9:21-4). Thus Milton puts art into a special category, in which direct inspiration – not “meditation,” i.e. conscious thought – can come to illuminate our world. Perhaps it is even relevant that Milton acknowledges this muse at the start of only every other book; even that level of self-consciousness must be partaken of and surpassed in turns.

It seems that the primary crime of the individuals is false judgment that removes them from their true wants and delivers them into the hands of illusion. Heaven is “now alienated,” with “distance and distaste” (9:19). Yet this seems more of a personal tragedy than a hierarchical transgression. We are forced to wonder whether “man’s first disobedience” (1:1) is not against G-d but against oneself. After all, we know that Milton believes that disobedience to G-d is coincident with the physical execution of the sin. Therefore, there *must* be some other sin, distinct from “the fruit” that was the technical sin, to which Milton refers. Perhaps, if the issue is that we have sinned against ourselves, we might do best by finding ourselves in any way we see fit – in this case, through a clear-eyed embracing of the source of our fall. We must continue to make difficult choices amidst confusing appearances of holiness. We can embrace our ego. Like Jesus we can “stand approv’d in sight of God, though Worlds / Judged thee perverse” (6:36-7). In knowing good and evil Adam and Eve separate themselves from good and evil; they are separating reason from self. We must learn to reinvest our choices with true creative power by feeling at home with systems of thought that, like art, are fallible but brave; through long contemplation and long creation we must find our way back to what we really mean. And this requires a careful balance, as Michael strikes in showing the couple the world after they have fallen: “Though bent on speed, so here the Archangel paused / Betwixt the world destroyed and the world restored” (12:2-3).

Works Cited

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