

Reflections of Virgil in Milton

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The poetry of John Milton has never lacked admirers, and it seems appropriate, four hundred years after his birth, for someone who teaches at his old school to examine some of the ways in which the most classical of English poets was influenced by the most classical of Roman poets. There are reasons for thinking the two men may have been similar in nature. Both were of a scholarly and reflective disposition, if biographers are to be believed, and Horace speaks of Virgil as an *anima candida*, possessing what is *molle atque facetum*. (*Sat.* 1.5.41; 1.10.44). This would accord with the qualities that led the young Milton to be admired for his intellectual sensibility and to be called in his Cambridge days, “the Lady of Christ’s”. Both were serious students, more concerned with literature and philosophy or, in Milton’s case, with Scripture, than with laying the foundations of a professional career. We know that Milton was especially drawn to Virgil in his time at St. Paul’s School. His facility in the classical languages was outstanding, and for years afterwards he corresponded with his school friend, Charles Diodati, in Latin, at one time contemplating writing *Paradise Lost* in that language. Both poets lived in turbulent times, experiencing the horrors of civil war, but strove not to let these horrors dispel their essential faith in humanity. It is also significant that, in the year of Milton’s death, a change in the form of *Paradise Lost* was instigated by his publisher: the 1667 version of the poem had been published in ten books, but seven years later, the poem appeared in twelve books, reflecting Milton’s own deliberate modification of its architecture, and so transferring the epic model from Lucan’s *Pharsalia* to the *Aeneid*.

Virgilian influence may be seen early in *Comus*, the masque Milton wrote for performance at Ludlow Castle in 1634, when he was 26 years old. He there describes the people of Ludlow as “an old and haughty nation proud in arms” (l. 33), recalling Jupiter’s and the Sibyl’s description of the Latins whom Aeneas must face in Italy (*Aen.* 1.263; 6.83-94; cf. 7.45; 8.5-6). One can see Milton feeling his way towards a role as poet in his invocation of Meliboeus, the vocational shepherd who is both *pastor*

and *poeta* (ll. 820-22). We know Milton abandoned his early intention of entering the church, and we find in *Comus*, and even more explicitly in *Lycidas* three years later, the notion that a learned poet could serve the Protestant nation just as well as a learned priest. This makes one think of the Augustan notion of the poet as “priest of the Muses”, in Horace’s phrase, no longer merely a *poeta* but a *vates* (C. 3.1.3), an inspired bard who could put his poetry at the service of his country: in Milton’s own phrase, “furnishing things doctrinal to the nation”.¹

Before we look at specific examples of Virgilian influence in Milton’s poetry, the question may be put: what, if anything, is to be gained by the modern reader from an awareness of this particular literary tradition Milton so consciously places himself in time and again? Are we really impoverished by ignorance of the tradition, or is it the case, as some teachers of English literature would argue, that nothing is sacrificed by ignorance of Milton’s Virgilian subtext, as an equivalent understanding can always be achieved by some other way of reading him? Oliver Lyne, the late lamented scholar of Balliol, has shown admirably in his *Further Voices in Vergil’s Aeneid*² how Virgil in his own use of allusion establishes a fruitful dialectic with earlier authors that does indeed yield a deeper response to his text in the alert reader. I hope to illustrate with some examples a similar process in Milton’s use of Virgil.

So, for instance, there is the famous passage in *Aeneid* 2, where Hector’s ghost appears to Aeneas in a dream, telling him of the sack of Troy by the Greeks. Aeneas stares in disbelief at his bloodstained kinsman:

quantum mutatus ab illo
Hectore qui redit exuvias indutus Achilli
(*Aen.* 2.274-75)

Satan’s first words in *Paradise Lost* echo this passage. As he lies beside Beelzebub in the flood of Hell and examines his chief ally, he struggles to recognise him:

If thou beest he; but oh how fallen! How changed
From him, who in the happy realms of light
Clothed with transcendent brightness didst outshine
Myriads though bright
(*P.L.* 1.84-87)

¹ Preface to the second book of *The Reason of Church-Government*, 1642.

² 1987, Oxford.

