

How well did Milton know Virgil?

Only five years after the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 there was born at the Sign of the Spreddeagle in Bread Street, London, one of the greatest of all Londoners, a child who was to astonish the world with works of such high merit as *Lycidas*, *Comus*, *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Not only was his poetry composed in the vernacular, but the breadth of his erudition was further demonstrated by compositions in Greek, Latin and Italian. Moreover by his matchless defence of the liberty of unlicensed printing, *Areopagitica*, published on 23 November 1644, he won for himself an immortal place in the annals of English prose. It was only two months before this that he became aware of the failure of his sight. A permanent curtain of darkness veiled his eyes from March 1652.

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!
O first created beam, and thou great Word,
Let there be light, and light was over all;
Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?¹

This denial of light, so movingly expressed in Samson's tragic soliloquy, was to be his bitter portion until November 1674 when his tempestuous and conflict-ridden life came to an end.

Behind the disarmingly simple question 'How well did Milton know Virgil?' lies a perplexing series of related questions—'How is the word 'know' to be interpreted?', 'How is the knowledge by one writer of another to be effectively demonstrated?' and—not least—'How well does the present speaker know these two poets?'. Obviously the author of *Paradise Lost* is under no obligation to prove to his readers that he is an

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authority on the *Bucolics*, the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*. Unlike T.S. Eliot, no lover of Martial's dictum—

*mea carmina, Sexte,
grammaticis placeant, ut sine grammaticis.*²

he does not favour us with private annotations. Moreover it would be hardly appropriate to remind an audience of Virgilians of the numerous similarities between Virgilian and Miltonic epic. My aims in this paper are more modest; I shall comment on a few limited passages and consider Milton both as a Latinist and as an adroit imitator of the kind of hexameters one finds in the *Eclogues* and the *Aeneid*. It would also be useful to say a little about other classical authors whom Milton obviously had studied.

As a student of Milton's Latinity I possess one slight advantage over most scholars from English faculties; for I have read with care and personally annotated an obscure collection of Greek and Latin poems penned by one whose scholarship and poetic technique were highly esteemed by the greatest *alumnus* of St Paul's School. This collection is entitled *Parerga sive Poetici Conatus*; its date is 1632 and the author is Alexander Gil, the younger. Perhaps I have yet another advantage, since for nearly sixty years I have been practising the minor art of Latin verse composition and can therefore try to put myself in the position of seventeenth-century Latinists grappling with the same problems of vocabulary and prosody.

The sound foundations of Milton's classical education began to be laid at St Paul's School, London, at the age of twelve. His High Master there was the remarkable Alexander Gil, who was born in Lincolnshire on 27 February 1565 and who became a scholar of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Among his many accomplishments one should not fail to mention the share he took in that translation of the Bible which we know as the Authorised Version. His highmastership dated from March 1609. A great enthusiast for English, he loved to illustrate his lessons on language and metre with citations drawn from contemporary poets, not least from Spenser, a poet from whom in later years John Milton was to quote freely. His *Logonomia Anglica* (1619 and 1621), written in Latin, was the product of a versatile and independent mind. Of his other book, *The Sacred Philosophy of the Holy Scripture* (1635) Douglas Bush

significantly wrote: 'he carried Christian rationalism to the extreme limits of orthodoxy, limits which his quondam pupil Milton was to overstep.' With two other Pauline pedagogues, William Sound, Surmaster from 1603 to 1637, and Oliver Smythe, Under Usher from 1615 to 1621, we need have no concern. A strong influence, however, was exerted on Milton by the High Master's son, Alexander Gil Jr., who was appointed Under Usher in 1621 at the age of twenty-four. A firm friendship was cemented between pupil and teacher. We have three letters addressed by Milton to Gil, and in one of these young John admits that Gil is the severest of critics in matters poetical and the most candid judge of his own poems. Gil's own 'slim volume' of verses, which appeared in print three years before the death of the venerable High Master on the school premises in November 1635 (he was then seventy-one) will be touched on later.

