

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES AND NEWS

The Artist as Critic: Two Modern Musical Responses to *Paradise Lost*

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In an August 16, 1890 letter to the editor of *The Scots Observer* Oscar Wilde observed that while “the critic has to educate the public,” the responsibility of the artist is different, for “the artist has to educate the critic” (332). In that observation there is something crucial that contemporary academic criticism sometimes seems to have forgotten: artists respond to art differently than do critics (especially of the university-trained and theoretically-inclined variety).¹ Additionally, while it often seems that critics have left off being educated by the artist (or by the art),² artists have largely bypassed the critics in favor of a direct connection both to other artists and to the public itself. This is an especially notable phenomenon in the music world, and is particularly interesting in cases where artists in different traditions respond across the divides between forms and styles—where a flamenco guitarist like Ben Woods (well-represented online) adapts and rearranges what were originally heavy-metal songs, producing an effect both familiar and exotic, that captures, complicates, and somehow strips to its elemental level the power of the originals. But the effect is perhaps most compelling where artists in different media interact. The frequency with which painters and sculptors have responded to literary artists is well-known, especially with the works of Milton and the responses by Blake, Fuseli, and others. What we have seen far less often, especially of late, are examples of *musicians* responding, through music, to Milton’s poetry—and this despite the fact that music was often a prominent element in Milton’s work (references thereto in *Lycidas* and its featured position in *A Masque* are well-known, as are the associations of *Paradise Lost* itself with song).

Recently, however, it seems that interest in Milton’s work among contemporary rock musicians has taken an upturn, with two particularly noteworthy figures, David Gilmour (the longtime guitarist and singer with Pink Floyd and in solo work) and Grant Hart (a multi-instrumentalist and songwriter with Hüsker Dü and other projects) releasing albums that are wholly, or in part, responses to *Paradise Lost*: Hart’s 2013 *The Argument* (Domino Recording Company), and Gilmour’s 2015 *Rattle That Lock* (Columbia Records).

Of the two, Hart’s album is the more exclusively focused on *Paradise Lost*; in fact, it is a concept album (in the mold of The Who’s *Tommy*) with twenty songs that range across the narrative and emotional landscape of Milton’s poem, using widely differing musical styles to capture the voices and moods of Satan, the Son, Eve, and Adam, including a haunting call-and-response trio between Satan (as the serpent), Eve, and Adam. Among the highlights of the album is the third track, “Awake, Arise,” drawn from Satan’s speech in Book 1. In Hart’s hands, the music

starts out with a grinding industrial sound inspired by the work of Trent Reznor's Nine Inch Nails, especially the *Downward Spiral* album and tracks like "Closer" and "Eraser." As the song builds to its climax, the sound becomes anthemic, a cross between Matt Bellamy's band Muse and classic-period Who, as the line "Awake! Arise! Or be forever fallen" seems to draw the listener up and out of his or her body as the song builds into a guitar, organ, and vocal chorus climax that fades into the sound of a military helicopter airlifting the fallen angels from the burning floods of hell to something like solid ground. Live solo performances of the song (easily locatable online) have a quieter, but somehow even darker intensity, and such lines as "We're defeated, deported, despised" take on an unusual power when listening now.

Another song from Satan's perspective takes a quieter, sadder tone: "I Will Never See My Home" starts with a slowly oscillating Leslie organ, which builds with a simple drumbeat and bass line before the solitary voice begins to sing of loss, exile, and the devastating realization that the once-familiar will never be anything more than an increasingly distant memory. The song speaks in simple details—staircases, fluffy clouds—of a kind of desolation one might call (inverting Georg Lukács's use of the term) "transcendental homelessness," only instead of feeling the urge to be at home everywhere (as Lukács describes it), in Hart's lyrics the sense is of a Satan who realizes that he will never again be at home *anywhere*.

Hart switches his musical palette when dealing with different characters. For example, his song devoted to the Son takes on a 1970s-era Bay City Rollers bubblegum pop sound (though with a harder, tube-driven distortion sound for the guitar) to accompany some amusingly jejune-seeming lyrics. "Glorious" sounds like the kind of rock song the Brady Bunch Singers would have included in their happy, happy, up-with-people repertoire; but the clever twist is that the lyrics, on a closer listen, speak to the depths (or the shallows) of a Son who will do "Glorious" (and happy!) battle "all in the name of love" while he continually affirms that he is "Glorious" with the phrase "Yes I am! You know I am!" Hart's take on this character approaches mockery, and one can almost imagine the perfectly-whitened-and-capped teeth inside the widely-stretched smile of the self-admiring voice, but when Hart comes to Adam and Eve, his tone shifts again.