Gilbert Highet shows persuasively that Milton has here a purpose similar to what Lyne describes in Virgil: we recognise the Virgilian allusion which colours Satan's words, but more than this, by making us view Beelzebub as in some way parallel to Hector (and by implication Satan to Aeneas) Milton gives his picture of the fallen angels far more emotional depth. To quote Highet, we are made to feel "the anguish and foreboding and defeat" of persons who may be conquered but still retain heroic qualities and passions that are recognisably human.³ So this is no mere parade of learning, a sort of Alexandrian *jeu d'esprit*, as Ovid might occasionally practise, but a genuine attempt by Milton to enlarge our sensibilities in considering the nature of Satan and his following. Are we perhaps intended to extend some sympathy to these creatures at war with God? It is as if, by placing this speech so early in his epic, Milton is deliberately reversing Virgil's own outburst against Juno at the start of the *Aeneid*, questioning how gods can show such rancour (*tantaene animis caelestibus irae?* *Aen.*1.11); Milton's Satan here invites the question: "How can devils show such humanity?"

In this context I would like to focus on the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. He is, arguably, the most interesting figure in the epic, and among the various literary influences on his portrayal, Virgil unquestionably has a part to play. Although, from the time of Dryden, critics have admired the "high, superior nature" of Satan, a view intensified by the Romantics, who claimed him as the true hero of the poem, it has been shown by John Carey that a fairer approach is to acknowledge the genuine ambivalence within *Paradise Lost* and to find in this ambivalence a major factor in the poem's success.⁴ Here we may think of recent conflict in Virgilian scholarship between rival schools of interpretation as to Virgil's pessimistic or optimistic outlook in the *Aeneid*, and reflect on how ambivalence is central to both poets' art.

We know from Milton's notebook of 1640 that he was thinking of composing a "great work" modelled on the Greek tragedians and Shakespeare. This work may never have come to fruition, but the remnants of these dramatic impulses are clearly apparent in Satan's great monologues in *Paradise Lost*. It is difficult for us with our post-Romantic sympathy for anti-heroes not to find something splendidly defiant in Satan's exclamation to his followers: "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (*P. L.* 1.263). This is itself a conflation of two classical passages, Achilles' famous words to Odysseus in the underworld about preferring to work on earth as a hired serf than to be king of all the

³ *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, 1949, Oxford, 156-70.

⁴ J. Carey, 'Milton's Satan', in D. Danielson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 1989, Oxford, 131-45 (132).

dead (*Od.* 11.489-91), and Juno's threat to stir up Acheron if the gods of Olympus are deaf to her wishes (*flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo. Aen.* 7.312). As Virgil had worked from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in tracing the fortunes of his Roman hero, so Milton examines the question of heroism against the background of the Homeric epics of strife and quest, and of the fusion of the two in Virgil's poem. At first Satan appears as a debased form of Achilles, sharing with Homer's hero a harshness and refusal to compromise. We are told of his "fixed mind / And high disdain, from sense of injured merit" (*P. L.* 1.98). But from the first description of Aeneas' Rutulian opponent in the *Aeneid*, by the Sibyl, our minds turn also to that "second Achilles", Turnus, and, as we shall see, this is a far more potent model for Milton's Satan. It can also be argued that, paradoxically, Satan in some respects recalls Aeneas: like Virgil's hero, Satan escapes from a flaming city to seek a better kingdom elsewhere, and the *Aeneid* pattern is continued by his adventures and successful victory in Eden. But we must not press things too far. Aeneas is, after all, for most of the time a model of *pietas*, and Satan, who allows his diabolic nature to triumph over his natural instinct to love, is the very embodiment of *impietas*. Aeneas succeeds in finding a new home in Italy, but for Satan, who brings hell with him wherever he goes, there can be no finding of a new homeland.

The *Aeneid* is also partly an epic of anger, as shown in Juno's relentless hatred for the Trojans and in the *furor* she inspires in Dido and Turnus, the principal obstacles to Aeneas' success. In *Paradise Lost* this theme of anger culminates in Satan's return to hell in book 10, when he liberates his wife, Sin, and his son, Death, from captivity. While this triumph is longer-lasting than that of Turnus when he carries all before him after the death of Pallas, Turnus is at least given some measure of dignity by Virgil before his end. Nonetheless his humiliation is still palpable in the final appeal he makes to Aeneas, if not as extreme as that of being turned into hissing serpents that suffer the thirst of Tantalus, the fate of Satan and his followers.

