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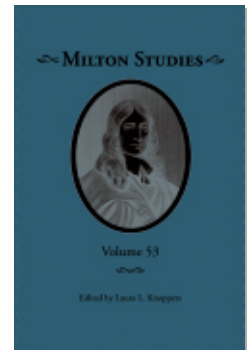
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Carter Revard

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Carter Revard

Canonizing Milton: Dryden Agonistes

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century it became possible for English poets to amplify¹ their voices by using Milton's lion-skin as echo chamber. Not until a culture's poets are canonized and classicized can this be done, because it assumes an audience not just familiar with but immediately alive to the actual words of the earlier poets, which is only possible once those poets are recognized laureates, and some of their poems learned by heart—whether in official schooling or by tacit agreement of the literate class as to what poets should be read in the vernacular. In the case of John Milton, the process of canonization can be seen as beginning when would-be rival John Dryden put on the lion's skin and tried to steal Milton's voice for his “opera” *The State of Innocence*—recognizing Milton as king of poets, but marking himself as an ass.² It was a typical opportunist and careerist use by Dryden of Milton's *Paradise Lost*; he would later preserve himself in its amber by the laudatory epigram he contributed for its third (1688) edition.³

How Milton's literary reputation rose has been exhaustively studied, but here I am concerned only with how his becoming a "classic" made his work usable by other writers to amplify their own.⁴ One mark of such classicizing in early eighteenth century England is public discussion of Milton, Shakespeare, and other poets and dramatists in the newly formed media that provided a kind of extension of the educational establishment, guiding manners and tastes and morals after a fashion via *Tatler*, *Spectator*, pamphlets, books, *Scriblerus Papers*, and the like: a public education alternative to the older forms of courtly, aristocratic, legal/clerical, and university reading and conversation. Another mark is the beginning of "classic" editions of the earlier poets, not just collections of their writings, but annotated editions—Shakespeare was edited by Alexander Pope and Lewis Theobald, Milton was edited by Richard Bentley and Thomas Newton—in classical format, in volumes sold by subscription; not as "hot" contemporary laps for the gossiping groupie-gropers, but as "cool" tomes, upon which one could sit magisterially in coffee-houses. By 1714, when Pope was finishing his *Rape of the Lock*, the mark of classic status had been stamped upon *Paradise Lost*: particular lines were parodied, impressive figures like Satan were mimicked and parodied. Pope's sylph Ariel, though named for a Shakespearean figure, gets from Milton's Satan some of his tempter's genes. Milton, in 1714, was being viewed as the English equivalent of Homer and Virgil, and by the 1730s *Paradise Lost* was being used like the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*.⁵

And Pope's Satanic Toad(y)

Pope, in the 1730s, expected his readers to have a detailed verbal memory of the fourth book of *Paradise Lost*. In the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, Pope stilettoes Lord Hervey with an allusion to *Paradise Lost* 4.797–809, then beheads him with a piece of Jewish lore. Here are Pope's lines:

Whether in florid impotence he speaks,
And, as the prompter breathes, the puppet squeaks;
Or at the ear of Eve, familiar toad,

Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad,
 In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,
 Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies.

.....

Eve's tempter thus the Rabbins have expressed,
 A cherub's face, a reptile all the rest.⁶

And here is *Paradise Lost* 4.797–809:

So saying, on he [Gabriel] led his radiant Files,
 Daz'ling the Moon; these [Ithuriel and Zephon] to the Bower direct
 In search of whom they sought: him [Satan] there they found
Squat like a Toad, close at the eare of Eve;
 Assaying by his Devilish art to reach
 The Organs of her Fancie, and with them forge
 Illusions as he list, Phantasms and Dreams,
 Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
 Th' animal Spirits that from pure blood arise
 Like gentle breaths from Rivers pure, thence raise
 At least distemperd, discontented thoughts,
 Vaine hopes, vaine aimes, inordinate desires
 Blown up with high conceits ingendring pride.⁷

With a single drop of Miltonic allusion, Pope curdles harmless court gossip into profoundly corrupting behavior. A mere "toady," dressed in Miltonic diction and let into Queen Anne's presence, takes on satanic stature and power. This, Pope wants us to see, is not just the courtly tittle-tattle and rumor-mongering which, in *Rape of the Lock*, he had lightly dismissed ("singing, dancing, ogling, and *all that*"): Lord Hervey, so the Miltonic allusion warns, is corrupting England's queen, the very source of literary patronage and artistic recognition, the true arbiter of national taste. Pope, in this Eden, is like Milton's Ithuriel, guarding Eve: his satiric pen, like Ithuriel's spear, "touches" Satan in his "toady" disguise as Lord Hervey. And that touch exposes, not a magnificent fallen angel, but a low, creeping, poisonous, fawning Lord Hervey—not a daylight Serpent, but a night-time Toad, with whispered rumors and gossip and innuendos "inspiring" (breathing into the queen's ears) his "venom" that would corrupt and pervert her imagination, her judgment, her very reason.

Pope is marvelously deft in nailing down the analogy. Lord Hervey is one of the court's "familiar," just as a toad could be a witch's familiar, sent to spy or to deliver messages. Perhaps the allusive familiar brings in a whiff of Shakespearean supernatural from the "blasted heath" of *Macbeth*, where devil-familiars in the form of cats and toads "call" the Three Weird Sisters, or do their evil bidding—perhaps, indeed, Pope hints that behind the androgynous Lord Hervey are nasty females, court hags who "hold their Sabbaths, less for joy than spite," as he puts it in his *Second Moral Essay, on the Characters of Women*.

Pope certainly implies that such petty court-scene details mask issues comparable to those in the garden of Eden. Since, for Pope, the literary scene was one of very high importance, since the poet was guardian of a nation's intellectual and moral standards, it was more than a trivial matter for the queen of England to be misled by someone like Lord Hervey into the merely personal, the purely gossipy version of issues and events of the time. So the Miltonic allusions let Pope imply a great deal about the beauty, innocence, majesty, and intelligence of the queen, and the evil of Lord Hervey.

Yet what Pope takes as canonized here is still just the poem, not the poet. As a Catholic, Pope would hardly identify himself with Milton the person, and Pope presents himself as Horace rather than Homer (though he did hope to crown his career with an epic, and proposed to write it in blank verse following Milton's example).⁸ By Pope's day Milton's poem was classic, but its poet was still a heretic. That would change only when English poets came to think of themselves as *like* Milton—antiestablishment, marginalized, midwives to the future rather than guardians of the past. Not until the Romantic period did poets evoke Milton as patron, friend, and muse to their poetry, and not only did they echo, use, or allude to Milton's poems, but chose those lines in which Milton constructed his own poetic self, and took that self as their model. And a century later, in a United States whose founding fathers took Milton as champion of republican government and model

for poetic greatness, so also did the greatest American poet of the twentieth century, Robert Frost.

John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Robert Frost made use in different ways of the language and poetic authority of John Milton.⁹ The use in each case was friendly, and the relationship of later to earlier classic not one of rivalry, anxiety, or contestation, but friendship and encouragement: the three later poets turned to passages of *Paradise Lost* in which John Milton constructed a heroic model of himself as poet in mortal combat with outward and inward dangers,¹⁰ and by using certain language from these passages the later poets placed themselves alongside Milton in a struggle against common enemies.¹¹

Singing in Darkness: Milton and Keats

I will first look at what Keats achieved by using one Miltonic word in "Ode to a Nightingale." To see what Keats saw, we must look first at where he found that word, then at what Milton himself was doing with it.¹² The word is "darkling," used in *Paradise Lost* 3.39, where Milton from his mortal darkness speaks directly to the holy light of heaven. He has just voiced his joy at being done with his account (in books 1 and 2 of the poem) of the realm of Chaos and eternal Night, but now is pierced by the irony of claiming that he, a man gone blind, is safely "revisiting" the deity's holy light:

thee I revisit safe,
And feel thy sovran vital Lamp; but thou
Revisit'st not these eyes, that rowle in vain
To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;
So thicke a drop serene hath quencht thir Orbs,
Or dim suffusion veild. (PL 3.21–26)

In these lines the impersonal epic has been transformed to personal lyric; the all-powerful poet acknowledges himself a blind and helpless man. But Milton refuses to be a victim, will not let his loss of sight deprive him of what is worth seeing—and the first of those sights is where the muses dwell:

Yet not the more
Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt,
Cleer Spring, or shadie Grove, or Sunnie Hill,
Smit with the love of sacred Song; but chief
Thee *Sion* and the flowrie Brooks beneath
That wash thy hallowd feet, and warbling flow,
Nightly I visit. (3.26–32)

Milton rejoices, having constructed something upon which to rejoice: he turns the dark nothing before his eyes into a sunlit Arcadia, a moonlit Mount Zion. He hears at night the voices of his own daughters, or the daughters of Mnemosyne, giving him the beautiful Greek or Hebrew songs, and he remembers the poets and prophets who made those verses, recalling that some of them were blind like him. Then, as he wishes he might be like them, not only in being blind but also in being a great poet, new poetry moves quietly, like the stream he describes, into him and from him, as he begins to

feed on thoughts, that voluntarie move
Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful Bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal Note. (3.37–40)

Yet this nocturnal note, it turns out, is hardly joyful; Milton drops again into deep sadness at the thought of what blindness has taken from him:

Thus with the Year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,
Or flocks, or heards, or human face divine. (3.40–44)

But here, even though these verses do just what the earlier ones had done—that is, while lamenting a loss, they re-create the thing lost—once more the bright imagined scene is snatched away:

But cloud in stead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the chearful wayes of men
Cut off, and for the Book of knowledg fair
Presented with a Universal blanc

Of Natures works to mee expung'd and ras'd,
And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out. (3.45–50)

The despair Milton has just fought off seems here to have caught and pinned him helpless, with “wisdom . . . quite shut out”—and Milton well knew that such blindness was read by opponents as God’s judgmental withholding of the light of understanding. But Milton will not accept defeat by the monster Despair; he fights him off, reverses his hold, and escapes—or so, as referee, I would judge—with a pin:

So much the rather thou Celestial light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight. (3.51–55)

I have gone slowly through this Miltonic passage, because when Keats gets around to using that one word “darkling” in his “Ode to a Nightingale,” it holds all the gravitas from Milton’s great psalm of lamentation and praise, but collapsed into itself like a neutron star. Keats’s poem differs in many dimensions from Milton’s, but the crucial likeness is that each poet while trying to sing finds himself in a kind of darkness where singing seems all but impossible. Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” was written in May 1819, when he had lately abandoned an earlier version of his epic *Hyperion*, which that summer and fall he would try to recast as *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*.¹³ In May 1819, the reviews of Keats’s badly flawed semiepic *Endymion* were flaying him as if he were Marsyas challenging Apollo—and when, one late afternoon, he went out into the garden of Wentworth House, and heard a nightingale begin to sing, it struck him as painfully unlike his poetry, which seemed doomed to perish, whereas the bird’s song would go on and be “a joy forever.”

Keats begins the ode not in darkness but in late sunlight (“shadows numberless”), and begins by speaking of his own feelings, not his efforts to produce an epic; in fact, he never mentions those efforts. Only the reader of this poem who knows the life it came from would recognize that it is about Keats’s efforts to write heroic

poetry, to produce a great epic or at least a body of permanently valued poetry. There are parallels with Milton, but also differences. Keats is not blind, and the “embalmed darkness” he moves within seems outward, not inward: he walks in an English garden at nightfall. His first words for his feelings on hearing the nightingale are not words of delight, or happiness, but pain and affliction. Yet he claims this is because the bird’s song makes him so happy that he aches; the song, he says, numbs him like an opiate or a drink of hemlock (Socrates dying for teaching too well). Then he denies that envy makes him feel this way—though, of course, we here should begin to realize that a kind of envy is precisely what makes him feel this way: he, an unsuccessful singer, is responding to a mythically successful one. What he hears makes him want to commit suicide—but to join the bird even while doing it, drinking wine whose effect is like the bird’s song, so that not only might he “drink, and leave the world unseen,” but also might fade *with* the bird “into the forest dim.” And when he then says he will join the bird not by actually drinking, but “on the viewless wings of Poesy,” we see that he means to get to where the bird is by himself singing, with this poem as his song.

All that is clear enough, and many critical readers have seen it. But I am here looking at how Keats is comparing himself not just to a lyric nightingale but also to a heroic singer. This ode is not a Horatian amble, but a Pindaric flight. He is not putting himself in the company of lesser poets, especially those dithy-Rambos of the later eighteenth century who tried to muscle their way up Helicon with odes to the passions or to the Bard or whatever. As shown by his next moves (in stanza 4), the nightingale he wants to join is John Milton.

His first move is to change the lighting. He had been listening to the bird sing “in some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,” but once he takes wing to join it, night has fallen: “Already with thee! tender is the night, / And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, / Clustered around with all her starry fays.” And his next move is the Miltonic one: the camera cuts back, from Keats in moonlit heaven with the bird, to himself

in darkness on earth: "But here there is no light, / Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown / Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. / I cannot see." Keats has situated and moved himself just as Milton did: first rising into the light of heaven, then falling back into the darkness of human mortality, where all that human eyes can see, or not see, seems cause for despair and proof of defeat. For Milton, it is the physical and spiritual "cloud, . . . and ever-during dark" that surrounds and cuts him off from "the cheerful ways of men"; for Keats, it is "the weariness, the fever and the fret / Here where men sit and hear each other groan," so that as Keats sits and listens to the nightingale he is tempted to give the whole struggle up.

It is just at this point that Keats uses that Miltonic word: "Darkling I listen, and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death / . . . Now more than ever seems it rich to die." If the word, as I believe it does, brings the Miltonic context with it, Keats has set himself alongside Milton, yet carefully differentiates himself: he wears his rue, as Ophelia recommended, with a difference—as a son of Milton, but with a coat of arms that has indeed been differenced. The mark of difference is in the verbs used by Milton and Keats. Milton says, "as the wakeful bird / Sings darkling," whereas Keats says "Darkling I listen." Milton has fully identified himself as a singer in darkness; Keats aspires to join him and even, by poetic imagination, is there for a moment, but falls back. For a moment he is with the bird in the starry heavens, but falls again into a darkness where "there is no light," and recognizes that dying will not bring him closer to its singing.

Yet in his next-to-last stanza Keats speaks without envy, praising the bird for its reaching an audience ranging over the whole social gamut from emperor to clown, for its touching the heart of Ruth, saddest of humans, in her despair, and for opening the narrative vistas of poetry's "magic casements." Then in his final stanza, as he hears the bird's song fading, Keats acknowledges that his own poetic fancy has created much of whatever reality there is in the bird's song and in poetry at large. The whole poem becomes, in the last two lines, part of what may be merely "a vision, or a waking

dream." The music has fled, and Keats asks himself, "Do I wake or sleep?"

