HUMOUR IN PARADISE LOST

By Roy Daniells

MOST readers of Milton have felt that his work deserves the remark made by the schoolboy about the work of Arnold:—"Not the place you would go for a laugh." Johnson's *Life* has helped to fix in all minds the picture of Milton as stiff and unsmiling. We all knew Johnson's phrases: "Such is the controversial merriment of Milton; his gloomy seriousness is yet more offensive. Such is his malignity, that hell grows darker at his frown . . . an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence; in petulance impatient of control, and pride disdainful of superiority." Johnson musunderstood not only the character of Milton but also the nature of the opportunities for formal gaiety which the conventions of Renaissance art permitted. His criticism of *Lycidas*, that elaborate game played within perfectly understood rules, is a complete miss.

Actually as the unbiassed reader moves through *Paradise Lost* at a reasonable pace, fast enough to catch the rhythm of successive episodes and the counterpoint of light and solemn themes, the smile of pleasure turns not infrequently to the smile of amusement and now and again to the laugh of pure fun. When this is pointed out, the usual reply is, "Yes, but did Milton intend it?" That Milton, writing a professedly sublime epic on a religious theme, could have been consciously amusing is thought incredible. But it is conceded readily enough that Donne or Herbert exhibits a gay humour, that in Herbert "all things are big with jest", that a seventeenth-century poem may at the same instant be deeply serious and crackling with wit. It is in this context of the so-called "metaphysical" style (in its expanded rather than in its condensed form) and within the ambit of the art-form known as Baroque that Milton's humour is at last finding recognition. Professor E. M. W. Tillyard in his *Studies in Milton*, 1951 (Chatto and Windus), has a number of perceptive remarks about humour in *Paradise Lost*. He does not care to exhaust the subject and he has left it to others to expand his suggestions on Milton and the Baroque.

Here let us limit our consideration. The *sardonic* humour of Milton, in which punitive ideas are expressed or implicit, has long been recognized:—the violent cross wind of the Paradise of Fools, Satan's mouth crammed with ashes, God the Father's smiling remark, "Nearly it now concerns us to be sure of our omnipotence." Let us confine ourselves, for the moment, to a more elusive, subtle and wholly delightful form, springing from a sense of liberation. Such a consideration is in line with modern theories of humour; there is increasing recognition that laughter, in its biological origins, is genial and affirmative; the play theory which has arisen out of scientific observations of your children lends support; and laughter, it is worth remembering, has been held by a variety of competent critics, including Voltaire, to spring primarily from gaiety, happiness or joy. The notion of Milton indulging in care-free humour is also in line with the practice of Baroque artists. Not infrequently in the history of Baroque art-forms we find that architect, sculptor or painter has achieved such an easy mastery over the elements of his craft that the creative spirit is at liberty, smiling over its own dexterity. Bernini (1598-1680) plants an Egyptian obelisk, replete with hieroglyphics, on the back of an elephant, exquisitely adjusting the apparently incongruous pedestal to its burden. Within the Baroque convention of heavy mass and lively movement, deliberate effects of legerdemain are natural. A flat painted ceiling simulates, to an observer entering the building, a vault with pillars and arches, although from a viewpoint a few yards distant the whole is utterly distorted and collapsing; an elaborate facade, leaping in redundant curves, may be quite separate in design from the interior it conceals; a stone ship, in the pool of a fountain, has streams of water doing duty for smoke from its cannon-mouths and cables from its hawse-holes. T. H. Fokker, author of *Roman Baroque Art* (Oxford, 1938), has remarked that "by the aggregation of contrasting bodies or by creating a decoration in a decoration in a gigantic shape, the artist can achieve an effect of superb caprice."

Let us ask at what point in *Paradise Lost* we should expect to find Milton liberated into the kind of exuberant freedom we have described. Not, certainly, when he is dealing with God in Heaven or with Satan in Hell, and not when he is occupied with those episodes where the primal sin casts its gloom over all. Rather when he is concerned with the human pair, as yet unfallen, and especially when he portrays the Archangels, those magnificent creatures, so acclimatized to the pomp and ceremony of the Baroque world.

Uriel amuses even the superficial reader.

> His back was turned, but not his brightness hid;
> Of beaming sunny rays a golden tiar
> Circled his head, nor less in locks behind
> Illustrious on his shoulders fledge with wings
> Lay waving round; on some great charge imployed
> He seemed, or fixed in cogitation deep.

Satan, disguised as a cherub, enters.

> He drew not nigh unheard; the Angel bright,
> Ere he drew nigh, his radiant visage turned,
> Admonished by his ear, and straight was known
> The Archangel Uriel—one of the seven
> Who in God's presence, nearest to his throne,
> Stand ready to command, and are his eyes
> That run through all the heavens.

