

The Love Poems of 'Paradise Lost' and the Petrarchan Tradition

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THERE are two passages of verse in *Paradise Lost* that may be isolated and read as independent love poems. The first of these is spoken by Eve to Adam in Book iv.

Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
When first on this delightful land he spreads
His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flower,
Glistening with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful evening mild, then silent night
With this her solemn bird and this fair moon,
And these the gems of heaven, her starry train:
But neither breath of morn when she ascends
With charm of earliest birds, nor rising sun
On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, flower,
Glistening with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
Nor grateful evening mild, nor silent night
With this her solemn bird, nor walk by moon,
Or glittering starlight without thee is sweet.

(*Paradise Lost* iv. 641–56)

The second is in Book viii. Telling Raphael of his experiences since the creation, Adam describes his feelings for Eve. Though uneasy about his susceptibility, 'here only weak | Against the charm of beauty's powerful glance', he describes these feelings with a lover's passion:

... when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in her self complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded, wisdom in discourse with her

Looses discountenanced, and like folly shows;
 Authority and reason on her wait,
 As one intended first, not after made
 Occasionally; and to consummate all,
 Greatness of mind and nobleness their seat
 Build in her loveliest, and create an awe
 About her, as guard angelic placed.

(*Paradise Lost* VIII. 546-59)

The way in which familiar Petrarchan sentiments are transformed in these two passages, by a characteristically Miltonic austerity, is striking — so much so, that they may be used to demonstrate a distinctive quality in the verse of *Paradise Lost*.

We need feel no surprise at detecting Petrarchan elements in *Paradise Lost*. With the exception of 'To a Nightingale', Milton wrote no English poem properly describable as a love poem, but his Italian sonnets are orthodox Petrarchan exercises. Moreover, the influence of the Elizabethan poets on Milton is generally admitted. Imitating poets like Spenser, Joshua Sylvester and Phineas Fletcher, and sharing their admiration for the Italians, Milton could hardly have helped observing the Petrarchan mode.

But in spite of his familiarity with the tradition, and in spite of his admiration for the poets who helped to create it, the 'love poems' of *Paradise Lost* contain certain tensions, betray certain inclinations, that tend to subvert orthodox Petrarchan attitudes. These are best seen when we compare the passages from *Paradise Lost* with Elizabethan poems on similar themes.

The passage from Book IV embodies a perennial theme of love poetry, and a favourite with the Elizabethans: the connection between the enjoyment of nature and the presence of the beloved. Among the many poems on this theme, there is a typically Petrarchan one by Henry Constable, a sonnet from his collection *Diana* (1594). Like the Milton passage, Constable's poem exploits a single central idea:

My lady's presence makes the roses red,
 Because to see her lips they blush for shame.
 The lily's leaves, for envy, pale became,
 And her white hands in them this envy bred.
 The marigold the leaves abroad doth spread,
 Because the sun's and her power is the same.
 The violet of purple colour came,
 Dyed in the blood she made my heart to shed.

In brief: all flowers from her their virtue take;
 From her sweet breath their sweet smells do proceed;
 The living heat which her eyebeams doth make
 Warmeth the ground, and quickeneth the seed.

The rain wherewith she watereth the flowers,
 Falls from mine eyes, which she dissolves in showers.¹

Unpretentiously charming like many Elizabethan sonnets, Constable's poem is close in spirit to Milton's Italian sonnets, where Milton uses the same sort of imagery in a similar way: 'Believe me, lady, your beautiful eyes cannot help but be my sun...'² Eve's speech, however, despite similarities, has a different flavour. Both Eve and Constable show a delight in nature, and both attribute it to the presence of their beloved. None of the beauties of nature, Eve tells Adam, 'without thee is sweet'; and Constable announces, 'My lady's presence makes the roses red'. Both pieces of verse, moreover, have an ordered calm and stately movement. The sonnet is only formally a complaint, Constable being more anxious to publish his lady's splendour, and the speech, though its context demands it be understood as private, has the grandeur of a public hymn. But the peculiar perfection of Eve's speech is in its sobriety, a quality lacking in Constable's sonnet. Eve allows no hyperbole, no suggestion of magic.

Constable, on the other hand, indulges in full-blown Petrarchan hyperboles. He postulates a direct causal connection between the beauty of nature and his lady's presence: 'all flowers from her their virtue take'. The reader is expected to respond to the archaic pagan content of the Petrarchan tradition, to remember Venus restoring the spring flowers. Roses blush because they are not so red as the lady's lips, lilies blench because not so pale as her hands. She gives fragrance to the flowers and, somewhat quaintly, sees that they get enough moisture.

