

WILLIAM POOLE

# Milton AND THE Idea of the Fall



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## MILTON AND THE IDEA OF THE FALL

In *Paradise Lost* (1667), Milton produced the most magnificent poetic account ever written of the biblical Fall of man. In this wide-ranging study, William Poole presents a comprehensive analysis of the origin, evolution and contemporary discussion of the Fall, and the way seventeenth-century authors, particularly Milton, represented it. Poole first examines the range and depth of early-modern thought on the subject, then explains and evaluates the basis of the idea and the intellectual and theological controversies it inspired from early Christian times to Milton's own century. The second part of the book delves deeper into the development of Milton's own thought on the Fall, from the earliest of his poems, through his prose, to his mature epic. Poole distinguishes clearly for the first time the range and complexity of contemporary debates on the Fall of man, and offers many new insights into the originality and sophistication of Milton's work.

WILLIAM POOLE is a Tutorial Fellow in English at New College, Oxford. He is the editor of Francis Lodwick's *A Country Not Named* (2005) and co-director of the AHRB research project 'Free-thinking and language-planning in late seventeenth-century England'.



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Know the fall is being created, for when we were not created, and uncome forth, we were as he is, that is in perfection.

Thomas Tany





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I next thank my close circle of friends, who know who they are. I also thank my pupils at Downing College – it is to your type of audience this book is primarily addressed. Valued assistance has also been offered by Matthew Armstrong, Rhodri Lewis, Richard Serjeantson, Marcus Tomalin, Jake Wadham and Jack Wakefield. Sophie Read cheerfully axed one third of the penultimate draft to meet the exigencies of this series. The two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press produced exemplary reports and opposing courses of revision, and my thanks to Ray Ryan, Maartje Scheltens and Robert Whitelock at the Press for their time.

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I dedicate this, my first book, to my family, and to the memory of my father D. E. Poole (1945–2001): *nunc est bibendum*.

## *Note on the text*

Texts originally in languages other than English have been cited in translation, or supplied in both original and translation if pertinent. All translations are my own, unless indicated. In the case of classical texts, I have relied heavily on the Loeb editions. Early-modern manuscript sources, like printed sources, are cited unmodernised, although I have italicised expansions.

## *Abbreviations*

- CG* Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei [City of God]*, ed. and trans. G. E. McCracken *et al.*, 7 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1957–72)
- CPW* John Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, ed. D. Wolfe *et al.*, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958–82)
- CRW* Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century* (London: Junction Books, 1983)
- E* Augustine of Hippo, *Enchiridion* in *Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. A. C. Outler (London: SCMP, 1955)
- JFHS* *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*
- LC* Augustine of Hippo, *De Genesi ad litteram [Literal Commentary on Genesis]* in *La Genèse au sens littéral*, trans. with introduction and notes by P. Agaësse and A. Solignac, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1972)
- MLQ* *Modern Language Quarterly*
- N&Q* *Notes and Queries*
- OED* *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. John Simpson and Edmund Weiner, 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)
- PL* John Milton, *Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books*, 2nd edn revised by the author (London: printed by Samuel Simmons, 1674)



## Introduction

[I]f I have spoken any thing, or shall hereafter speake in this Pamphlet vnaduisedly, illiterately, without good order or methode; acknowledge (I beseeche thee) the generall punishment of whole mankinde, which more especially discouers it selfe in my weaknesse, the confusion of tongues. I am confounded, I am confounded, poore silly wretch that I am, I am confounded, and my minde is distracted, my tongue is confounded, and my whole nature corrupted . . .<sup>1</sup>

This – slightly disingenuous – apology for bad prose was written in 1616 by the future bishop of Gloucester and crypto-Catholic, Godfrey Goodman, some way into his stout quarto on the effects of original sin, *The Fall of Man; or, the Corruption of Nature*. Goodman here pauses in his general narration of woe to lament his own inarticulacy, tracing this first to ‘the confusion of tongues’ that took place at Babel, but, behind that, with his ‘whole nature corrupted’, to the Fall of man itself, the primal transgression of Adam and Eve in Eden as recorded in Genesis 2–3. Goodman thus adds to his catalogue of human ills not merely the conviction that man’s linguistic capacity has become crippled – his ability to describe accurately, and then subsequently to report such descriptions to others – but also the corruption of his very physical and moral fabric. Indeed, Goodman’s tract, as its full title indicates, extended the effects of the Fall from the microcosm of man to the macrocosm of his environment – the Fall has altered external reality itself.

