THE COMPLETE TEXT

UNABRIDGED

John Milton

Paradise Lost

Read by

Anton Lesser

AudioBooks

NA935012D

1	Book 1 – The Argument	3:20
2	Book 1	44:25
3	Book 2 – The Argument …	2:11
4	Book 2	1:00:19
5	Book 3 – The Argument	3:08
6	Book 3	44:13
7	Book 4 – The Argument	3:00
8	Book 4	59:44
9	Book 5 – The Argument	2:08
10	Book 5	51:00
11	Book 6 – The Argument	2:05
12	Book 6	52:07
13	Book 7 – The Argument	1:25
14	Book 7	34:48
15	Book 8 – The Argument	1:25
16	Book 8	37:35
17	Book 9 – The Argument	2:57
18	Book 9	1:10:51
19	Book 10 – The Argument	3:16
20	Book 10	1:02:57
21	Book 11 – The Argument	1:38
22	Book 11	53:47
23	Book 12 – The Argument	1:42
24	Book 12	42:02

Total time: 10:42:03

John Milton

Paradise Lost

John Milton:Life and Background

John Milton signed the copyright for *Paradise Lost* in 1667; in the same year, Sir Christopher Wren laid his first plans for the new St Paul's Cathedral. *Paradise Lost* is probably the greatest artistic expression of the Puritan cause, while St Paul's is arguably the finest Baroque monument in England; Milton's epic was written after the end of the Puritan revolution, but Wren's cathedral points towards the new age of reason and the confident expansion of English power into almost all corners of the globe. Yet, if *Paradise Lost* seemed in its own age to be the relic of an earlier, now discredited system of values, it has come to be recognised as a unique and extraordinary masterpiece, the last and greatest of the English epics.

Although first printed in 1667, it is likely that Milton had finished the poem as early as 1663 and we know from surviving notes that he first contemplated writing *Paradise Lost* as early as 1640. Milton was determined from a relatively early age to write an epic of some sort: among other ideas, he seems to have been particularly keen on an Arthurian epic which would use the 'Matter of Britain' as a way of expressing his concept of national and religious destiny. So, in a sense, *Paradise Lost* was twenty years in the making, even if the writing of it occupied him for only a few of those years. Those two decades – 1640-1660 – proved to be among the most momentous in English history, and Milton played an active and only partly literary role in them.

He was born in 1608 in Cheapside, London, to a father who worked as a scribe and was a talented musician. He went from St Paul's School to Christ's College, Cambridge at the tender age of 14. Nicknamed the 'Lady of Christ's', he seems to have been known for a certain *hauteur* and pedantic 'niceness of nature', as he himself later put it. His intention was to take holy orders, but he was already producing poetry of marked maturity and control, climaxing in his *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* of 1629, the year in which he received his BA. Milton devoted the next few years to furthering his education and to travelling – he met the officially disgraced

'So numberless were those bad Angels,
Hovering on wing, under the cope of Hell'
(Book I, lines 344, 345)

Galileo in Florence. On his return to England he became increasingly involved in the composition of trenchantly argued pamphlets defending freedoms and attacking (for example) episcopacy – the structure of the Church of England based on bishops. By now Milton was a convinced Parliamentarian: his marriage in 1642 to Mary Powell was soon disrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War, when her Royalist parents demanded her return. They were not to be reunited until 1645. Although his life was complicated by increasing blindness, Milton was appointed by Cromwell to the important post of Latin Secretary in 1649, the year of Charles I's execution. Later he would be assisted by his distinguished fellow-poet Andrew Marvell. Having given him three daughters, his first wife died in 1652; his second wife, Katherine Woodcock, died in 1658, but his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, whom he married in 1663, survived him.

Paradise Lost: its Composition

As Milton sensed the collapse of the Commonwealth established by Cromwell and the imminent restoration of the monarchy, he composed *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, but it was to no avail and within months he had gone into hiding. He was found and arrested, but, partly through the intercession of friends, he was released upon the payment of a modest fine. Now he had the time and inclination to return to his old project: the composition of *Paradise Lost*. He probably began the writing in 1658 and he may have finished it by 1663 but, as noted above, the copyright was not signed for another four years, in 1667. If he did indeed take only five years to write *Paradise Lost*, it is a remarkable tribute to his intellectual grasp, especially when we consider his blindness and his method of composition, which was to dictate about forty lines in the morning, the lines having (he claimed) come to him in his sleep by divine inspiration. Milton's last years were devoted mainly to the production of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* (printed together in 1671).

