

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On John Milton

Robert Wood · Wednesday, December 13th, 2017

For a while I worked as a union official. I would visit nursing homes to organise workers, moving through corridors as they administered drugs to elderly residents, sitting down in staff rooms where people would come in to complain and smoke, watching news that spoke of the hottest summer yet. We were taught that we were there to build power, to help people become more autonomous, to make their own decisions in the workplace. It was more than the simple suggestion of better pay and conditions. It was about the feeling of pride that came with respect. Collective effort was the way to get that, or so we were taught to teach the workers as we faced off with managers, hassled members and were bullied back in our head office by Macchiavellian characters who wanted a career in politics simply for the sake of it.

It was during this time that I began to understand what Max Weber meant when he spoke of charisma. For Weber, charisma is a ‘gift of grace’ and ‘men [sic] do not obey him by virtue of tradition or statute, but because they *believe in him*.’ Charisma is about an ideal, about an imagined possibility that comes from inside you, that you project onto a figure that is new. As a unionist, I met many people who were charismatic, even as there was another side to them that followed rules and was tradition bound to be bureaucratic. But the charismatic union leader in our time in Australia is a dying breed, for they have become like their organisation, a smaller and smaller part of the late capitalist economy. One cannot imagine a bestselling literary novel based on such a figure, not like DH Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* in 1923.



In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Satan, like any revolutionary leader, is charismatic. He is that Kangaroo. Although it might not be the most apposite or timely to debate the truth of his vision, I do want to comment on his relative power and where it comes from. This is neither post-structural, or post-truth, or something about the relativity of our own fake news moment, but the observation that charisma is mutable for both its progenitor and its audience. Satan, after all, changes, and the hero of the first two books is gradually diminished so that by book ten he is a shadow of his former self. If ‘it is better to rule in heaven than to serve in hell’, we might want to ask what shifts and changes in those places and what is the dialectic that would have us know that the master is the real slave when we see with a true consciousness of ourselves. It would after all be rather onerous to be a God, even as one among many down below.

Satan is Promethean then, which is not the same type of myth common to existentialism (Albert Camus’ *Sisyphus*) and with that we must recognise that every day Prometheus is bound to the rock is different. Even if his liver grows and he suffers in a general way, what does the eagle make of

this? Does the eagle feast for time immemorial? Do her chicks grow up and eat in the same way? To ask as much is to suggest that Satan in *Paradise Lost* changes because we come to hear the voices of Adam, Eve and God as the story progresses. The dawn of a new day happens even in hell, just as there are seasons in heaven also. If Satan is the chess piece that never moves, what is he to make of the board as the game goes on regardless of who and what he claims to be?

Satan though is a wheeler-dealer, a kind of greaser and fixer, not only someone who is untrustworthy but someone who sets up false contracts full of betrayal and sin. This is commonly expressed as being a 'deal with the Devil', which does, of course, provide a touchstone for other people in other historical moments outside of Milton alone – think of blues musicians who sell their soul to play the guitar, think of politicians who trade in their beliefs for power, think of the union official who sells out the worker. This might be the reality of the social contract as it is with real estate agents, stockbrokers, undertakers. The 'gift' though, be that apple or guitar or ballot box, sets up a different relationship to obligation precisely because it is not part of the same market, does not obey the simple logic of payment and forgetting. The gift is there to tie one to another through a feeling that is not the invisible hand of the market or the geist of the working classes, which both obscure the social relations and methods of production. It becomes about belief now, belief in the immaterial, and receiving when you didn't think anyone had remembered your birthday in a long while. And that is the danger in rhetoric, in language that is not quite real.

The negation of Satan might be the martyr; for the martyr has an anti-organisational charisma. It is not even the reign in hell they are after but the knowledge that by suffering one may begin to see the true world. They believe purely, which is reflected in the followers they try not to lead at all. This is there in the writings of Hildegard von Bingen and St John of the Cross. One sees it in her poem, 'O Greening Branch':

O greening branch!
You stand in your nobility

Like the rising dawn.
Rejoice now and exult

And deign to free the fools we are.
From our long slavery to evil

And hold out your hand
To raise us up.

She is no leader it seems, but one of us suffering as well. We are in this together she wants to say and if she must sacrifice herself to be free then so be it.

When I stopped working for the trade union I let go of the possibility of a career in politics. I could not hold out my hand to raise them up in the way that was expected. I was not built for backroom deals, handshakes under the table. But I hold onto the hope that I can make an ethical impact in the world because of the poetic material that underpins my very self. That is where we must grasp the greening branches we are given no matter where we find ourselves in the rising dawn even if that appears to be some sort of hell with a Satanic leader who leads us deeper into trouble with every passing morn.

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