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### MILTON AND THE PARADOX OF THE FORTUNATE FALL

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To many readers of *Paradise Lost* in all periods the most surprising lines in the poem must have been those in the Twelfth Book in which Adam expresses a serious doubt whether his primal sin—the intrinsic enormity and ruinous consequences of which had elsewhere been so copiously dilated upon—was not, after all, rather a ground for self-congratulation. The Archangel Michael, it will be remembered, has been giving Adam a prophetic relation of the history of mankind after the Fall. This, though for the greater part a most unhappy story, concludes with a prediction of the Second Coming and the Final Judgment, when Christ shall reward

- (462) His faithful and receive them into bliss,  
Whether in Heav'n or Earth, for then the Earth  
Shall all be Paradise, far happier place  
Than this of Eden, and far happier days.  
So spake the Archangel Michael; and then paused,  
As at the world's great period, and our Sire  
Replete with joy and wonder thus replied:  
“ O Goodness infinite, Goodness immense,  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good—more wonderful  
Than that which by creation first -brought forth  
(473) Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done or occasioned, or rejoice

Much more that much more good thereof shall spring—  
 To God more glory, more good will to men  
 (478) From God-and over wrath grace shall abound.

The last six lines are Milton's expression of what may be called the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall. It is a paradox which has at least the look of a formal antinomy. From the doctrinal premises accepted by Milton and implicit in the poem, the two conclusions between which Adam is represented as hesitating were equally inevitable; yet they were mutually repugnant. The Fall could never be sufficiently condemned and lamented; and likewise, when all its consequences were considered, it could never be sufficiently rejoiced over. Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit, many theologians had observed, contained in itself all other sins;<sup>1</sup> as the violation by a rational creature of a command imposed by infinite wisdom, and as the frustration of the divine purpose in the creation of the earth, its sinfulness was infinite; and by it the entire race became corrupted and estranged from God. Yet if it had never occurred, the Incarnation and Redemption could never have occurred. These sublime mysteries would have had no occasion and no meaning; and therefore the plenitude of the divine goodness and power could neither have been exercised nor have become known to men. No devout believer could hold that it would have been better if the moving drama of man's salvation had never taken place; and consequently, no such believer could consistently hold that the first act of that drama, the event from which all the rest of it sprang, was really to be regretted. Moreover, the final state of the redeemed, the consummation of human history, would far surpass in felicity and in moral excellence the pristine happiness and innocence of the first pair in Eden—that state in which, but for the Fall, man would presumably

<sup>1</sup> So Milton himself in *De doctrina chr.* 1, ch. 11 in *Milton's Prose Wks.*, Bohn ed., 4, p. 258: "What sin can be named, which was not included in this one act? It comprehended at once distrust in the divine veracity, and a proportionate credulity in the assurances of Satan; unbelief; ingratitude; disobedience; gluttony; in the man excessive uxoriousness, in the woman a want of proper regard for her husband, in both an insensibility to the welfare of their offspring, and that offspring the whole human race; parricide; theft, invasion of the rights of others, sacrilege, deceit, presumption in aspiring to divine attributes, fraud in the means employed to attain the object, pride and arrogance."

have remained.<sup>2</sup> Thus Adam's sin-and also, indeed, the sins of his posterity which it "occasioned"—*were* the *conditio sine qua non* both of a greater manifestation of the glory of God and of immeasurably greater benefits for man than could conceivably have been otherwise obtained.

Necessary-upon the premises of orthodox Christian theology-though this conclusion was, its inevitability has certainly not been always, nor, it may be suspected, usually, apparent to those who accepted those premises; it was a disturbing thought upon which many even of those who were aware of it (as all the subtler theologians must have been) were naturally reluctant to dwell; and the number of theological writers and religious poets who have given it entirely explicit and pointed expression has apparently not been great. Nevertheless it had its own emotional appeal to many religious minds-partly, no doubt, because its very paradoxicality, its transcendence of the simple logic of common thought, gave it a kind of mystical sublimity; betweenlogical contradiction (or seeming contradiction) and certain forms of religious feeling there is a close relation, of which the historic manifestations have never been sufficiently studied. And for writers whose purpose, like Milton's, was a religious interpretation of the entire history of man, the paradox served, even better than the simple belief in a future millennium or celestial bliss, to give to that history as a whole the character, not of tragedy, but of a divine comedy.<sup>3</sup> Not only should the drama have (for the elect-and about the unredeemed the elect were not wont to be greatly concerned) a happy ending, but the happy ending had been implicit in the beginning and been made possible by it. The Paradox of the Fortunate Fall has consequently found recurrent expression in the history of Christian religious thought; the idea was no invention, or discovery, of Milton's. In the present paper, I shall note a few earlier phras-

<sup>2</sup> On this last point, however, there were, in the early Fathers and later theologians, differing opinions; the view that the primeval state was not that in which man was intended to remain, but merely a phase of immaturity to be transcended, had ancient and respectable supporters. Into the history of this view I shall not enter here.

<sup>3</sup> The application of the phrase here is borrowed from Professor C. A. Moore, *PMLA* 12 (1921). 11.

ings of the same idea, which it is of interest to compare with Milton's. They may or may not be "sources" of *P. L.* 12. 469-478; they are in any case illustrations of a long tradition lying behind that passage.