Milton's aim in *Paradise Lost* was nothing less than to '…assert eternal providence/ And justify the ways of God to men.' He believed that he was '[pursuing]/ Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.' In other words, Milton intended to tell the story of Man's creation, fall and redemption in such a way that his readers might be moved to appreciate and understand God's wise purposes. *Paradise Lost* is, in a sense, the Christian version of history retold and explained. Milton's classical education made

him eager to model his own epic on the great primary epics of Homer (the *Odyssey* and *The Iliad*) and on Virgil's *Aeneid*. Thus he arranges *Paradise Lost* in twelve books; so also he begins *in medias res* (in the middle of the action); and he is careful to adopt a form and style which befit the dignity of his material. In Book I, for example, Milton gives a catalogue of the devils, listing the forms they took in later history as pagan gods – Moloch the arch-devil becomes the god by whom Solomon was led astray. This catalogue is modelled on the list of Greek ships in Homer's *Iliad* (Book II). Like his predecessors, Milton employs 'flashbacks' as well as visions of the future to extend the scope of his epic, which is centred around the story of Adam and Eve: by this means he is able to tell a gripping and tragic tale while at the same time providing a context which reassures the reader that 'all shall be well' under the mantle of God's providence.

Paradise Lost: the Arguments

Milton added an 'Argument' to each book shortly after the first copies were printed. These act as plot summaries but also provide useful indicators of Milton's larger, thematic intentions.

Book I: 'This first Book proposes, first in brief, the whole Subject, Man's disobedience, and the loss thereupon of Paradise wherein he was plac't: Then touches the prime cause of his fall, the Serpent, or rather Satan in the Serpent; who revolting from God, and drawing to his side many Legions of Angels, was by the command of God driven out of Heaven with all his Crew into the great Deep…' Having thus vividly sketched the events immediately preceding, Milton plunges into the action with a description of Satan and his followers rousing themselves from the fiery lake on which they lie. Satan urges the fallen angels into order and tells them that they may yet recover Heaven, and that they should in any case strive to discover the truth of a prophecy which foretold the creation of a 'new World and new kind of Creature'. With renewed hope the Palace of Pandemonium is built and a council of war decreed.

Book II: The second Book begins with the 'Great Consult', a cleverly managed debate in which Satan allows various colleagues to suggest different strategies – one is for a renewal of open war with heaven, while another suggests 'ignoble sloth' – and then, with Beelzebub as his faithful 'stooge', proposes the most dangerous yet attractive option, an expedition to discover the

whereabouts and nature of this rumoured new world and to find some way of subverting it. Satan himself heroically volunteers for this task when the other devils shrink from it. He sets off to Hell Gates where he must persuade his son Death and daughter Sin, keepers of the Gates, to let him pass. Then he faces the ordeal of passing through Chaos, 'this wild Abyss,/ The Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave'. At last Satan is able to view not only Heaven, once his home, but also 'hanging in a golden Chain/ This pendant world, in bigness as a Star/ Of smallest Magnitude close by the Moon.'

Book III: The Book opens with Milton's famous invocation of heavenly light, made poignant by the contrast with his own blindness: 'but thou/ Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain/ To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn…' Yet Milton suggests that, with God's help, he 'may see and tell/ Of things invisible to mortal sight'. God, having seen Satan making his way towards Earth, tells his Son that Satan will be successful in his bid to pervert Mankind, but that Man will be offered grace because he was 'seduced' rather than acting out 'of his own malice'. God is also careful to explain that he himself will not *cause* Adam and Eve to fall: they will fall only after the exercise of free will. Nevertheless Man, previously immortal, must be punished by death, as will all his descendants unless someone offers to take Man's penalty upon himself. This the Son of God undertakes to perform; God accepts the offer; and the Angels unite in praise of God and his Son. Meanwhile Satan is prowling around the purlieus of Heaven, Earth and the Sun. The angel Uriel, unaware of Satan's true identity, directs Satan towards Earth, where he duly alights on Mount Niphates.

