“This lucid and entirely jargon-free guide to *Paradise Lost* will help any reader of the poem to find their feet, and to understand what makes it the best poem in the English language. Hopkins has one, and only one, resemblance to Milton’s Satan, which is that he can make intricate seem straight.”

*Colin Burrow, Oxford University*

“Where most Miltonists use *Paradise Lost* as a quarry for an investigation of the theological and political ideas of the period, Hopkins’ book restores the poem to where it properly belongs, the sphere of literature. It treats *Paradise Lost* as a great poem, indeed one of the greatest ever written, and shows what that claim means in its beautiful choice of quotations and illuminating commentary upon them, demonstrating the work’s imaginative reach, human interest, and supremely bold and varied verbal artistry. This is the best introduction to *Paradise Lost* there is, suitable for the intelligent sixth-former or undergraduate, or the enquiring general reader outside the academy – or indeed anyone who cares about poetry. It is also a joy to read, indeed a real page-turner – and of how many academic books can one say that?”

*Charles Martindale, Bristol University*
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Reading *Paradise Lost*

David Hopkins
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Preface

This book explores some of the main narrative and poetic qualities which have compelled and fascinated readers of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* for more than three centuries. Designed to be readable in a single sitting, it will, I hope, appeal both to beginners seeking some initial critical orientation, and to others wishing to refresh or extend their acquaintance with *Paradise Lost* after, perhaps, a preliminary encounter with parts of it at school or university. It may also have some interest for more experienced readers, since, though the scale and scope of the book preclude any sustained or detailed engagement with the vast body of secondary literature on *Paradise Lost*, it offers an implicit contribution to some of the most enduring and vigorously contested debates about Milton’s poem.

There are already many books on *Paradise Lost*, from which readers will learn much of value. What, then, apart from its brevity, is distinctive about the present one? The best way of answering that question may be by way of a short account of the reception history of Milton’s poem. This account, needless to say, is given in very broad brush-strokes, and ignores numerous local exceptions and nuances. But it is, I think, true enough in its general outlines for my present purposes.

For nearly two centuries after its appearance, *Paradise Lost* was widely admired for the grandeur and beauty of its imaginative vision, narrative sweep, and poetic language. Milton was felt to have told a story of human and cosmic significance with a mastery that rivets the reader’s attention. His unique and challenging verse style, often employing blank-verse paragraphs of majestic compass, was thought to have successfully embraced the widest range of expressive effects, from awe-inspiring sublimity, through calm
philosophical survey, to sensuously delicate description, and the intimate rendering of human speech. Milton was thought to have enriched the English language with resonances from his Latin, Greek, and Hebrew reading. He was believed to have created the definitive modern epic, subsuming and eclipsing the achievements in that genre of the great poets of classical antiquity and renaissance Italy. ‘This man,’ the poet Dryden is reported to have remarked on first reading *Paradise Lost*, ‘cuts us all out – and the ancients too.’

To be sure, some of Milton’s earlier readers expressed (sometimes quite severe) reservations about specific details of the design and language of *Paradise Lost*. And the poem’s reputation was no doubt enhanced in a general way by the fact that it was based on subject matter – the story of the Fall of Man as narrated in the Old Testament Book of Genesis – that was central to the teachings of the Christian religion which most of its readers professed. But local quibbles did not diminish the near-universal reverence in which *Paradise Lost* was held. Nor were the poem’s admirers limited to those who shared the particular doctrinal or political beliefs of its author. *Paradise Lost* gave enormous pleasure to readers of both sexes, right across the political and religious spectrum. It soon established its reputation as the single greatest non-dramatic poem in English literature.

But around the middle of the nineteenth century, things began to change. In some respects, Milton’s reputation continued to grow, and his status as (in Gordon Campbell’s phrase) ‘the national poet’ was consolidated in the publication of David Masson’s vast seven-volume biography (1859–94). But doubts began to be expressed about his greatest poem. *Paradise Lost* ceased to be generally regarded as a bountiful provider of rich, diverse, and awe-inspiring poetic pleasure, and started to be seen by some as a ‘problem.’ The poem’s Old Testament subject matter – which, it was thought, Milton had believed in as ‘literal’ truth – had now begun in some quarters to seem embarrassingly primitive and outmoded. How, it was asked, could Milton possibly have made a coherent and appealing narrative poem out of such a grotesquely implausible story? How could he have hoped to deal satisfactorily, in the context of a poetic narrative, with issues – such as the origins of evil, and the compatibility of human free will with divine
foreknowledge and omnipotence – that had exercised, and
frequently baffled, the greatest philosophers and theologians
down the ages?