Milton's other close friend at St Paul's, Charles Diodati, was the son of an Italian Protestant married to an English wife. To him were dedicated two of the poet's Latin elegies, the first, described in the penultimate line as the *fidi parvum . . . munus amici*, and the sixth, the final pentameter of which—*Tu mihi, cui recitem, judicis instar eris*—shows how Milton valued his friend's judgment. In the former of these witty and lively productions Milton outlines (verses 81–86) his present creative activity.

*Paciferum canimus caelesti semine regem,
Faustaque sacratis saecula pacta libris,
Vagitumque Dei, & stabulantem paupere tecto
Qui suprema suo cum patre regna colit.
Stelliparumque polum, modulantesque aethere turmas
Et subito elisos ad sua fana Deos.*

The mention of the King of Peace, the birth in the lowly stable, the star of Bethlehem and the choring angels are a foretaste of the ode *On the Morning of CHRIST'S Nativity*.

May we detect Virgilian influence even here? The *canimus* of *Eclogue* 4.3 and 10.8? Does the 'noble five-word line' which opens the passage, with its 'framing' of *paciferum regem*, owe something to lines like *concordes stabili fatorum numine Parcae* (*Ecl.* 4.47)? This may be fanciful. It must be admitted that the startling phrase *stelliparumque polum* smacks to me rather of Statius (cf. *Theb.* 12. 565: *stelligeri . . . poli*) than Virgil.

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Milton was, however, to pay an even greater tribute to Diodati than these two elegies. The magnificent *Epitaphium Damonis*, comprising 219 beautiful hexameters, which bear a strong impress of the *Bucolics*, are dedicated to this promising young man, who, after graduating at Trinity College, Oxford, died in London before his thirtieth birthday. I quote selectively from the *Argumentum* to the lament: *Damonis autem sub persona hic intelligitur Carolus Deodatus . . . ingenio, doctrina, clarissimisque caeteris virtutibus, dum viveret, juvenis egregius.*

Of Milton's not wholly pleasurable sojourn at Christ's College, Cambridge I shall merely record that he was placed fourth in the Honours List for 1628–9 and that his best friend Edward King (1612–37) was elected to a fellowship at Christ's in June 1630. King, (alas!) while crossing from Chester Bay to Dublin was drowned in calm seas (Aeolus confirmed 'That not a blast was from his dungeon stray'd', *Lycidas* 97). The drowned man's sorrowing friends published a memorial volume entitled *Iusta Edouardo King naufrago ab amicis moerentibus amoris et mneias charin* (Cambridge 1638). The undisputed jewel of this collection is the pastoral monody *Lycidas*, which, though twenty-six lines shorter than *Epitaphium Damonis*, is considerably more complex, for it embraces as a second subject the ruin of the corrupted clergy—

Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
A sheehook, or have learned aught else the least
That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs. (119–21)

Their spiritually unfed and bewildered congregations are an easy prey to the proselytising Jesuits represented here as wolves, not merely as being traditional foes of the flock (*triste lupus stabulis*, *Ecl.* 3.80) but also because the coat of arms of their founder Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) depicted two gray wolves—

Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing sed. (*Lycidas* 128–9)

Lycidas, which contains so many unmistakable reminiscences of Virgilian and Theocritean pastoral, resembles the *Bucolics* also in the diversity of its many-layered fabric.

At the end of Milton's thirty-fifth year his eyesight began to cause him

serious concern. He was not yet forty-three when he had to grapple with the problems of total blindness and was—

Presented with a Universal blanc
Of Nature's works to mee expung'd and ras'd
And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out. (*P.L.* 3.48–50)

After fifteen years spent in this pitiful condition appeared the first edition of *Paradise Lost*. The second edition, revised and augmented, was divided, like the *Aeneid*, into twelve books and was not published until a few months before his death in November 1674 and a month before his sixty-sixth birthday. *Paradise Regain'd* along with *Samson Agonistes* appeared in 1671. These dates are included because it is important to stress that for some thirty years personal consultation of books and verification of references were fraught with difficulty, whereas for as much as twenty-two years such work was physically impossible. Moreover his frenzied career as a controversialist and his marital and family differences allowed little leisure for the Muses.

Alexander Gil's *Parerga* are of importance both because Milton so much admired the author and because the choice made of metres and the use of classical models throw light on the Miltonic Latin corpus. The ninety-one pages of his anthology fairly present the man himself. Noblemen, royalty and distinguished generals loom large in the work. Among these are King James I, Anne of Denmark, Viscount Campden, the Chancellor of Oxford University, Sir Paul Pindar (*pietatis causa nominatus*, for at his own expense he had in 1632 embellished the Cathedral Church of St Paul), Sir John Strange, who was a great admirer of Statius (indeed the elegiac poem addressed to him was sent along with a copy of the poet) and King Gustavus Adolphus II of Sweden, mortally wounded at the battle of Lutzen in 1632. Both the poems themselves and the verbose introductions to them would interest not merely the classicist but any observer of human foibles. For instance, the death of Anne is an *obitus*, while that of her husband, the most serene and potent King, James I, ranks as an *apotheosis*. The long *Epinikion* for the 'Lion of the North' began in epic vein with *arma prius cecini*. He is hailed thus:

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*Tu vero qui tela Dei, qui sacra Tonantis
Bella geris, spes Catholicae certissima turbae,
Terror et Austriacae mastix saevissima gentis,
Macte animi, Gustave Heros; tibi militat aether.*

Three brief notes may be useful: (1) just as Gil transliterates the Greek *mastix*, so Milton introduces an unfamiliar Greek word in *Epitaphium Damonis* (97); *sic densi veniunt ad pabula thoes*. Milton's line recalls *Iliad* 11.474 ff. where the Trojans beset the wounded Odysseus as tawny jackals a wounded stag. Incidentally William Cowper's verse translation of Milton's Latin poems, well worth looking at, goes astray here in the rendering 'So graze the dappled deer in numerous droves'. Gil's metaphorical use of *mastix* stems of course from Homer (*Iliad* 12.37, 13.812). *Macte animi* suggests to every Virgilian *macte nova virtute* (*Aen.* 9,641), but Statius's *macte animo, iuvenis*³ comes closer. The end of the verse, *tibi militat aether*, is a direct borrowing from Claudian's panegyric on the third consulship of Honorius (*cui militat aether*, 97). Like Statius in the *Silvae* Gil uses Greek terms for genre poems: epithalamium, epinikion, genethliakon and threnodia. The Flavian poet, who made a deep impression on such masters as Chaucer and Dante, was unlikely to be overlooked by John Milton.

Odium theologicum infects much seventeenth-century prose and verse. Gil excels himself in this. When the house of a Catholic burned down in London of 26 October 1623, Gil, celebrating the joyous event in savage senarii, used these choice definitions of the offending sect—'You Papists, a race loathsome to Britain, locusts issuing from the cave of Tartarus and the pit of the abyss, cunning artificers of guile, common plague of the Christian world, Jesuits spawned of the seed of Satan . . .' Let us look at the motto placed at the end of the poem

*Occidit una domus, sed non domus una perire
Digna fuit.* (Ovid, *Met.* 1.240–1)

The appropriateness of the quotation deserves emphasis. The Arcadian king Lycaon, doubting Jupiter's divinity, serves up before him a cannibal feast. His punishment fits the crime and he is changed into a wolf—*fit lupus et veteris servat vestigia formae* (*ib.* 237). Once again wolf is equated with Jesuit.