Book IV: As Satan approaches Eden itself he is almost overwhelmed by self-doubt and memories of his former, better self; but he returns by an effort of will to his original plan, vowing that henceforth 'Evil be thou my Good'. He arrives in Paradise and wonders enviously at the beauty and happiness of Adam and Eve. Eavesdropping, he discovers that their one prohibition is to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, and so vows to persuade them to it. Uriel's suspicion of Satan has been aroused by his 'furious gestures in the Mount', and he informs Gabriel, who in turn appoints Ithuriel and Zephon as guardians of Adam and Eve. Too late to prevent Satan from instilling a dangerous dream into Eve's ear, they expel Satan temporarily from Paradise.

'Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite dispair?'
(Book IV, lines 73, 74)

Book V: When Eve awakes she recounts to Adam her disturbing dream of temptation; he reassures her. Together they sing a hymn of praise to God: 'These are thy glorious works, Parent of good'. God – 'to render Man inexcusable' – sends Raphael to warn Adam and to explain the workings of free will and predestination. If Adam and Eve sin now, they will have no excuse… Raphael begins an account of Satan's history, 'from his first revolt in Heaven, and the occasion thereof'. Thus Milton initiates a lengthy 'flashback' which will extend through Books VI, VII and VIII.

Book VI: Raphael continues the story of Satan's revolt. God sends Michael and Gabriel to lead his forces. The first battle is inconclusive. On the second day, the 'devilish Engines…put Michael and his Angels to some disorder', but they respond by pulling up mountains to neutralise the rebels' power. Still the outcome is undecided; but God in his wisdom has already ordained that his Son, the Messiah, shall have the glory of victory. So, on the third day, the Messiah draws up his legions in motionless ranks before launching a single-handed assault, driving straight at the foe 'with his Chariot and Thunder'. He pursues the rebels towards the wall of Heaven over which they are forced to leap 'with horrour and confusion into the place of punishment prepar'd for them in the Deep'. Thus the story has been brought back to the point in Book I where the action of the poem began, with Satan rousing himself and his fellow fallen angels from the lake of fire in Hell.

Book VII: At the half-way point of his epic, Milton begins with an invocation of Urania, classical Muse of Astronomy but here representing God's power to inspire and help the struggling artist. He refers again to his own circumstances, describing the hostile post-Restoration world in which he must live and work: '…though fall'n on evil days, / On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues;/ In darkness, and with dangers compast round,/ And solitude; yet not alone, while thou/ Visit'st my slumbers Nightly, or when Morn / Purples the East…' Adam asks Raphael to tell him how and why this world was first created. Raphael explains that God, having expelled Satan and his fellow rebels from Heaven, desired to create a new world populated by new creatures. His Son was sent with a team of angels to 'perform the work of Creation in six days'. Raphael ends by reminding Adam that death is the penalty for eating of the Tree of Knowledge.

Book VIII: Adam now 'inquires concerning celestial Motions' and receives an evasive answer, being advised instead to 'search rather things more worthy of knowledge'. Raphael's 'doubtful' answer almost certainly reflects the controversy raging in Milton's day over the two contrasting views of the universe, the modern Copernican and the older Ptolemaic. Adam enjoys Raphael's company and tells him his own story, relating all he can remember since his own creation. He especially dwells on the loneliness he first experienced and how, in conversation with God, he begged for a companion and helpmeet, which of course God graciously granted in the form of Eve. Adam and Raphael discuss relationships between men and women until Raphael makes to depart, offering a final warning to 'take heed lest Passion sway/ Thy Judgement'. This, of course, confirms the need for male rationality to control female passion.

Book IX: Milton heralds the approaching dramatic climax by announcing that he 'now must change/ Those notes to tragic'; he must describe 'revolt and disobedience' on Man's part, followed by 'judgement giv'n/ That brought into this World a world of woe,/ Sin and her shadow Death, and Misery/ Death's harbinger'. Satan, having circled the world, now penetrates Paradise 'involv'd in rising mist', and enters the sleeping serpent. Meanwhile Eve suggests that she and Adam should work separately today, as being more productive, but Adam at first forbids this, claiming that she would be vulnerable to the enemy. Eve, however, stubbornly insists, claiming that if she is tempted she will be able to prove her steadfast virtue by resisting. Adam yields the point. Eve is found alone by Satan, who cunningly winds his way into her favour, asserting that his power of speech came from eating of the forbidden Tree and suggesting that, if she were to eat also, she would become as a goddess. He leads her to the Tree and there persuades her to eat. Delighted with the taste, she decides, after some deliberation, to share her new knowledge with her partner and hurries to Adam. He is at first profoundly shocked but eventually agrees to eat also, so that he may at least share in her fate. Nature is shaken to its foundations by this double treachery. At first Adam and Eve are drunk with the pleasure of knowledge, but before long they fall to mutual recrimination.