I forget my selfe, I forget my selfe, for, speaking of mans corruption, I am so far entangled, that I cannot easily release my selfe; being corrupted as wel as others, me thinkes whatsoever I see, whatsoever I heare, all things seeme to sound corruption.<sup>2</sup>

Not only perception (‘my minde’) and description (‘my tongue’), but also the objects of such perception and description had become ineluctably compromised.

Goodman, though, offered a narrative of *continual* decline, something that the Fall had inaugurated but not concluded: this first great shock had been followed by a series of aftershocks from the *confusio linguarum* and the Flood down to the present age. Had not of recent years the telescope revealed blemishes in the moon, and had not the first new star appeared in the supposedly changeless heavens back in 1572? Worse, are there not now more females than males engendered?<sup>3</sup>

Others held the theologically neater position that the original Fall was bad enough, and no further decline was necessary. Henry Vaughan, in his poem 'Corruption', for instance, wrote of Adam's crime: 'He drew the Curse upon the world, and Crakt / The whole frame with his Fall.'<sup>4</sup> John Milton said something similar in 'At a solemn musick', in which, under his musical metaphor, he implicates 'all creatures' in not only the effects but also the cause of the Fall:

... till disproportion'd sin  
 Jarr'd against natures chime, and with harsh din  
 Broke the fair musick that all creatures made  
 To their great Lord, whose love their motion sway'd  
 In perfect Diapason, whilst they stood  
 In first obedience, and their state of good.<sup>5</sup>

This was a neater position because it conformed to St Paul's contrast between the Fall of the first and the Atonement of the second Adam: 'For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 Corinthians 15:22). And without the first Adam, what need of a second?

Not everyone in the seventeenth century, though, was happy about narratives of decline, whether catastrophic or continual, and Goodman was answered by the Oxonian George Hakewill in 1627 with his *Apologie of the Power and Providence of God*.<sup>6</sup> Hakewill replaced Goodman's pessimistic narrative with a more lenient, optimistic vision. The world, he said, was not in decline, and undue scepticism concerning man's access to external reality was likewise exaggerated. Modern poets, Hakewill declared, are as good as their ancient counterparts, and the reason why change in the heavens has only recently become visible is because finer instrumentation has been developed, not because change is something new.<sup>7</sup>

Hakewill thus restricted the consequences of the Fall to the purely human realm, locking original sin into the moral core of the individual, but out of man's other faculties, and out of the external world. In doing so, he was following Francis Bacon, who had opened his *Of the Proficiency*



*and Advancement of Learning* (1605) with a brusque rejection of ‘the zeale and jealousie of [those] Diuines’ who taxed seekers after natural knowledge with admonishments of the Fall of man, and of the vanity of human knowledge.<sup>8</sup> The Fall, replied Bacon, affected only man’s moral rectitude: it did not alter his sensory acuity or the things his senses observed. Bacon thought this a point important enough to repeat, opening the *Instauratio magna* (1620) with the same affirmation.<sup>9</sup> It is not hard to see how men such as Bacon or Hakewill found it necessary to contest the point of view represented by Goodman. How could the new science feel confident about the processes it sought to observe if both these processes and their observers were irreversibly damaged?