This mid-nineteenth-century suspicion of the poem survived
into the twentieth, where it was coupled with objections to Milton’s
poetic language. Whereas earlier critics had admired the variety,
subtlety, and sensuous richness of Milton’s verse, it was now seen by
some as monotonous, bludgeoning, pompously rhetorical, syntacti-
cally tortuous, and excessively Latinate. Milton was said to have
violated the inherent character of the English language. Such
charges were vigorously contested in some quarters, but some of
the champions of Milton’s language were surprisingly willing to
accept the nineteenth-century objections to his poem’s larger
design: Milton was defended by some for the fineness of his local
effects, but not for the coherence of his overall conception. In other
quarters, it was conceded that admiration (or distaste) for Milton’s
poem was likely to go hand-in-hand with one’s sympathy with (or
hostility to) the religion which underpins it, and some of Milton’s
champions were quite willing to concede that *Paradise Lost* would
be unlikely to appeal to non-Christians – unless, that is, they were
willing to read the poem manifestly against its grain.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century objections to *Paradise
Lost* are nowadays commonly treated as passé. And an older-style
admiration for the poem was no doubt maintained by many readers
throughout the twentieth-century ‘Milton controversy’: ordinary
readers’ habits are often remarkably unaffected by the palace revo-
lutions of the critical community. But the effects of twentieth-
century anti-Miltonism linger on to a surprising degree, even in the
work of those who would probably be shocked to find themselves
associated with it.

Recently, discussion of *Paradise Lost*, like that of most earlier lit-
erature, has retreated within the walls of the academy, and has been
primarily addressed to those studying the poem formally at school,
undergraduate, or postgraduate level. Some of this discussion has
continued to celebrate the poetic qualities of *Paradise Lost* in terms
which would have been recognizable by the poet’s early admirers.
But in accordance with current academic fashion, much recent writ-
ing on Milton has been less concerned with the artistic merits or
demerits of the poet’s work than with the relations between that work and its ‘context,’ political, theological, and ideological. Indeed, in some quarters this has involved a turning away from Milton’s poetry altogether, in favor of the polemical and political prose which occupied much of his career. This body of work—which, the poet said,¹ had involved ‘the use … but of [his] left hand’—had contributed significantly to Milton’s high standing in Whig and republican circles in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the quatercentenary year of Milton’s birth, one journalist reflected the renewed emphasis on the poet’s prose when he commented that *Paradise Lost*, with its copious references to ‘a theology and mythology that today are gone,’ is ‘largely empty’ for modern readers. ‘Milton the poet,’ this writer asserted, ‘was a bore and a prig.’ If he is to be admired today, it will not be for his verse but for his ‘sensational,’ and ‘majestic’ polemical writings, and particularly for his ‘explosive defence of free speech.’² In the following year, another writer, reviewing a new biography of Milton, noted that the authors of this work had devoted three times as much space to one of Milton’s minor pamphlets than to one of his most famous shorter poems. ‘By writing so richly about the polemical prose and saying so little about the literary art,’ the reviewer suggested, the biographers had given the impression that Milton will be remembered as ‘a superior Salmatius rather than a figure who shaped English poetry for two centuries.’³