Infinitely more restrained, Eve's speech lives in the territory of Petrarchan hyperbole without succumbing to the local vices. A different causal relationship is postulated: Constable's lady makes nature beautiful, Adam makes Eve enjoy the beauty of nature.

¹ *Elizabethan Lyrics*, ed. Norman Ault, 1925, pp. 189-90.

² Sonnet V. Translation from *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler, 1968, p. 95.

She simply observes that with Adam various aspects of nature are 'sweet', without him they are not.

Milton's diction in this passage directs the reader's attention more to nature as judged in Eve's imagination than to the appearance of nature itself. Constable's sonnet is packed with words and phrases evoking sensations: 'blush', 'sweet breath', 'living heat', and so on. Eve's speech is not without this sort of diction. 'Sweet is the breath', 'glistening', 'soft showers', 'silent', 'mild', all excite shadowy sensations, but the peculiar flavour of the lines derives more from the unsensuous, abstracted, sober terms of judgement: 'sweet' (used for other than olfactory or gustatory experience), 'charm', 'pleasant', 'delightful', 'grateful', 'fair'. Indeed, some apparently descriptive epithets appeal more to judgement than to the senses: 'fragrant' indicates a class of enjoyable experiences rather than a particular sensation, and 'fertile', though it implies a good deal about the appearance of the earth, equally registers appreciation.

Some recent criticism has urged us not to admire this sort of thing. We have been asked to applaud poetry mimicking experience as it affects the senses, to treat with suspicion anything in poetry that appears to withdraw from sensation towards abstraction. Such doctrines appear sometimes to neglect the fact that most members of civilized societies are accustomed to contemplating abstractions, about which they often feel passionately, and that to exclude them from poetry is to exclude a large part of human experience.

The special beauty of Eve's speech, it seems to me, rests in the way sensation is restrained by, and subordinated to, abstract judgement. 'Sweet', and 'charm' (which can denote the blended song of birds) contain suggestions of immediate sensation, but express more strongly the careful and just judgement of experience. 'Pleasant', and 'delightful' offer no information about the sun or the landscape, but in their moderation assure the reader that Eve respects both the integrity of nature and the integrity of the human affections. The absence of rapture, the refusal to adopt sentimental postures, is more than compensated for in the grace and dignity of the verse, in the majesty of rhythm and movement.

There is an admirably cool, though cordial, deliberation in the way Eve projects her judgement on to nature in 'grateful evening'.

'Fair moon' is almost pleonastic — no one has ever seen an ugly moon — but the steadiness of the expression, in the context of a love poem, conveys firm assurance of sanity and sense of proportion. In all these terms there is a judicious exactness, a modesty, a normality, that the reader feels as resistance against the pressure exerted on the passage by the Petrarchan tradition. Eve's speech operates as a salutary medicine against the tradition's more extravagant devices. It is beautiful because of its purity.

To find Petrarchan verse of the same stature as this speech, we have to turn to Shakespeare — to sonnet 98, for instance.

From you I have been absent in the spring,
 When proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim,
 Hath put a spirit of youth in everything,
 That heavy Saturn laughed and leaped with him,
 Yet nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell
 Of different flowers in odor and in hue,
 Could make me any summer's story tell,
 Or from their proud lap pluck them where they grew.
 Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,
 Nor praise the deep vermilion of the rose;
 They were but sweet, but figures of delight,
 Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.
 Yet seemed it winter still, and, you away,
 As with your shadow I with these did play.

Shakespeare uses the same convention, asserting a causal link between the presence of the beloved and the enjoyment of nature, and in full-dress Petrarchan fashion — hyperbolically. 'You are the prototype of beauty in nature', he suggests to his beloved. But this sonnet escapes the limitations of Constable's by its dramatic life, and it is by his power to create such a life that Shakespeare raises the quaint devices of the Petrarchan tradition to the level of great poetry.

Although it helps to establish her character and to explain her subsequent behaviour, Eve's speech is not dramatic in the way Shakespeare's sonnet is. The calm perfection of Eden in Book iv of *Paradise Lost* is not the setting for intricate personal relations. It is in the difference between the untroubled simplicity of Eve's speech and the dramatic complexity of Shakespeare's sonnet that we may detect the different way each poet has of exploiting the Petrarchan tradition.

The drama of sonnet 98 consists in the poet's method of discreetly deploying artifice. The first ten lines of the poem offer an essentially sober account of the poet's experiences, punctuated only by lightly conventional tropes (April personified, 'heavy Saturn') and the rich metaphor of the flowers' 'proud lap'. Fancy is kept strictly under control. Not until lines eleven and twelve are we confronted with a startling fancy. The delights of April, we are told, were 'but figures of delight, | Drawn after you, you pattern of all those'. We are surprised by the sudden extravagance of the conceit, which brings the poem's feeling to its greatest intensity. But the extravagance is not gratuitous. It is dramatically effective. After ten lines of restraint, we feel the poet being forced, as it were, out of his sobriety into a rhapsodical gesture commensurate with the richness of his feelings. The poet's control is masterly. In the couplet all fervour is cooled to a gentle melancholy. The hyperbolic posture is abandoned, and the poet soberly and sadly contemplates his loss.

Shakespeare, then, exploits the Petrarchan tradition by recognizing the absurdity of many of its devices, and by capitalizing on the dramatic possibilities of such absurdity. In Eve's speech, Milton makes poetry of similar stature, exploiting the Petrarchan tradition by repudiating the absurdity. The excellence of Shakespeare's sonnet lies in the control the poet exercises over his momentary surrender to the tradition; the excellence of Milton's speech in the controlled refusal to surrender.

Much more immediately dramatic than Eve's speech, Adam's speech in Book VIII is in some ways less satisfactory (the reader is aware of Adam's misjudgement), in other ways more so, indicating as it does the moral tensions that are to ruin him. It may profitably be compared to sonnet xxxv of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*.

What may words say, or what may words not say,
 Where Truth itself must speak like Flattery?
 Within what bounds can one his liking stay,
 Where Nature doth with infinite agree?
 What Nestor's counsel can my flames allay,
 Since Reason's self doth blow the coal in me?
 And, ah, what hope that Hope should once see day,
 Where Cupid is sworn page to Chastity?
 Honour is honour'd that thou dost possess

Him as thy slave, and now long-needy Fame
 Doth even grow rich, meaning my Stella's name.
 Wit learns in thee perfection to express:
 Not thou by praise, but praise in thee is rais'd.
 It is a praise to praise, when thou art prais'd.

Both Adam and Sidney employ the Petrarchan device of asserting the superiority of their ladies over abstract or personified excellencies. Higher knowledge, wisdom, authority and reason, Adam tells Raphael, seem Eve's subordinates; she encompasses greatness of mind and nobleness. Sidney tells his reader that neither Truth, Nature, Reason, Hope, Honour, Fame, Wit, nor praise may do justice to Stella. Like Petrarch himself, they see their ladies as living manifestations of absolute values.

If we read it simply as verse in the Petrarchan tradition, Adam's speech must be allowed a higher place there than Sidney's sonnet. Adam's conceits are better assimilated into a plausible argument, and more passionate:

... so absolute she seems
 And in her self complete, so well to know
 Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
 Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best . . .

By contrast, Sidney's conceits are routine and prefatory:

Not thou by praise, but praise in thee is rais'd.
 It is a praise to praise, when thou art prais'd.

Milton's verse, moreover, is much more subtle and flexible than Sidney's in this sonnet. Sidney's miscellany of contrived questions and ingenious compliments, arranged line by line, contrasts unfavourably with Milton's delicate use of pauses, and of 'the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another'. Milton's personifications are livelier and more discreet than Sidney's. Wisdom 'discountenanced', showing like folly, is immediate and vivid, whereas Cupid acting page to Chastity is merely quaint.

But the difference between the two pieces of verse lies not merely in the ability with which the poets handle the Petrarchan ingredients. Sidney, probably relying on the authority of fashionable Platonism, pretends wholly to believe in his fancies. Truth, he suggests, really is inadequate to express Stella's perfections; she really does possess qualities belonging to the Ideal; and so on. Adam's speech, on the other hand, though it operates at one level

in both the speaker's and the reader's minds as a passionate eulogy, is much more tentative. He has already, before it is uttered, apologized to Raphael for the intensity of his passion for Eve, and perhaps he anticipates the rebuke that is shortly to follow.

Eve only *seems* absolute to Adam. Her speech or behaviour *seems* 'wisest, virtouosest, discreetest, best'. Wisdom only *shows like* folly. Eve is served by authority and reason, 'As one intended first, not after made | Occasionally'. (Adam knows this simile to be inaccurate.) And finally greatness of mind and nobleness create an awe about her 'as a guard angelic placed'. There is an ambiguous dramatic irony in this last instance. If we believe angelic guards to be effective we must, as readers familiar with the Christian myth, smile sadly at Adam's misplaced confidence. If we doubt their effectiveness, as the performance of the one in the poem authorizes us to, we must laugh ruefully at the unconscious appropriateness of Adam's simile.

