MILTON’S TREATMENT OF SATAN IN PARADISE LOST

The question in how far what we know of a poet’s character can be used to explain or interpret his work, is not easily answered. Nor is it the aim of the present essay to present an analysis of Milton’s personality, or a detailed study of the connections between his personality and his work. There are, however, some traits in Milton’s character, that obviously play an important part in Paradise Lost, and the extent to which they do so, will, in our opinion, bear further investigation. The most conspicuous of these traits is, no doubt, his pride.

In his introduction to the Oxford Book of Christian Verse, Lord David Cecil says: “Pride was to Milton the mark of a superior nature”. Saurat, who thinks of Milton as a man whose basic emotions were a monumental pride and powerful egotism, comes to this conclusion: “Because of his peculiar pride, his egotism will always need to be identified with something great... And Milton will end by identifying himself with God.” How important the latter part of this statement is, we shall see presently, after we shall have reached similar conclusions in connection with Milton’s chastity and stoicism.

Another trait which, in this connection, deserves our attention is Milton’s sensuality; an important part of his life was taken up by the struggle against his desires to “Sport with the tangles of Neaera’s hair”.

In the Comus period, Milton extols chastity as a Saintly virtue, which turns “the unpolluted temple of the mind by degrees to the soul’s essence, till all be made immortal”. From this passage in Comus, we may conclude with Tillyard, that chastity was to Milton “the essential means by which the human soul reaches out to divinity”. Milton’s puritan belief may, to a certain extent, have been the cause of this valuation of chastity, but there may be more to it; Professor Herford rightly remarks; “Milton’s chastity, sublime and exalted as it is, is at the bottom a self-regarding virtue”. Milton must have felt that his sensuality was one of his weak spots, and therefore he armed himself against it by adopting the principles of chastity, as he armed himself against any other irrational forces by inclining to stoicism. In his book Lucifer and Prometheus, Dr. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky defines the ideal of stoicism as “The completely rational man, who is beyond the reach of all the irrational realities of this world, who is unmoved and unmovable and hence equal to God, because

sufficient unto himself”. Milton may have considered his chastity as “the essential means by which the human soul reaches out to divinity”, but with Werblowsky’s definition in connection with his stoicism in mind, we may even go further and say that it (the soul) actually becomes equal to God. And so this definition shows (as Saurat’s statement about Milton’s identifying himself with God also did) that Milton is not only guilty of pride, but even of the original sin of the Greeks, hubris, the sin of aspiring too high, of overstepping one’s bounds and losing all sense of proportion because of one’s pride, skill, power or good fortune, and so becoming arrogant towards God and Man. As we shall see, both this Greek original sin, hubris, and the Hebraic original sin of indulging in sensuality – that is, allowing oneself to be drawn to the level of animal existence and being infidel to a spiritual calling –, play an exceedingly important part in Paradise Lost. Both hubris and sensuality were extant in Milton’s mind and, as these two sins are exactly one another’s opposites as reactions to the birth-process of human consciousness, as Jung’s psychology has sufficiently proved, this could not but give rise to a conflict. One aspect of Paradise Lost is that it is a projection of this conflict.

A second exceedingly important fact connected with Milton’s stoic inclinations, is that he controls the irrational realities of this world, the upsurging passions that find their origin in the dark recesses of the subconscious mind, by reason, the product of the conscious mind, which is superimposed. We shall presently see that an important aspect of Milton’s Satan is, that he is partly a personification of these passions, striving up (mark the hubris aspect), from Hell. Looking at it from this angle, we may go on to say, that Satan’s antagonists, God and Christ, are Reason, the product of the conscious mind; in which picture, Hell stands for the subconscious- and Heaven for the conscious mind, so that the whole of the human soul would offer a picture, analogous to the Ptolemaic geography of the universe, which Milton uses in Paradise Lost.

But before coming to such conclusions, it is our aim to subject Milton’s treatment of Satan, in chronological order, to a close scrutiny, thereby tracing at the same time the result of the fascinating struggles and conflicts to which we have been alluding.

The difficulties that lead to Man’s fall in Paradise, start when God announces that, henceforth, his Son shall be head of all the angels in Heaven. Satan is then led by his pride, to refuse to look upon the Son as his Lord and to bend his knees for him, and with the aim of starting a rebellion, he secretly commands his subordinate to assemble the host that is under their command in the North of Heaven. This pride is Satan’s besetting sin; all his later actions are determined by it. When in a powerful speech, in which the basic emotion, again, is pride, Satan incites his host to rebellion, Abdiel fervently opposes him: