

# JOHN MILTON (1608-1674)

*Paradise Lost* (1667 and 1674)

# John Milton

- A Cambridge student, he learnt Latin, Greek and Italian. He studied Shakespeare and Spenser.
- He was a committed **Protestant** and a humanist, who felt his poetic inspiration was a gift from god.
- Seriousness: he studied high literature to prepare himself for his creative work .
- 1637: European tour. He visited Galileo (1564-1642) in Fiesole.
- When he came back, his sympathies were for Cromwell  
→ he was appointed Secretary for Foreign Languages in his Council of State.

# John Milton

- Between 1632-37 published two poems **L' Allegro** and **Il Penseroso**, where he contrasts gaiety and melancholy, action and contemplation: the joys of two different types of life (the **hedonist** vs the **contemplative**). The latter only allows contact with the divine and gives a sense to one's existence. It is superior to the former which is not, however, necessarily immoral. Juxtapositions: **pagan** vs **Christian**, the **court** vs **Puritans**.

# The Intellectual's Role → Pamphlets

- He believed in the **responsibility** of the **intellectual** to contribute to the history and civilization of a country. **Books** and **culture** are essential tools for the development of civil life. The intellectual must be **active** in the community of citizens showing them the path to follow.
- The **classics** and the **holy texts** are the basis for the formation of the intellectual.
- He wrote several pamphlets and treatises.
- *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, 1643, resulted from personal experience (his unhappy marriage), justifies divorce for mutual incompatibility/personality clash .

# Other pamphlets

- *Areopagitica*, 1644, pleading for the freedom of the press
- *Of Education*, 1644, in which he advocates the reformation of the traditional educational system putting at its heart the humanist literary and philosophical disciplines to become responsible citizens.
- *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, supporting the view that people had the right to depose and punish tyrants. It was published after Charles I's execution in 1649. Sovereign power always resides with the people, which is "free by nature".

# After the Restoration

- During Cromwell's Protectorate he basically wrote essays and pamphlets.
- At the end of the Protectorate he wrote a courageous **defense of the republican cause**: *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*.
- After the Restoration copies of his works were publicly burnt. His liberty and his life were in danger. He could then devote himself to his masterpiece: *Paradise Lost*.

# *Paradise Lost* 1667 and 1674

- He had become **blind**, so he had to dictate the 10 Books of the poem (10 to double the 5 acts of classical **drama**). In the 2nd edition of 1674 the books became **12 as in the *Aeneid***.
- Reference to **drama** and tragedy is important as well as reference to the **classical world and epic literature**.

# Drama and *Paradise Lost*

- *Paradise Lost* is the story of a defeat, just as in the majority of Elizabethan tragedies which portray the fall of a grandiose character (Macbeth, King Lear) who yielded to temptation or to a fatal flaw and is not able to enjoy his fortunate estate.
- The fall of Adam and Eve becomes the archetype of the Fall. There is also a literal fall at the beginning of the poem, prefiguring the Fall of Man: the fall of Satan, the head of the angels that rebelled against God.



# Epic and the Bible

- Epic celebrates a victory, Milton celebrates a defeat.
- Epic celebrates the deeds of heroes who are the mythical ancestors of a nation (Beowulf, Aeneas) → Milton wants to celebrate the ancestors of the human race.
- Mix of classical epic and biblical characters and events.
- The classics celebrate the Golden Age, now departed and lost forever. The Bible celebrates the magnificence of Paradise.
- Invocation of the Muse at the beginning of Book I

# Paradise = Golden Age of Humanity

- Constant comparison with epic: at the outset of Book IX Milton insists that the argument of the poem is not less **heroic** than that of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.
- The epic tells of **a nation's collective identity**: shared values, beliefs and common notions. But this time the nation is **the whole humanity**.

# Classical vs religious

- Beginning **in medias res** (as in epic). The story is made of a series of jumps backward and forward which does not end in a victory but in resigned acceptance.
- But there is **no positive hero**, no Achilles or Ulysses, who contains the supreme epic virtues of courage in battle, spiritual nobility, valour.
- In the early books **Satan** seems to incarnate these virtues → Satan a hero? Is Milton “of the devil’s party?” as Blake underlined?

# Which values are promoted by the book?

- The answer is no. The values on which human civilization should be based and the virtues proposed are completely different from those of epics.
- Humility, sobriety, meekness (which does not mean renouncing the defence of one's rights and is compatible with revolution against a tyrant), temperance, friendship, conjugal love and labour.

# Important Values for Milton

- **Conjugal love** and **labour**: important values for Puritan/Protestant ethics.
- **Before the Fall**: the relationship of **Adam** and **Eve** was based on **shared thoughts and feelings** and **solidarity**. Their sensuality is innocent, free of the excesses of lust and passion. **After the Fall**: **inflamed by carnal desire**.
- The ideal relationship between husband and wife is that of pre-fall Eden and must be our inspiration, when Eve turned to Adam “with eyes of conjugal attraction unproved/And meek surrender”.

# Marital Relationship

- Woman is appraised for her submission to man. Adam's superiority is often emphasized.
- Adam damns himself with his love for Eve in which «we are one/One flesh: to lose thee were to lose myself.»
- Innovative in thinking that marriage should be based on shared principles and feelings, but son of his time and of Puritanism in condemning a relationship which values sexuality.

# Ethics of Labour

- In contrast with the **ideals of elegant indolence** of the aristocratic class.
- In Eden, not «irksome toil» (annoying fatigue) but «sweet gardening labour» . **Work** is a pleasant task that justified man's privileged place within nature: it is man who gives nature order and subjects it. **Nature is benign** but tends to be **excessive**. **Man has to control it**, using his reason (God's gift, which places him on top of all beings).

# Adam and Eve (=humans) after the Fall

- After the Fall Adam and Eve spent fruitless hours in mutual accusation (until book IX). Only in book X they finally recognize they have been the **cause of their damnation**.
- The final two books illustrate the **possibility of salvation** through the intercession (XI) and incarnation (XII) of Christ.
- The Archangel Michael exposes the future coming of Christ and the **corruption of medieval Church** and of the **Anglican Church** of Milton's own time.



## A “Paradise within”

- Paradise is lost forever, but, following the Archangel's advice, Adam and Eve will face a world of suffering and **hard work** guided by the light of virtue and love, which will assure them a “**paradise within**” in the hope of the life to come → Milton sketches out **the model of the new bourgeois family**.

# Blank verse and Latinate Lexis

- Blank verse not heroic couplet = Shakespeare.
- Puritans regarded rhyme as a decorative frivolity.
- Milton rejects the verse of aristocratic culture, the heroic couplet, in favour of formal rigour.
- T.S. Eliot criticised his syntax for its forms proper to Latin: “kisses pure”