## 1

To Milton-specialists the occurrence of a similar passage in Du Bartas is, of course, well known; but to facilitate comparison it seems worth while to cite the lines here. In the section of the *Seconde Semaine* entitled "The Imposture," after the Creator has pronounced sentence upon Adam, the poet interrupts his narrative to introduce a disquisition of his own, designed to answer the usual complaints against the justice of God in his dealings with Adam and his descendants:

Here I conceive, that flesh and blood will brangle,  
And murmuring Reason 'with th'Almighty wrangle.<sup>4</sup>

The ensuing essay in theodicy is apparently addressed primarily to mankind in general, though the poet sometimes rather confusedly seems, when he uses the second person singular, to be thinking of those whose errors he is refuting, sometimes of Adam, sometimes of departed saints in general, sometimes of all the elect. The lines which concern us are the following:

For, thou complainest of God's grace, whose Still  
Extracts from dross of thine audacious ill,  
Three unexpected goods; praise for his Name;  
Bliss for thy self; for Satan endless shame:  
Sith, but for sin, **Justice** and Mercy were  
But idle names: and but that thou didst erre,  
**CHRIST** had not come to conquer and to quell,  
Upon the Cross, Sin, Satan, Death, and Hell;  
Making thee blessed more since thine offence,  
Then in thy primer happy innocence . . .  
In Earth thou liv'dst then; now in heav'n thou beest:  
Then, thou didst hear God's word; it now thou seest:  
Then pleasant fruits; now, **CHRIST** is thy repast:  
Then might'st thou fall; but now thou standest fast.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Works of Joshua Sylvester*, ed. Grosart (1880), 1. 111. Sylvester's tr., 1611 ed., p. 249.

<sup>5</sup> Grosart 1. 111-2; in 1611 ed., p. 249. The original in Du Bartas, whom Sylvester here follows closely, is as follows:

. . . sa grace  
Dont l'alambic extrait de ta rebelle audace

Since, as we shall see, the thought was not original with Du Bartas, the passage in *P. L.* 12 is not one of those which can confidently be cited among the evidences of Milton's utilization of *La Semaine*. There is, however, a similarity in one detail which perhaps lends a slight probability to the supposition of a conscious or unconscious reminiscence by Milton of the corresponding passage in the French poet: the fact that both specify three "greater goods" which sprang from the evil inherent in the Fall.<sup>6</sup> Of these, two are identical in both passages—greater "glory" to God, greater benefits conferred by God upon man. The third is different; for the defeat and humiliation of Satan Milton substitutes, as the last happy consequence, the manifestation of the predominance of God's grace over his wrath—religiously a more moving and edifying conception, though less apposite to the plot of Milton's epic of the war between God and the rebel angels? There are two other differ-

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Trois biens non esperez: sçavoir, gloire pour soy,  
 Vergongne pour Sathan, felicité pour toy.  
 Veu que sans le peché sa Clemence et Justice  
 Ne seroient que vains noms; et que sans ta malice  
 Christ ne fust descendu, qui d'un mortel effort  
 A vaincu les Enfers, les Pechez, et la Mort,  
 Et te rend plus heureux mesme apres ton offence,  
 Qu'en Eden tu n'estois pendant ton innocence . . .  
 Tu viuois icy-bas, or tu vis sur le Pole.  
 Dieu parloit avec toy: or tu vois sa Parole.  
 Tu vivois de doux fructs: Christ ore est ton repas.  
 Tu pouvois trebucher: mais or tu ne peux pas.

(La *Seconde Semaine*, Rouen, 1592, p. 53.) It is to be remembered that not only were the poem of Du Bartas, and Sylvester's English version of it, famous and familiar in the 17th century, but also Simon Goulart's prose *Commentaires et Annotations sur la Sepmaine . . .* (1582, 1584) and Thomas Lodge's translation of Goulart: *A learned Summarie of the famous Poeme of William of Saluste, Lord of Bartas, wherein are discovered all the excellent Secrets in Metaphysicall, Physicall, Morall and Historicall Knowledge . . .*, 2 vols., 1637. The 1584 ed. of Goulart in the Harvard University Library does not contain the commentary on *The Second Week*, but the passage corresponding to Du Bartas's lines may be found in Lodge, *ed. cit.*, 2. 69-70: "The Poet expresseth this in the Verse 509, saying. That without sinne the Mercy and Justice of God had not so much been manifested," *etc.* The comparison of this passage of Du Bartas with *P. L.* 12. 468 ff. is not made by G. C. Taylor in *Milton's Use of Du Bartas*, 1934.

<sup>6</sup> This detail is not found in other expressions of the paradox known to me.

<sup>7</sup> This eventual consequence of the Incarnation and Resurrection had, however, been dwelt upon by Milton in *P. L.* 3. 250-8. If in writing the passage in Bk. 12, Milton was recasting that of Du Bartas, the change of the third "good" may be attributable to a desire to avoid repetition.

ences worth noting: (a) Milton gains greater dramatic effect by putting the paradox into the mouth of Adam himself—a ground for this being laid in the device of the preceding recital of the future history of man by the Archangel.\* (b) In Milton, however, the paradox is not so sharply expressed. Du Bartas puts quite categorically the point that but for the Fall there **could** have been no Incarnation and Redemption and that, “but for sin, Justice and Mercy were but idle names”; Milton’s Adam is made to express merely a doubt whether he should repent his sin or “rejoice much more” over its consequences. Yet the logic of the paradox remains clear enough in Milton’s lines; Adam could have had no reason for his doubt except upon the assumption that the sin was truly prerequisite to the “much more good” that was to follow—was, in Milton’s own significant term, to “spring” from it; and an intelligent reader could hardly have failed to conclude that the doubt was to be resolved in favor of the second alternative.