Adam sings of Eve in "Shine, Shine, Shine," a tune that immediately brings to mind Herman's Hermits and songs like "I'm Into Something Good." The "ooh-woo" harmonies serve as a counterpoint to the hilariously adolescent lyrics in which Adam declares (perhaps *of* rather than *to* Eve):

you shine, shine, shine,
like a star above, what I'm dreaming of, you were made for love
and you're mine, mine, mine[.]

Eve encounters the serpent in a song titled "Underneath the Apple Tree" (a clear hat-tip to the Andrews Sisters of the 1940s), whose music is a deliberate homage to Cole Porter's "Let's Misbehave" from 1928. The ukulele and Rudy-Vallee-style megaphone vocals with the occasional slide-trombone fill create the atmosphere for a lyric that is as playful as Porter's while dealing with issues of free will, temptation, and immortality:

You can become a goddess
 if that's your desire
 use free will, eat your fill
 and step a little closer to the fire
 I know it's a great temptation
 to be offered immortality
 just sitting in the garden underneath the apple tree[.]

But Eve's most profound moments, in Hart's re-visioning, are in the songs "Most Disturbing Dream" and "The Argument." The former is a straight-ahead rock song, with a kind of pulsing rhythm to the organ that plays nicely against lyrics that suggest a desire about to be unleashed:

I saw myself standing by a tree
 Beautiful man standing next to me
 into a Goddess I would be made
 he said, if only I disobeyed
 Ooh, I can feel the fire
 Ooh, is it Nature's desire?
 It was a most disturbing dream[.]

Perhaps the most profound song on the album is "The Argument," a call-and-response straight out of the Hebraic poetic tradition Milton builds on with his epic poem. The voices—accompanied by a simple pipe organ pulse, that periodically builds into a chordal swell before falling back to the pulse—switch between those of Satan, Eve, and Adam at different points, as accusations, explanations, pains, understanding, and finally resolution weave their way through the lyrics:

laws to us were given by the father	father of me no I never knew him
knew him just from hearing second hand	hands are unfamiliar to a snake
snake why do you tempt me? Why the bother?	Bother not with laws I see right through them
through them he has told us his demands	demand to know exactly what's at stake
stake me to a mountain if I'm lying	lying I don't understand the term
terminate my time upon the Earth	Earth holds many wonders if you're looking
looking for alternatives to dying	dying is so permanent so firm
firmament of stars salute each birth	birth is the direction that he took
	you are my lifelong friend[.]

At least to this listener, the last line of Hart's lyric is spoken by all three voices, in a vision of the poem, and its characters, in which the three are forever intertwined in a way no theology of "salvation" will ever be able to unravel.

Hart's album finishes with a mordant irony that suggests *Paradise Lost* may have more to say about our political moment than some more conservative readers might wish to acknowledge. In the final tune, "For Those Too High Aspiring," a slightly psychedelic take on *Blonde on Blonde*-era Bob Dylan, the mocking question asked of the "unhappy exile" Satan hangs in the air:

Don't you know
 you cannot beat the status quo?
 No, no, no, no no!

In Hart's treatment, regardless of whether Satan's rebellion ultimately is admirable or execrable, heroic or foolish, power is left in the hands of a status quo that keeps secrets, forbids knowledge to those under its sway, and in the terms of the song "Glorious," laughs as it uses "the sword" all "in the name of love" while affirming itself as "Glorious! Yes I am!" Hardly an ending designed to comfort any but the most ardent admirers of authority.

David Gilmour's recent solo album, *Rattle That Lock*, deals with themes derived from, or related to those of *Paradise Lost* in several of its songs, but especially in those whose lyrics were written by Gilmour's wife Polly Samson. The first of these, the title tune, wraps a lyric derived from—if not identical to—the situation of Milton's fallen angels, inside a slightly more pop-styled instrumental arrangement than many listeners would expect from Gilmour, all the while punctuated with guitar phrasings familiar to anyone even casually acquainted with the decades-long career of Pink Floyd. The lyrics are simpler than Hart's, perhaps a concession to a pop (or pop-psychology) sensibility:

Whatever it takes to break
 Got to do it
 From the Burning Lake
 Or the Eastern Gate
 You'll get through it
 Rattle that lock and lose those chains[.]

From a certain point of view, one might understand these lyrics as about what Blake called the "mind-forg'd manacles" as much as about anything specific to Milton's epic, though later references to "a world suspended on a golden chain" bring the lines back home.

At once more familiar and more foreboding is "In Any Tongue," also with lyrics by Samson. It complicates the scenes of war in *Paradise Lost*, while also dealing with the themes of loss and regret that so often feature in the speeches Milton writes for Satan. A sense of confusion, self-blame, and entrapment within the walls of ideology and religion permeates the words:

I know sorrow tastes the same on any tongue
 How was I to feel it
 When a gun was in my hands
 And I'd waited for so long
 How was I to see straight
 In the dust and blinding sun
 ...
 How am I to see you
 When my faith stands in the way[?]

The cries of despair are captured in a signature Gilmour guitar solo at the end, which soars high on the neck of a Stratocaster, while sounding like the wails of those who will never again see loved ones, lost homes, or their own lost selves.

But the song that best captures the emotional dynamics of much of *Paradise Lost* (if not its literal characters and/or scenes) is the Gilmour-and-Samson written piece "The Girl in the Yellow Dress." A Sarah-Vaughan-inspired piece that

smolders with frustrated passion and unrealized desire, with blues guitar, upright bass, brush-stroked drums, alto sax, and piano, Gilmour's surprisingly smoky voice navigates a tune of teasing and forbidding, of song and dance around the sacred hill of sex and longing, a "Heaven and hell" in which "the flames curl up his spine / As she shakes, whirls and snakes." The censoriously allegorical among us may wish to assign the song to the role of replaying the first meeting between Satan and Sin, but others will merely wish to enjoy the bluesy-jazzy, more-than-slightly palpitated feel of the track.

Closing with "Today," the most openly Floydian tune on the album, Gilmour's guitar crunches and snakes its way through a bass, drums, and keyboard-heavy arrangement that ends with a paean to the life lived now in the light of the Evening Star, and a sense, similar to that of the Nietzschean Eternal Return, of affirmation of all that has happened in a long life, and a willingness to go through it all again as the guitar solos into the fade:

If this should be my last day on earth
I'll sing along
...
Evening Star, a guitar in the smoke of the fire
Light of gold in the garden of old
I would take it all again, if it came my way
But today[.]

William Blake is famous—and infamous among professional, academic Miltonists—for having described Milton as "of the Devil's party without knowing it." Western musicians, from the legends that circulated around Niccolò Paganini to the rumors surrounding Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, often have been associated with the devil's party as well. But such musicians—and here I speak from my own long experience of the trade and its practitioners, of whom I was one long before I ever stepped a foot onto a university campus—*know* what party they belong to. Whatever label is affixed to it by others, it is the party, not of "the spirit that negates," but of the spirit that says *yes*. It is the party that sees poetry (and music)³ through the lived experience of bodies, minds, *hearts* on fire with desire, doused with regret, rekindled by renewed hopes and possibilities. It is *not* the party of those who see poetry (and all other forms of art) as referring only to itself, or its medium, or the conditions of its creation and promulgation. Such a view (one that insists along with Maurice Blanchot that "the work of art, the literary work—is neither completed nor unfinished: it is. What it says is only this: it is—and nothing more. Apart from that, it is nothing. Whoever wants it to express more, will find nothing, find that it expresses nothing"⁴) is not one shared by Hart or Gilmour, nor is it shared by many, if we are to be perfectly honest, who do not live and move and have their being in the shadow of the university.⁵ What Wilde once reminded us, and what we would do well to heed once more, is that critics like Blanchot too often simply get in the way of art, getting between art's power and the public, or in the case of *academic* critics, getting between that power and the very students who might otherwise have gotten something from the art or poetry or music in question *other* than the mere fact of its existence, something *other* than

half-remembered intonations about the artwork's overt or covert ideological structures, or its enmeshment within the structures of language, or its reduction to a series of brushstroke techniques, or musical scales and modes.

