

“the smoke and stir of this dim spot”: THE PROBLEMATICS OF DIVINE ORGANIZATION IN MILTON’S *COMUS*

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Abstract

Milton inherited a deep trust in God’s creation and organisation of the universe from the Bible. Yet, many of his poems are haunted by an anxiety of disorder that threatens to dissolve this worldview. This problem goes back to the classical pre-Socratic philosophers, who attempted to negotiate this dissolution through a variety of paradigms. This paper attempts to locate the anxiety of disorder in its historical pretexts, and examine Milton’s engagement with the classical trope, in an effort to resolve it on an essentially Christian template.

Keywords : anxiety, disorder, creation, organization, Christian template, worldview, *Comus*, pre-Socratic philosophers.

According to J.H. Hanford, Milton’s minor poems in English, Latin and Italian were written during the period from the last year of his attendance at St. Paul’s School to the moment at which he undertook the actual composition of *Paradise Lost*, probably around 1655 (Hanford 105). He published the bulk of these poems in a single volume in 1645. A second edition appeared in 1673 which contained a few additional early pieces and the subsequently composed sonnets and translations. Milton divided the Latin poems according to their metre and arranged them in a rough chronological sequence with the English compositions and even dated many of them, though critics distrust them today. In spite of this uncertainty, beginning with the translations of the Psalms (cxiv and cxxxvi) “done by the Author at fifteen years old”, it is easy to locate

Milton's deep faith in the creation and organization of the universe by "the strength of the Almighty's hand", a belief he inherited from the Scriptures (Psalm cxiv 4).¹ This recurs as a trope in most of his early poems and is often interpenetrated with many a pagan cosmogonic feature to integrate the classical with the Christian and simultaneously posit the superiority, legitimacy and sanctity of the Christian worldview against that of classical antiquity.

It will be relevant, at this point, to refer to the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C who attempted to reconstruct the origin, structure and functioning of the universe. These survive in doxographical fragments.² Pioneered by Thales and followed by Anaximander and Anaximenes, the Ionian-Miletic school of cosmogony located the uniformity and eternity of the cosmic organization in the "divine", indefinite, eternal and unlimited one first matter that persisted through the universe. Thales identified this primary substance as water while Anaximenes insisted it was air. Anaximander admitted a duality within his "apeiron" (a separation into the opposites of water and earth because of motion) that often clashed, yet he emphasized the dynamic equilibrium and formal coherence of the universe. Heraclitus of Ephesus reinterpreted this change, opposition and conflict as identical on a larger, mystic template of order, balance, symmetry, stability and unity that he termed "Logos". It was Pythagoras who first used the word "Kosmos" to describe the ordered universe while his disciples, the Pythagoreans, attempted a quantitative and mathematical formulation of this abstract order and symmetry that persisted through the physical world. They subsequently posited a dualistic philosophy of the unlimited and limited, of numbers, shapes and qualities within a void but reconciled the opposites in a harmony that reverberated through the nine-fold spheres of the universe. Their formally coherent and stable cosmogony, thus, came to rest on the older monism, resolving evolution and duality within a melodious and "divine" unity.

The Eleatics, Parmenides and Zeno, on the other hand, argued for the essential homogeneity and changelessness of what "is" and

predicated it as a now, one, continuous, perfect, complete and balanced symmetry that was unborn, unshaken and unperishing and a unique whole held by Necessity. They excluded generation and destruction and insisted on indivisibility and motionlessness as the “Way of Truth”. Empedocles returned to review Nature as the theatre of ceaseless change where harmonization of variety into a unity was immediately followed by a dissolution into the plurality, of what he first identified, as the four elements. He, however, stressed the formal coherence and stability of the physical world that was based on a fine balancing of these opposite thrusts that he named “Love” and “Strife”. Anaxagoras identified an even greater variety and plurality (different “seeds”) that persisted together in equal proportions in a homogeneous mass that continued even after separation and organization on which Leucippus and Democritus developed their theory of atomism and applied it to cosmogony and a host of other arenas. Their infinite number of unchanging primary substances (atoms), too, existed in a void and their aggregation and dissipation produced a constantly changing arrangement of beauty, order and symmetry in the “Great World System”. Thus, all these early Greek philosopher-poets formulated a comprehensive account of the universe as one, formally coherent system, either admitting or denying plurality, motion and flux within a continuum and this materialistic and essentially unified account of the universe left no role for the Olympian gods.