Du Bartas, however, was not the only poetic precursor of Milton in the use of the paradox. It was peculiarly adapted both to the theme and the style of Giles Fletcher in his most ambitious poem, *The Triumph of Christ*. It naturally occurred to a devout but reflective mind when it dwelt rapturously upon that theme; the more intense the feeling of the sublimity of the redemptive act and the magnitude of the good both inherent in it and resultant from it, the more apparent the impossibility of regarding as merely evil the sin which had evoked it. And to a writer whose poetic method consisted chiefly in the multiplication of conceits and rhetorical antitheses, even when dealing with the gravest articles of his faith, such a paradox naturally had a special attraction. Consequently in *Christ’s Triumph over Death (1610)* Fletcher, descanting upon the Passion of Christ in a series of what may be called antithetic parallels between the Fall and the Redemption—the two trees (i. e., the

<sup>8</sup> Du Bartas employs the same device of a prophetic recital of subsequent history (*Seconde Semaine*, 1611 ed., p. 293); but here the prophet is Adam himself, who tells the story of things to come to Seth, and his prediction abruptly ends with the Deluge. If we were sure that Milton was, in Books 11-12, consciously recasting Du Bartas, the comparison between his and the earlier poet’s use of the same group of themes would significantly illuminate the working of Milton’s mind in the construction of his poem.

forbidden tree and the cross), the two gardens (Eden and Gethsemane) , etc.-introduces the paradox-and converts it into a play upon words:

Such joy we gained by our parentalls,  
That good, or bad, whither I cannot wiss,  
To call it a mishap, or happy miss  
That fell from Eden and to heav'n did rise.<sup>9</sup>

Fletcher, however, while raising the question clearly, is, like Milton's Adam, ostensibly non-committal about the answer to it; yet it is so put that the reader could hardly remain in doubt about the answer. A fall from Eden which made the greater joys of heaven possible was plainly no "mishap."<sup>10</sup>

The last act of Andreini's *L'Adamo* (1613) has a good deal in common with the last book of *Paradise Lost*, including a long speech by Michael in which, after reproachfully reminding Eve of her guilt—

Tu cagionera a l'huomo  
E di doglia et di pianto-<sup>11</sup>

he proceeds to a prophecy of the final triumph of grace and of the future bliss to be enjoyed by the first pair and their progeny, both on earth, which will then be like Paradise, and in heaven.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, stanza 12; in *Giles and Phineas Fletcher: Poetical Works*, ed. F. S. Boas (1908), 1. 61.

<sup>10</sup> The second stanza following 'might be construed as a more affirmative expression of the paradox:

Sweet Eden was the arbour of delight,  
Yet in his honey flowres our poyson blew,  
Sad Gethseman the bowre of baleful night  
Whear Christ a health of poyson for us drew;  
Yet all our honey' in that poyson grewe.

If the "poyson" in the last two lines is that referred to in the second-i. e., the forbidden fruit, or the consequences of eating it-the final line is a figurative way of asserting once more the dependence of the Redemption upon the Fall. But it is possible that the "poyson" in the penultimate line signifies the Agony in the Garden and that the last line is merely a repetition of this. The former interpretation seems the more likely.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, tercentenary ed. E. Allodoli (1913), Act 5, Sc. 9, p. 140, 11. 4122-3; cf. "cagionera" with Milton's "occasioned" in 12. 475, apparently his only use of the word as a verb.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143, ll. 4235 ff.: "per la gioia D'esser rapito l'huomo A l'artiglio infemale il tutto gode, E pel diletto sembra 11 Cielo in terra, e'n Paradiso il Mondo"; cf. *P. L.* 12. 462-5. The supreme good, however, Andreini, unlike Milton, expressly says, will be the beatific vision: "di Dio . . . il sacrosanto viso, . . . il sommo bel del Paradiso."

In their response to this archangelic discourse, Andreini's Adam and Eve, like Milton's Adam, expand with gratitude and wonder over the benignant power which can so "unite" good with evil:

Con la morte, la vita,  
 Con la guerra la pace,  
 Col perder la Vittoria,  
 Con l'error la salute  
 E con l'Inferno il Cielo  
 Insieme unir, non è poter umano,  
 Ma de l'eterno *mano*  
 Omnipotenza summa. Ondè, Signore,  
 Ch' Eva trafitta è sana,  
 E perdendo trionfa, et vinta *hà gloria*.<sup>13</sup>

There is in these lines, especially in "perdendo trionfa," an evident adumbration of the paradox, but they hardly give it unequivocal expression.<sup>14</sup>

## 2

Some of Milton's precursors, then, in the century preceding *Paradise Lost*, had dwelt upon the idea that the Fall had not

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141, ll. 4157 ff.