It is typical of Virgil not to present his hero's enemies as unmitigated villains, and certainly the characterisation of Turnus in the closing books of the *Aeneid* is complex. The violent warrior who gloats over the fallen Pallas with all the apparent heartlessness of Priam's killer, Neoptolemus, never wholly eclipses the romantic young prince whose wedding hopes are dashed by the Trojans' arrival in Italy. Indeed, with the murderous fury of Aeneas after Pallas' death, Virgil reinstates Turnus in our affections by showing him as the gallant young patriot defending his country, like Homer's Hector, against impossible odds. This sympathetic portrayal is enhanced by the heartlessness of Jupiter scaring off Turnus' last ally with a frightful fiend, a *Diva* (*Aen.* 12.853-86), just as

another creature from hell, Allecto (*Aen.* 7.415-66), had sent him out of control at the outset of the war. Virgil's sympathy extends even to the monstrous tyrant Mezentius who loses his son and dies with heroic dignity after communing with his beloved horse, Rhaebus, in words of great nobility (*Aen.* 10.861-908). It may be that Milton, when he came to portray Satan, was partly influenced by this typically Virgilian refusal to see things in black and white.

Certainly, Satan becomes a far more interesting figure when it is hinted that his natural instinct is to love, not to hate, as in the passage where he feels he could love Adam and Eve because they so strongly resemble God (*P.L.* 4.362-64); or again, when he weeps angelic tears at the sight of his fallen followers. (1.619-20). This recalls the passage where Turnus learns the tide of battle has turned against the Latins and the Latin queen, his chief supporter, has died by her own hand. It is a moment worthy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and Virgil, like Shakespeare, finds heroic greatness in the man whose cruelty we have come to deplore:

*obstipuit varia confusus imagine rerum
Turnus et obtutu tacito stetit; aestuat ingens
uno in corde pudor mixtoque insania luctu
et furiis agitatus amor et conscia virtus.*

(*Aen.* 12.665-68)

A clear correspondence between the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* has been pointed out by K. W. Gransden in his commentary on the eighth book of the *Aeneid*,⁵ namely the use of a double time-scale that has to be synchronised by the reader. In the *Aeneid* we are aware of a narrative past, the Aeneas story itself, and of a future, made known to Aeneas through prophecy, which corresponds to the Augustan present. So in the Underworld Aeneas is told that the splendid young prince he sees will one day restore to Italy her lost Golden Age, an echo of Jupiter's consolation to Venus in book 1, itself Virgil's celebration of the Augustan settlement: *aspera tum positis mitescent saecula bellis* (291). Jupiter's promise to the Romans exhausted by war is echoed by Milton's God when he prophesies the destiny of mankind, who will:

*And after all their tribulations long
See golden days, fruitful of golden deeds,
With joy and love triumphing, and fair truth.*

(*P.L.* 3.336-38)

⁵ *Aeneid, Book VIII*, 1976, Cambridge, 14-20.

Milton, then, follows Virgil in using the double timescale to unfold history as a moral process. This becomes clear when we look at the words with which the Archangel Michael ends his prophecy of the royal dynasty of Israel, culminating in the person of Christ:

*he shall ascend
The throne hereditary, and bound his reign
With earth's wide bounds, his glory with the heavens.*
(*P.L.* 12.369-71)

The Virgilian reflection here is a conflation of Jupiter's prophecy about Augustus in his speech to Venus:

imperium Oceano, famam qui terminet astris
(*Aen.* 1. 287)

and Anchises' words to Aeneas on Rome:

*illa incluta Roma
imperium terris, animos aequabit Olympo*
(*Aen.* 6.781-82).

So Milton is inviting us on one level to see Adam and Aeneas as parallel figures, both men destined to shoulder the burden of setting in motion the fated sequence of history. The toil and suffering of Aeneas will result in the glory of the Roman empire, but the Fall from God's grace means no such empire being established on earth and the City of God, a true *imperium sine fine*, will exist only in Heaven.

Related to this use of temporal structures by both poets is, of course, the flashback. Milton is clearly aware of Virgil's narration of the fall of Troy by Aeneas when he incorporates into his own poem the angel Raphael's narration of the Fall of Satan's angels (*Aen.* 2; cf. *P.L.* 6).