John Milton, on the other, hand, insists on God as the material cause of the universe (*creation de deo and not ex nihilo*) where the formless mass of pre-temporal primal substance was given existence and shape by Him. It was at His Word that the wild confusion and conflict of Chaos ended, darkness fled and light appeared and the creation and organization of Nature (and the universe) and “other worlds” was begun. *Paradise Lost* is replete with several long and short narratives that establish the superiority and eternal relevance of the Almighty’s hierarchic arrangement as against the disruption - ridden pagan construct. In the early poems, Milton refers frequently to God’s creation of the universe. Psalm cxxxvi describes His “all-commanding might” and

wisdom that “did the sold earth ordain/To rise above the watery plain” and filled the new-made world with light even as He created the “painted heavens” so full of state and arranged the sun, moon and stars in it (Psalm cxxxvi 17-26). The hymn, *On The Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, describes the “creator great” setting His constellations and casting the “dark foundations deep” over the “weltering waves” as the “well-balanced world on hinges hung”. The angelic symphony celebrates this “ninefold harmony” that invests the spheres (Carey 106-107). In the Latin poem, *That Nature does not suffer from old age*, he describes the Almighty Father as having “taken thought” for the universe and firmly commanded each thing to keep its course forever in a supremely ordered whole (Carey 65). *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* trace the order that runs through the temporal and seasonal cycles, country and city and ends in every star that “heaven doth show” (Carey 146). The poet dissolves into ecstasies as he hears the sweet music “above, about, or underneath”, that brings “all heaven” before his eyes and he attains to “something like prophetic strain”(Carey 145-146). This wisdom is attendant to both Mirth and Melancholy and the poet chooses to live with them forever. The immense variety in the bounty of Nature’s wealth that has been coordinated and arranged to reflect and concretize the harmony that invests the celestial realms is the theme of many a Latin elegy, song and sonnet. The descriptions have been critiqued as lacking in visual imagination but D.C. Allen in *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton’s Poetry*, argues that the poet has transferred the visual to the immaculate sequence of his details in the scenes, identifying his “description as cosmos” (95-109).

However, Milton is forced to admit, like the ancients before him, that this balance is repeatedly shattered by contrary forces that he identifies variously as Time, Old Age, Death, “disproportioned sin”, the papacy and the wicked brood of classical / pagan deities in the poems. On a mock-serious note, he describes “ravenous Time” as gobbling up heaven itself so that the floors of the vaulted universe collapse with a terrifying crash while the poles of the earth shriek when they feel the shock. The foundations of the earth are torn apart and hurled to the

depths of the abyss (Carey 65). The death of the Bishop of Ely makes Milton seethe with fierce anger and melancholy as he imagines Death, the “dark daughter of Night” stepping out of the gulf of Chaos and the “mournful realms of dusky Tartaros” to spread evil and disaster through “rich Britain’s cities” (Carey 26-27). “Disproportioned sin” jarred against “nature’s chime” and disrupted the “perfect diapason” of the prelapsarian universe, writes Milton in *At A Solemn Music* (Carey 160). He describes the consequences of the Babylonian papacy in terms of the same invasion of this order. “Fierce-eyed Murder” and “double-tongued Trechery, savage Discord’s twin children” along with Guile, Strife and Calumny, Fear and “bloodless Horror” leave their cavernous den, shut up in eternal darkness, and enter ordered domains. The earth shrieks and rots with blood as all order is violated (Carey 45-46).

Milton subsumes and reinvents these infractions on a classico-Christian template by representing it as an accession into the higher and transcendent perfection of a preeminently Christian world order, that is beyond all disruptions. This offers solace to the mourning poet in the elegies while the grieving mother of the fair infant is consoled with the thought that he has flown out of this “besieged” and “hated” earth to be reinstated in the heavenly world of eternal truth and order. In the Nativity hymn, he represents the “damned crew” as escaping into hell with the birth of Christ and God’s order reigning triumphant through the universe. He emphasizes that the process of this essentially Christian universe will go on forever, worked out with scrupulous justice, until the last flames destroy the globe, enveloping the poles and the summits of vast heaven, and the frame of the world blazes on one huge funeral pyre (Carey 64-65). One can sense Milton’s unbounded faith and happiness in this successful resolution of the older dialectics on a Christian template in these poems.

But the problem of dissolutions refused to end and, perhaps, troubled Milton deeply. It reappears in the masque presented at Ludlow Castle in 1634, later printed as *Comus*, where Milton makes yet another attempt to negotiate the problematics of organization and disruption within the spectacle and entertainment of a royal performance. Written

on the occasion of the Earl of Bridgewater being vested with the authority to govern Wales and the counties on its border in June-July, 1631, the masque was produced and arranged by the court musician Henry Lawes and enacted by him and the earl's children. *Comus* has been variously interpreted over the years – as a Platonic debate, a moral entertainment, a pastoral play and a Christian allegory of temptation. But it may also be read as a reengagement with the dynamics of cosmic organization and the inevitability of ruptures in its trajectory.