<sup>14</sup> The later scenes of the fifth act of Salandra's *Adamo Caduto* (1647), especially in a dialogue between two personified divine attributes, Omnipotence and Mercy, dwell upon the happy ending which was to follow the disaster of the Fall; the Incarnation and Atonement are foretold, and, as in Milton, there are devout ejaculations over *la gran Bontade* which is to be made manifest through this outcome; and it is remarked that other attributes of deity—Infinity and Charity—would thereby obtain wider scope for their exercise:

### L'Infinitade

In compartirsi sin fra Creature.  
 Applaudara la Caritade, mentre  
 Verrà più dilatato il suo *bel* Regno.

But the essence of the paradox—the dependence of the possibility of all this upon the Fall—is not emphasized. In the equally cheerful outlook upon the future with which Vondel's *Lucifer* (1654) concludes, there is no hint of the paradox. That poems about the Fall should be given a happy ending by the introduction, through one device or another, of a prevision of the coming of Christ and the future bliss of the redeemed, may be said to have been a convention of this genre; and, as Professor C. A. Moore has pointed out in *PMLA* 12 (1921).463 ff. the accepted dogma itself made it virtually incumbent upon the author of such a poem to foreshadow the "far happier place, far happier days," which the elect should know. To end upon a tragic note was to depart from both literary and theological orthodoxy. But a recognition of the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall was not a necessary or invariable part of a happy ending.

only been over-ruled for good by the divine beneficence, but had been the indispensable means to the attainment of far greater good for man and-if it may be so put-for God than would have been possible without it. Milton's eighteenth century annotators and editors soon began to point out-though with a characteristic and exasperating neglect to give definite references-that the idea had already been expressed in the patristic period. The earliest suggestion of such a source seems to have been given in J. Richardson's *Explanatory Notes and Remarks* on *Milton* (1734), in which line 473 is annotated: "*O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!* 'tis an exclamation of St. Gregory."<sup>15</sup> Newton and other annotators in the same century were, prudently, still more vague in citation: "He seems to remember the rant of one of the Fathers, *O felix culpa,*" etc.<sup>16</sup> So far as I have observed, no modern editor has given any more precise reference for this yet more striking phrasing of the Paradox of the Fall. An extensive, though not exhaustive, search of the writings of St. Gregory<sup>17</sup> fails to disclose it. But it is to be found in a probably earlier, more noteworthy, and, at least to non-Protestants, more widely familiar source-a passage in the Roman Liturgy? In the service for Easter Even (Holy Saturday) there is a hymn, sung by the deacon in the rite of blessing the paschal candle, which bears the title of *Praeconium* but is better known, from the word with which it opens, as the *Exultet* (*exultet iam angelica turba caelorum*); in it, a Catholic writer has remarked, "the language of the liturgy rises into heights to which it is hard to find a parallel in Christian literature."<sup>19</sup> In this rapturous exultation over the mystery of the Redemption the sentence already cited is preceded by another expressing the same paradox yet more pointedly: "O

<sup>15</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 521.

<sup>16</sup> Fourth ed. (17'57') of Thomas Newton's ed. of *P. L.*, 2, 429 (note). The parallel is not indicated in the earliest commentary, Patrick Hume's *Annotations on Paradise Lost* (1695).

<sup>17</sup> Richardson's "St. Gregory" presumably refers to Gregory the Great (d. 604), since the citation is in Latin.

<sup>18</sup> For my knowledge of this fact, and for other valued assistance in this section, I am indebted to Professor G. La Piana of Harvard University.

<sup>19</sup> C. B. Walker, in *Catholic Encycl.*, art. "Exultet."

*certe necessarium Adae peccatum, quod Christi morte deletum est! O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem!* ” Adam’s sin was not only a “happy fault” but “certainly necessary”-necessary to the very possibility of the redemptive act, which, it may be supposed, was by the author of -the hymn conceived as itself a necessary, and the central, event in the divine plan of terrestrial history.

The date of composition of the *Exultet* and that of its incorporation in the service of Easter Even can be determined only approximately.<sup>20</sup> It was originally no part of the Roman Liturgy, but appears first in the Gallican, which, as some liturgiologists hold, was probably in existence by the beginning of the fifth century ;<sup>21</sup> but the earliest manuscript of this liturgy which includes the hymn in question is of the seventh century.<sup>22</sup> Certain conjectures concerning its authorship have been made, but none is supported by any substantial evidence ;<sup>23</sup> in the words of the most careful modern study of the subject, “in the present state of the sources, one must give up the attempt to determine the authorship and even the place of origin of this famous hymn.”<sup>24</sup> All that can be said, then, on

<sup>20</sup> For the text of the hymn (in its oldest known form) see Duchesne, *Christian Worship*, 5th ed. (1923), p. 254 ; Migne, *Patr. Lat.*, 72, col. 269 f. For its history cf. Duchesne, *loc. cit.* : A. Franz; *Die kirchliche Benediktionen im Mittelalter* (1909) I. 519-553; V. Thalhofer and L. Eisenhofer, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik* (1912) 1.643 ff.; A. Gastoué, *Les vigiles nocturnes* (1908), p. 18; C. B. Walker, *loc. cit.*; J. Braun, *Liturgisches Handlexikon* (1922), art. “Praeconium paschale.” An English version of the entire hymn may be found in I. Schuster, *The Sacramentary* (1925), 2, 293-5.