Book X: The Guardian Angels return to Heaven in order to defend their failure to keep Satan out of Eden; God acknowledges that they are not to blame. The Son is sent down to pass sentence on the guilty pair:

Eve must bear children in sorrow, submitting to her husband's will, while Adam must henceforth labour on the land to produce their food: 'in the sweat of thy Face shalt thou eat Bread'. Both are condemned to die, though not yet. Before he returns to Heaven the Son takes pity on their shameful nakedness and clothes them. Sin and Death, still waiting at the Gates of Hell, sense the great changes on Earth and resolve to follow their father Satan. They create a vast bridge spanning Chaos but meet the returning Satan before they have set out. Satan arrives at Pandemonium to boast of his success, but instead of applause is greeted by a general hiss: both he and his fellows have been temporarily turned into serpents, fulfilling the judgement passed on him in Paradise. In reaching to eat of an illusory Tree of Knowledge which springs up before them, they taste instead 'dust and bitter ashes'. In Heaven, God predicts the Messiah's final victory over Satan, but meanwhile must bring mortality and seasonality to the previously unchanging Earth. Adam laments his fallen state and cannot at first be comforted by Eve. She then proposes suicide, which prompts Adam to look more optimistically to the future and to seek God's forgiveness.

Book XI: Books XI and XII complement V, VI and VII: just as they looked back to events preceding the creation of the Earth, so these look forward and recount the principal narratives of the Old Testament as well as the redemptive life and death of the Son of God. In XI, the Messiah perceives the penitence of Adam and Eve and intercedes with God on their behalf. God accepts these intercessions but nevertheless insists that they must be expelled from Paradise. The angel Michael is sent down with a team of Cherubim to 'drive out the sinful pair', but with instructions first to explain in brief the future history of the world. Michael discovers a mournful and repentant Eve who yet believes that she and Adam may be allowed to stay in Paradise, even if condemned to hard labour. Michael delivers their sentence, but then takes Adam to the summit of a high hill and shows him in a vision what is to come, beginning with the first murder – the killing of Abel by Cain, both sons of Adam. Further human evils – all the product of Adam and Eve's original sin – are revealed, ending with the story of Noah and the Flood.

Book XII: Michael continues his summary of what we would call Old Testament history. His mention of Abraham leads him eventually to explain 'who that Seed of the

'Leaning, half raised, with looks of cordial love,
Hung over her enamoured'
(Book V, lines 12, 13)

Woman shall be, which was promised Adam and Eve in the Fall': in other words, the Messiah. Michael concludes his account with Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension. Adam is greatly comforted by this assurance that his and Eve's error will ultimately lead to such a good outcome. Michael and Adam descend the hill to wake Eve, who has meanwhile been enjoying a consoling dream. Taking them by the hand, Michael leads the pair out of Paradise: they shed some tears, but

> 'The World was all before them, where to choose
> Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through Eden took thir solitary way.'

Paradise Lost: Language, Style and Form

When Milton added the Arguments to each Book, shortly after the poem's first printing, he also provided a prefatory note on 'The Verse'. It begins: 'The measure is English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin; Rime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially, but the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Metre…' This typically dogmatic, even aggressive piece of self-justification is nevertheless persuasive: it *is* difficult, in English certainly, to write an extended, serious poem in rhyme. Over a long period the rhyme begins to draw attention to itself and its chiming regularity proves a distraction. Augustan rhyming translations of Homer (Alexander Pope's, for example) soon begin to pall, however skilfully written, whereas William Cowper's unrhymed versions (from the late 18th century) maintain an appropriate dignity throughout.

We would nowadays describe Milton's chosen form as *blank verse*: in other words, unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter – the most popular line in English verse – means that each line contains ten syllables, of which every second syllable is stressed. This is the staple form of all Shakespeare's plays. It has the advantage of resembling normal speech rhythms more closely than any other metre: consider how quickly we forget in the theatre (if we ever notice) that most of Shakespeare is in verse.