Keats's ode, then, overtly celebrates the nightingale's powers of song, but covertly evokes the epic poet Milton's achievement. It tells us Keats wants to be such a singer as a nightingale is or as Milton was, but except for a brief moment in the fourth stanza of the poem, Keats carefully assigns himself the role of listener rather than singer. Milton, in his battle with despair, turns to celestial light and asks it to shine inward, but Keats does not have Milton's religious conviction to fall back on, and the art he celebrates as a way out of his own mortality and despair is, he admits, perhaps more fancy than reality. Keats seems really to believe in the muse, but he never quite commits himself. His ode celebrates the range of listeners to great poetry, the healing and cheering powers it has, and the views of enchanted realms it opens, but he gains at best a draw with despair. He calls upon Milton, as heroic poet, to join him in the fight, but does not believe in himself enough, or in the reality of what he was writing, to stay the course as Milton does.

Singing in Sunlight: Shelley and Milton

The story is somewhat different when we look at what Shelley did with Milton's word "unpremeditated" (*PL* 9.24). In 1820, Shelley used it not only in the opening stanza of "To a Skylark," but twice more in his translation of the "Homeric" *Hymn to Hermes*.¹⁴ Milton used "unpremeditated" as he turned from friendly domestic scenes with Raphael, Adam, and Eve, to the tragedy of the Fall itself:

Sad task, yet argument
Not less but more Heroic than the wrauth
Of stern *Achilles* on his Foe pursu'd
Thrice Fugitive about *Troy* Wall; or rage
Of *Turnus* for *Lavinia* disespous'd,
Or *Neptun's* ire or *Juno's*, that so long
Perplex'd the *Greek* and *Cytherea's* son;
If answerable style I can obtaine
Of my Celestial Patroness, who deignes

Her nightly visitation unimplor'd,
 And dictates to me slumbring, or inspires
 Easie my unpremeditated Verse:
 Since first this Subject for Heroic Song
 Pleas'd me long choosing, and beginning late;
 Not sedulous by Nature to indite
 Warrs, hitherto the onely Argument
 Heroic deem'd, chief maistrie to dissect
 With long and tedious havoc fabl'd Knights
 In Battels feign'd; the better fortitude
 Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom
 Unsung.

(PL 9.13–33)

Here as before, the poet, confined in darkness, must fight through doubt and despair to sing “darkling,” but this time his self-doubt does not spring from loss of sight, but from the weight of his chosen task—and, also, from fear of being no longer listened to. In the 1660s, many in his (far from fit) audience had apparently turned from Milton’s blank verse to Dryden’s heroic quatrains and couplets.¹⁵ He needs, therefore, not only inward vision, but also a style that can sustain the great argument he has chosen; and with this he must reach an audience who, though few, will rightly hear his song. These gifts he can only obtain from the Muse: from Urania, the Holy Spirit, his “Celestial Patroness.” “Celestial,” not “royal”: Milton carefully distinguishes his patroness from those of other would-be writers of heroic verse—for instance, the English poet laureate with his merely royal patroness, who might “deign” to allow her adoring poet an evening visit; her laureate might choose to write of earthly wars (*Annus Mirabile* perhaps?). Milton’s is no flattering preface to Her Royal Highness, but an austere casual account of divine inspiration, of being granted an audience with the Holy Spirit.

Milton is fighting royalist/imperialist notions of poetry, particularly epic poetry, which Restoration readers and critics were foisting off on his fellow poets. Milton understood fully that a Cowley or Dryden might take the Bible and—as Marvell feared might happen for Milton himself—“ruin...the sacred Truths to Fable and old Song.” Milton must fight in himself the human weakness that

might do the same, so at the start of book 9 he asks the Muse to help him avoid this, asks that he might rise to a style high enough to suit his great theme, to write of both the war in heaven and the wars within the human heart, to justify the ways of God to man by matching his epic form to this great theme. This theme, he asserts, is “not less but more heroic” than those of Homer and Virgil,

If answerable style I can obtain
Of my Celestial Patroness, who deignes
Her nightly visitation unimplor’d,
And dictates to me slumb’ring, or inspires
Easy my unpremeditated verse. (9.20–24)

With that help, Milton’s “higher Argument” will be “sufficient of itself to raise” (9.42–43) the poem and justify its being called “Heroic” (9.29),

unless an Age too late, or cold
Climate, or years damp my intended wing
Deprest—and much they may, if all be mine,
Not Hers who brings it nightly to my Ear. (9.44–47)

It is worth putting this plainly: a poet now generally considered the greatest writer of his age is here appealing for an audience willing to listen, and for continued support from the Muse, who thus far has inspired his lines, to come into his mind and dictate the “unpremeditated” verses his task demands.

Everything Milton says in these lines fits Shelley’s view of himself and his work in July 1820, when he wrote “To a Skylark,” echoing in its very first stanza Milton’s appeal to the Muse in *Paradise Lost* 9.24:

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heav’n, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.¹⁶

“Unpremeditated,” for Milton as “Puritan,” speaks to the divine source of both poetry and prayer, recalling the inspired song and speech of Adam and Eve as they pray, the morning after Eve’s troubling dream:

Their Orisons, each Morning duly paid
 In various style, for neither various style
 Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise
 Thir Maker, in fit strains pronounc't or sung
 Unmeditated, such prompt eloquence
 Flowd from their lips, in Prose or numerous Verse,
 More tuneable than needed Lute or Harp
 To add more sweetness. (PL 5.145–52)

Once we hear these Miltonic echoes in the first stanza of “To a Skylark,” we understand that Shelley is not referring only to “natural” inspiration. True, he hears the bird’s song as offering a prelapsarian spontaneity like that of Milton’s Adam and Eve. He is indeed a Romantic poet, wishing to break into spontaneous song like the bird—but that is only part of the truth about Shelley, who like Milton was both a classically learned and politically committed poet. The classical dimensions emerge once we realize that in July 1820, when Shelley wrote “To a Skylark,” he was also translating the “Homeric” *Hymn to Mercury* (“Hermes” in the Greek original)¹⁷—and that he used the same Miltonic word “unpremeditated” twice within that translation, each time using it to describe not merely natural but divinely inspired song.

The *Hymn to Mercury* narrates the very origins of lyric song: how Zeus begot Hermes on Maia, and the precocious infant emerges from the cave where he was born, spies a tortoise, kills it, and of its shell makes the very first lyre, stringing it with sheep-gut. Immediately the god begins to play this new instrument, and to sing a brilliant and bawdy song:

When he had wrought the lovely instrument,
 He tried the chords, and made division meet
 Preluding with the plectrum, and there went
 Up from beneath his hand a tumult sweet
 Of mighty sounds, and from his lips he sent
 A strain of unpremeditated wit
 Joyous and wild and wanton—such you may
 Hear among revellers on a holiday.
 (*Hymn to Mercury*, stanza 9, lines 63–71)

Hermes, however, is an incorrigible trickster, a “king of robbers” (229), who covets the great wealth that Father Zeus had given

to his half-brother Apollo, much of which Hermes argues that he himself should have had.¹⁸ Before long, he lays down the lyre and goes out to steal his brother Apollo's oxen of the sun, two of which he butchers, roasts, and devours. Phoebus Apollo discovers their theft, tracks Hermes back to the cave, and hales him off to Olympus to indict him before the court of Zeus. Protesting his innocence, Hermes nevertheless leads Apollo to where he has hidden the oxen of the sun. Apollo tries to punish him—but Hermes, who is still carrying in his left hand the tortoiseshell lyre, suddenly begins to sing, and by the beauty and power of his song—a Creation song, “illustrating the birth / Of the bright Gods, and the dark desert earth” (571–72)—Apollo is enchanted and overcome, asking in wonder,

Whether the glorious power you now show forth
Was folded up within you at your birth,
Or whether mortal taught or God inspired
The power of unpremeditated song? (587–90)

Apollo is so ravished by this music that he says not only is it worth the 50 stolen oxen of the sun, but that he will lead Hermes back to Olympus and lavish upon him “many glorious gifts” (619). Whereupon the sly Hermes, with a flattering but quite true praise of Apollo's great powers and wisdom, offers in return to give Apollo the lyre. This Apollo at once accepts:

And then Apollo with the plectrum strook
The chords, and from beneath his hands a crash
Of mighty sounds rushed up, whose music shook
The soul with sweetness; as of an adept
His sweeter voice a just accordance kept. (672–76)

Hermes and Apollo, like Shelley's skylark, are divinely inspired singers, and the key word Shelley uses for all their songs, “unpremeditated,” he took from *Paradise Lost*.

But what of the political dimensions? These emerge once we recall that earlier in 1820 Shelley had written his “Ode to Liberty,” where he speaks of Milton as both inspired poet and champion of freedom. Addressing “Liberty,” Shelley says,

And England's prophets hailed thee as their queen,
 In songs whose music cannot pass away,
 Though it must flow forever: not unseen,
 Before the spirit-sighted countenance
 Of Milton didst thou pass, from the sad scene
 Beyond whose night he saw, with dejected mien. (145–50)

"Spirit-sighted countenance" echoes Milton's invocation to the Muse in *Paradise Lost*, 9.13–47—precisely where Shelley found "unpremeditated." Shelley, in the "Ode to Liberty," pictures Milton as (during the 1660s) a blind seer, watching Liberty pass from the "sad scene" of England, yet still (though "with dejected mien") seeing beyond that dark night—not only divinely inspired poet, but political prophet, as fearlessly antimonarchist as Shelley himself, and—also like Shelley—someone who for his political views and actions endured obloquy while watching those he considered enemies of a free and just society prevail and flourish. Shelley—like Milton—looked beyond the darkness, asking to sing beyond his despair, so that (as he says in the last line of "To a Skylark") "the world should listen then—as I am listening now."

So, in the summer of 1820, Shelley was keenly focused on poetic inspiration, on finding or creating an audience for his poetry, and on speaking out for political liberty. In his "Ode to Liberty" he references the very lines of *Paradise Lost* that tell of the poet's being visited nightly by a Muse who inspires "easy [his] unpremeditated verse," even as he celebrates the skylark as Nature's own example of inspired singing and asks that it teach him how to sing as perfectly, unselfishly, and usefully—and how to be listened to with like joy and (implied) assent:

Teach me half the gladness
 That thy brain must know,
 Such harmonious madness
 From my lips would flow
 The world should listen then—as I am listening now. (101–05)

His lyric aspires to the heroic political dimension: he wants, like Milton, to be heard, to win hearts and minds, to change England from a corrupt empire to a clean democracy. He wants to sing like

the skylark, like Adam and Eve, like Hermes and Apollo, like Milton—so that his songs might Edenize and deify the world, free it by love from supernatural chains of vengeance.

Milton and Frost: Tree of Knowledge, Witness Tree

The twentieth century American poet Robert Frost, like Keats and Shelley, makes strong use of Milton, but more darkly, as we see in five poems that he put into his 1942 volume *A Witness Tree*: first, “Beech” and “Sycamore,” which begin the volume and (in “Beech,” line 7) supply the book’s title phrase; then, in a later sequence of three poems, “The Most of It,” “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same,” and “The Subverted Flower.”¹⁹

In “Beech” and “Sycamore,” Frost turns to the Bible and Milton to show us the book’s central theme: exploring boundaries between a human self and the realms of community, nation, and world of “dark and doubt” that press in upon the self.²⁰ “Beech” is Frost’s statement of where and how he stands, and he makes it by using both biblical and Miltonic language. As it begins, he evokes the Old Testament story (Gen. 31:43–54) of Jacob’s setting a boundary between himself and Laban; in its last two lines he echoes Milton’s self-presentation in *Paradise Lost* 7.23–31. As for the three later poems, “The Most of It,” “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same,” and “The Subverted Flower,” other scholars suggest that they are thematically related.²¹ I propose that in these three poems (as in “Beech” and “Sycamore”) Frost draws on the Bible and *Paradise Lost* to adumbrate his own poetic, political, and personal situation in the period 1938–42—and that to see how Frost was using Milton deepens and clarifies our understanding of what Frost was doing not only with the five poems in question but also in the whole of *A Witness Tree*.

Frost took the title of *A Witness Tree* from line 7 of his poem, “Beech”:

Where my imaginary line
Bends square in woods, an iron spine
And pile of real rocks have been founded.

And off this corner of the wild,
 Where these are driven in and piled,
 One tree, by being deeply wounded,
 Has been impressed as Witness Tree
 And made commit to memory
 My proof of being not unbounded.
 Thus truth's established and borne out,
 Though circumstanced with dark and doubt—
 Though by a world of doubt surrounded.

That title, and certain other words and phrases of the poem, point first to the Old Testament, then to the etymological meaning of those words. Genesis 31:43–54 tells how Jacob, after serving his father-in-law Laban for years, departed with his wives, children, servants, and possessions, and when Laban pursued him they made a covenant by which they parted all their possessions and set a stone pillar and heap of stones, which they denominate as “a witness,” to mark the boundary between their lands. Laban says (31:44), “let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me,” so Jacob sets up a stone as pillar (31:45) and tells his kinsfolk to gather stones and make a heap, which he and Laban (31:46–48) call “The Heap of Witness.” They share a ceremonial meal beside this “witness heap,” after which Laban concludes (31:52), “This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm.”

There was no doubt a New England custom of thus marking boundaries between properties,²² though perhaps not everyone who set up such a heap of stones, and marked a tree beside it, had the Old Testament story in mind. Still, Frost in “Beech” and “Sycamore” deliberately evokes both Old and New Testament passages. He has moved from the earlier humorous skepticism of “Mending Wall” to a kind of humorous and faintly skeptical fideism. The 1914 *North of Boston* wall between neighbors (one of whom moves in “a darkness” but the other considers himself, humorously, as somewhat more enlightened) has become a 1942 *Witness Tree* boundary marker between individuals that both isolates and protects them from each other, and the boundary is now built with biblical words

that separate not only individuals but whole religious bodies (and communities) from each other.

In "Beech" and "Sycamore," every common word rings like a bell with deep overtones and undertones: this wounded witness, in or near a pile of rocks, is a Martyr Tree, for Greek *martyr*, as Frost well knew (he was a prize student of Greek), means "witness." The first Christian martyr, Stephen, was stoned to death. Tree and Cross are twins, and Zacchaeus the publican as witness "Did climb the tree / Our Lord to see": in the King James version of Luke 19:2–10, the tree is a sycamore, and Zacchaeus not only sees Jesus entering Jerusalem, but is called down, asked to be his host, and told that "This day is salvation come to this house, . . . for the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Recall, now, that "beech" and "book" are etymologically the same: in Old English, the singular *boc* took the unlauted plural *bec*, and at an early stage writing was done on wooden tablets—on *beech*. So the "wounded Witness Tree" is also *the Book*. As for those rocks, they are not only what martyrs were stoned with, but as Jesus said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this *rock* I will build my church." What Frost says is "established and borne out" is not some personal credo, but "truth," the kind of truth to which martyrdom witnesses: but all is done by hints and voice tones and allusions: like Emily Dickinson, Robert tells it "slant."