<sup>21</sup> Duchesne, *op. cit.*, p. 86, thinks the hymn may be as early as the middle of the fourth century.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the liturgiological authorities cited.

<sup>23</sup> Some ancient manuscripts credit it to St. Augustine “when he was deacon,” a highly improbable ascription (cf. Thalhofer and Eisenhofer, 1. 644 ; Franz, 1. 534) . It is probably due to the fact that Augustine, as he himself records (*De civ. Dei*, 15. 22), once wrote a short *laus cerei* in verse; but this was not the *Exultet*. It appears to have been originally the custom for the deacon to compose his own *praeconium* for the rite of blessing the Easter candle (Braun, *loc. cit.*), a practice of which the *locus* in Augustine gives probable evidence. One of Migne’s editors (H. Menard in *Pat. Lat.*, 78, col. 335) suggests that the hymn may perhaps have been written by St. Ambrose, which is perhaps possible, but incapable of proof. Gastoué’s suggestion of St. Ennodius of Pavia (d. 521) as the author appears to be due to a confusion of the *Exultet* with two quite different formulas of benediction composed by that Father (v. *Corp. script. lat. eccles.* 6.415-419).

<sup>24</sup> Franz, *op. cit.*, 1.534.

the question of date, is that the passage which some of Milton's editors have regarded as the probable source of *P. L.* 12. 473 *ff.* was in liturgical use as early as the seventh and possibly as early as the fourth century, in the churches employing the Gallican sacramentary. It is, however, certain that the popularity of the hymn was so great that it presently drove out, even in the Roman Liturgy—apparently after some hesitations on the part of the popes—all rival formulas in the rite of blessing the Easter candle. It evidently “owed its triumph,” as a Catholic historian of the liturgy has said, “to the fact that it was far superior to all these rivals both in expression and content.”<sup>25</sup> In certain medieval missals there are some interesting variations in the wording of the two sentences relevant to the theme of this paper;<sup>26</sup> and it is of interest to note that these sentences were by some ecclesiastical authorities considered dangerous, and were omitted from the hymn—rather generally in German and not infrequently in French and Italian sacramentaries.<sup>27</sup> But with the establishment of liturgical uniformity since the late sixteenth century, both sentences found an accepted and permanent place in the Missal of the Roman Church.

## 3

That the Protestant religious poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who gave expression to the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall had heard or read the part of the Catholic liturgy containing the *Exultet* is, of course, possible; but there is no need to suppose them to have done so. It is rather more likely that they—or at all events the earliest of them, Du Bartas—became acquainted with the idea through the reading of one of the Fathers, whose writings still had among Protestant theologians much authority. St. Ambrose, for example, (4th c.) had flatly asserted that Adam's sin “has brought more benefit

<sup>25</sup> Thalhoffer and Eisenhofer, *op. cit.*, p. 644.

<sup>26</sup> E. g., in the Missal of Westminster Abbey (ed. Lagg, 1893, 2, 581) the words *et nostrum* follow *Adae peccatum*.

<sup>27</sup> See Franz, I, 540 f., for examples, of which I cite only one: Hugo, Abbot of Cluny (d. 1109), commanded that these sentences should be “deleted and no longer read, *cum aliquando non bene haberetur ‘O felix culpa,’ et quod peccatum Adae necessarium esset.*”

to us than harm" (*amplius nobis profuit culpa quam nocuit*),<sup>28</sup> and had even permitted himself the more generalized and hazardous apophthegm that "sin is more fruitful than innocence" (*fructuosior culpa quam innocentia*).<sup>29</sup> God "knew that Adam would fall, **in order that** he might be redeemed by Christ (***ut redimeretur a Christo***). ***Felix ruina, quae reparatur in melius.***"<sup>30</sup> The identity of the thought and the approximation of the phrasing here to those of the two sentences quoted from the *Exultet* are evident; and it is probable that these Ambrosian passages are the primary source of the expressions of the paradox, alike in that hymn and in Du Bartas, Fletcher and Milton. To the last two the idea may or may not have been transmitted through Du Bartas;<sup>31</sup> or to any of them it is possible that the medium of transmission may have been some later patristic repetition or amplification of the theme. In the century after Ambrose his enunciation of it was echoed, with some weakening, by one of the greatest of the Popes, **Leo I**, in his ***First Sermon on the Lord's Ascension***:

Today we [in contrast with the first of our race] are not only confirmed in the possession of Paradise, but have even penetrated to the higher things of Christ; we have gained more by the ineffable grace of Christ than we had lost by the envy of the Devil.<sup>32</sup>

And in the next century Gregory the Great (d. 604) expressed the paradox with all possible explicitness.<sup>33</sup>

What greater fault than that by which we all die? And what greater goodness than that by which we are freed from death? And certainly, unless Adam had sinned, it would not have behooved our

<sup>28</sup> *De institutione virginis*, ch. 17. 104 (MPL, 16. 331).

<sup>29</sup> *De Jacob*, 6. 21 (MPL, 14. 60'7).

<sup>30</sup> In Ps. XXXIX, 20 (MPL, 14.1065).