Gil's Greek verse features trimeters and anacreontics, Milton's trimeters and Homeric hexameters. Most of the latter is represented by an able rendering of Psalm 114 (*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*) in twenty-two epic verses, which naturally bear no resemblance to the Septuagint version. It is possible that at St Paul's Milton gained some knowledge of the original Hebrew. In Latin both men compose in senarii, but Milton also tries scazons. Following the Greek poets and Varro rather than Catullus, Persius and Martial, he does not restrict himself to an iambic penultimate. The result startles the orthodox:

Vicina dulci prata mulcebit cantu. (Ad Salsillum 32)

Both compose in alcaics and the 'Epode metre' as well as in hexameters and elegiac couplets. Gil also tackles hendecasyllables and the anapaestic systems of Senecan choruses. What defies analysis is the extraordinary mish-mash of verses and non-verses which make up the *Ode to John Rouse, Oxford University Librarian* (eighty-seven lines of it!) composed on 23 January 1646 when the poet was thirty-eight.

Altogether Milton seems to have composed two thousand and seventy six Latin verses, most of these before reaching the age of twenty. This is only one hundred and twelve lines less (about five per cent) than the total of the *Georgics*. The second Eclogue is only seventy-three lines long, Virgil was at least twenty-six before completing it. This shows the remarkable precocity of the Old Pauline. Undeniably there are some infelicities, false quantities, metrical aberrations; to my mind Milton too readily follows the trend in utilizing convenient metrical licences; but one should listen to Pope's sage couplet:

Even copious Dryden wanted or forgot
The last and greatest art, the art to blot.⁴

Of Milton's five hexameter poems three may be briefly dismissed. *Naturam non pati senium* (Cowper's *Nature unimpaired by Time*) suggests that the processes of the universe continue with undiminished vigour until the final conflagration prophesied in 2 Peter 3.10. Of its sixty-nine verses let us quote one with a distinct Virgilian flavour:

Oedipodioniam volvit sub pectore noctem.

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Setting aside the reference to Torquato Tasso, the complimentary verses addressed to John Baptista Manso are memorable chiefly for the information that Milton, who had reviewed twenty-eight possible epic subjects, toyed with the idea of writing an *Arthuriad* relating how Arthur, performing, like Aeneas, a *katabasis*, sought to acquire the magic cauldron of the Otherworld—

Arturumque etiam sub terris bella moventem.

Milton's *Ad Patrem*, a record of filial piety, may owe something to Gil's poem honouring his father's sixtieth birthday; it may equally be indebted to Statius's *Epicedion in patrem suum* (*Silvae* 5.3). In these lines he thanks his father for not forcing him into a lucrative profession but allowing him to cultivate the Muses:

*Sed magis excultam cupiens ditescere mentem
Me procul urbano strepitu, secessibus altis
Abductum Aoniae iucunda per otia ripae
Phoebaeo lateri comitem sinis ire beatum. (73–6)*

In the long poem *In quintum Novembris* composed twenty-one years after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot one might expect, if anywhere, to see clear evidence of the seventeen-year-old's debt to Virgil. Not so; the smoothness of most verses, the rarity of harsh elision, the many compound and un-Virgilian epithets, the obvious imitations of Ovidian originals and the frequency of golden or near-golden lines point clearly to Ovidian influence. Here is a typical line:

*Cannabeo lumbos constrinxit fune salaces.*⁵ (84)

He has bound a hempen rope round his lustful loins.

When Milton writes—

*neque enim secretus adulter
Producit steriles molli sine pellice noctes (75–6)*

the phrase *secretus adulter* (Juvenal 6.237) is far from proving that Milton

had read and remembered the *Sixth Satire*; indeed, in view of Juvenal's next line,⁶ one wonders if he used an expurgated edition. Though I admire the verbal fireworks of the poem on 5 November, I find myself in strong disagreement with E.K. Rand's enthusiastic note of approval: 'The little epic on Guy Fawkes, the work of the author's seventeenth year, shows greater poise and firmness than the little epic on the *Gnat* which Virgil wrote at sixteen.' Milton's poem is colourful, exciting and impassioned (indeed, especially in its portrayal of Satan, it gives a shadowy glimpse of *Paradise Lost*), but *comparare non comparanda* is a pointless exercise, and even if the *Culex* were Virgilian one might borrow Martial's useful dictum (12.36.13): *nulla est gloria praeterire asellos*. I find it not at all surprising that the gentle and melancholic Cowper found himself unable to translate this violent poem.