Milton's avoidance of rhyme means that the end of each line is less obvious; like Shakespeare, he makes frequent use of run-on lines where the reader must keep the voice up, often waiting for the appearance of the main verb which 'resolves' the sentence (rather in the manner of music). For example, the main verb ('Sing') of the

very first sentence of *Paradise Lost* does not appear until the beginning of the sixth line:
(line 1) Of Man's First Disobedience…
(line 6) …Sing, heavenly Muse
Or Milton can introduce the main verb early and then focus on drawing out the description to match (in the next instance) the physical fall from heaven of Satan and his devils, using several successive run-on lines to suggest the vertiginous length of their descent, finally and characteristically adding a scathing sideswipe aimed at their foolish and wicked presumption:

'…Him the Almighty Power
Hurled headlong flaming from th'Ethereal Sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,
Who durst defy th'Omnipotent to Arms.'

These last lines give some impression of Milton's 'Grand Style'. You may notice the effective use of alliteration, and the adjectival emphasis, sometimes ('headlong flaming') working in pairs. Milton is especially in love with exotic proper nouns and the associations which they so resonantly conjure:

'As when far off at Sea a Fleet descri'd
Hangs in the Clouds, by Equinoctial Winds
Close sailing from Bengala, or the Isles
Of Ternate and Tidore, whence Merchants bring
Thir spicy Drugs: they on the trading Flood
Through the wide Ethiopian to the Cape
Ply stemming nightly towards the Pole.'

Just as Milton wants to suggest the universality of his history in *Paradise Lost*, so also with geography: the whole earth, in all its historical and geographical diversity, is his subject.

The last example may also serve as an instance of Milton's use of the 'epic simile'. This is a comparison which is developed at some length and which is designed to bring into proximity with Milton's immediate subject-matter ideas, places and events from human experience with which we can readily associate. In the above example, Milton compares Satan's exploratory flight with the way in which a spice-laden fleet, seen at a distance, seems to float in the clouds over the horizon. The simile may also be read as symbolising the dangerous appeal of the 'goods' (or 'evils') which Satan is carrying towards Eden. Another example may make this clearer: in Book I, Satan's huge bulk, lying 'prone on the Flood', is compared to Leviathan (the whale),

'…which God of all his works
Created hugest that swim th'Ocean stream:

Him haply slumb'ring on the Norway foam
The Pilot of some small night-founder'd Skiff,
Deeming some Island, oft, as Sea-men tell,
With fixed Anchor in his scaly rind
Moors by his side under the Lee, while Night
Invests the Sea, and wished Morn delays:
So stretch'd out huge in length the Arch-fiend
lay…'

Of course the size of the whale, familiar to us, helps us to imagine the sheer mass of Satan, but the comparison is also apt because, Milton implies, so many misguided human beings place their deluded trust in Satan – dangerously, they 'fix anchor' in him, 'moor by his side', instead of believing and trusting in God.

Milton invented a highly original (and – in some critics' opinion – highly artificial) style for *Paradise Lost*. It is impressive, and in some ways impressionistic: he is perhaps stronger on general atmosphere than concrete precision of description, for example. In his use of delayed main verbs and liking for the etymologically original meaning of words he may be seen as Latinate – for example, when Milton uses the adjective 'horrid' he means 'bristling' rather than 'nasty' – and he is undoubtedly obscure and difficult at times because of his tendency towards ellipsis and long, complex sentences with numerous subordinate clauses. But, well read, *Paradise Lost* generates a cumulative power and magnetism unlike anything else in English literature.