<sup>31</sup> That Du Bartas "used Ambrose's *Hexameron*" is said by U. T. Holmes and his associates to be a certainty (*The Works of Du Bartas* (1935), 1.128); it is improbable that Du Bartas's reading in Ambrose was confined to this writing. Cf. Thibaut de Maisières, *Les poèmes inspirés du début de la Genèse* (1931), p. 26. Milton, however, was acquainted with Ambrose at first hand; cf. *Tetrachordon in Prose Works*, Bohn ed. (1848), 3. 418.

<sup>32</sup> MPL, 54.396: *ampliora adepti per ineffabilem Christi gratiam quam per diaboli amiseramus invidiam.*

<sup>33</sup> Richardson, therefore, was perhaps not wholly wrong in indicating Gregory as a source of the passage in *P. L.*, though in error in attributing the 0 *felix culpa* to that saint.

Redeemer to take on our flesh. Almighty God saw beforehand that from that evil because of which men were to die, He would bring about a good which would overcome that evil. How wonderfully the good surpasses the evil, what faithful believer can fail to see? Great, indeed, are the evils we deservedly suffer in consequence of the first sin; but who of the elect would not willingly endure still worse evils, rather than not have so great a Redeemer? <sup>34</sup>

## 4

In the foregoing examples, the writers who enunciated the paradox, it is evident, usually had chiefly in mind the relation of causal dependence between specific historical events, the Fall and the Redemption; and the argument was that the latter, or consequent, being preponderatingly a good, the former, as its necessary (though not sufficient) cause, must have been preponderatingly a good. Yet the Fall none the less remained, upon orthodox principles, a moral evil. These considerations, taken together, tended to suggest two larger, and awkward, questions. Was it true in general that the existence of moral evils is, from another and more comprehensive point of view, a good? And if, from such a point of view, the Fall was preponderatingly a good, was it not necessary to assume that its occurrence must after all have been in accordance with God's will? These questions, implicit in the notion of the *felix culpa*, were fairly explicitly raised and considered by Augustine; and his answers to both were, at least sometimes, in the affirmative; in other words, he not only accepted the paradox but gave it a more generalized form. Thus in his *Enchiridion ad Laurentium* he writes:

<sup>34</sup> *In Primum Regum Expositiones*, 4, 7; *MPL*, 79, 222: "Quae maior culpa, quam illa, qua omnes morimur? Et quae maior bonitas, quam illa, per quam a morte liberamur? Et quidem nisi Adam peccaret, Redemptorem nostrum carnem suscipere nostram non oporteret. . . Ex illo malo, quo morituri erant, bonum quod malum illum vinceret, omnipotens Deus sese facturum providerat. Cuius profecto boni magnitudo, quis fidelis non videat quam mirabiliter excellat. Magna quippe sunt mala, quae per primae culpa meritum patimur, sed quis electus nollet peiora mala perpeti, quam tantum Redemptorem non habere?" The echo of the last clause in the *Exultet* suggests that the author of the hymn may have been remembering both this passage of Gregory and those of Ambrose; in which case a seventh century date for the hymn, or at least for the part of it which here concerns us, would be indicated. But it is, of course, possible, that Gregory was echoing the *Exultet*.

Although those things that are evil, in so far as they are evil, are not good; nevertheless, it is good that there should be not only goods but evils as well. For unless this—namely, that there be also evils—were not a good, men would under no circumstances fall away from the omnipotent Good;<sup>35</sup>

*i. e.*, neither Adam nor any man would ever have sinned. And again:

The works of God are so wisely and exquisitely contrived that, when an angelic and human creature sins, that is, does, not what God wished it to do, but what itself wishes, yet by that very will of the creature whereby it does what the Creator did not will, it fulfills what he willed—God, as supremely good, putting even evils to good use, for the damnation of those whom he has justly predestined to punishment and for the salvation of those whom he has benignantly predestined to grace.<sup>36</sup>

The greatest of the Latin 'Fathers was here manifestly skating on rather thin ice. It was always difficult for an acute-minded theologian with a strong sense of the divine sovereignty to admit that Adam's sin had really frustrated the will of God, and had compelled the deity to perform, unwillingly, acts which he would not otherwise have performed; it was therefore not easy, when dealing with these matters, always to avoid the thought that the Fall itself, with its consequences—so happy for the elect—was but a part of the eternal and ineluctable divine purpose for mankind. These passages of Augustine's thus reveal more clearly some of the moral difficulties and metaphysical pitfalls which lay behind the conception of the *felix culpa*—difficulties and pitfalls which Augustine himself cannot be said to have wholly escaped.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, ch. 96 (MPL 40. 276): *Quamvis ergo ea quae mala, in quantum mala sunt, non sint bona; tamen ut non solum bona, sed etiam sint et mala, bonum est. Nam nisi esset hoc bonum, ut essent et mala, nullo modo sinerentur ab omnipotente bono.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* ch. 100 (MPL 40. 279): *Opera domini [sunt] . . . tam sapienter exquisita, ut cum angelica et humana creatura peccasset, id est, non quod ille, sed quod voluit ipsa fecisset, etiam per eandem creaturae voluntatem, qua factum est quod Creator noluit, impletet ipse quod voluit; bene utens et malis, tamquam summe bonus, ad eorum damnationem quos iuste praedestinavit ad poenam, et ad eorum salutem quos benigne praedestinavit ad gratiam.*