Milton was quite prepared to defend his use of blank verse as against the rhyming couplet favoured by Dryden, pointing out that neither Homer nor Virgil had the need of "such jingling sound of like endings", and claiming that he was restoring to heroic poetry its "ancient liberty" by rescuing it from "the troublesome and modern bondage of Riming".⁶ There is more to this, I think, than Milton vindicating his own blank verse against the vulgar taste of the present: that taste was, after all, that of Charles's

⁶ Notes to the first edition of *P.L.* quoted in S. N. Zwicker, 'Lines of Authority: Politics and Literary Culture in the Restoration', in K. Sharpe & S. N. Zwicker (eds), *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth Century England*, 1987, Berkeley and Los Angeles CA, 230-70 (249).

court with its lionisation of Dryden, and there is even, arguably, a subtext that the only restoration that really interested Milton was that of English liberty from Stuart tyranny. Indeed, there was always going to be an inherent problem for Milton in worshipping too fervently at Virgil's shrine. As a convinced republican he can hardly have warmed to the Virgilian model which celebrates the founding of the line of Caesars that terminated forever the Roman republic. Far more to his political taste must have been the republican epic of Lucan with its celebration of Pompey and the great Cato, last of the republicans. Spenser and Shakespeare were widely admired in Milton's day, but from his considerable reputation among English poets Abraham Cowley would also have been familiar to Milton. In 1656 Cowley had published his own attempt at a modern biblical epic, the *Davideis*, and in his preface he had nailed his political colours to the mast, by declaring himself a defeated royalist who had accepted the new order and given up his earlier intention to write an epic on the civil war, since "it is ridiculous to make Laurels for the Conquered". It was also true that Royalist poets and pamphleteers had usurped the Virgilian heroic model even before the Restoration, and once Charles II had reclaimed his father's throne, poets explicitly celebrated the new era in Virgilian terms as a restored Golden Age, with Charles as a new Augustus. Foremost among these was Dryden with his *Astraea Redux*, which is clearly inspired by the Fourth Eclogue. But Milton was too principled to sail so obviously with the wind. He may have lost faith in the English government ever becoming an aristocratic republic, but the opening lines of *Paradise Lost* make it clear that no English Augustus will bring about the true Restoration, but rather a divine hero, the Christ of *Paradise Regained*.

Both Virgil and Milton unite politics and religion, and Milton's hostility to monarchic power is always to be seen in its religious context within the poem. Satan has usurped a kingship that belongs only to Christ, and while the surface associations of his monarchy are with the Stuarts, particularly with Charles I and his love of Catholic ceremony and pomp, few Englishmen of the day would dispute that Cromwell in the final years of the Protectorate had behaved in an increasingly monarchical fashion, promoting rebellion as a cloak for ambition and using republican rhetoric to justify his position of eminence in the state. In these respects Cromwell, not Charles or his restored son, provides the model for Satan. It is also true that Jupiter in no sense has the spiritual authority for Virgil that God provides for Milton, and so his apparent underpinning of Aeneas and the Roman empire ultimately lacks the binding moral imperative at work in Milton's epic. As Servius pointed out, in commenting on the famous passage in the *Aeneid* where Jupiter contradicts himself (*Aen.*

10. 8-9), Virgil's Jupiter is politic and will say what the occasion requires; he is, in fact, as Stephen Harrison has pointed out in his Oxford commentary on this book,⁷ no less capable of cunning than any other god in the *Aeneid*. To suggest this of Milton's God is plainly absurd. It is also perfectly possible that Virgil, while not blind to his violent record, thought Augustus represented the best possible hope for Italy and that the great prayer of the first *Georgic*, asking the gods to let "this young man at least" repair his shattered country comes straight from the poet's heart: that innocuous little word, *saltem*, immediately following upon *hunc iuvenem*, lends an authenticity to the poet's prayer (*Ge.* 1.498-501). Still, there is ambivalence within the *Aeneid* itself, which ends with the hero going directly against his father's famous injunction, *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (*Aen.* 6. 853). Virgil may have shown Renaissance poets how to write encomiastic epic which honours a nation state and its prince, but he also showed how this can be done without sacrificing a sense of political unease. Milton's republicanism was naturally attracted to this, and it is significant how much he seeks to undermine imperial conquest in his own poem. Empire, as we have seen, is consistently portrayed as a divine prerogative alone, and as falsely appropriated by Satan, the embodiment of fraudulence. When at the end of *Paradise Lost* the fallen Adam and Eve quit paradise "with wandering steps and slow" (12.648), the mood is reminiscent, not of triumphant vengeance but of the Trojans resignedly abandoning their conquered city as the morning star rises above Ida.