The peculiar poetic strength of Adam's speech lies, in fact, in its tensions. Where in Eve's speech in Book iv the Petrarchan tradition is felt by its being restrained, here it is used as a warning sign. Milton expects his reader to be critical of the sort of hyperbolic conceits that Sidney uses innocently, and to recognize Adam's folly. All the key words such as 'seems', 'as', and 'like' (surely key words throughout *Paradise Lost*) set up local systems of anxiety in the reader's mind, revealing as they do incipient and half conscious doubts in Adam's. The reader is provoked to question Adam's conceits and to remember the stern warning of Book iv:

. . . in their looks divine
 The image of their glorious maker shone,
 Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
 Severe but in true filial freedom placed;
 Whence true authority in men; though both
 Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
 For contemplation he and valour formed,
 For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
 He for God only, she for God in him . . .

(*Paradise Lost* iv. 291-99)

Except with Milton, this 'warning sign' technique in a solemn context is unusual. It is difficult to find comparable verse of a similar stature. One of two of Spenser's *Amoretti* seriously

employ a similar device for magnifying the beloved's virtues, with moderate success. Sonnet LXI complainingly praises Spenser's 'sovereign saint':

For being as she is divinely wrought,
 And of the blood of Angels heavenly born,
 And with the crew of blessed saints upbrought,
 Each of which did her with their gifts adorn;
 The bud of joy, the blossom of the morn,
 The beam of light, whom mortal eyes admire:
 What reason is it then but she should scorn
 Base things, that to her love too bold aspire?

There is no warning here, of course. Spenser, with his great verbal skill, triumphs over an unpromising fashion, making good poetry despite the quaintness of the concept. But even this sonnet lacks the more rewarding complexity of Adam's speech.

Though quite different in obvious ways, some of Shakespeare's mockery of the Petrarchan tradition in the comedies is nearer in spirit to Adam's speech. A similar complexity of judgement is provoked by Berowne's boast of the knowledge he has learned from women, in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive.
 They sparkle still the right Promethean fire;
 They are the books, the arts, the academes,
 That show, contain and nourish all the world.
 Else none at all in aught proves excellent.¹

The context is comic, and the reader, or member of the audience, is more indulgent towards Berowne's argument than he is towards Adam's, but both speeches warn the reader, with Petrarchan devices, Petrarchan sentiments, to be on his guard, to be prepared to judge.

In the two passages from *Paradise Lost* that we have been examining, we can see that by the time Milton came to write his epic, he had repudiated the Petrarchan tradition, or at least its more flamboyant devices and sentiments. They were, he felt, a betrayal of the sober truth, and he uses them, directly or by suggestion, only to provide a contrast with a more discerning apprehension of truth. In this we can see an example of the curious

¹ *Love's Labour's Lost*, iv. iii. 249-53.

literalness of the verse of *Paradise Lost*, evident in more than one of the poem's characteristics.

Milton's literal bent is one among a variety of reasons that led him to choose simile as the characteristic figure of speech for the poem. Besides being more 'epic', it is less deceptive and more open to inspection than metaphor. Many of the similes, it is noticeable, are designed to show the reader, not so much what the object being described is like, as what it is *not* like. Such is the one describing Satan's spear, 'to equal which the tallest pine | Hewn on Norwegian hills . . . were but a wand' (*Paradise Lost* I. 292-4). This is a useful device for evoking what has never been seen.

Similar motives may be detected in Milton's explanation of the pagan gods as fallen angels in disguise, and in his apologies for classical allusions ('Hesperian fables true, | If true, here only'). It is evidently a concern for sober truth that prompts Raphael's apology for the lack of verisimilitude in his descriptions of celestial and infernal events:

. . . what surmounts the reach
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
By likening spiritual to corporeal forms,
As may express them best . . .
(*Paradise Lost* v. 571-4)

It is perhaps this literalness that Dr Leavis has in mind when he asserts that Milton was handicapped by a 'defect of imagination' and was 'for the purposes of his undertaking disastrously single-minded and simple-minded'.¹

Yet the complexity of Milton's treatment of his subject in its details is evident in his use of the Petrarchan tradition in the two 'love poems'. The poet constantly exposes the reader to attractions of which he disapproves. In his simultaneous exploitation and repudiation of the Petrarchan conventions, making poetry at once startlingly beautiful and curiously severe, we can see the strength of Milton's poetic imagination. It is an imagination characterised by a firm moral decisiveness combined with an acute awareness of the power of other values.

¹ F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation*, 1936, p. 58.