Frost thus tells us, in this title poem and teasing little follower, that this book is his wounded witness, has been "impressed" (a word for men forced into military service, but playing on "printed") to establish and bear out the truth of his mortal limits, of his being "bounded" within his "corner of the wild," his "woods."²³ He alludes to the biblical splitting up of Laban and Jacob, developing into two different nations: like them, Frost invokes God as witness to the boundary between human individuals—in spirit, body, property, and all other ways. Frost in his craggy, oblique way is also marking off his self and spirit in particular ways: his book testifies to the suffering of someone who had lately lost a daughter, wife, and son, who as a peculiar conservative is politically alienated from leftist power centers of the 1930s; a teacher who had resigned his position at Amherst College and (like Dante while writing the

Commedia) had not yet found a new patron, nor a new academic or establishment post (like Milton after the Restoration).²⁴

Later in *A Witness Tree*, Frost returns to these nested distinctions—skin, house, nation—in the poem “Triple Bronze,” remarking, “And that defense makes three / Between too much and me.” The “triple bronze,” however, with its classical resonances, puts Frost in the company of Achilles and Aeneas, those bearers of shields made by divine powers. The poet is “shielded” by his skin, by his house, by his nation, as those great figures were shielded by the triple bronze of their warrior shields; though playful, Frost’s image of his poetic self has epic dimensions, just as does the implied figuring of himself as choosing, like Jacob, to go his “separate” way.

Frost and Milton: In Dark, by Doubt Surrounded

Frost, then, adapted biblical and Miltonic language for the book’s first two poems, figuring himself in the early 1940s as an exiled poet and founder of “my own nation.” Yet there is more: in the last two lines of “Beech,” “Though circumstanced with dark and doubt—/ Though by a world of doubt surrounded,” by echoing *Paradise Lost* 7.23–31 Frost evokes Milton’s “exile at home” after the Restoration: *A Witness Tree*, published in 1942, sets Frost alongside Milton, who in the 1660s was politically isolated and threatened, poetically at a late and perhaps sterile phase of his career, personally wounded (blind, a beloved wife not long dead, watching other poets gain the laurels and proclaim new canons of verse and morals and power). Here is *Paradise Lost*:

Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole,
More safe I Sing with mortal voice, unchang’d
To hoarse or mute, though fall’n on evil dayes,
On evil dayes though fall’n, and evil tongues;
In darkness, and with dangers compass round,
And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
Visit’st my slumbers Nightly, or when Morn
Purples the East: still govern thou my Song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few.

(*PL* 7.23–31; emphasis mine)

It must be mentioned of course that *A Witness Tree* was published in 1941–42, when World War II was in its darkest phase, so that no one was likely to take Frost's "circumstanced with dark and doubt" to refer to merely personal or purely poetic circumstances—and surely Frost made his book witness to the darkness around his nation as well as his own person and life as he neared the age of 70.

Milton and Frost: Before and After the Fall

Frost, then, with the first two poems of *A Witness Tree*, lets astute readers know what he will be doing in the book. Three other poems in the volume, like his title poem, make use of Milton: "The Most of It," "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," and "The Subverted Flower." Each of these reflects on human social identity, first in relation to the nonhuman animal world (with a subtext involving male companionship), then in relation to the Edenic and post-Edenic marriage of Adam and Eve, and finally in relation to heterosexual relations in the fallen world. Each of the poems is set in a biblical context—that with which Milton reframes Genesis in books 7 and 8 of *Paradise Lost*.

"The Most of It" is about Adam's crying out for human company before Eve was created; "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" is a report (by a child or grandchild) of what Adam said about how Eve's presence changed and humanized the whole world; and "The Subverted Flower" is about the painful twisting and knotting of sexual relations after the Fall. Frost's personal crisis, and his long-term grappling with questions of human boundaries, divine presence, suffering and its meaning, are all dealt with elsewhere in *A Witness Tree*, but in these poems they are examined darkly in biblical terms, as through a Miltonic glass.

One clue that Frost is playing these three poems off *Paradise Lost* is their being placed sequentially together in *A Witness Tree*. "The Most of It" takes its cue—if I am right—from the dialogue between Raphael, Adam, and God in *Paradise Lost* 8.338 and following, a look at which shows how Frost's poem is a response to,

indeed a dramatic rendering of, Adam's desire for human companionship, which God answers by creating Eve.

In *Paradise Lost*, Adam tells Raphael how as a newly created being he was taken in a dream by his Creator up to the top of the paradisaal mount, where he waked and found before his eyes "all real, as the dream / Had lively shadowed." The Creator then gives to Adam and his race "all the earth...and all things that therein live," and brings all of these before Adam to receive from him their names. As he names them, says Adam, he "understood their nature"—but, he says, "in these / I found not what methought I wanted still." He then daringly asks God how "all this good" can be enjoyed without companionship: "In solitude / What happiness?"

God smiles at this naïve question, then tests Adam—asking what he means by "solitude," since the earth and air are full of living creatures at Adam's command to "come and play before" him, and Adam knows "their language and their ways, they also know, / And reason not contemptibly"—so, God suggests, Adam should "with these / Find pastime, and bear rule." Adam passes the test, by pointing out that God has made these creatures "inferior, far beneath," and asks,

Among unequals what societie
Can sort, what harmonie or true delight?
Which must be mutual, in proportion due
Giv'n and receiv'd.

.....

Of fellowship I speak
Such as I seek, fit to participate
All rational delight, wherein the brute
Cannot be human consort; they rejoyce
Each with thir kinde, Lion with Lioness;
So fitly them in pairs thou hast combin'd;
Much less can Bird with Beast, or Fish with Fowle
So well converse, nor with the Ox the Ape;
Worse then can Man with Beast, and least of all. (PL 8.383–97)

In reply, God, "not displeased," compliments Adam on his discriminating taste in rejecting solitude and subhuman companionship

in favor of "rational fellowship," but he then wonders what Adam thinks of God himself, who is "alone / From all eternity, for none I know / Second to me or like, equal much less" (405–07). God (as Adam points out) does not need to propagate, being already infinite; and whenever he wishes can raise one of his created beings "to what height thou wilt / Of union or communion, deified," but Adam cannot "erect / From prone" (431–33) the animals to speak with them. In response to Adam's reasoned plea, God then creates Eve: and by Adam's account, she (as he rhapsodizes to Raphael) is not only "so lovely fair / That what seemed fair in all the world, seemed now / Mean, or in her summed up, in her contained" (471–73), but "Greatness of mind and nobleness their seat / Build in her loveliest, and create an awe / About her, as a guard angelic placed" (557–59).

If we turn now to look at Frost's poem, "The Most of It," I propose that it is Frost's dramatic rendering of Adam's state of mind while wandering about Eden, seeking companionship, before God appeared to him in a dream, took him up to Eden, held the conversations we have just been listening to, and created Eve in response to Adam's lonely yearning for a human companion. Here is the poem:

THE MOST OF IT

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
And nothing ever came of what he cried
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
In the cliff's talus on the other side,
And then in the far-distant water splashed,
But after a time allowed for it to swim,
Instead of proving human when it neared
And someone else additional to him,
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
And landed pouring like a waterfall,

And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

One unsettling thing about this poem is its title, "The Most of It." It is, perhaps, a weary comment by Frost on the usual experience, for Adam and for us, of seeking some kind of rational fellowship in the world. His poem, so the title suggests, is a commentary both on Adam's situation before the creation of Eve, and that of human beings in a post-Edenic world: *for the most part*, the search for a companionship of equals ends in disappointment. I think we, as readers, must see the man's search as not reducible to a sexual, or intellectual, or merely human-sized seeking, because (as it seems to me) Frost here as always raises the stakes to the spiritual; even in a "purely human" encounter like that which Frost focuses upon in "Two Tramps in Mud Time," the stakes are equally high:

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes. (67–70)

In the world of Frost's poetry, human always neighbors heavenly, though both may be wearing homespun or guised as animal, and they may keep stone walls and witness trees between them.