What Wilde's perspective, and those of artists like Hart and Gilmour, might well persuade us to reconsider is the long trend of theory and criticism that has served as an explicit argument that art should be held at a wide remove from life, that art is little more than a locus of linguistic, socio-historical, economic, and political forces, and that art reflects a set of techniques and conventions through which nothing can be expressed except that which is always already dead.⁶ Art works, not just at the level of the intellect, at the level of abstractions, but at the visceral level of *emotion*, a basic point Aristotle noted nearly twenty-five centuries ago, but that we too often seem to have forgotten. What most powerfully matters in art is that *emotions* are evoked, that art and an audience have similar enough frames of reference ("conventional" thoughts and objects of thought, if one *must* use such ground-to-dust terminology) that sympathy, empathy, even pity and fear can be evoked—that lived experience can be recalled, reframed, and made new again, even if only for a moment. Art "reveals in a more concentrated or intense way what ordinary life reveals in its expressive aspects."⁷ Art is *alive*, so long as *we* are alive, and the passionately creative engagement of artists with the work of other artists can remind us of that fortunate fact more readily than can a thousand critics at a thousand typewriters.

Milton's poetry, too, is *alive*, visceral, passionate—and the work of musicians like Hart and Gilmour can help remind us that its greatest power lies far outside the bounds of classrooms and journal articles. Milton's is the power of music.

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NOTES

¹ As Rita Felski notes, the reigning paradigm in much academic criticism of the last several decades has been *suspicion*: a form of reading that argues that the surface of a poem hides a "real" or "deeper" meaning that undermines the apparent one, and that the critic's job is to pull back or tear away the misleading surface in order to expose the "truth" that lies beneath it. Felski traces this attitude back to "the medieval heresy trial," noting that "[h]eresy presented a hermeneutic problem of the first order and the transcripts of religious inquisitions reveal an acute awareness on the part of inquisitors that truth is not self-evident, that language conceals, distorts, and contains traps for the unwary, that words should be treated cautiously and with suspicion" ("Suspicious Minds," *Poetics Today* 32.2 [2011]: 219).

² Geoffrey Hartman speaks of his critical practice as one that "liberates . . . critical activity from its positive or reviewing function, from its subordination to the thing commented on," while claiming that "literary commentary is literature" (*Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*. [New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1980], 191, 202). Such a practice might well dispense with the author (in the style of Barthes and Foucault), since the critic here has made himself supreme as both author and interpreter.

³ The artificial separation between the two, which received a sharp rebuke with the recent awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan, has its Western origins in an incredibly contentious period during the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, when the Roman church's so-called Gregorian reforms were clamping down on expressions of *eros* even between married couples, and when the Albigensian Crusade quite nearly destroyed the poetic—and *musical*—culture of *le Midi*, the

region now known as the South of France. (More extensive arguments along these and other lines are made in my book, *Love and its Critics* [currently scheduled for release at the end of 2017]).

⁴ “L’œuvre d’art, l’œuvre littéraire—n’est nini achevée ni inachevée: elle est. Ce qu’elle dit, c’est exclusivement cela: qu’elle est—et rien de plus. En dehors de cela, elle n’est rien. Qui veut lui faire exprimer davantage, ne trouve rien, trouve qu’elle n’exprime rien” (Maurice Blanchot, “La Solitude Essentielle,” *L’Espace Littéraire* [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1955], 12).

⁵ This view, however, is amply represented among academic critics. For Michel Foucault, “l’écriture d’aujourd’hui s’est affranchie du thème de l’expression: elle n’est référée qu’à elle-même” [today’s writing has freed itself of the theme of expression: it refers only to itself] (“Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” *Dits et Écrits, 1954-1988* [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994], 1: 792). Rod Coltman puts the case in the starkest possible terms: “Because it does not refer to anything outside of itself, there is nothing beyond the poem that is more important than the poem itself. The text of the poem remains, in other words, because the poem is not about anything, or rather, it is only about itself” (“Hermeneutics: Literature and Being.” *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn. [Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016], 550–51). Richard Klein makes a similar point, asserting that the “fragility of literature, its susceptibility to being lost, is linked to its having no real referent” (“The Future of Literary Criticism,” *PMLA* 125.4 [2010]: 920).

⁶ “Wofür wir Worte haben, darüber sind wir auch schon hinaus” [Whatever we have words for, we are already beyond] (Friedrich Nietzsche. *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [1887] *Götzendämmerung* [1889], [Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2013], 244).

⁷ Colin Falck. *Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 122.