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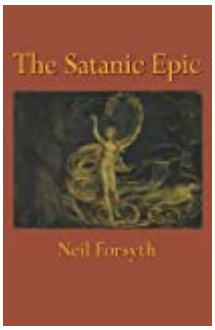

Neil Forsyth. *The Satanic Epic.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. x + 382 pp. $72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09996-5; $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-11339-5.

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Neil Forsyth's *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (1987) is a learned account of the transformations in the idea of an evil one in religious writings from the Sumerian to modern monotheisms, and particularly how it develops into the Christian notion of Satan, the fallen Lucifer. Forsyth's new book is a powerful and dense interpretation of *Paradise Lost* that pursues the implications of these earlier materials for Milton's representation of Satan, while also engaging closely with Milton's language and particularly his narrative forms.

Forsyth's argument has much in common with that put forward in William Empson's *Milton's God* (1961): Milton wrote a Satanic epic within his more orthodox one, the epic in which a heroic Satan takes arms against a God who is unreasonable, unattractive, unsympathetic, and ethically compromised. Milton criticism for decades has been inventing ways of disguising, denying, defying, or sterilizing this, trying to make the heterodox poet orthodox. So we have Stanley Fish's brilliant and massively influential account (in *Surprised by Sin*, 1967, revised 1997) of how to read the poem, an interpretation that attributes heterodox readings (Satan is heroic) to the method of an ultimately orthodox poem (God is good) that elicits sympathy for the devil in order to correct and ultimately teach the reader the process of virtuous interpretation and decision making. This is wrong, says Forsyth. Milton knows he's unorthodox: listen to his narrator, whose voice is far distant from the objective commentator of classical epic who vocalizes his own poetic authority. Milton constructs a narrator who feels sympathy for the devil, while knowing he has to distance himself from Satan. Hence he gets involved, gets upset, unconsciously confuses pronouns, posits resemblances between Satan and the Son; and hence the epic similes that so often clash with or rub against their narrative context. Milton is not the narrator, Forsyth argues, and the distance he creates enables him to put into the epic a pro-Satan reading.

The pre-Christian materials of the earlier *The Old Enemy* suggest that there is a long history of ambivalence about Satan before Augustine pins him like a display butterfly. Milton's sensitivity to the development of ancient religions, to Gnosticism, Manichaeism, and other "heresies," perhaps to the Watcher Angel story as elaborated in the *Book of Enoch*, and to classical representations of villainy is always in evidence when he reads scripture. Finding this residual ambivalence inscribed in the history of Satan, Milton offers us an alternative version. He begins (as does the myth) with the heroic version of Satan in books 1 and 2: we see him first as a character, before he turns into the combat myth's personification of evil. Milton wants us to run with this Satan for a

while, and to see his point of view, as the poet cannot be certain that Satan is completely and simply bad. So a Satanic version of events is wrapped up in a more orthodox one–this doubleness, multiple-referentiality, and ambiguity being characteristic of *Paradise Lost*–and this is Satan's and Milton's challenge to Christian orthodoxy.

Forsyth, like Empson, who mistook Milton for a Calvinist, believes the problem of the poem originates in the problem of Milton's God, and in how a decent and sane person deals with the existence of evil in a universe governed by a deity who is omnipotent, omniscient, and good. Intellectually Milton tackles it through an account of freedom, but one that occasionally gets entangled in a residual Calvinism. The Son is necessary to man's salvation, but it's hard to get away from the fact that God will know what will follow from Satan's action, and that he is therefore in some way responsible for it. Satan and the Son spring from the same apple: one as persecutor, the other as redeemer, roles which are interdependent. Time and again we find a doubling between the Son and the fallen angel. No Satan no Son. Yet Satan is the unknowing fall guy, while the Son only rises.

But Milton also deals with the problem another way, through narrative, in which lies the real theology of the poem. Narrative is paramount in the poem and its message. *Paradise Lost* describes the experience (as opposed to the doctrine) of Grace, and therefore of the opportunity to change direction. It is the story that enables us to make sense of this, and of Satan; and sympathy for his plight is necessary to this story. In *De Doctrina*, Milton's systematic theology which does not tell much of a story, Satan is scarcely mentioned. It is narrative that enables Milton to make sense of the Fall and the problem of evil. Empson, too, thought that Milton's narrative powers overcame his repugnant theology, and railed against the injustices of predestination (which Milton did not believe in). For Forsyth the honesty of narrative inheres in its ability to offer multiple accounts of that which is indeterminate, sympathetically to present other voices speaking on their own behalf, to allow the imagination to repudiate dogma.