On this reading, then, Milton is deliberately seeking to exploit the uncertainties implicit in Virgil's treatment of his imperial theme. A connection between the republicanism of both poets may be seen in the way Aeneas and Satan are shown to be in a stranded situation at the start of both epics. Certainly, a striking fact about the *Aeneid* is the way its hero is introduced to us as helpless and afraid, his loss of his helmsman Palinurus emphasising how rudderless he is in his voyage towards his fate. This, as editors have pointed out, is reflected in the first sight we have of Milton's Satan, also engaged in a stormy, perilous voyage through a disordered cosmos. But while Aeneas clearly expects to die at sea, and has no hopes, as his language shows, of imperial conquest to be gained in Italy, Milton's Satan is made to aspire hubristically to heroic success within a world governed by an omniscient and provident God. This is a bold reworking of Virgil's poem, that treats his text as Virgil had treated his own sources, perhaps the most complimentary way in which a poet can imitate a predecessor.

A further example of Milton's delicate and ingenious transformation of Virgil can be found in comparing Virgil's treatment of Dido and Milton's of Eve. By 1660 Virgil

⁷ *Vergil, Aeneid 10*, 1991, Oxford, 59-60.

had become entrenched firmly within the tradition of Christian epic, and part of this assimilation was his perceived resistance to the charms of women. But, whereas Aeneas successfully resists Dido and pursues his Roman destiny of imperialism, Milton's Adam falls because of his bond of sympathy with Eve, and the heroic figure in pursuit of empire is the devil. Again, in this context, there is the obvious correspondence between Satan and Virgil's Juno, who, until *Aeneid* 12, when the goddess ceases to oppose fate and becomes a Roman deity, is the main model for Milton's arch-fiend. Milton boldly presents us with the antithesis of the divine reconciliation scene at the end of Virgil's poem by transforming Satan, his parody of a classical epic hero, into a serpent. (It is interesting also that, when Nahum Tate reworked the Dido story for the libretto of Purcell's famous opera, the notion of Juno inspiring the characterisation of the devil lives on in the chorus of witches and their mistress Hecate, who replace Virgil's imperious daughter of Saturn).

I end with a final example of Milton's debt to Virgil, in which I offer a close reading of one of his greatest sonnets, *On his Deceased Wife*:

*Methought I saw my late espoused saint
 Brought to me like Alcestis from the Grave,
 Whom Jove's great son to her glad Husband gave,
 Rescu'd from death by Force though pale and faint.
 Mine as whom wash'd from Spot of childbed Taint
 Purification in the old Law did save,
 And such, as yet once more I trust to have
 Full Sight of her in Heav'n without Restraint,
 Came vested all in white, pure as her Mind:
 Her Face was veil'd, yet to my fancied Sight,
 Love, Sweetness, Goodness in her Person shin'd
 So clear, as in no Face with more Delight.
 But O as to embrace me she inclin'd
 I wak'd, she fled, and Day brought back my Night.*

This sonnet, Milton's last, is justly famous. Scholarly dispute over which wife's death is being commemorated – Katharine Woodcock's (1658) or Mary Powell's (1682) – cannot be entirely resolved, but it seems more fitting for a husband who had never seen his wife's face to know her, *despite* her wearing a veil. His hope of seeing her in heaven "without restraint" further suggests he is thinking of the woman he married after becoming totally blind, Katharine Woodcock. More difficult to gauge is the mood of the sonnet. Is this a happy poem or a sad one? On a first reading it seems to contain

both grief and joy. There is little doubt that the poem has a strong Christian vision which argues for optimism: the poet's wife, now a "Saint", appears to him all in white, reflecting her purity of mind and body, the physical purification of the "old Law" of Moses being an image of how her spirit has been cleansed by Christ. Milton senses, rather than sees, love emanating from her face, and he is confident of being reunited with her finally in heaven, and enjoying the "full sight" of her denied him on earth. The allusion to Alcestis, the wife in Euripides' play rescued from death by Hercules and restored to her husband Admetus, conjures up the paradox of the play – that tragedy, however harrowing, can end with tears of joy.

But there is no real parallel here: *his* wife is not restored to him, except to his "fancied sight" in a dream – cold comfort indeed. The physical rapture of Euripides' Admetus in holding his lost wife once more is conspicuously denied to Milton as day brings back his night. Further doubts arise when we consider another, less explicit influence on this poem – book 2 of the *Aeneid*. Milton has conflated two passages from Virgil's account of the sack of Troy. The first is Aeneas' vision of his goddess mother in all her divine radiance, illuminating the darkness of that terrible last night:

*talia iactabam et furiata mente ferebar
cum mihi se, non ante oculis tam clara, videndam
obtulit et pura per noctem in luce refulsit
alma parens, confessa deam qualisque videri
caelicolis et quanta solet,*

(*Aen.* 2.588-92)