The first scene of *Comus*, accordingly, discovers a “wild wood” and the Attendant Spirit descends and contrasts the “smoke and stir of this dim spot, / Which men call earth” with the higher ordered realms, ‘calm and serene’, inhabited by the bright aerial spirits (Carey 175-176). The Spirit refers to the noble peer's charge of “guiding” the nation but warns that the way lies through the “perplexed paths of this drear wood”, the “nodding horrors” of whose shady boughs and its dark confusion defies and threatens “Jove's sovran order”. It is the domain of the “blithe” son of Circe and Bacchus and Comus presides over the thick, dun shades of the ominous wood intent on devising means of “foul disfigurement” of both man and Nature. He enters thereafter, representing the antimasque, with a rout of monsters, headed like “sundry sorts of wild beasts”, making a “riotous and unruly noise”. He hails the “dark-veiled Cotytto” and Hecate as his mates and they riot in wild revelry as the “Stygian darkness spits her thickest gloom, / And makes one blot of all the air....” (Carey 183). This is a visual representation of the ugly disorder that they portend.

The action of the masque is graphed on this idea of the infringement of order by the forces of disorder and evil. A Lady, lost in this “tangled” wilderness, approaches the sound of riot, and “ill-managed merriment”, warily hoping for succor. Comus, sensing her approach, smartly metamorphoses into a harmless villager, locates his credibility in the natural (and divine) order that invests the woods, and ensnares her in his “glozing courtesy”. The Lady, reposing faith in her Christian virtues and singing the song of “all heaven's harmonies”, trusts his offer of help and Comus slyly leads her away to his castle.

The two brothers of the Lady enter thereafter and are immediately able to recognize the “shagged” wilderness in the “double night of darkness, and of shades”, swept by “black usurping mists” under the empty-vaulted Night as an extension of the domain of Chaos and disorder extending into the depths of hell. This causes the younger brother to agonize over the dire fate of their “defenceless” sister but the older one reposes confidence in the hidden strength of her virtues and wisdom and the grace of heaven to be able to resist and thwart the temptations of ugly disorder. The Attendant spirit, habited like a shepherd Thyrsis, appears at this critical juncture and confirms their apprehensions by underscoring the evil and ugly confusion that thrives in this hideous wood, whose entrance leads to hell. He warns them of the sly capacity of the “monstrous rout” to ensnare and ruin all semblance of virtue and order. The elder brother’s desperate threat of assaulting and eliminating this disruptive principle is cautioned by Thyrsis, who offers “harmony” as the only means of defeating them. Critics have debated extensively on the meaning and significance of the term.

Meanwhile, Comus leads the lady to his stately palace and transfixes her in a chair and Milton layers the temptation scene and interpenetrates the courtly entertainment genre with a new seriousness that is nuanced with ethical and religious resonances. The trope of organization and disorder is also buried in the site. Comus represents the riotous abundance of bounties that Nature pours forth with a “full” and “unwithdrawing hand”, covering the earth with odours, fruits and flocks and thronging the seas so that no corner is vacant of God’s plenty. This is concretized in the sensuous and lush imagery of his verses. He provokes the lady to join in his celebration of this natural wild anarchy that subverts all semblance of order and harmony. He also denies and defies God’s virtues and graces and His organization of the universe and asserts this entropy as the “canon law” of Nature, thereby revealing the grim reality of his “ugly-headed monsters” and their barbarous dissonance. The Lady has no difficulty in recognizing and rejecting their “false rules” that are “pranked in reason’s garb” and proceeds to underscore the “good” and “sober” laws that “well dispensed” the vast excess of

Nature's full blessings in "unsuperfluous even proportion", "where no crude surfeit reigns". This is the "sublime notion, and high mystery" of the universe, she insists, though Comus refuses to concede this higher truth.

The brothers rush in at this moment but are unable to free their virtuous sister from the enchanted chair while Comus escapes in the general melee. Finally, Thyrsis evokes Sabrina and her song invokes the harmony of the pagan world order vested with the deities of classical antiquity and subsumes it into the superior grace of heaven and its holy order. This enables the Lady to free herself and they all rush out of the cursed place. The masque ends with the celebration of the victory of this "divine order" and virtue over disorder and evil within the ordered precincts of President's Castle in Ludlow town which is eulogised in the concluding epilogue. But the sense of closure eludes *Comus*.

This ecstatic defence of virtue and order "triumphant" over the forces of disorder, however, fails to blot out the fear and inconclusiveness that mark the conclusion. Comus continues to haunt the dark woods and remains uneliminated, posing a perennial threat to the unwary traveller and the universe that lies behind the ordered pales. Rosamund Tuve in *Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton* has identified Comus's association with light several times in the masque as a reminder of his inexorable and intractable presence (147). This presence problematizes the coherent, Christian world order that Milton attempts to posit in the masque and renders it peculiarly fragile and vulnerable. This had worried the pre-Socratics and it haunts Milton too. He therefore continues to engage with the problem of disruptions in the years ahead. *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistis* are testimony to this anxiety of disorder.

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