The splendid *Epitaphium Damonis* has already been introduced. I briefly paraphrase the prose summary: Thyrsis and Damon, shepherds from the same neighbourhood, had followed the same interests and were bosom friends from childhood. While abroad Thyrsis heard of the death of Damon. Returning home and ascertaining the truth of the report, he mourns his loneliness in this poem. Thyrsis represents Milton, Damon Charles Diodati.

Edward King, the subject of *Lycidas*, was drowned in August 1637: Diodati's burial took place in the following August. As much as two years may have elapsed between the printing of the two laments. The flavour of *Damon* is well sampled in the first three lines:

*HIMERIDES nymphae (nam vos & Daphnin & Hylan
Et plorata diu meministis fata Bionis)
Dicite Sicelicum Thamesina per oppida carmen.*

Himerides nymphae along with *Sicelicum* at once suggests *Sicelides nymphae* in *Eclogue* 4.1. There is also the obvious adaptation of *Romana per oppida carmen* (*Geo.* 2.176). The Sicilian river Himera is twice mentioned by Theocritus, and by its waters in *Idyll* VII the oak trees sing a dirge for Daphnis. Moreover, when in Moschus's *Epitaphios Bionos* the rivers are bid weep for the handsome Bion, the word rendered here by 'handsome'—*himeroenta*—echoes the name of the river. Scholars are quick to pounce on the long first syllable in *Hylan*; they should remember that in *Elegy* 7.24 Milton ends a pentameter correctly with *raptus*

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Hylas (a line strongly echoing Prop. 1.20.6). As Virgil exercised the license of variable scansion with words like *Orion*, *Diana* and *Sychaeus*, so Milton pleased himself about quantities. Here are three hexameter endings to stress the point; *donasse Jacobum*, *derisit Jacobus ignem* and *veniens Jacobus ab arcto*.

Pastoral poems in Latin and Greek are conspicuous for refrains which may remain unvaried throughout the entire piece, or undergo modification. In Theocritus 1 the verse 'Begin, sweet Maids, begin the woodland song' is changed to 'Forget, sweet maids, Forget your woodland song.' Moschus, a considerably later writer, confines himself to a single refrain 'Sing, Sicilian Muses, raise your song of grief.' *Epitaphium Damonis* has but one refrain:

Ite domum impasti, domino iam non vacat, agni.

Vacare with the sense of 'have time for' occurs in Virgil only at *Aen.*1 373. Rhyme between the two halves of the hexameter, absent from the refrains of *Eclogue* 8, is present in Moschus (*Sikelikai . . . Moisai*). Observant readers of the *Aeneid* may raise their eyebrows at the word *impasti*, which at *Aen.*10.560 is applied to hungry fish licking the wounds of a decapitated warrior, while at 9.339 and 10.723 it refers to a starving lion let loose on a crowded shippen. One could say that pastoral usage of a word need not be identical with epic usage, or one could defend Milton by citing *Eclogue* 9.31:

sic cytiso pastae distendant ubera vaccae.

Perhaps the monosyllabic rhyme *impasti agni* deliberately evokes the rhyming of *pastae* with *vaccae*. As in *Geo.*3. 231 *carice pastus acuta* refers to a bull and in Lucan 6.628 *impastae volucres* are vultures, it may be that *pastus* is used of farm animals and *impastus* of predators and scavengers.

Turning from the literal to the metaphorical sense of the refrain we note that Milton, who has towards the end of this poem canvassed possible subjects for an epic, is bidding farewell to the pastoral tradition. The refrain hammers home this message with seventeen identical strokes. Similarly the final verse of the last *Eclogue* signals the break with the pastoral tradition—

ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae.

