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# Milton's Treatment of the Eucharistic Sacrament in *Paradise Lost*

by Bev Byford

As the late C. A. Patrides points out in *Milton and the Christian Tradition*, *Paradise Lost* is not a theological treatise, but it is a religious poem. More to the point, it is a "Christian Protestant Poem" (5). As a Christian poem, *Paradise Lost* offers a dynamic network of contrasts: good vs. evil, love vs. hate, humility vs. pride, reason vs. passion, servitude vs. freedom, and the Son vs. Satan. A less obvious, yet equally compelling, contrast is that between the two meals that occur in the epic. These two meals are set in opposition to one another and used, I believe, to illustrate the radical difference between the Puritan form of the Communion Service and the Communion ritual of the Roman Catholic Church.

Although Milton claims (through inspiration from a "Heav'nly Muse") to "assert Eternal Providence, / And justifie the wayes of God to men" (*Paradise Lost*, 1.6, 1.25-26), I believe that he used these two meals to weave into his great epic his own particular point of view concerning the controversy surrounding the nature of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Patrides reminds us that while "assuredly the coincidence of Catholic and Protestant ideas [in *Paradise Lost*] are of considerable significance," their differences are of greater importance, "and to disregard them is to distort our understanding of the order of ideas characteristic of the seventeenth century" (5).

The question of the nature of the sacrament of the Eucharist was for Milton and his contemporaries "the subject of harsh debate involving not only clamorous exchange between Protestants and Catholics but thunderous attacks of Protestant upon Protestant" (217). Martin Luther believed in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but he repudiated transubstantiation, the Catholic belief in the literal *transformation* of the bread and wine into Christ. In Luther's doctrine of Consubstantiation the presence of the Body and Blood of Christ is retained, but they *coexist* with the bread and wine. According to Powers, Luther insisted that transubstantiation "was the invention of Aquinas without foundation in scripture or tradition" (33).

A brief historical survey will give the background of this debate.

The English Reformation under Henry VIII (1509-1547) was more political than religious. His church retained many Catholic practices and doctrines including the doctrine of transubstantiation (McKay 494). His successor, Mary Tudor (1553-1558) brought Catholicism back to England with a vengeance. Her policy of persecution, including the execution of several hundred Protestants, alienated many of her subjects (McKay 494). Her successor, Elizabeth I (1558-1603), a shrewd politician, didn't much care what her subjects believed as long as they were quiet about it. Her succession to the throne in 1558 generated the beginnings of religious stability in England. However a number of returning English exiles, forced to flee the country under Mary Tudor, wanted *all* Catholic elements in the English Church removed. Because they wanted the Church "purified," they were called Puritans. The Puritans of England were strongly influenced by Ulrich Zwingli of Germany and John Calvin of Switzerland, religious reformers who refuted the doctrine of transubstantiation (Strayer 383). Both men "maintained that Christ is only symbolically and figuratively present in the Eucharist" (Powers 35). John Milton agreed with Zwingli and Calvin. Using food as an analogy for grace or knowledge of God, Milton used the two meals in *Paradise Lost* to illustrate, from the Puritan point of view, the proper and the improper means of mankind's reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The first meal occurs when Raphael comes to warn Adam and Eve of Satan's intention to destroy their happiness. Following the tradition of hospitality derived from both scripture and classical epics, Milton has Adam welcome his guest to rest "in yonder shadie Bowre" (5.367), "To sit and taste, till this meridian heat / Be over, and the Sun more coole decline" (5.369-70).<sup>1</sup> Serving a guest food not only exemplifies the virtue of hospitality, it is also an action symbolic of a union between guest and host. The simple but ample meal served to honor Adam's and Eve's "god-like Guest" (5.351) celebrates the wholesome relationship between humanity and God.

As a proper hostess, Eve tells Adam: ". . . I will haste and from each bough and brake, / Each Plant & juiciest Gourd will pluck such choice / To entertain our Angel guest" (5.326-28). Milton's use of the word "pluck" here is significant. The food that Eve "plucks" for *this* meal is from the bountiful and varied supply of nourishment given to them by a loving and caring God to serve their needs and ensure their happiness. It is proper food. Her choice of food here prefigures her choice in the later meal in which she "pluck'd" improper food (9.781).