<sup>37</sup> Donne in one of his sermons bases upon the authority of Augustine as well as of Scripture a similar remark that matters have been so ordered that sin in general—not specifically the sin of Adam—is made conducive to moral good: "If I cannot

The familiarity of the idea in the fourteenth century is shown by its occurrence both in *The Vision of Piers the Plowman*, ca. 1378, and in Wyclif's *Sermons*. In the former it is put into the mouth of Repentance, after the Seven Deadly Sins have made their confessions: God created man "most like to himself, and afterwards suffered him to sin,"

And al for the best, as I bileve .what euer the boke telleth,  
**O felix culpa! o necessarium peccatum ade!** etc.  
 For thourgh that synne thi sone .sent was to this erthe,  
 And bicam man of a mayde .mankind to save.<sup>38</sup>

Wyclif in a Christmas sermon preached, perhaps, to his rustic flock at Lutterworth in the early 1380s, did not shrink from the paradox, but on the contrary joined with it a still more sweeping optimism, of very dubious orthodoxy: all things, including sin, are for the best in the best of possible worlds, since all happens in accordance with God's will:

And so, as many men seien, alle thingis comen for the beste; for alle comen for Goddis ordenance, and so thei comen for God himsilf; and so alle thingis that comen fallen for the beste thing that mai be. Moreover to another witt men seien, that this world is betterid bi everything that fallith therinne, where that it be good or yvel and herfore seith Gregori, that it was a blesful synne that Adam synnede and his kynde, for bi this the world is beterid; but the ground of this goodnesse stondith in grace of Jesus Crist.<sup>39</sup>

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find a foundation for my comfort in this subtilty of the Schoole, that sin is nothing, . . . yet I can raise a second step for my Consolation in this, that be sin what it will in the nature thereof, yet my sin shall conduce and cooperate to my good. So *Ioseph* saies to his Brethren, You *thought evill against me, but God meant it unto good*: which is not onely good to *Ioseph*, who was not partaker in the evill, but good even to them who meant nothing but evill." What Donne has in mind here at least in part, however, is the more special idea that, after many little sins, a good round sin may be a means of grace, by bringing the sinner to a realization of his own state. "Though it be strangely said, yet I say it, That God's anger is good; so saies S. Augustine, *Audeo dicere*, Though it be boldly said yet must I say it, *Utile est cadere in aliquid manifestum peccatum*, Many sinners would not have been saved if they had not committed some greater sin at last, then before; for, the punishment of that sin, hath brought them to a remorse of all their other sins formerly neglected" (LXXX *Sermons* (1640), p. 171).

<sup>38</sup> B. Ms., *Passus V*, 489 ff., in Skeat, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman* (1886).

<sup>39</sup> *Select English Works* of John Wyclif, ed. Thomas Arnold (1869), Sermon XC, 1. 320-321. There is no corresponding passage in the Latin sermon from the same text and for the same festival: *Ioannis Wyclif Sermones*, ed. Loserth (1888) 2.1 ff.

An interesting late-medieval lyrical poem gives to the paradox a turn not found in any of the other examples here cited; it is presented in its relation to the cult of the Virgin. Since there would have been no Incarnation without the Fall, all that phase of Catholic piety and religious emotion which centers about the figure of the Virgin Mother manifestly owed its possibility to Adam's eating the forbidden fruit. There is also in the poem, if I am not mistaken, a touch of sly humor; the anonymous author hints that poor Adam, to whom not only mankind in general but the Queen of Heaven herself are so deeply indebted, has been rather badly treated. This further inference from the idea of the *felix culpa* would, one may suspect, hardly have been approved by St. Ambrose and St. Gregory. Adam, the poet recalls, lay bound for four thousand winters:

And all was for an appil,  
 An appil that he tok . . .  
 Ne hadde the appil take ben,  
 The appil taken ben,  
 Ne hadde never our lady  
 A bene hevene quene.  
 Blessed be the time  
 That appil take was.  
 Therefore we moun singen  
 ' *Deo gracias.*'<sup>40</sup>

A sixteenth century illustration of the vogue of the concept of the *felix culpa* is to be found in the widely used Latin *Commentary* on Genesis of the Jesuit Benito Pereira (Pererius). The commentator is dilating, *à propos* of Genesis 1, 31, upon the manner in which God transmutes evils- even moral evils (*mala culpae*) -into good.

A signal proof and example of this is exhibited to us in the sin of Adam. How grave this sin was, how far and wide it spread poison and destruction, how severely it was punished, is acknowledged by all men. Yet -this so great sin, such is the goodness and power of

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Wyclif also apparently confused in his memory the *Exultet* and the passage of Gregory above cited, or else believed Gregory to have composed the hymn.

<sup>40</sup> Professor Douglas Bush has kindly brought this poem to my notice. It is printed in Chambers and Sidgwick's *Early English Lyrics* (1907), p. 102, and is believed to have been written in the early fifteenth, century.