The sense-link with *Eclogue* 10 is further underlined since, just before the refrain at 161, comes a verse ending with *vos cedite silvae*. This surely picks up Virgil's *ipsae rursus concedite silvae* (63).

Milton's affection for the *Eclogues* is shown also in the motto of the title-page for *Comus* (1637):

*Eheu quid volui misero mihi! floribus Austrum
Perditus—* (Ecl. 2.58–9)

and for the *Poems both English and Latin* (1645)—

*Baccare frontem
Cingite, ne vati noceat mala lingua futuro.* (Ecl. 7.27–8)

The *vates futurus* is both the poet of the *Aeneid* and the composer of the small-scale epic *Paradise Regain'd* and the full-scale epic *Paradise Lost*, though the smaller work is a postscript to the larger.

Paradise Regain'd has come in for much abuse from the critics, Northrop Frye going so far as to damn the central figure as 'a pusillanimous quietist in the temptation of Parthia, an inhuman snob in the temptation of Rome, a peevish obscurantist in the temptation of Athens'. Complaints that the style is more flat and dry than that of *Paradise Lost* are not uncommon or without foundation, though the laconic terseness of the poem has not wanted admirers.

If we look first at the seven-line introduction of which I quote the first three lines:

I who e're while the happy Garden sung
By one man's disobedience lost, now sing
Recover'd Paradise to all mankind.

it is obviously a *sphragis* or seal-poem comparable to *Georgics* 4.559–66 and shorter by just one verse. We look back to a completed epic of Homeric proportions, forward to a second and complementary epic which to our surprise has fewer lines than the *Georgics*. Indeed *Samson Agonistes* is only three hundred lines shorter. Moreover the characters

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number only two, Jesus Christ, whose Greek and Hebrew titles signify 'the Healer, the Anointed, the Saviour' and Satan whose Hebrew name means 'the adversary' (in battle or the law-courts) or simply 'the enemy'. No physical violence is offered by either to the other. One might—*si parva licet componere magnis*—compare the contest between Dikaios and Adikos Logos in Aristophanes's *Clouds*. Nevertheless the Holy Spirit is asked to inspire the bard 'to tell of deeds | Above Heroic, though in secret done' The bulk of the epic, that is from the first sight of the 'aged man in Rural weeds' (Satan disguised) to the climax, when 'the Tempter proud . . . Fell whence he stood to see his Victor fall', more in fact than fifteen hundred lines, is an expansion of thirteen scriptural verses (Luke 4.1–13).

How different is the *Aeneid* from *Paradise Lost*! While the former moves from defeat, painful wanderings and exile to victory, re-settlement and the fusion of two peoples destined to dominate the world, the other, considering first the two mortal characters, moves from unutterable bliss in a *sedes beata* to disgrace, misery and permanent expulsion. Aeneas personifies *pietas*, though his lapses from piety are pardoned; Adam, a man without ancestry and therefore without memory, puts his *pietas* for a new and unsophisticated wife, flesh of his flesh and born fully nubile⁷ before piety to God, his creator. The rebel angels, precipitated from Heaven to the pit of Hell, denied return or the chance of expiation, doomed to never-ending torment, yet retain immunity from death. Being deathless they can perform no *aristeia*. Instead of the favouritism bestowed by the Olympians on warriors with whom they have personal links, a partisanship limited by the immutable laws of Fate, we have the intervention at infinite cost to himself of God's only Son to the end that in the fullness of time the two sinners and their unborn progeny may be forgiven their sins and re-united with their Maker.