This meal becomes theologically suggestive when the narrator says:

So down they sat,  
 And to thir viands fell, nor seemingly  
 The Angel, nor in mist, the common gloss  
 Of Theologians, but with keen dispatch  
 Of real hunger, and concoctive heate  
 To Transubstantiate. . . . (5.433-38)

There are two related but distinctly different meanings of the word "transubstantiate." Milton uses the first definition, that is: "the change of one substance into another, (Oxford English Dictionary) to refute the second:

The conversion in the Eucharist of the whole substance of the bread into the body and of the wine into the blood of Christ. Only the appearances (and other accidents) of the bread and wine remaining: according to the doctrine of the Roman Church. (Oxford English Dictionary)

Although the term, "transubstantiation," is not biblical, the idea it expresses is as old as is Christian revelation (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* 259). In Jurgen's three-volume text, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, one can trace the development of the doctrine. Ignatius of Antioch (117 A.D.) points out that the Eucharist is the Savior's flesh (I.64.6,2). Justin (165 A.D.) writes: "the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic Prayer set down by Him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nourished, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus" (I.128.66). Gregory of Nyssa (394 A.D.) wrote: "These things [the changing of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ] He [God] bestows through the power of the blessings which transforms the nature of the visible things to that of the immortal" (II.1035.37). John Chrysostom (407 A.D.), after testifying that Christ Himself through His priest causes the bread and wine to be made His Body and Blood, adds that the formula, "This is my body," transforms the Eucharistic elements (II.1157.1,6). A similar account is found in the writings of Ambrose (397 A.D.): "As often as we receive the sacramental elements which through the mystery of the sacred prayer are transformed into the flesh and blood of the Lord, we proclaim the death of the Lord" (II.1270.). Cyril of Alexandria (444 A.D.) also used the word "transform" instead of "transubstantiate":

... by some secret of the all-powerful God the things seen are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, truly offered in a sacrifice in which we, as participant, receive the life-giving and sanctifying power of Christ. (III.2101)

By the end of the seventh century, the doctrine of transubstantiation was understood throughout Christendom. Controversy was provided, however, by Berengarius of Tours (1086), who denied the Eucharistic conversion and (much like Milton) advocated a purely spiritual and symbolic presence of Christ. Theologians of the time refuted his views in a number of synods. The most important was the Roman Council of 1079, which for the first time in an official document declared that the bread and wine were "substantially changed" into the body and blood of Christ (Catholic Encyclopedia 259).

In the thirteenth century the doctrine of transubstantiation was formalized by Thomas Aquinas in his great work, *Summa Theologiae*:

The complete substance of the bread is converted into the complete substance of Christ's body, and the complete substance of the wine into the complete substance of Christ's blood. Hence this conversion is not a formal change, but a substantial one. It does not belong to the natural kinds of change, and it can be called by a name proper to itself – "transubstantiation." (73)

In the late sixteenth century this medieval idea of one unified church with one unified belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation to which all people agreed was shattered by the Reformation. Milton, as an independent Puritan, believed in religious tolerance, but his tolerance did not extend to Catholicism in general and to the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation in particular. In *De Doctrina Christiana (DDC)*, Milton wrote concerning the Roman Mass:

Consubstantiation, and above all the papistical doctrine of transubstantiation, or rather anthropophagy for it deserves no better name, are irreconcilable, not only with reason and common sense, and the habits of mankind, but with the testimony of Scripture. . . . (*Works*, 16.199)

Milton believed that the "papists" "have well nigh converted the Supper of the Lord into a banquet of cannibals" (*Works*, 16.197).

When the narrator of *Paradise Lost* speaks of "concoctive heate / To transubstantiate (5.437-38), he is describing the process by which food, "corporal nutriments" (*PL* 5.496), is converted "To proper substance" (5.493) for the beings that consume it. In Milton's opinion, transubstantiation properly occurred *only* when human beings assimilated as much knowledge of God as their spiritual maturity allowed. Human beings matured spiritually in a *gradual* process through faith in God and obedience to His laws. The more spiritually mature humans

became, the finer their spiritual diet would become until, as Raphael tells Adam:

Wonder not then, what God for you saw good  
 If I refuse not, but convert, as you,  
 To proper substance; time may come when men  
 With Angels may participate, and find  
 No inconvenient Diet, nor too light Fare:  
 And from these corporal nutriments perhaps  
 Your bodies may at last turn all to Spirit,  
 Improv'd by tract of time, and wing'd ascend  
 Ethereal, as wee . . .  
 If ye be found obedient. . . . (5.491-501)

Raphael tells Adam that "whatever was created, needs / To be sustained and fed" (5.414-15), but he cautions Adam that just as there is a proper Chain of Being, there is also a proper food chain: "of Elements / The grosser feeds the purer" (5.415-16). This concept of a *proper*, harmonious hierarchy is essential to Milton's epic, and as C. S. Lewis points out in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Milton did not merely pay "lip service" to it: "The Hierarchical idea is not merely stuck on to his poem at points where doctrine demands it, it is the indwelling life of the whole work, it foams or burgesons out of it at every moment" (79).

Raphael reminds Adam that God has provided in his natural world (that world in which Adam is lord and master according to his position in the Great Chain of Being) *all* that Adam and his helpmate, Eve, will need to nourish their physical and spiritual well-being, and He warns Adam:

But Knowledge is as food, and needs no less  
 Her Temperance over Appetite, to know  
 In measure what the mind may well contain,  
 Oppresses else with Surfet, and soon turns  
 Wisdom to Folly, as Nourishment to Winde.  
 (7.126-30)

Man's attempt to gain knowledge of God by consuming His body was, for Milton, unthinkable and nothing less than an attempt to violate Man's proper position in God's Great Chain of Being. Milton cautions, "The flesh which he verily and indeed gives is not that which can be eaten with teeth . . . but [is] the food of faith alone" (*Works*, 16.195). Milton believed that proper spiritual nourishment occurred during a proper Communion Service based upon faith, obedience, and natural simplicity. The simple meal that Adam and Eve serve Raphael

prefigures such a proper Communion Service. The table, "Rais'd of grassie turf" (5.391), is natural; it is simple yet ample – unlike the richly adorned altars in the Roman Rite. The food is also natural, simple, and abundant: "from side to side / All Autumn pil'd" (5.393-94). The harvest fruit symbolizes Adam's and Eve's obedience to God in abstaining *only* from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In place of the ornate and artificially made Roman Chalice, Eve uses "fit vessels pure" (5.348). Instead of incense, Eve "strews the ground / With Rose and Odours from the shrub unfum'd" (5.348-49). And Adam, acting as minister, "without more train / Accompani'd then with his own compleat / Perfections" (5.351-53), is favorably compared to the "tedious pomp" of the "Princes" of the Roman Church with their "rich Retinue" and their "Grooms besmeared with Gold" (5.354-56). In place of scriptural readings, which Milton believed the Roman Church had corrupted, Raphael, acting as God's appointed mediator, reveals to Adam and Eve His sacred word:

Yet what thou canst attain, which best may serve  
 To glorifie the Maker, and inferr  
 Thee also happier, shall not be withheld  
 Thy hearing, such Commission from above  
 I have receav'd, to answer thy desire  
 Of knowledge within bounds; beyond abstain  
 To ask, nor let thine own inventions hope  
 Things not reveal'd, which th' invisible King,  
 Onely omniscient hath suppress in Night . . . .  
 (7.115-23)

"Knowledge within bounds." This meal represents for Milton the proper form of transubstantiation which Grossman says "is that which transforms the visible creation into divine affection" (46). It represents a process of natural transformation. Such a natural transformation causes human beings gradually to mature spiritually in order gradually to digest more refined spiritual nourishment. As humanity's understanding of God's ways deepens and expands, so does the human heart grow with a deeper, more refined love of God (Grossman 46). Raphael instructs Adam that:

Love refines  
 The thoughts, and the heart enlarges, hath his seat  
 In Reason, and is judicious, is the scale  
 By which to heav'nly Love thou maist ascend. . . .  
 (8.589-92)

If Adam and Eve had not disrupted this harmonious hierarchy of knowledge by attempting to eat what they could not digest, they would have eventually achieved the results Eve was deceived into thinking she had achieved; that is, a share in the heavenly feast which this simple meal in the garden prefigures. Had Eve not substituted faulty reasoning for faith and obedience, she and Adam, like the faithful angels, would have eventually partaken of "Angels Food and rubied Nectar" (5.633):