Paradise Lost and its critics

Even though Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* in a hostile intellectual and religious climate, it was not long before genuine appreciation was expressed. John Dryden, a pioneering Augustan of the new age, declared in 1677 that *Paradise Lost* was 'one of the greatest, most noble and sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced'. His admiration did not, however, prevent him from producing a rhymed version of the poem – although it has to be said that Dryden was, in any case, a great re-writer, creating (for example) *All For Love*, his 'take' on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Milton – and especially the Milton of *Paradise Lost* – was hugely influential in the eighteenth century: even when writing in rhyming couplets, the Augustans found Milton's grandly poetic diction almost impossible to resist. Samuel Johnson, the first really important literary critic in English, writing in about 1780, praises the scope and grandeur of the poem: 'the characteristic quality of his poem is sublimity. He sometimes descends to the elegant, but his element is the great. He can occasionally

'To whom the winged Hierarch replied:
O Adam, one Almighty is, from whom
All things proceed' (Book V, lines 468-470)

invest himself with grace; but his natural port is gigantick loftiness. He can please when pleasure is required; but it is his peculiar power to astonish.' Few readers would disagree with that verdict. But Johnson is also critical of *Paradise Lost*, claiming that it is hard for us to empathise with Adam and Eve since they 'are in a state which no other man or woman can ever know', and that 'the want of human interest is always felt'. On the other hand, Johnson approves of the rich texture of allusion and comparison that Milton weaves into his narrative: 'Milton was able to select from nature, or from story, from ancient fable, or from modern science, whatever could illustrate or adorn his thoughts'.

Even the Romantics found Milton difficult to avoid: while wishing themselves to adopt 'the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes' (Wordsworth: Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*), they could not help using the Miltonic idiom in their more serious or philosophical poems, such as *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's epic account of 'the growth of a poet's mind'. In addition, Milton became for the radical, freedom-loving Romantics a hero, even if some of his religious and sexual beliefs hardly corresponded with theirs. Wordsworth addresses a sonnet to him in 1807, seeing in him an icon of integrity in a corrupt world:

'Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee…'

Byron is rather more ambivalent:

'Milton's the prince of poets – so we say;
A little heavy, but no less divine…'

John Keats' debt to Milton is clear from the magnificent fragment *Hyperion* which (almost alone amongst later poems) sees a successful use of Miltonic blank verse.

Perhaps most interesting is William Blake's attitude. Blake the visionary poet and artist responded both visually and verbally: we have the 1808 illustrations to *Paradise Lost*, but we also have his own reworking of Milton's 'mythology' in the poem *Milton,* where Blake sees himself as Milton's successor, imbued with his spirit in the modern world, seeking to defeat the destructive forces of rationalism (represented here by Bacon, Locke and Newton). Blake is famously radical in his interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, claiming that Milton 'wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and Gods, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell…because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it'. In other words, Milton unconsciously sympathised with the rebel Satan and his followers because they

articulated a gospel of human freedom set against the tyrannical control exerted by the traditional Judaeo-Christian deity.

For much of the nineteenth century literary analysis of *Paradise Lost* follows a predictably favourable line: given that the Victorian era witnessed a long drawn-out battle between, on the one hand, traditional versions of the Christian faith and the twin challenges posed by historical Bible criticism and Darwinism on the other, those arguing for 'Faith' were usually happy enough to have Milton on their side. Only when we reach the (perhaps) more complicated and sophisticated world of twentieth-century criticism is the Milton debate re-ignited, fuelled by F R Leavis and T S Eliot as the sceptics, C S Lewis as the defender of Milton the religious poet and Christopher Ricks as advocate for Milton's style. Eliot shocked the critical establishment by daring to suggest that Milton as a poet – and especially the poet of *Paradise Lost* – had exercised a damaging influence on later poets by persuading them to use a mechanical and artificial language which depends on a specialised kind of rhetoric rather than either retaining a close connection with the language of common speech or showing a capacity to create vivid and precise pictures. Indeed, Eliot says that he prefers to read those passages in which there is least to visualise: 'the eye is not shocked in his twilit Hell as it is in the Garden of Eden, where I for one can get pleasure from the verse only by the deliberate effort not to visualise Adam and Eve and their surroundings.' For Eliot, Milton had stretched English almost to breaking point in developing his own style. F R Leavis, writing like Eliot in 1936, claims that 'so complete, and so mechanically habitual, is Milton's departure from the English order, structure and accentuation that he often produces passages that have to be read through several times before one can see how they go, though the Miltonic mind has nothing to offer that could justify obscurity – no obscurity was intended: it is merely that Milton has forgotten the English language…Milton forfeits all possibility of subtle or delicate life in his verse.' These are severe comments indeed, and ones that have been vehemently contested, although it seems to me pointless to deny that both these great critics have at least some right on their side: Milton *is* often obscure, he *does* frequently stretch the possibilities of understanding, and delicate effects do not come easily to him.