Dryden's translation into rhyming couplets is as much Dryden as Virgil but captures the immediacy of the verse:

*Thus while I rave, a gleam of pleasing Light
Spread oe'r the Place, and shining Heav'nly bright,
My Mother stood reveal'd before my Sight.
Never so radiant did her Eyes appear;
Not her own Star confess'd a Light so clear.
Great in her Charms, as when on Gods above
She looks, and breaths her Self into their Love.*

Venus' purpose is to prevent her frenzied son from killing Helen, the apparent cause of all Troy's woes. Significantly, she achieves this end by enabling Aeneas to *see* what no other mortal combatants can, that the gods themselves, not the Greeks, are the

real agents of the city's destruction. The question of sight, so central to Milton's sonnet, reminds us that the poet's vision of a state of bliss is in the future, not, as in Virgil, the gift of a god removing the scales from mortal eyes, and that what is clearly built around an allusion may also be for Milton an illusion: "*Methought* I saw ..."

How real is this experience? Milton "trusts" to have full sight of his wife eventually, but does this imply certainty or hope? If the latter, Milton's deep knowledge of Greek tragedy would have conjured up the sober warning of Sophocles' Ajax: "No merit has he in my eyes, the man who warms himself with empty hopes" (*Aj.* 477-78). There may well be a tension here between Milton's Christian understanding of hope as a theological virtue and the classical notion of hope as a deceiver of man (Aesch. *Supp.* 97; Thuc.5.103; Men. *Mon.* 42).

The second Virgilian allusion is closer still to Milton's imagined experience here. Aeneas, frantically searching Troy for his lost wife, is suddenly confronted by her ghost, the first indication to him that Creusa is dead (*Aen.* 2.771-94). She offers the cold comfort that he has a higher destiny to pursue, in which she cannot share, that she will be spared the degradation of captivity in Greece, and that she has been chosen to serve "the great mother of the gods" as a favourite acolyte. Like Milton's wife, she has passed on to a higher spiritual plane. Her final word to Aeneas is love (*amorem*) but it is not *their* love she means, but the love they share for their son, who now has no mother. Aeneas might well have been haunted for the rest of his life by the last word she had spoken to him while still alive: *relinquor* ("I am being abandoned", *Aen.* 2.678). Virgil then underlines the pathos of their parting:

*haec ubi dicta dedit, lacrimantem et multa volentem
dicere deseruit, tenuisque recessit in auras.
ter conatus ibi collo dare bracchia circum;
ter frustra comprehensa manus effugit imago,
par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno.*

(*Aen.* 2.790-04).

Dryden's version reads:

*I strove to speak, but Horror ty'd my tongue;
And thrice about her Neck my Arms I flung;
And thrice deceiv'd, on vain Embraces hung,
Light as an empty Dream at break of Day,
Or as a blast of wind, she rush'd away.*

Creusa leaves him “in tears, wanting to say many things”, having earlier told him to banish his tears for the Creusa he “had loved” (*lacrimas dilectae pelle Creusae*, 784), where *dilectae* is surely the most eloquent past participle in Latin: she is a ghost and their love now belongs *in the past*. In Milton’s poem the dead wife does not speak but *shows* her love, or rather is about to, when there is a sudden reversal of the rising mood of happiness, as the blind man wakes and any further contact is denied: the final, haunting line evokes not only Creusa’s farewell but the tale of that other tragic wife, Eurydice: “I wak’d, she fled, and day brought back my night”. Despite the Christian vision that informs the sonnet, this is hardly a happy ending, with its frustration of the loving couple’s approaching reunion, and the image of the poet plunged back into solitary darkness as the world around him wakes up to the light of day. His only fault, if fault it be, was to wake, and here he can be no more blamed than the Orpheus of the Fourth *Georgic*, betrayed by his heart on the verge of blissful reunion with his wife. The pathos of Virgil’s telling of the familiar tale is striking and memorable, but there is an obvious and crucial difference with Milton: neither Virgil nor his narrator, Proteus, is personally affected by loss, but for Milton the loss is all too personal. All the more remarkable, then, is the way the English poet expresses this loss without a trace of self-pity, showing true classical restraint. The poem attains a balance between Christian optimism and classical pathos, no easy task. Milton’s vision may not achieve perfect harmony between the claims of heaven and the grave, but it is this honesty, and not just the formal beauty of expression, that makes the sonnet so impressive. It enables Milton to make sense of an extraordinary experience and at the same time to give us a poem of true Virgilian sensibility.

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