The account of this sympathy is supported by a parallel argument about Satan's inner life. Satan is doubled, self-divided. We identify with Satan because he has a split self. According to Forsyth, Sin–born from Satan's head, resulting in narcissism and auto-eroticism–is the discovery of interiority. Satan is a projection of "our modern and divided selves" (p. 152). In this argument Forsyth dispenses with old-fashioned soteriology and theology in favor of modern identity-politics and reminders of our bourgeois condition (and of the bourgeois nature of the epic to which we relate). This is a recension of a very familiar modernization thesis. Instead of finding our own sinfulness in our identification with Satan, we find our divided selves. Welcome to modernity.

Forsyth writes very well, and he is a talented reader of *Paradise Lost.* The account of the dramatic tensions around the end of book 10 and the beginning of book 11, when Adam and Eve apparently freely repent while supported by prevenient grace, is excellent. He has an ear for classical allusion (too good for the coherence of his argument; some of the chapters read like consecutive issues of *Notes & Queries*). The account of the structure of the epic, and the revision from the ten-book 1667 version to the twelve-book structure of 1674, is strong, and ties in very well with his larger argument. Forsyth agrees with Arthur Barker that the earlier version suggests a tragic form (such as Milton had been planning in the 1630s), and that the move to the Virgilian twelve-book structure undercuts Satan's version of events; it contains him, and instead follows the divine plot. Twelve books also allow for greater permutations within and perspectives upon the epic structure. Nonetheless the two plots, divine and Satanic, are wound together; they are mirrors. We should stand full of doubt, and know, as Milton tells us in *Areopagitica* (1644), that it is hard to discern between Good and Evil, as it was for Psyche to separate the "confused seeds."

But we are meant to spit out the sour seeds. William Hazlitt was certainly right: dramatic poetry can operate through sympathy, and the sense of irreparable loss and unavailing regret we find reading Milton's Satan is perfect. But does this add up to sympathy for or with the devil, the kind of sympathy that seduces us and half-persuades us that his point of view is right? Forsyth is right that it is in the nature of narrative to present moral decisions and politics and theology in profoundly and disturbingly complex ways, but the narrative of Satan, his wonderful speeches and pathetic resistance to pain and logic, is not irreconcilable with the other narratives of the poem. Nor is it irreconcilable with seventeenth-century theology, which often (particularly if one considers sermons and practical theology as opposed to the systematic theology that structures *De Doctrina*) explores Satan's motivation, and responds to his near-presence and the invasive threat he poses to the believer, while remaining rather bland on the subject of God and angels. *Paradise Lost* is in many ways representative of early-modern religious writing.

But it is not conventional on theological grounds, and here Forsyth's rhetoric of orthodoxy and heterodoxy is misleading. What or who is orthodoxy? Adherence to the Apostles', Athanasian, and Nicene creeds? You will not find that in *Paradise Lost* unless you really want to. Reading *Paradise Lost* as pro-Satan cannot be defined as heterodox, any more than reading it as Anglican can be described as an orthodoxy. Judging by recent debates about the authorship of *De Doctrina*, it is more likely to be the other way around, though the terms risk confusion with seventeenth-century arguments about heresy. I suspect that most Miltonists want to be heterodox these days, even those who think Satan is a bad thing, one reason why some modern scholarship has been devoted to the complexities of Milton's peculiar theology. These suggest a further ground on which *The Satanic Epic* is unsatisfying. In accordance with the prevailing tendencies in Milton criticism (there are many references to the blunders of "most critics" in the book), Forsyth detects explicit political references within the poem, e.g. the war in heaven as the civil wars of Britain. Variously, however, he subordinates theology to politics, by identifying politics as the deciding factor between competing religious traditions and positions. The religious contexts offered are ancient; too often the contemporary contexts are simply and narrowly political. Forsyth does not account for the messiness of history, the state of seventeenth-century scholarship, confessional disputes and the spread of post-Reformation heresies, communities of belief, the way politics and religion are scarcely separable. Religion, for Forsyth, is always still embedded in its ancient origins; as a way of understanding the world it is largely separate from politics. Religion is old, politics is new; and when Forsyth sees conflict, what is at stake in a theological or exegetical disagreement is probably politics. Ironically, he may therefore understate the role of religion in Milton's imagination.

Heterodox Forsyth's reading may not be, though to my mind it is wrong. He does not have Empson's ability to wrongfoot the reader, and leave her, though doubtful, impressed at his form, but it is nonetheless a rich and intensely scholarly book. The reading is eloquently presented: precise, patient, witty. The conclusion brings home the complexity of the deployment of signs and portents, as metaphors and narrative elements, in the poem, and, provided one overlooks the denuded cultural context of superstition and faith in providence, it emphatically makes Forsyth's point about the double-narrative of *Paradise Lost*.

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