In terms of theology as well as style, C S Lewis has countered Milton's critics with his own trenchantly argued *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). Lewis sees Milton's rhetoric as largely beneficial and, indeed,

'Back to the thicket slunk
The guilty serpent'
(Book IX, lines 784, 785)

‘Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon’
(Book XII, line 645)

essential: Milton, having a right and reasonable cause to plead, must deploy all his linguistic and intellectual resources to take us with him. For him, too, syntactical ambiguity and complexity are likewise appropriate in their difficulty and, where not understood, are at any rate capable of creating a powerful sense of *struggle* towards meaning – just as Satan, Adam, Eve and others must 'struggle' to understand both themselves and the events in which they are caught up.

Christopher Ricks remains one of our most brilliant contemporary critics, and his book *Milton's Grand Style* seeks to establish that Milton's style is far more than merely 'grand' – a point already well made by the Victorian Matthew Arnold when he observed that Milton 'is our one first-rate master in the grand style'. Ricks wishes to show the reader that Milton was also capable of extraordinary control and variety in his use of rhythm; that apparently perverse or tortured syntax (word order) might in fact be sharply evocative of something real; and that Milton's use of epic simile is brilliantly economical rather than self-indulgent. To end with a specific example from Book V: when Eve is arguing for a chance to work independently of Adam in the Garden, she closes her speech with the plaintive words:

'Thoughts, which how found they harbour
in thy brest,
Adam, missthought of her to thee so dear?'

Ricks goes on to defend these lines by saying: 'The lines are admittedly tortuous, and they may well use a foreign idiom. But perhaps they *use* it, rather than merely copy it. Is tortuousness out of keeping here? Eve is hurt by Adam's 'unkindness', and she is also keen to get her own way. She starts naturally enough with 'Thoughts, which…', and then breaks across with the indignation of a more direct syntax, a hurt question: 'how found they harbour in thy brest?' And then, with a fine austereness, she condemns the thoughts as *missthought*, and ends with the time-honoured appeal, 'how could you think such things of me?' – 'missthought of her to thee so dear'. The word-order unfolds with admirable psychological truth, and it combines in exactly the right proportions the pathos, the indignation and the tearfulness.'

So we are reminded of Milton's extraordinary range: his great epic reveals an intensely poignant awareness of human frailty as well as conjuring vistas of the moral and physical universe which the poet so urgently wishes us to understand.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside

The music on this CD taken from the NAXOS catalogue

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Music programmed by Sarah Butcher

Engravings by Gustave Doré.

Anton Lesser has worked extensively at the National Theatre and is an Associate Artist of the RSC where he has played over the years many of the principal Shakespearean roles including Troilus, Romeo, Petruchio and Richard III. His many appearances on television include *The Cherry Orchard*, *King Lear*, *The Politician's Wife, Invasion Earth* and *Vanity Fair*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has also read *The Iliad, The Odyssey*, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin and Other Favourite Poems*, *Paradise Lost*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Old Testament*, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, *The Pickwick Papers, David Copperfield,Oliver Twist, Nicolas Nickleby* and takes the title role in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

Cover picture: Adam with Eve by William Blake courtesy of AKG

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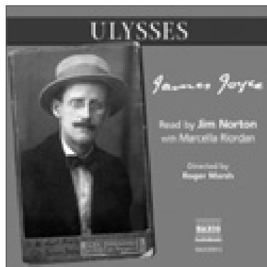

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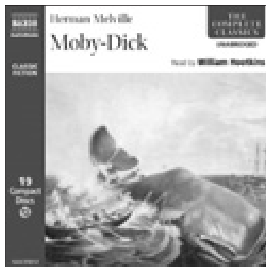

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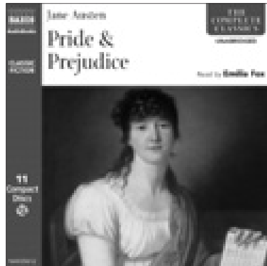

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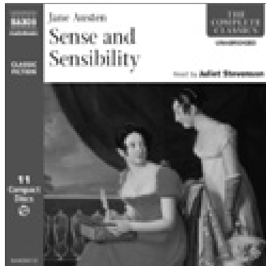

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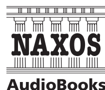

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