God, has been wonderfully converted into the greatest good and the most glorious of God's works, namely, the incarnation, passion and death of the Son of God. So that Gregory not unadvisedly or rashly somewhere exclaims, *O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem.*" <sup>41</sup>

Upon the crucial point of the paradox, however-that God could not have performed this *praeclarissimum opus* if Adam had remained innocent-Pereira does not dwell.

## 5

For a final example, which will bring us back to Milton's century, I will cite one of the most famous and widely read of Catholic devotional works, the *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* of St. Francis de Sales (1616). <sup>42</sup>

The mercy of God [he writes] has been more salutary for the redemption of the race of men than the wretchedness of Adam has been poisonous for its destruction-. And so far is it from being true that the sin of Adam has overcome the benevolence (*debonnairété*) of God, that on the contrary it has served to excite and provoke it : so that, by a gentle and most loving antiperistasis <sup>43</sup> and opposition, that benevolence has been re-invigorated by the presence of

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<sup>41</sup> *Benedicti Pererü Valentini Commentariorum et disputationum in Genesim tomus primus* (Leyden, 1594), p. 168. Pereira, like Wyclif, it will be observed, either attributes the *Exultet* to St. Gregory or has confused the phrase from the hymn with the dictum of Gregory above cited. The passage is a highly probable source of Richardson's similar error previously noted; and it is a conceivable source of the locus in Milton. On the importance of this and similar Renaissance commentaries on Genesis for the background of *P. L.*, see the article of Arnold Williams in *Studies in Philology*, April, 1937, pp. 191-208. But it is to be borne in mind that Pereira's work and the others mentioned by Williams were later than Du Bartas's poem.

<sup>42</sup> The passage is therefore of later date than those cited from Du Bartas and Giles Fletcher.

<sup>43</sup> A technical term of the physics of the period, signifying a process by which a quality or force in a substance is increased or intensified by the action of an opposing quality or force. Milton expresses the same idea in the hymn of the celestial choirs, 7.613 ff.

Who seeks

To lessen thee, against his purpose serves

To manifest the more thy might: his evil

Thou usest, and from thence creat'st more good.

The "more good" here, however, is the creation of "this new-made world" and of man, to "repair that detriment" resulting from the defection of the rebel angels-not the Redemption and its consequences.

its adversary: and, so to say, gathering together its forces in order to win the victory, it has caused grace 'to abound more exceedingly where sin abounded.'<sup>44</sup> Therefore the Church, in a holy excess of admiration, exclaims on the Eve of Easter: 'O sin of Adam, truly necessary' *etc.* [quotes the two sentences from the *Exultet*]. Of a truth, we can say with that man of ancient times: 'We should be lost (*perdus*) if we had not been lost;'<sup>45</sup> that is to say, our loss has been our gain, since human nature has received more gifts of grace (*plus de* graces) from its redemption by its Savior than it would ever have received from the innocence of Adam, if he had persevered in it. . . . The redemption of our Lord, touching our miseries, renders them more useful and amiable than the original innocence would ever have been. The Angels, the Savior tells us, 'have more joy over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety-and-nine just persons that need no repentance'; and in the same way, the state of redemption is one hundred times greater in value than the state of innocence.<sup>46</sup>

Here the strangest aspect of the paradox is even more pointedly brought out than by Du Bartas or Milton: not only did the Fall make possible more good for man, but God himself *needed* a fallen race to evoke fully the divine attributes and powers.

## 6

It is unlikely that the pre-Miltonic expressions of the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall which I have noted are the only ones to be found in Christian literature from the fourth to the seventeenth centuries, but they pretty certainly include the most important; all but one of them could have been known to Milton at first hand; and they are sufficient to place in its proper historical perspective the passage of the Twelfth Book of *Paradise Lost* cited at the beginning. In that perspective, the passage ceases to be surprising, or indicative of any originality or of any great boldness in Milton's thought. A paradox which had been embraced by Ambrose, Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, Francis de Sales, and Du Bartas, had for at least ten centuries had a place in many missals, and had finally been

<sup>44</sup> *Romans* 5. 20. The Pauline text gave a seeming biblical sanction to the paradox, though it does not in fact express the essential point of it.

<sup>45</sup> The reference is to a saying of Themistocles in Plutarch's *Life of Themistocles*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, Bk. 2, ch. 5.

officially adopted by the Roman Church, was, obviously, sufficiently orthodox ; and it had been put more sharply and boldly by at least two of the Doctors of the Church, by the composer of the *Exultet*, by the French mystic, and by the author of *La Semaine*, than by Milton. Though the hint of antinomianism latent in it had made many writers to whom it was probably familiar avoid expressing it, it had nevertheless a recognized and natural place in the treatment of the topic in Christian theology—that of the culmination of the redemptive process in human history—which was also for Milton the culminating theme in his poem. Yet it undeniably placed the story of the Fall, which was the subject of the poem announced at the outset, in a somewhat ambiguous light ; when it was borne in mind, man's first disobedience could not seem the deplorable thing which for the purposes of the poet—and of the theologian—it was important to make it appear. The only solution was to keep the two themes separate. In the part of the narrative dealing primarily with the Fall, the thought that it was after all a *felix culpa* must not be permitted explicitly to intrude ; that was to be reserved for the conclusion, where it could heighten the happy final consummation by making the earlier and unhappy episodes in the story appear as instrumental to that consummation, and, indeed, as its necessary conditions.

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