He is one of God's "eyes" yet so unseeing that he must rely upon his "ear". His pompous, patronizing speech to the disguised fiend, ending, "Thy way thou canst not miss; me mine requires" is in contrast to his anxious haste soon after when, discovering his mistake, he shoots down to warn Gabriel:

> Thither came Uriel, gliding through the even
> On a sunbeam, swift as a shooting star.

His approach and return have a switchback effect:

> Returned on that bright beam, whose point now raised
> Bore him slope downward to the Sun, now fallen
> Beneath the Azores.

Uriel's switchback is one of several machines which Milton produces in the space between Heaven and Hell where he can, as it were, spread himself. They are devices of which Inigo Jones might well have been proud. As Professor Tillyard has indicated, both the golden stair to Heaven and the causeway to Hell are sources of humour. Some readers would add the alabaster portal of Eden, with its deliberate association of formal and natural shapes (reminiscent of Bernini) and its exclusive function secretly contradicted by the neglected back hedge. In general, Milton's machines and stage sets are in keeping with the deep love of Baroque artificers for turning life into stage effects, with their delight in garden and city design, with their large-scale theatrical appliances at once rational and scenic.

The brightest coruscations of Milton's humour are to be found in the books dominated by the "sociable" Raphael, the most gay, garrulous and friendly of the archangels. Here Milton is recording a situation he knows with loving familiarity, the meeting of two friends for a free interchange of ideas. Raphael has the creation of a universe to recapitulate and a great epic conflict to delineate and decorate. His listener is a willing and responsive one, a man on his honeymoon, in the highest good humour. (The comedy of the situations and conversations between Adam and Eve, about which Professor Tillyard has some good things to say, is perforce given no attention here.) Raphael and Adam have a whole afternoon before them, with no God to overawe or Satan to disturb; indeed, after a point, there is no Eve to distract their attention. It is Milton and Diodati, Milton and Lawrence, Milton and Skinner; perhaps even Milton and King or Manso or Marvell Here is an academic exercise in debate, conducted, as Tillyard says in another connexion, with "baroque gravity like that of a good heroic play." They are having a wonderful time, revelling in "enormous bliss". Raphael is on holiday from Heaven, strictly, on a half-holiday; Adam is determined to cram all he can into these few hours. From beneath the imperturbable gravity of Milton's high style and the elevated manner of Baroque rhetoric their joyful mood breaks irrepressibly forth. Adam, although he is all deferential politeness and is filled with real reverence for his guest, is simply bursting to hear all and tell all. Raphael is there to warn Adam of his danger, but he is drawn into (it is hard not to say sucked into or jockeyed into) telling Adam what will satisfy his curiosity. The four books are a rippling stream of grace and gaiety.

Raphael, having eaten lunch "with keen dispatch of real hunger" and having assured Adam that he possesses an excellent digestive system, is ready to treat "Of things above his world and of their being Who dwell in heaven." Adam, feeling increasingly at ease with this denizen of Zion, is inclined to pump him a little:

> his *wary* speech
> Thus to the empyreal minister he framed.

He continues, in effect, It is indeed good of you to have a meal here when generally you have meals in heaven, and how are the two to be compared? Raphael replies with a discourse on spiritual natures and promises that Adam may attain to such "if ye be found obedient". Adam says, Your words delight me as music; I knew I was created free; I am sure we shall never disobey God; my only doubts are about the nature of this war in heaven you mention; tell me all; I will keep very quiet. Raphael, his monitory purpose deflected, pauses, as well he may. He then says, in sum, It is a hard task: some of the story may not be lawful to reveal.

The description of the war in heaven, into which Raphael now launches, suffers a skilful omission which is deliberate on Raphael's part but seems to escape Adam. Although Raphael is a participant, he says nothing of his own exploits; at the place where these would be appropriate he glides into easy generalities:

> Deeds of eternal fame
> Were done, but infinite; for wide was spread
> That war and various.

Humour of a different kind, and outside our immediate scope, is provided by the bravura of the epic battles; the heavy jesting over Satan's artillery is only the most obvious passage.

The description of creation provides less humour than might be expected. We see the humble little bush arise "with frizzled hair *implicit*," the childish tangle. We watch while

> scarce from his mould
> Behemoth, biggest born of earth
> Upheaved his vastness

and are happy that the hippo was not altogether deprived of legs. But the true comedy scene of creation is to be found in Book IV and may be for convenience transplanted into this context. Adam and Eve sit down quietly in the early evening and watch a little circus performance:

> Sporting the lion ramped, and in his paw
> Dandled the kid; bears, tigers, ounces, pards,
> Gambolled before them; the unwieldly elephant,
> To make them mirth, used all his might, and wreathed
> His lithe proboscis.

Milton, resembling his own elephant by combinations of massive strength and sly finesse, is telling us in solemn and imperturbable numbers that he can tie a knot in his trunk.

As the end of Book VII is reached, Adam has fallen into the glazed immobility common to all who listen attentively to long lectures.