Nevertheless, in *A Witness Tree* the poem that follows "The Most of It" celebrates an achieved Edenic companionship, that of Adam and Eve. Frost, however, characteristically distances this, making the poem a half-mocking report by one of Adam's children of what Adam used to say, perhaps after Eve had died. It is a miraculous sonnet, as exquisitely casual and conversational as Chaucer at his best, and it celebrates not only the "counter-love, original response" that Adam and Eve found with each other, but the musical echo of that companionship which humans still hear in the song of birds:

NEVER AGAIN WOULD BIRDS' SONG BE THE SAME

He would declare, and could himself believe,
That the birds there in all the garden round
From having heard the daylong voice of Eve

Had added to their own an oversound,
Her tone of meaning but without the words.
Admittedly an eloquence so soft
Could only have had an influence on birds
When call or laughter carried it aloft.
Be that as may be, she was in their song.
Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds' song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came.

This poem's speaker reports to us what Adam used to say—and not only reports it with raised eyebrow, but tells us that Adam himself said it in a way that suggested bemused and uncertain belief in what he was saying. Adam "could himself believe" what he would declare. We can all but hear Adam, on one day of many when he was reminiscing to their children about their mother: "I declare, and I can believe it too, that..." But once he has declared that the birds, from having heard Eve's constant talking and singing, had picked up "an oversound, / Her tone of meaning but without the words,"²⁵ he qualifies this as if he's conceding to common sense that the declaration sounds peculiar: "I admit that her voice was ever soft and low, so the only way the birds could have picked up her tone was from her calling out, or laughing—not when she was just speaking to me or the animals down among us, but when she raised her voice in calling me, or laughing." What the birds picked up from Eve, and added to their songs as an oversound, was therefore Eve's companionable call to Adam or the children or the animals, or her laughter: nothing but happy sounds ever went from Eve into the song of birds.

But Adam goes on to dismiss this doubt, and to state firmly his belief: "Be that as may be, *she was in their song.*" And he adds with what at first seems equal certainty, "*Moreover*, her voice upon their voices crossed / Had now persisted in the woods so long / That" (10–12)—but here, his common sense pulls him up. He was about to affirm that this "oversound" in the song of birds would never be lost, but he does not want to make absolute statements about

what the future may hold, so (I imagine him here as responding to the expression of his amused and quizzical listener—his child or grandchild) he throws in a word of caution: “That *probably* it never would be lost.” And yet, now that it is time for him to sum up his “declaration” (and time for Frost to finish the sonnet with a couplet), he roundly declares, “Never again would birds’ song be the same. *And to do that to birds was why she came.*” For me, this is both an amusing and a heartbreaking declaration of love, a recognition of loss beyond compare, one of the great tragicomic moments of literature in the English language. It is also a wonderful “Miltonic answer” to the frustrated Adamic longing in the preceding poem, “The Most of It.”

What follows this rosy Edenic sonnet, though, is a dramatic lyric full of weeds and thorns, a sexual encounter set in a fallen world, ending in misery, as vivid as a D. H. Lawrence story, indeed almost a contrarian response to Lawrence, a comical tragedy. It begins with a woman and man standing near each other in (as we learn) a field. He has picked a flower and must have just said something that has made her draw back from him in alarm; he remains calm and tries to explain, but so roughly that she grows fearful.

THE SUBVERTED FLOWER

She drew back; he was calm:
 “It is this that had the power.”
 And he lashed his open palm
 With the tender-headed flower.

We are not told what he had just said, but from what he now says about “the power,” illustrated by lashing his open palm with “the tender-headed flower,” we infer he was talking of the power of sexual attraction; and from the woman’s drawing back in alarm, it seems—to put it very crudely—he was using a kind of “Darwinian” argument to suggest that he and the woman are feeling just such natural attraction to each other and perhaps therefore might...? Unluckily for him, he illustrates this too roughly, by lashing his palm with the flower, and then tries to make up for it by smiling, inviting her to smile along with him.

He smiled for her to smile,
But she was either blind
Or willfully unkind.
He eyed her for a while
For a woman and a puzzle.
He flicked and flung the flower,
And another sort of smile
Caught up like fingertips
The corners of his lips
And cracked his ragged muzzle.

When she stands off, "either blind / Or willfully unkind," the man, baffled, retreats into an abrupt misogyny, then makes it worse by angrily tossing the flower and by smiling "another sort of smile"—which now frightens the woman, and for a moment Frost lets us look through her eyes at the man as a wolfish threat with a smile that "cracked his ragged muzzle." Then we see the two of them in sunlight, she beautiful and aloof, he aching to touch her:

She was standing to the waist
In goldenrod and brake,
Her shining hair displaced.
He stretched her either arm
As if she made it ache
To clasp her—not to harm;
As if he could not spare
To touch her neck and hair.

But his words only make things worse, pleading for her to recognize that their attraction is mutual, when she is appalled by his passion—and once again Frost lets us see the man through the woman's frightened eyes even as he pleads for understanding:

"If this has come to us
And not to me alone—"
So she thought she heard him say;
Though with every word he spoke
His lips were sucked and blown
And the effort made him choke
Like a tiger at a bone.
She had to lean away.

She dared not stir a foot,
Lest movement should provoke
The demon of pursuit
That slumbers in a brute.

Now, suddenly, Frost drops into the scene a shadow of Eden, the bright voice of Eve calling to her daughter:

It was then her mother's call
From inside the garden wall
Made her steal a look of fear
To see if he could hear
And would pounce to end it all
Before her mother came.

Frost gives us here the fallen world's spectacle of human loneliness and isolation: the corruption of Edenic love, companionship, and communion between humans, transformed to fear and violence that border on, and may become, the bestial. Yet Frost gives us, in the final lines of the poem, the clear understanding that this is "all in the mind," that (as D. H. Lawrence used whole novels to argue) this is not how things need to be, though only too often it is how things are. The woman "sees" a kind of reality, the man's rough and beastly passion, how "a flower had marred a man," but the poem shows us what she fails to see, that "the flower" need not be "base and fetid," and that some of what is wrong is in her own heart.

She looked and saw the shame:
A hand hung like a paw,
An arm worked like a saw
As if to be persuasive,
An ingratiating laugh
That cut the snout in half,
An eye become evasive.
A girl could only see
That a flower had marred a man,
But what she could not see
Was that the flower might be
Other than base and fetid:
That the flower had done but part,

And what the flower began
Her own too meager heart
Had terribly completed.

But the story in this poem has no happy ending: the man flees the scene, the mother retrieves her daughter, and (as in the final line of "The Most of It") "that was all":

She looked and saw the worst.
And the dog or what it was,
Obeying bestial laws,
A coward save at night,
Turned from the place and ran.
She heard him stumble first
And use his hands in flight.
She heard him bark outright.
And oh, for one so young
The bitter words she spit
Like some tenacious bit
That will not leave the tongue.
She plucked her lips for it,
And still the horror clung.
Her mother wiped the foam
From her chin, picked up her comb,
And drew her backward home.