Bacon’s sentiment was much repeated throughout the century. The educational reformer Jan Amos Comenius visited England in the winter of 1641–2, at which time his influential pamphlet *A Reformation of Schooles* was published. He too employed Bacon’s distinction, equating ‘serpentine’ knowledge with the wrangling of the schools, and taking issue with the strategy of blaming the impossibility of reformation in educational method on original sin, ‘[a]s if the feare of the Lord ought not to be an antidote against that corruption, which God hath so often pronounced to be both the beginning, and the end of wisdome’.<sup>10</sup> In 1665 Robert Hooke prefaced his *Micrographia*, the first and flamboyant classic of microscopy, with the slightly dangerous sentiment:

And as at first, mankind *fell* by *tasting* of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, so we, their posterity, may be in part *restor’d* by the same way, not only by *beholding* and *contemplating*, but by *tasting* too those fruits of Natural knowledge . . .<sup>11</sup>

‘. . . that were never yet forbidden’, he hurriedly adds.

Bacon and Hakewill represent attempts to restrict but not to deny original sin. As the century progressed, however, increasingly radical voices were heard, especially throughout the revolutionary decades. These denials were usually phrased in evangelical rather than epistemological terms, but one of the arguments of this book will be that such ‘radical’ voices are not to be found simply in the obvious places – the pamphlets of the political radicals, the Ranters, Diggers, Seekers, Quakers, Behmenists, Mugglestonians and their colourful ilk. Indeed, these ‘third culture’ radicals actually developed complicated and on occasion mutually incompatible theories about the Fall, and a later chapter will sort out some of these strands. More importantly, radical speculation on the Genesis narrative often emanated from socially conservative, even on occasion high-church, quarters. Throughout the 1650s, another future bishop, Jeremy Taylor,

launched a punishing campaign against the doctrine of original sin, much to the horror of his fellow exiled Anglicans – and much to the glee of his Presbyterian adversaries. One of them, Nathaniel Stephens, wrote a book pointing out that there was not much difference between what Taylor was saying and the opinions of the radical Baptist and Agitator Robert Everard.

After the Restoration, scepticism concerning the traditional understanding of the Fall persisted. The ecstatic texts of Thomas Traherne, for instance, read curiously like some passages in the Quaker George Fox's *Journal*. Who wrote these lines?

I knew nothing but pureness, and innocency, and righteousness, being renewed up into the image of God by Christ Jesus, so that I say I was come up to the state of Adam, which he was in before he fell. The creation was opened to me, and it was showed to me how all things had their names given them according to their nature and their virtue.<sup>12</sup>

Blunter voices were also raised from high in the aristocracy. As Rochester lay dying in 1680, he told Gilbert Burnet that original sin did not exist and that 'the first three Chapters of *Genesis* . . . could not be true, unless they were Parables'.<sup>13</sup> Also in these decades various figures in the early Royal Society developed geological and palaeontological theories that at best marginalised the events in Eden, and, in the case of Hooke, hinted at the extreme antiquity of the Earth, thereby casting doubt on the scope and accuracy of the Mosaic narrative of creation. Hooke and his friends were also reading the notorious *Prae-Adamitae* (1655) of the Calvinist heretic Isaac La Peyrère, which hypothesised on biblical grounds that men had existed for countless aeons before Adam, and that the Bible only told of a specifically Jewish creation. As Hooke wrote in his journal in late 1675, 'To Martins and Garaways club: Ludowick, Hill, Aubery, Wild. Discoursd about Universal Character, about preadamits and of Creation.'<sup>14</sup>

The major project of this book is to investigate some of the discussions canvassed above, particularly with reference to the writings of John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* is easily the most famous exploration of the causes and consequences of the matter in Eden. In order to understand the various disputes over the Fall, we need to know where these ideas came from and how they operated in contemporary English theology and literature. Goodman's pessimism reflects the inheritance from late scholastic reactionaries, and afterwards from the early Reformers, of a predominantly Augustinian theology. It was Augustine who had systematised

ideas on the Fall and original sin in the patristic period, and who, following his disputes with Pelagius, bequeathed his harsh exegesis of Genesis 2–3 to Western theology. Although, after Anselm, Augustine's ideas were somewhat softened, and further so when combined with an Aristotelian anthropology, the early Reformers reinstated the father, and the Calvinism which underpinned the theological dimension of the English Reformation continued this emphasis. Consequently, the ninth and tenth of the Thirty-Nine Articles, 'Of original or birth sin' and 'Of free will', are more in keeping with, say, Goodman than with Hakewill, and these articles remained (and remain) unrevised.