The present book is written out of three main convictions: First, that it is possible for modern readers to recapture much of the enthusiasm for the imaginative vision, narrative excitement, and poetic beauty of *Paradise Lost* that was felt by its earliest admirers. Second, that such an enthusiasm need be no more dependent than that of many of Milton’s early readers on any particular sympathy with the beliefs and opinions of Milton the man, or any specialized interest in the religious and ideological conflicts of the seventeenth century. Third, that, as with any great poem, understanding *Paradise Lost* is inseparable from enjoying it. As William Empson noted, ‘the act of knowing is itself an act of sympathising; unless you are enjoying the poetry, you cannot create it, as poetry, in your own mind.’⁴ The present book, accordingly, concentrates on those areas of *Paradise Lost*—the depictions of Satan and God, the
descriptions of Adam and Eve’s life together in Eden, the portrayal of the events leading to the Fall – which might, because of some of the advance publicity they have received, present obstacles to modern readers’ enjoyment, and thus understanding, of Milton’s poem. The suggestion is not that Milton’s poem is faultless, ‘for faults and defects,’ as Samuel Johnson noted, ‘every work of man must have,’ but, rather, that a critic’s first duty is to draw attention to the strengths of his subject. ‘A true critic,’ wrote Joseph Addison in one of his Spectator papers on Paradise Lost, ‘ought to dwell rather upon excellences than imperfections, to discover the concealed beauties of a writer, and communicate to the world such things as are worth their observation.’ Such a focus, together with the need to maintain brevity, has meant that there are many important areas of Paradise Lost which receive no coverage in the present book. Nor does the book offer (except incidentally) basic handbook information about such matters as the circumstances of the poem’s composition, or the poet’s sources. The note on Further Reading gives some suggestions of books and essays which will provide such information, and which will enable readers both to develop further the issues discussed in this book, and to explore areas and aspects of the poem for which no room could be found in a study of this scale. The same note also gives offers some pointers for readers interested in pursuing some of the current concerns of Milton scholarship.

The ideas and arguments in this book have been tried out over many years in lectures and seminars at the University of Bristol. I am grateful to several generations of students, whose enthusiasm and resistance has, I hope, enabled me to refine, correct, develop, and clarify my material over the years. I am grateful to Colin Burrow, Greg Clingham, David Fairer, Charles Martindale, and Tom Mason, all of whom read the book in draft form and made useful and encouraging comments. A valuable early stimulus to my thinking about Paradise Lost was provided by J. R. Mason’s 1987 Cambridge PhD thesis, ‘To Milton through Dryden and Pope.’ James Hopkins and Eric Southworth both provided useful help on particular points. Kate Hopkins applied her discerning editorial eye to my manuscript, and Sandra Hopkins provided detailed and searching criticism at all stages throughout the book’s gestation. Needless to say, none of them is responsible for the imperfections
which remain. Emma Bennett at Wiley-Blackwell has been most supportive in bringing the project to its final published form.

All quotations from earlier sources have been modernized for readers’ convenience. In accordance with the general nature of the book, endnotes have been kept to an absolute minimum, and references are only supplied when readers might have genuine difficulty in locating the source being referred to.

**Endnotes**

1

Paradise Lost: Poem or “Problem”? 

Two Propositions

I begin this short exploration of Paradise Lost with two simple propositions, which the rest of the book will be devoted to fleshing out and, I hope, substantiating. The first proposition is that Paradise Lost is a narrative poem, not a work of theology, or philosophy, or political polemic, and that it works on readers’ minds according to the laws and procedures of narrative poetry, not according to those which govern the other kinds of discourse. The second proposition is that discussion of Paradise Lost always begins to go awry when the truth of the first proposition is forgotten.

The Laws of Poetry

What do I mean by saying that Paradise Lost operates “according to the laws of poetry”? “Poetry,” of course, is notoriously difficult to define. When asked, “What is poetry?,” Samuel Johnson is reported to have replied: “Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.” Elsewhere, however, Johnson ventured some more positive suggestions on the subject. When discussing, for example, some of the technical minutiae of versification employed by poets, he remarked:
Without this petty knowledge no man can be a poet; and ... from the proper disposition of single sounds results that harmony that adds force to reason, and gives grace to sublimity; that shackles attention and governs passions.²

Johnson was here drawing attention to the way that the powerful emotional effects produced by poetry are the direct result of a skillful deployment of language, which is organized and patterned by poets to a far more telling and significant degree than is usual in either written or spoken language. Poets, to be sure, have regularly stressed the role of “inspiration” in the exercise of their art – the belief that they are, in some sense, in a “higher” state when composing their work than that which they command in ordinary life. Milton himself, indeed, powerfully invokes this idea when, at the beginning of Books I and VII of Paradise Lost he pleads for the assistance in his great task of Urania, the Greek muse of astronomy whom he identifies as the inspiring power behind the prophet-poets of the Bible.

But such inspiration goes hand in hand, Johnson’s passage quoted above suggests, with a meticulous and painstaking exercise of verbal artistry. If poetic genius is, in another formulation of Johnson’s, “cold” and “inert” without its capacity to “amplify” and “animate” its raw material, it is also a faculty that involves much labor of “collecting” and “combining.”³ Poets deploy the full resources of words – not only their meanings in the obvious dictionary sense, but their subtler resonances, overtones, connections, suggestions, and ambiguities. Poets are also attentive to the ways in which language has been deployed by predecessors in their art. They both absorb the language of their forebears silently into their own, and signal towards it openly by various kinds of imitation, allusion, and echo. In poetry, language is organized so as to exploit its sounds and rhythms to the full, its capacity to evoke or – so it has seemed to many – “enact” its subject matter by onomatopoeia, assonance, and other mimetic effects.⁴ For this reason, poetry is best appreciated when read aloud, whether in a full vocal rendering, or to the mind’s ear. It needs to be experienced sensuously and viscerally as well as intellectually. It speaks, in W. B. Yeats’s famous phrase, to “the whole man – blood, imagination, intellect, running together.”⁵ In poetry, “form” and “content,” “style” and “subject” are indivisible:
If you read the line, “The sun is warm, the sky is clear,” you do not experience separately the image of the warm sun and clear sky, on the one side, and certain unintelligible rhythmical sounds on the other; nor yet do you experience them together, side by side; but you experience the one in the other ... Afterwards, no doubt, when you are out of the poetic experience but remember it, you may by analysis decompose this unity, and attend to a substance more or less isolated, and a form more or less isolated. But these are things in your analytic head, not in the poem, which is poetic experience. And if you want to have the poem again, you cannot find it by adding together these two products of decomposition; you can only find it by passing back into poetic experience. And then what you recover is no aggregate of factors, it is a unity in which you can no more separate a substance and a form than you can separate living blood and the life in the blood.6

Reflections of the kind summarized above have become commonplace in the discussion of poetry. But for many modern readers the term “poem” has effectively come to mean “short poem,” and “poetry” today suggests a kind of writing – usually in the form of first-person reflection – that can be printed on one side, or at the very most, two or three sides, of paper. For most modern readers, the form most associated with storytelling is not poetry but the prose novel.

But Milton, of course, wrote in – and sought to extend and enrich – a tradition of narrative poetry stretching back to the great classical epics of Homer and Virgil. Narrative verse in this tradition – which enjoyed great prestige for centuries – was thought to have all the qualities associated with short poems, but many more besides. The great narrative poems were thought to have the same powers of verbal suggestiveness, animation and enactment that are found in shorter examples of poetic art. Such powers, it was felt, allowed readers of narrative verse a vivid emotional engagement with, rather than a mere intellectual comprehension of, the actions they depicted. Alexander Pope, for example, described the effect on him of Homer’s Iliad thus:

No man of a true poetical spirit is master of himself while he reads [Homer]. What he writes is of the most animated nature imaginable; every thing moves, every thing lives, and is put in action. If a council be called or a battle fought, you are not coldly informed of what
was said or done as from a third person. The reader is hurried out of himself by the force of the poet’s imagination, and turns in one place to a hearer, in another to a spectator.7

And Pope wrote in similar terms of a much shorter and much more recent narrative poem, John Dryden’s *Alexander’s Feast* (1697). In that work, Dryden had imagined how Alexander the Great – the alleged son of Jupiter (“Lybian Jove”) and the mightiest conqueror in the world, who has just triumphed in battle over the great Persian empire – was disconcertingly transported by the mercurial artistry of his court poet-musician Timotheus into a succession of emotional states quite beyond his control. To read Dryden’s poem, Pope suggested in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), is to feel Alexander’s constantly shifting emotions with something like the irresistible immediacy experienced by the poem’s “godlike hero” himself:

Hear how Timotheus’ varied lays surprise,
And bid alternate passions fall and rise!
While, at each change, the son of Lybian Jove
Now burns with glory, and then melts with love;
Now his fierce eyes with sparkling fury glow;
Now sighs steal out, and tears begin to flow:
Persians and Greeks like turns of nature found,
And the world’s victor stood subdued by sound!
The power of music all our hearts allow;
And what Timotheus was, is Dryden now.

(374–83)

The great narrative poems, it was believed, did not merely reflect, reproduce, or record the world we inhabit in daily life. They could create “new worlds,” inhabitable only in the imagination, drawing on the world we know but radically transforming, reconstituting, and recombining its elements. In the words of Shakespeare’s Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,

as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(V. i. 14–17)
Narrative poets could, moreover, it was believed, combine emotional states and sentiments which would normally be thought incompatible, and could make attractive and comprehensible beliefs, relationships and events which would be perplexing, even repellent, in ordinary life. The poet Shelley commented memorably on this quality in his *Defence of Poetry* (written, 1821, published 1840):

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches.

Narrative poems, like dramas, it was thought, cannot be properly represented by extracts, or in parts, but work in a cumulative manner to produce their effects on the imagination. Like dramas, they contain speeches in which different characters are allowed their say, and different views are juxtaposed, without being resolved into any single perspective. In the great Preface to his edition of the works of Shakespeare (1765), Samuel Johnson noted that while Shakespeare’s plays contain eminently quotable “practical axioms and domestic wisdom,” “his real power is not shown in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable and the tenor of his dialogue.” In the same way, the insights of a great narrative poem, it was thought, are not located, in a detachable way, in any of its local parts – even those in which the poet apparently speaks in his own voice and offers his own commentary on the action – but in the temporally unfolding and cumulative effect of the whole, and the dramatic interplay between its descriptive passages (including the extended similes that are a such a notable feature of epic poetry) and the various “voices” which speak within it. Key sentiments and ideas are returned to, and seen from different angles as the narrative progresses. Apparent digressions and interludes turn out, as one reads, to be relevant to the poem’s larger concerns. Significant words – in *Paradise Lost*, for example, such apparently simple terms as “bliss,” “height,” “love,” “naked,” “reason,” “sin,” “sweet” – acquire further depth and resonance as the story unfolds. And at the local level, the narrative
poet controls the movement, rhythm, and evocative power of his language in the way with which we have become familiar from shorter poems, thus enabling any “ideas” or “doctrines” which his work contains to affect the reader in a quite different way from that in which similar material would affect them if encountered in a work of philosophy or theology.

Paradise Lost, this book suggests, operates as a narrative poem in the ways broadly sketched above. It achieves its objective of “justifying the ways of God to men” not by deductive reasoning or theological dogma, but by conducting us through an experiential process which conveys to us both the goodness of the divine dispensation which it imagines, and the perils of rejecting that dispensation. It allows us to live with paradoxes which in other kinds of writing would seem mere contradictions. It solicits our imaginative participation in the events which it depicts, and enables us to comprehend the sentiments of the various agents in those events with inwardness and sympathy. It brings home to us the complexities and difficulties of the choices which they face. It offers a plausible depiction of scenes, sentiments, and relationships which, in other treatments, might seem remote from human comprehension and concern. And it does all this in language that is remarkable for its variety, ranging from sublime grandeur to the most minute and sensuous delicacy.

Such a general view of Milton’s poem was once commonplace. What has caused it to lose its hold? One answer, I think, might go somewhat as follows. Paradise Lost contains, at various points, arguments that are close to those of philosophy or theology. The poem, no less than those of Lucretius and Dante, is, indeed, full of theological and philosophical argumentation. That argumentation, moreover – about divine foreknowledge, human free will, the relations between the sexes, the origins of evil – concerns issues on which Milton himself expressed strong views in prose, and about which his readers are likely to have strong opinions of their own. It has been very easy, therefore, for commentators on Paradise Lost to slide from talking about Milton’s ideas and arguments as they are presented in the poem into discussing them as if they were independent entities, abstractable from “the progress of the fable and the tenor of the dialogue” of Paradise Lost. It has also been
frequently assumed that *Paradise Lost* contains much that Milton believed as literal, historical fact, but which we find quite unacceptable or ludicrous. Milton, it has been suggested, was asking us to accept and approve of a wrathful, omniscient, anthropomorphic God, and a hierarchical arrangement of the universe in which, at the centre, man and woman exist in a divinely appointed hierarchy. And he was asking us to believe in these not as fictions, symbols, myths, or metaphors, but as events with a factual, historical status.

**Two French Critics and an English Poet on *Paradise Lost***

Such arguments, I would suggest, are based on serious misapprehensions about Milton’s whole artistic endeavor. In support of such a proposition, let first us consider two general statements about *Paradise Lost* by critics of the past. They are both by Frenchmen of a decidedly skeptical temperament. The first is by the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778), and is taken from his *Essay on Epic Poetry* (1727):

> What Milton so boldly undertook, he performed with superior strength of judgement, and with an imagination productive of beauties not dreamed of before him. The meanness, if there is any, of some parts of the subject is lost in the immensity of the poetical invention. There is something above the reach of human forces to have attempted the creation without bombast, to have described the gluttony and curiosity of a woman without flatness, to have brought probability and reason amidst the hurry of imaginary things belonging to another world, and as far remote from the limits of our notions as they are from our earth; in short, to force the reader to say, “If God, if the angels, if Satan would speak, I believe they would speak as they do in Milton.”

> I have often admired [wondered at] how barren the subject appears, and how fruitful it grows under his hands.

> The *Paradise Lost* is the only poem wherein are to be found in a perfect degree that uniformity which satisfies the mind and that variety which pleases the imagination, all its episodes being necessary
lines which aim at the centre of a perfect circle. Where is the nation who would not be pleased with the interview of Adam and the angel? With the Mountain of Vision, with the bold strokes which make up the relentless, undaunted and sly character of Satan? But above all with that sublime wisdom which Milton exerts, whenever he dares to describe God and to make him speak? He seems indeed to draw the picture of the Almighty as like as human nature can reach to, through the mortal dust in which we are clouded.

The heathens always, the Jews often, and our Christian priests sometimes, represent God as a tyrant infinitely powerful. But the God of Milton is always a creator, a father, and a judge, nor is his vengeance jarring with his mercy, nor his predeterminations repugnant to the liberty of man ...

But he hath especially an undisputable claim to the unanimous admiration of mankind, when he descends from those high flights to the natural description of human things. It is observable that in all other poems love is represented as a vice; in Milton only ’tis a virtue. The pictures he draws of it are naked as the persons he speaks of, and as venerable. He removes with a chaste hand the veil which covers everywhere else the enjoyments of that passion. There is softness, tenderness and warmth without lasciviousness. The poet transports himself and us into that state of innocent happiness in which Adam and Eve continued for a short time. He soars not above human, but above corrupt nature, and as there is no instance of such love, there is none of such poetry.

The second passage is by the nineteenth-century French politician, man of letters, and one-time theologian, Edmond Scherer (1815–89), and is taken from his essay “Milton and ‘Paradise Lost’” (1868):

“Paradise Lost” is an epic, but it is a theological epic, and the theology of the poem is made up of the favourite dogmas of the Puritans – the Fall, Justification, the sovereign laws of God. Moreover, Milton makes no secret of the fact that he is defending a thesis: his end, he says in the first lines, is to “assert eternal providence And justify the ways of God to man.”

There are, therefore, in “Paradise Lost” two things which must be kept distinct: an epic poem and a theodicy [a vindication of divine justice]. Unluckily, these two elements … were incapable
of thorough fusion. Nay, they are at complete variance, and from their juxtaposition there results an undertone of contradiction which runs through the whole work, affects its solidity and endangers its value ... Christianity is a religion which has been formally “redacted” and settled; and it is impossible, without doing it violence, to add anything to it or subtract anything from it. Moreover, Christianity is a religion serious in itself and insisting on being taken seriously, devoted to ideas the gravest, not so say the saddest, that imagination can form ...

But this is not all. Christianity is a religion of dogma: in place of the fantastic and intangible myths of which the Aryan religions were made up, it has abstruse distinctions, paradoxical mysteries, subtle teachings. In short, it amounts to a metaphysic, or, to return to the expression I used at first, a theology. And theology has never had the reputation of being favourable to poetry ...

“Paradise Lost” is not only a theological poem – two words which cry out at finding themselves united – but it is at the same time a commentary on texts of Scripture. The author has chosen for his subject the first chapters of Genesis, that is to say a story which the stoutest or the simplest faith hesitates to take quite literally, a story in which serpents are heard speaking and the ruin of the human race is seen to be bound up with a fault merely childish in appearance. In fixing on such a subject, Milton was obliged to treat the whole story as a literal and authentic history; and, worse still, to take a side on the questions which it starts. Now these questions are the very thorniest in theology; and so it comes about that Milton, who intended to instruct us, merely launches us on a sea of difficulties. What are we to understand by the Son of the Most High, who, one fine day, is begotten and raised to the rank of viceroy of creation? How are we to comprehend an angel who enters on a conflict with God, that is to say, with a being whom he knows to be omnipotent? What kind of innocence is it which does not prevent a man from eating forbidden fruit? How, again, can this fault extend its effects to ourselves? By what effort of imagination or of faith can we regard the history of Adam as part of our own history, and acknowledge solidarity with his crime in ourselves? And if Milton does not succeed in arousing this feeling in us, what becomes of his poem? What is its value, what is its interest? It becomes equally impossible to take it seriously as a