In "The Most of It" Adam in solitude longed for a companionship beyond the animal; in "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" he remembered the "Edenic" companionship with Eve, still echoing in the song of birds; in "The Subverted Flower" the man and woman are caught in a post-Edenic misery of solitude, a wretched alienation of male from female human. Humans may be, or be seen as, bestial, unfit for human company. The woman is frightened for her life, although it would seem that the man, at least as he thinks of it, is only declaring a frank sensuality and hoping "to clasp her—not to harm." In solitude, hoping for a lover, he uses the flower to suggest what he thinks is natural (both Edenic and Darwinian) sexual attraction, but his gesture has a kind of violence and roughness that frighten her; and she is not capable of seeing "that the flower might be / Other than base and fetid," and

that her own responsiveness was part of what frightened her so much: "what the flower began / Her own too meager heart / Had terribly completed."

Why, though, do I think Frost's language in the poem suggests that he is setting this poem with the others as a trio of Miltonic/Edenic pieces? Because it contains lines that, I believe, evoke Eve as this young woman's mother:

It was then her mother's call
From inside the garden wall
Made her steal a look of fear
To see if he could hear
And would pounce to end it all
Before her mother came.

Frost does not capitalize "garden wall," so we might take this to be an ordinary nineteenth century encounter of an amorous young man and a prudish young woman, in a field just outside her mother's walled garden. But placed as the third in this trio of poems, with the first evoking Adam in the garden of Eden before Eve was created, and the second evoking Adam and Eve in the garden (though set, it would seem, after the death of Eve), surely "The Subverted Flower" is best seen as evoking a daughter of Eve, outside a garden created by Eve in the fallen world, and wooed by an all too plain-speaking and rough-acting lover—"raising Cain," as it were.

Milton as Muse for *A Witness Tree*

Frost's *A Witness Tree* looks to me as if he had been reading and meditating on biblical stories (Laban and Jacob, the Gospel account of Jesus entering Jerusalem, the Fall as narrated in Genesis), and on Milton's versions of these in *Paradise Lost*. And if we trace Frost's biography over the years 1938–42, when he was gathering and perhaps composing some of the poems in that book, I think we can see that he was taking Milton as a kind of muse for his own poetry. He would have known that Milton (1608–74) died not long before his sixty-sixth birthday,²⁶ and we may note that in 1941, when *A Witness Tree* was about to go to press, Frost (1874–1963) would

have been 66 or 67 years old. That Frost knew Milton's poetry very well is clear: *Lycidas*, for instance, he knew by heart. He might not even have needed to reread *Paradise Lost*, which most likely was alive and echoing in his mind, an "oversound," of the blind poet "On evil days though fall'n and evil tongues; / In darkness, and with dangers compassed round, / And solitude" (*PL* 7.26–27). For my part, I find it deeply satisfying that in 1942, Frost won a fourth Pulitzer Prize for *A Witness Tree*, and that during the 21 years from then until his death in 1963, Frost not only found a fit audience, but one that grew and widened year by year—much as Milton's fame and audience grew in the years from 1667 (when *Paradise Lost* was published) until his death in 1674. I think their audiences will continue to read them as long as the English language is understood. The small fact that Frost was never given the Nobel Prize is as much a shame as the petty fact that Milton was never named poet laureate of England—but I suspect that Frost will be recognized, ultimately, with Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, as one of the three great poets who up to now have written within the United States.

Washington University, St. Louis

Notes to Revard, "Milton as Muse for Keats, Shelley, and Frost"

1. "Amplify" is hardly an adequate word for what John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Robert Frost gained by making use of a Miltonic "music" in some of their poems. Briefly, it helped them to speak not only personally but also heroically. Milton, to write a great epic poem, had to find "answerable style," and in *Paradise Lost* he tells us how desperate a struggle it was to find it. Keats, Shelley, and Frost use certain passages in which Milton tells of this struggle to lift their lyric voices up into the heroic range, and by "amplify" I refer to this lifting. Earlier uses of Milton in mock-heroic poetry, as by John Dryden (Satan /Achitophel) and Alexander Pope (Lord Hervey/Satan), work to bring down false heroes.

2. Steven Zwicker, "Milton, Dryden, and the Politics of Literary Controversy," in *Heirs of Fame, Milton and Writers of the English Renaissance*, ed. Margo Swiss and David A. Kent (Lewisburg, Pa., 1995), 270–89, esp. 283–87, elegantly exposes the political and personal agenda of Dryden in appropriating *Paradise Lost* and turning it into his opera *The State of Innocence*: far from merely "tagging Milton's verses," Dryden turned them into a piece of royalist propaganda, for which he wrote a preface even more flattering than usual, rhapsodizing about James, Duke of York, and his new bride Mary of Modena. Surprisingly, after showing how Dryden mutated Milton's work to serve precisely those views and political groups opposed by Milton, Zwicker describes this "contest" between Dryden and Milton as, on Dryden's part, "adaptation and admiration," and Milton's response as "envy and denial" (270). For a different view of the Milton/Dryden rivalry, see Nicholas von Maltzahn, "Dryden's Milton and the Theatre of Imagination," in *John Dryden: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Paul Hammond and David Hopkins (Oxford, 2000), 32–56.

3. In the 1688 edition of *Paradise Lost*, beneath the portrait of Milton that served as frontispiece, Dryden's well-known epigram on Milton by Dryden was printed (without his name on it: his authorship was first acknowledged in a 1716 edition of the *Sixth Part of Miscellany Poems*):

Three poets, in three distant ages born,
 Greece, Italy, and England did adorn.
 The first in loftiness of thought surpass'd,
 The next in majesty, in both the last:
 The force of Nature could no farther go;
 To make a third, she join'd the former two.

Quoted here from George R. Noyes, *The Poetical Works of Dryden* (Boston, 1950), 253.

4. For the growth of Milton's reputation, see John Shawcross, *John Milton, The Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, 1628–1731 (London, 1970); see also Kay Gilliland Stevenson, "Reading Milton, 1674–1800," in *A Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas Corns (Oxford, 2001), 447–62. Already in 1685 we can see through Dryden's reluctant praise that Milton was idolized: "It is as much commendation as a man can bear, to own him excellent; all beyond it is idolatry." Others, more generous, evidently agreed with the 1694 judgment of Milton's nephew Edward Phillips that *Paradise Lost* was "the Noblest ['Heroick Poem'] in the general esteem of Learned and Judicious Persons, of any yet written by an other Ancient or Modern." Daniel Defoe could remark in 1711 that the poem "passes with a general Reputation for the greatest, best, and most sublime work now in the English tongue." Voltaire, in 1727, refers to it as "the noblest work, which human Imagination hath ever attempted" (Shawcross, 94, 103–04, 146, 249). Nothing by Dryden received that kind of praise, and by the time he died in 1700, even Dryden knew how far short he fell of deserving it.

5. See David Hopkins, "Milton and the Classics," in *John Milton, Life, Writing, Reputation*, ed. Paul Hammond and Blair Worden (Oxford, 2010), 23–42, particularly his discussion (32–41) of "critical insights that can be inferred from the Miltonic echoes in the classical translations of . . . John Dryden and Alexander Pope."

6. Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, 317–31, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Major Authors*, 3rd ed., ed. M. H. Abrams (New York, 1975), 1195.

7. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Oxford, 2007), book 4, lines 797–809; hereafter cited in the text.

8. See Nicholas von Maltzahn, "Milton: Nation and Reception," in *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England*, ed. David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens (Toronto, 2008), 401–42, esp. 430–42.