Nevertheless, the Augustinianism of most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologies, particularly Protestant but also Catholic, found no real answers to certain problems Augustine himself had left unresolved. Augustine's central assumption had been that a perfect God ought to create perfectly, leaving the glaring logical difficulty that perfect beings should not then have behaved as Genesis 2–3 appeared to record. Augustine had in fact pointed this problem out, concluding in the *De Genesi ad litteram* that God had not made man entirely sufficient to have stood. But the reason for this momentous decision remained occluded and, at this juncture, Augustine counselled that the pious should avoid further discussion. Narrative poets like Milton who disobeyed this advice were going to have to discover and develop strategies to overcome or at least to disguise the inherited problems.

It would be simplistic, however, to see the endorsed narrative of the period as one only of the universal decline of belief in the Fall and original sin. Many, if not most, groups maintained such beliefs, and after initial rejection some (for instance the Quakers after the Restoration) even redeveloped them.<sup>15</sup> Again, La Peyrère the pre-Adamite, having wrecked the traditional reading of Genesis 1–3, nevertheless found he could not dispense with the theological importance of the first Adam and his Fall, and so was forced to create the device of 'retroimputation' of original sin *backwards* in time from Adam to the ancient pre-Adamite races, an idea Marin Mersenne for one found hard to digest.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, original sin is a very difficult concept for any Christian to dismantle, as a proper demolition job leaves Christ with not all that much to do, and many, seeing that danger, turned back. As was affirmed in the academic disputations for 1624 in Cambridge University, 'the incarnation of Christ presupposes the Fall of man into sin'.<sup>17</sup> Christ's connection to the Fall is graphically enforced by a Latin pattern-poem recorded by Abraham Fraunce in 1588:

Qu an di tri mul pa  
 os guis rus sti cedine uit  
 H san mi Chri dul la

Resolving the middle into the top and then into the bottom lines produces the sentiment 'Those whom the ill-omened serpent struck with his dire stroke / Are those whom the marvellous blood of Christ washed with its sweetness.'<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the seventeenth century did witness a combination of critiques of the Genesis narrative and the doctrines raised upon it that rendered Augustinian-derived understandings of the matter in Eden increasingly problematic: the patristic scholarship of Taylor, for instance, privileging the Eastern Church fathers for anti-Augustinian purposes; the declarations of Hobbes, Spinoza and La Peyrère concerning the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and their subsequent adoption by Père Richard Simon;<sup>19</sup> the growing conviction in some minds that the fossil record was both of organic and very ancient origin. Such critiques could be ignored, but they could not be undone.

PART I

*Fallen culture*



## CHAPTER I

### *The Fall*

In early-modern England, you could not escape the Fall. It was political: if man was fallen and wayward, how should he be governed? Was the original state of Adam as, supposedly, head and ruler of his family, holding, 'by Right of Father-hood, Royal Authority over [his] children', intrinsic justification for a patriarchalist monarchy? Was 'the desire of Liberty . . . the First Cause of the Fall of *Adam*'?<sup>1</sup> Or, asked Republicans of Patriarchalists, was Adam, created in the image of God, originally free, and in possession of political liberty, and does this apply to his progeny too? In 1649 Milton certainly said so: 'No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey: and that they liv'd so.'<sup>2</sup>

The Fall also had class implications: in a famous sermon preached late in 1662, Robert South declared that it was as difficult for us now to imagine the height of unfallen Adam's intellect 'as it is for a Peasant bred in the obscurities of a cottage, to fancy in his mind the unseen splendour of a Court'.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Defoe later claimed that 'the most noble Descendants of *Adam*'s Family, and in whom the Primogeniture remained, were really *Mechanicks*'.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Eve's role as temptress secured for her daughters particular opprobrium. As Abraham Cowley lamented:

Nay with the worst of Heathen dotage We  
(Vain Men!) the *Monster Woman Deifie*;  
Finde *Stars*, and tye our *Fates* there in a *Face*,  
And *Paradice* in them by whom we *lost* it, place.<sup>5</sup>

Not stopping at feminine inferiority because of the Fall, most commentators located such inferiority even in the state of innocence, occasionally somewhat inadvertently, as when John Salkeld protested that Eve before

the Fall wasn't frightened of snakes 'though by nature timorous and fearfull'. Alexander Ross repeated a commonplace when he said that Eve didn't mind being treated as inferior to Adam before the Fall: only fallen women, presumably, resent being dominated.<sup>6</sup> Most trenchant was John Knox, who insisted on feminine subjection because 'God by the order of his creation hath spoiled woman of authoritie and dominion'.<sup>7</sup> In many discussions of the Fall, including *Paradise Lost*, circularity thus ensues, where Eve is stated to be inferior to Adam before the Fall, and is then told afterwards that this is one of her punishments, a possible cause of the Fall thereby redefined as an effect (*PL* 4.295–9, 10.195–6). The way out of this problem, theologically, was to claim that women's inferiority is double, deriving from *both* nature *and* sin: 'One of them onely was deriued from this sinne, the other was the prerogatiue of creation.'<sup>8</sup>

Lack of any political and legal rights for women, again, was all because of Eve. Reflecting on the curse delivered to Eve in Genesis 3:16, one lawyer explained:

See here the reason . . . that Women have no voyse in Parliament, They make no Lawes, they consent to none, they abrogate none. All of them are understood either married or to be married and their desires or [*sic*] subject to their husband, I know no remedy though some women can shift it well enough. The common law here shaketh hands with divinity.<sup>9</sup>

Not all women took this kind of attitude lying down. Aemilia Lanyer, for one, devoted a section of her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* to a defence of Eve, arguing that Adam was more to blame for the Fall than Eve, who was in her inexperience 'simply good'.<sup>10</sup>

Eden and what happened in it were not, however, completely shut away in the past. The place Eden itself, though supposedly lost, intruded on the early-modern reader as a literal, mappable location. The Geneva Bible (1560) included such a map, deriving from the French text of Calvin's *Commentary on Genesis* (1553). By this point, emblematic maps in which Eden was depicted as the centre of the Universe, with Adam, Eve, tree and serpent observed by God looking down from the heavenly spheres, were giving way to geographical maps. In these, emblematic elements had been replaced by something similar to modern cartographical practice, in which a rough scale map of ancient Mesopotamia was drawn, insinuating similarity to other geographical maps.<sup>11</sup>

Though it might be locatable in this way, one could hardly deny that Eden itself had disappeared, presumably as a consequence of the Flood. But the ideal lived on, not just as a metaphor for delight, idleness,



solitariness, even death, as in Shirley's 'summer room, / Which may, so oft as I repose / Present my arbour and my tomb'.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly, and reciprocal to the Protestant affirmation that Adam and Eve worked hard in Eden, agricultural reform in early-modern England adopted corresponding terminology, often in combination with an at first incongruous, rather technical vocabulary of 'artificiall help[s]'. Thus John Beale, future FRS and current cider enthusiast, in 1657:

We do commonly devise a shadowy walk from our Gardens through our Orchards (which is the richest, sweetest, and most embellisht grove) into our Coppice-woods or Timber-woods. Thus we approach the resemblance of Paradise, which God with his own perfect hand had appropriated for the delight of his innocent Masterpiece. If a gap lyes in the way between our Orchard and our Coppice, we fill up the vacancy with the artificiall help of a hop-yard.<sup>13</sup>

Gardening provided man with a zone that could remind him of his lot before the Fall, and the many manuals for agricultural and horticultural improvement combined recollection of Eden with often Messianic expectations of salvation to come, just as biblical commentaries celebrated the perennial pleasures and duties of gardening:

As [Adam's] charge was both to dresse the garden, in planting and nourishing of trees: in which kind of husbandrie many euen now do take a delight, and hold it rather to be a recreation, then any wearines vnto them: as also to keepe it from the spoile of the beasts . . . Adam was not to liue idely in Paradise, much lesse should we spend our daies in doing of nothing.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, standing in a garden also gave opportunity for reflection, as to Ralph Austen, author of one of the most popular horticultural manuals of the century, *A Treatise of Fruit-Trees*. For Austen, tending to fruit trees allowed opportunity for lamentation and self-abasement.<sup>15</sup>

Beale's correspondent John Evelyn was one of the most enthusiastic gardeners of the age. In the difficult days just before the Restoration, Evelyn proposed to withdraw from the confusions of society, and found a utopian group who would cultivate their garden: 'a society', he said, 'of the *Paradisi Cultores*, persons of antient simplicity, paradisean and hortulan saints . . . by whome we might hope to redeeme the tyme that has bin lost'.<sup>16</sup> Unfallen Eden was supposed to be a changeless environment; Evelyn employed evergreens in his horticultural designs.<sup>17</sup> His fragmentary *Elysium Britannicum* pointedly echoed Bacon's line on God almighty first planting a garden, and elsewhere in the work Evelyn wrote with a grammatically enforced parallelism between pre- and postlapsarian opportunities: 'It was then indeede that the *Protoplast* onely remained

happy, whilst he continued in this *Paradise* of God; and, truly, as no man can be very miserable that is master of a Garden here; So no man will ever be happy, who is not sure of a Garden hereafter.<sup>18</sup> In the opening words of Evelyn's *Kalendarium hortense*, the parallelism (with carefully limiting brackets) is explicit:

As *Paradise* (though of *Gods* own Planting) was no longer *Paradise* then the *Man* was put into it, to *dress it and to keep it*; so, nor will our *Gardens* (as neer as we can contrive them to the resemblance of that blessed Abode) remain long in their *perfection*, unless they are also continually *cultivated*.<sup>19</sup>

At the other end of the political scale, the haberdasher and one-time army Agitator Roger Crab decided, in about 1652, to give away all he owned and take up the life of a hermit in his garden, where he ate 'nothing but *Roots*, and the *fruits of the Earth*, and . . . *fair Water*', as the press reported.<sup>20</sup> There he turned east, and had a vision of paradise: 'Reader, this is to let the[e] understand, when I was in my Earthly Garden, a digging with my Spade, with my face to the East side of the Garden, I saw into the *Paradise of God* from whence my Father *Adam* was cast forth . . .'<sup>21</sup>

Such partial re-enactments of paradisaical behaviour appeared in many different places. Augustine's autobiographical *Confessiones* had instigated this trend with the father's anecdote about his youthful sins, including stealing fruit from someone else's pear tree, merely 'because we would doe that which was not lawfull'. Likewise, in his partially imitative autobiography, Richard Baxter recalled how 'to concur with naughty Boys that gloried in evil, I have oft gone into other men's Orchards, and stoln their Fruit, when I had enough at home' (Baxter later recounts how he was abused in the streets of Kidderminster for preaching infant damnation as a consequence of the Fall).<sup>22</sup> Cowley, in his remarkable ode on the Royal Society, celebrated Bacon, in an inversion of the traditional ethical signatures of the Eden narrative, as a marauding orchard-robber:

With the plain magique of tru Reasons Light,  
 He chac'd out of our sight,  
 Nor suffer'd Living Men to be misled  
 By the vain shadows of the Dead:  
 To Graves, from whence it rose, the conquer'd Phantome fled;  
 He broke that Monstrous God which stood  
 In midst of th'Orchard, and the whole did claim,  
 Which with a useless Sith of Wood,  
 And something else not worth a name,  
 (Both vast for shew, yet neither fit