Quaff immortalie and joy, secure  
 Of surfet where full measure onley bounds  
 Excess, before th' all bounteous King, who showrd  
 With coupious hand rejoycing in their joy.  
 (5.637-41)

But the promised joy was not to be. The second meal in *Paradise Lost* disrupted the harmonious relationship between God and mankind and "brought into this World a world of woe, / Sinne and her shadow Death, and Miserie / Deaths Harbinger" (9.11-13). It is this meal, eaten as a result of the deceptive persuasion of Satan, that Milton likens to the Roman ritual of the Mass. In Book Nine, Satan, disguised as a serpent and acting as priest, says "mystical words," a jumble of half truths concerning the fruit and thus *seemingly* transforms a thing forbidden into "Godlike food" (9.717). The serpent tells Eve: "... in the day / Ye Eate thereof . . . ye shall be as Gods" (9.705-08); "so ye shall die perhaps, by putting off / Human, to put on Gods . . ." (9.713-14); "And what are Gods that Man may not become / As they, participating God-like food?" (9.716-17); "... and wherein lies / Th' offense, that Man should thus attain to know? / What can your knowledge hurt him, or this Tree / Impart against his will if all be his?" (9.725-28).

For Milton this same kind of deception takes place at the Roman Mass: "by mere muttering of the four mystical words 'this is my body,' it [the literal body of the living Lord] is supposed to be created out of the substance of the bread" (DDC, *Works*, 16.213). Like the Jesuits, who Milton said "are indeed the onely corrupters of youth, and good learning" (*Anti-Prelatical Tracts*, in *Works*, 3.51), this talking snake convinces Eve that the *outward* sign (the fruit) is the essence of the sacrament, the giver of grace. But, as Milton explains: since every sacrament is, by its very definition, a seal of the covenant of grace, it is evident that the Papists err, when they attribute to the outward sign the power of bestowing salvation or grace by virtue of the mere *opus operatum*; seeing that sacraments can neither impart salvation nor

grace of themselves, but are given as a pledge or symbol to believers of the actual blessings (DDC, *Works*, 16.201).

Eve's grievous error was to transfer her faith in God's unvarnished truth to the lacquered lies of the serpent who seemed "... friendly to man, farr from deceit or guile" (9.772). As noon grew near (the same time the first meal took place), under plain sight of the sun, Eve's sensual appetite overshadowed her reason. She was "intent now wholly on her taste, naught else / Regarded . . ." (9.786-87). She "pluck'd" (9.781) and "greedily she ingorg'd without restraint" (9.791).

Milton likens the act of consuming the body of Christ in the Roman Rite to Eve's act of consuming the forbidden fruit. After her offensive action of greedily engorging without restraint, Eve paid homage to the *tree* rather than to God which would be for Milton like the Papists' erroneous worship of the physical presence of God in the eucharist rather than proper worship of the Spirit of God.

The punishment that Adam and Eve receive for attempting to eat what they could not naturally digest is alienation from God. In *De Doctrina Christiana* Milton warns: "The neglect, or improper celebration of the sacraments . . . provokes the indignation of the Deity. I Cor. xi.29 &c [sic]. 'He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself'" (*Works*, 16.201).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> In Homer's *Odyssey* gracious hospitality is the hallmark of an honorable person. For example, Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, welcomes the grey-eyed Athene (disguised as a stranger) into his home, offering her food and drink (1.151-52), and Eumaeus, the humble swineherd and most faithful servant of Odysseus, welcomes his master (disguised as a lowly beggar) into his home, makes him comfortable and shares a meal with him *before* he asks his guest who he is or from where he came (14.50-67). In the Old Testament Abraham welcomes three strangers into his home, has water drawn for them that they may refresh themselves and has bread and meat prepared for them. In return, one of the strangers tells Abraham that within a year's time, Sarah, his aged and barren wife, will bear him a son (Gen.18:1-11). Abraham's hospitality was intended, by the author, to demonstrate that the virtue of hospitality is most pleasing to God. "He who exhibits it entertains God in the traveler" (McKenzie 5). Throughout *Paradise Lost* Milton uses both classical epic and Biblical references.

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