9. See Peter Kitson, "Milton: The Romantics and After," in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 463–80; and David Fairer, "Milton and the Romantics," in Hammond and Worden, *John Milton*, 147–65. Meg Harris Williams, *Inspiration in Milton and Keats* (London, 1982),

devotes a chapter (143–52) to a comparative discussion of “Ode to a Nightingale” and *Paradise Lost* 3.1–156, noting that in both Milton and Keats, “The poet who listens ‘darkling’ is . . . identified with the nightingale who sings ‘darkling’” (147–48). She mentions also Milton’s use of the word “unpremeditated” (chapter 4, 96–102; see esp. 86–90); but of course—since her concern is with Milton and Keats—she does not mention Shelley’s use of that word. See also Lucy Newlyn, *“Paradise Lost” and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford, 1992); and Joseph Crawford, *Raising Milton’s Ghost: John Milton and the Sublime of Terror in the Early Romantic Period* (London, 2011).

10. For outward dangers Milton faced in 1660–61, see Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 2003), chap. 12, esp. 398–415.

11. In a wider context the later poets, like Milton, were indeed elbowing other poets. Certainly they are constructing their ancestry, choosing their father, naming their brother. And the Milton constructed as father or brother by Frost, or Shelley, or Keats, need not be the father or brother whom others—Wordsworth, Byron, or Pope—would have hologrammed. Nor, for that matter, is the Milton of Keats’s lyric “Ode to a Nightingale” quite the same as the Milton of Keats’s epic *Hyperion*—to whom critics have given most attention—or the simple Milton of Keats’s saccharine early sonnet, “To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent.”

12. See Williams, *Inspiration in Milton and Keats*, 143–52. In May 1819 Keats had lately been reading closely both Milton and Shakespeare, and since “darkling” occurs not only in *Paradise Lost* but (as Williams discusses) in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* 2.02.86, *King Lear* 1.04.217, and *Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15.10, its Shakespearean contexts are worth exploring; but I focus here on the Miltonic and not the Shakespearean dimension of Keats.

13. Keats dropped *Hyperion* with the remark that what was life to Milton was death to him—but he could have said the same of Shakespeare, considering that his try at Shakespearean tragedy was much less impressive than his attempt at Miltonic epic: *Hyperion* is one hell of a “failure.” And see Fairer, “Milton and the Romantics,” 163–64, for commentary that makes use of Keats’s annotations to his edition of *Paradise Lost* to discuss the shift from *Hyperion* to *The Fall of Hyperion*.

14. For the Greek text and a prose English translation of the *Hymn to Hermes*, see the Loeb Classical Library edition: *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer*, ed. and trans. Martin L. West (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 112–59. For Shelley’s fluent (almost

Byronic) ottava rima translation of the *Hymn to Hermes* (which—as usual in Shelley's time—he called *Hymn to Mercury*), see *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 3, 1819–1820, ed. Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington with the assistance of Laura Barlow (Harlow, 2011), 508–43; poems by Shelley are from this edition and hereafter cited in the text.

15. Apposite here is the view of Zwicker, “Milton, Dryden,” that Milton wrote *Paradise Regained* (1671) as a “challenge to the form, style, and ethos of the heroic drama, to its theoretical defense of the form, and to Dryden’s astonishing career as the central protagonist of a new literary culture, its laureate, a commercial and critical success beyond anything that Milton had experienced or could now hope to achieve” (272). As we see in *Paradise Lost* 9.13–33, Milton in 1667 was already addressing the question of what a truly “heroic argument” must be, thinking forward (I believe) to *Paradise Regained*. As for Dryden’s challenge, by the time of Joseph Addison and the early Pope, Milton was esteemed as much the greater writer, though Zwicker’s phrasing points to what many royalist coffeehouse critics perhaps thought (or what royalists hoped they would think) as of 1671 or so. Milton no doubt recognized Dryden’s ambition to outdo him, and fought his literary corner accordingly, in the last few years of his life: “You may tag my verses,” his reputed answer to Dryden’s request for license to appropriate *Paradise Lost* for his opera *The State of Innocence*, sounds faintly amused—Muhammad Ali to Norman Mailer, as it were.

16. Shelley used “unpremeditated” only three times: once in “To a Skylark” (line 5), and twice in his translation of the Homeric *Hymn to Mercury*, line 69 (stanza 9, line 6) and line 590 (stanza 75, line 2). All three uses of “unpremeditated” are noted by the editors of *The Poems of Shelley*, who comment: “Milton’s *Paradise Lost* ix 20–4 had attached to the word the sense of authentic inspiration as spontaneously given”; they note that “S. seems also to be recalling the morning worship of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* v 146–50,” and add, “Cp. also *Hymn to Mercury* . . . 69–70 . . . and 590” (3:470–71). They cite also discussion of the *Hymn* by Timothy Webb in *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation* (Oxford, 1976), 70–79, 112.

17. See *The Poems of Shelley*, 3:508–10. Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (New York, 1974), 598–601, notes that Shelley was translating the *Hymn to Mercury* in the summer of 1820, in the same period he was writing “To a Skylark” and “The Cloud.” Near the time he wrote “To a Skylark,” he obtained and read Keats’s 1820 *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, which included the “Ode to a Nightingale”—of whose twilight singer Shelley’s skylark

seems a conscious counterpart; a copy of Keats's 1820 poems was recovered from Shelley's jacket pocket when his drowned body washed ashore (Holmes, *Shelley*, 730).

18. In 1814–18 Shelley had been fighting to obtain his own inheritance, which his father Sir Timothy was trying hard keep him from getting: for details, see Holmes, *Shelley*. Did Shelley identify with Hermes, not only as inspired singer but also as trickster/robber who used all his wiles to get some of the family wealth that Father Zeus had given to Apollo, half-brother of Hermes?

19. Robert Frost, "Beech," "Sycamore," "The Subverted Flower," "The Most of It," and "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt, 1975). All quotations of Frost's poems in this essay are from this volume, hereafter cited in the text by line number and reprinted with permission.

20. For Frost's afflictions in 1935–42, see Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (London, 1998), chapters 16 and 17, esp. 293–310, 328–32, 334–43.

21. See Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (Stanford, 1990), 159–72; W. H. Pritchard, *Robert Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1993), 227–39; and Robert Faggen, *The Cambridge Introduction to Robert Frost* (Cambridge, 2008), 128–33.

22. Parini, *Robert Frost*, says of "Beech": "The poem is founded, literally, on the tree that marked the boundaries of the Homer Noble farm, an old sugar maple marred by a spike, situated near a rock cairn that delineated the poet's property" (340). This fails to recognize that Frost's poem specifies both a witness tree (as in Luke 19:1–4, the sycamore or fig tree that Zaccheus climbed, "our Lord to see") and (as in Gen. 31:43–54) a pile of stones placed as a witness.

23. By this time no reader should be startled to notice that Dante's *selva selvaggia* is just around the corner, and that Frost's poem, like the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*, marks his own midlife crisis.

24. For a succinct account of these years in Frost's life, see Pritchard, *Frost*, 213–34; for detailed study, Donald Sheehy, "(Re)Figuring Love: Robert Frost in Crisis, 1938–1942," *New England Quarterly* (1990): 179–231.

25. A key belief of Frost's was that human speech does have such a tone, and the true poet is able to catch and word his poems to carry this: the sonnet's Adamic speaker tells us that the birds have done precisely what every true poet's task is to do. Frost gave a clear, succinct account of his "theory of versification" in a July 4, 1913, letter to his friend John T. Bartlett (Poirier and Richardson, *Frost*, 664–66). Rachel Buxton, *Robert Frost and Irish Poets* (Oxford, 2004), shows

that Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Mebh McGuckian, Eavan Boland, and Ciaran Carson, among others, knew and were influenced by this sound/sense theoretic of Frost's, valued his poems and made frequent allusive use of them, and drew far more on Frost than on T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, or other "modernist" American poets.

26. Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford, 2008), 374–75.