The angel ended, and in Adam's ear
So charming left his voice that he awhile
Thought him still speaking, still stood fixed to hear
Then, as new-waked, thus gratefully replied.

Thank you, thank you, "divine historian", he says, but could you tell me how this firmament, these planets, and so forth actually *work?* Once more it is fresh information he is seeking and the counterpoint continues of his desire to acquire knowledge and Raphael's commission to impress warnings on him.

Eve observes that Adam "by his contenance seemed Entering on studious thoughts abstruse". She wisely rises and leaves, while Milton solemnly assures us that the men would have preferred her to stay and that she delighted in such discourse. The conversation, nevertheless, becomes notably more free and easy thereafter.

And Raphael now to Adam's doubt proposed
Benevolent and facile thus replied.

His reply is a masterpiece of evasion. God, he says, has concealed the springs of the celestial machine; if men try to reason out the mechanics of the system, God will only be amused; there will be heard "His laughter at their quaint opinions wide". Whether the sun moves round the earth or the earth round the sun is not for you to trouble your head about, says Raphael.

Adam is visibly disappointed and gives up his attempt. There is gentle irony in his reply, beginning,

How fully has though satisfied me, pure
Intelligence of Heaven, Angel serene....

He tries a new tack; nowhere is the comedy of his relation with Raphael better seen:

now hear me relate
My story, *which, perhaps, thou hast not heard.*

This is too transparent and he adds hastily, You see I am merely enticing you to stay, for I love your company. Raphael plays up nobly:

Say therefore on;
For I that day was absent, as befell,
Bound on a voyage uncouth and obscure,
Far on excursion toward the gates of Hell

At Adam's look of incredulity, which can hardly have failed at so palpable a fabrication, he goes on, hastily improvising.

> Squared in full legion (such command we had),
> To see that none thence issued forth a spy
> Or enemy while God was at his work,
> Lest he, incensed at such eruption bold,
> Destruction with creation might have mixed.
> Not that they durst without his leave attempt;
> But us he sends upon his high behests
> For state, as sovran King, and to insure
> Our prompt obedience.

And all this, like the painted ceiling in some church of the Asam brothers, may be perfectly sound from one point of view and perfectly preposterous from another.

Adam now tells his story, which brims with humour. Alone in Eden, he asked God for a partner and God "with a smile more brightened" asked if the animals were not company enough; and Adam ventured to say, No they were not; and God, "not displeased," said, Well you see I live alone; and Adam said, Yes, but you are perfect while I am imperfect and need companionship; and God said, Well argued, Adam I'll give you just what you want. And He gave me Eve, says Adam, in a burst of confidence, to Raphael, and Eve is simply marvellous:

> what she wills to do or say
> Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best.
> All higher knowledge in her presence falls
> Degraded; wisdom in discourse with her
> Loses, discountenanced, and like Folly shows.

Raphael frowns.

> To whom the angel with contracted brow...
> In loving thou dost well; in passion not,
> Wherein true love consists not.

But Adam has been growing in confidence all along and is not quite put down even by the archangelic rebuke:

> To whom thus, half abashed, Adam replied...
> Bear with me, then, if lawful what I ask.
> Love not the Heavenly Spirits, and how their love
> Express they—by looks only, or do they mix
> Irradiance, virtual or immediate touch?

And this direct request for the details of his sex-life, Raphael blushes, babbles forth something and says he really must go.

> To whom the Angel, with a smile that glowed
> Celestial rosy-red, Love's proper hue,
> Answered:—Let it suffice thee that thou knows't
> Us happy, and without Love no happiness...

> But I can now no more: the parting Sun
> Beyond the Earth's green Cape and verdant Isles
> Hesperean sets, my signal to depart.

The pace has quickened from book to book and insensibly familiarity has mingled with awe in increasing proportions. Thus when at the close Adam scores heavily off Raphael, we are not surprised. But all this comedy—and here the Baroque sense of total structure is beautifully evident—is without damage to these books as structural members in the edifice of *Paradise Lost*. At the beginning of the next book we are told that Adam's talk has been "Venial discourse unblamed."

Milton's humour, then, is far more varied than one would imagine. Not always sardonic; indeed, sometimes gay, but never artlessly so; the concept of formal gaiety is here required. What has been sadly neglected is a study of the artistic mode in which formal gaiety here operates,—the world of Baroque. It involves a felt freedom on the part of the artist, based on complete familiarity with accepted forms (e.g., High Renaissance interpretations of classical originals) and on superb technical competence in handling them. The convention provides a firm frame, familiar elements, known rules. Within these, and with an air of high seriousness, the game is played. In the metaphysical conceit of the seventeenth century this process has long been understood and appreciated. Milton too is metaphysical but on a great scale and his conceits are displayed on a stage of grand proportions. The bliss he achieves in Eden is, even in its comedy, "enormous".