Nevertheless, the similarities are numerous and significant. Action in Milton's epic takes place, as in the *Aeneid*, on three planes; these are Heaven, Paradise and the bottomless pit. Great issues are at stake for the protagonists. Adam, like Aeneas, puts a lower before a higher loyalty; Eve, like Dido, commits a fatal *culpa*; God, like Jupiter, is the ultimate agent of reconciliation. Both epics are enriched by copious descriptions; both abound in elaborate similes and metaphors; both are to be interpreted in the light of past and future events; in both the subtleties of characterization and motives for action or inaction are analysed by speech and answering speech. Above all, the diction is majestic, as befits

the noblest deeds and thoughts of gods and men.

In my estimation what separates Miltonic from Classical epic (and this may be illustrated easily by the twenty-six line *exordium* to *Paradise Lost*) is the English poet's refusal to maintain objectivity. Of course in expressions like *cano, canimus, cecini, ordior arma* or *da fontis mihi, Phoebe, novos* the singer is entitled to use the first person. With somewhat less justification he may descend, as does Lucan, to base adulation of the *princeps* and write *si te pectore vates | Accipio* (*Bell. Civ.* 1.63–4), where *te* refers not to Apollo or a Muse, but to the Emperor Nero (incidentally with a sickening perversion of *Aen.* 9. 276–7). What flatly contradicts the epic is to assume, as Milton does, that writer and reader are bound by a mutual bond and that the former may seek to influence the beliefs and behaviour of the latter. In expressions like 'all our woe', 'till one greater man | Restore us' and 'what cause | Moved our grand parents?' we are directly importuned, gratuitously solicited by a Puritan to react as he directs. The reader is bombarded by phrases like 'our Saviour meek', 'our mother Eve' and 'our Father penitent'. It is summed up in two verses from *Paradise Regain'd*:

Queller of Satan, on thy glorious work
Now enter, and begin to save mankind. (4.634–5)

The genre of Milton's two poems on Paradise, didactic epic, is unacceptable in ancient literary practice. As instruments of teaching one doubts if they achieved any success in the poet's own day. Enthusiasm for these works in our own time does not march hand in hand with evangelistic fervour. When brilliant stars of our English faculties cannot praise too highly the Authorized Version and the Book of Common Prayer, it is decidedly gauche to enquire which church they attend. On a more serious note one has to give thought to Blake's view expressed in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790):

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

I have, as I am well aware, failed to give an adequate answer to my question 'How well did Milton know Virgil?'. Had Milton chosen a secular

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subject for his epic, I believe a more confident and better-documented answer could be given. As it is, the Old and the New Testaments, omnipresent in *Paradise Lost*, are like the mists in which Homeric gods wrapped their heroes to save them from exposure. Superficial imitation one can of course detect in many places, but I maintain that it is only in Milton's pastorals that the Virgilian spirit is essentially caught. An instructive parallel is supplied by the Royalist poet Abraham Cowley, whose epic in decasyllabic couplets on King David, the *Davideis*, was published in 1656. Imitations of Virgil in this poem, which is rarely read today, are easily identified and meant to be identified. Incidentally, the author's death, before he was fifty, occurred in 1667, the year when the ten-book version of *Paradise Lost* appeared. Ovid was undoubtedly Milton's first love and with the important exception of *Epitaphium Damonis*, which is pure Virgil, his preferred model for composition. After all, no-one who could summarise the *Aeneid* as 'rage | Of Turnus for Lavinia disespous'd' could be exactly on the Mantuan's wavelength.

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NOTES

1. *Samson Agonistes* 80–5
2. Martial 10.21.5–6.
3. *Thebaid* 7.280.
4. *Book 2, Epistle 1 (to Augustus)* 280–1.
5. Similar lines include:
 - Sceptra Caledonio conjunxerat Anglica Scotis:* (4)
 - Regnaque olivifera vertit florentia pace* (15)
 - Tarda fenestratis figens vestigia calceis* (85)
 - Signaque Aventino ponet fulgentia colle* (109)
 - Vasta ruinosi quondam fundamina tecti* (140)
6. *Impatiensque morae silet et praeputia ducit.*