

Knowledge After the Fall.
Milton and the Question of Censorship

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In November 1644, John Milton published a short treatise entitled *Areopagitica, A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing to the Parliament of England*.¹ In June of the previous year, the Long Parliament had issued a Licensing Order “which stipulated that all printed matter be first approved and licensed by a government agent, [and] then officially entered in the *Register* of the Stationer’s Company”.² Milton himself came to be affected by this Order when in August 1644 the Stationer’s Company mounted a complaint to Parliament that Milton and his publisher had failed to obtain licensing for his divorce tracts. Three months later, Milton published the *Areopagitica*. Casting himself as an adviser of the “Lords and Commons of England”³, he addresses the concerns of his critics and of the political supporters of the Licensing Order, and undertakes to demonstrate the ineffectiveness and at worst the damage wrought by the political practice of licensing.

The force of Milton’s pamphlet stems – to a considerable degree – from the fact that he speaks on behalf of his own profession, as an active intellectual engaged in the political, theological and cultural debates of his day, as a representative of England’s literary and scholarly elite, and – last but not least – as a poet who considered his literary vocation to be closely connected to a broader educational project. In the *Areopagitica* especially, Milton takes position with regard to an issue that had important ramifications for the emerging figure of the intellectual and allowed him, among other things, to define the public and scientific responsibility of those who – by publishing their work – contribute to the intellectual project of their times.⁴ Of the four considerations concerning the practice of licensing which Milton develops in this

¹ Although it is called a “speech”, Milton never held nor intended to hold it as a speech before Parliament. Rather, as various scholars have argued, the title and the choice of genre serve to establish a connection with two important precedents from antiquity, in particular the Greek orator Isocrates and the Apostle Paul. On the former see e.g. Wittreich (1972), on the latter Burt (1998). The conscious parallel to Isocrates and the motto from Euripides’ *The Suppliants* are used by Dowling (2006) to suggest an “against the grain” interpretation of the *Areopagitica*.

² Dobranski (1999: 13). Research on the problem of censorship in relation to the *Areopagitica* includes the following valuable studies: Tanner (1977) provides a comparative survey of censorship in English literary history from Milton to D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad; Patterson (1984) develops a whole “hermeneutics of censorship” in the early modern period; Meyer (2011) reads early modern tracts as documents of fundamentalist tendencies during the Reformation. Among those who focus on Milton’s *Areopagitica* in particular are Limouze (1980), Blum (1987), Norbrook (1994) and Tournu (1999). Limouze (1980) foregrounds Milton’s insistence on private morality and authorial self-regulation as necessary complements to a free press. A remarkable recent contribution shows the relevance of Milton’s argument to the Arab world (Issa 2015).

³ The works of Milton are quoted according to the edition by Merritt Y. Hughes (1975) *John Milton. Complete Poems and Major Prose*. All references to the *Areopagitica* are to page numbers; those to *Paradise Lost* are to book and line.

⁴ See Norbrook (1994) for a discussion of the *Areopagitica*’s impact on the emerging early modern public sphere.

work, the second clarifies “what is to be thought in general of reading, whatever sort the books be” (720), and it develops a broader perspective on the political and eschatological relevance of publications. This reflection allows Milton to conclude that books, and indeed all kinds of books, ought to be produced, published and circulated freely, without the restraints imposed by licensing, that is by politically or religiously motivated censorship. At the heart of this perspective lies the conviction that even “bad” books, in effect, can be put to good use for the following reason:

Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably [...]. It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good by evil. (728)

According to Milton, it follows from this state of affairs that human beings inevitably must also know evil in order to know good. It is effectively impossible to have any knowledge or wisdom at all without knowing good and evil together through a contrastive dynamics. Thus, he continues his train of argument:

Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather, that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. [...] Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with less danger, scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reasons? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read. (728-729)

In these lines, Milton posits a connection between the post-lapsarian human condition on the one hand and the role of books and the free press on the other. Indeed, the notion that all kinds of books, that is all kinds of ideas, invariably contribute to an effort, both individual and shared, of knowledge acquisition and thus invariably have a political relevance, is really founded upon a specific conception of human knowledge. Similarly, Milton’s confutation of the political and cultural practice of censorship rests – to a considerable extent – upon his views concerning the conditions under which humankind is forced to acquire knowledge after humankind’s “first disobedience” and attendant fall from the original state.

The connection between censorship and the fallen condition of human knowledge leads us from the 1644 pamphlet to one of Milton’s mature masterworks, in which he develops a sophisticated and complex interpretation of humanity’s origins. Indeed, it is an essential part of Milton’s educational project in his great epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which he wrote about 15-20

years after *Areopagitica*, to provide, in the form of a Christian epic narrating the circumstances of the fall of Adam and Eve, the biblical and theological justification for the present state of humankind and human knowledge.⁵ The poet defines the scope of his task as follows:

Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
brought death into the world and all our woe
[...] Sing *Heav'nly Muse*, that on the secret top
of Oreb or of Sinai didst *inspire*
That shepherd who *first taught* the chosen seed,
In the beginning, how the heav'ns and earth
Rose out of chaos. [...]
And chiefly thou, O Spirit, [...]
Instruct me, for thou know'st [...]
[...] What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the heighth of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men. (1, 1-26, emphasis added)

In the famous opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, Milton presents himself as a prophetic teacher in the tradition of Moses, whom he calls “That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed, / In the beginning, how the heav'ns and earth / Rose out of chaos” (1, 8-10). By invoking the same heavenly Muse that inspired the great biblical teacher, Milton casts himself as a second Moses entrusted with the task of teaching God's new chosen people, the English (an idea which Milton only hints at in *Paradise Lost*). The role of the prophetic poet allows Milton to use his poetic voice to fulfil a specific educational function: thanks to his privileged access to a particular kind of knowledge (mostly revealed or divinely inspired), Milton sets out, in the poem's most frequently

⁵The question of what role Milton attributed to learning and knowledge and whether he changed his mind on this matter towards the final years of his life has attracted much scholarly attention and generated a wealth of research. Particularly in his early and middle works (e.g. *Of Education*, *Areopagitica*), Milton showed himself to be a fervent supporter of learning and one of the most erudite writers in the English language. From his earliest years, he received an excellent education and dedicated also much of his adult life to the study of literature and theology (for more details on Milton's life, context and works, see Barbara K. Lewalski (2000), *The Life of John Milton. A Critical Biography*). Many scholars have sought to explain how a poet of Milton's calibre could have written the condemnation of human (in particular pagan) learning voiced by the Christ figure in *Paradise Regained*. In the context of this paper, only a few selected studies can be drawn to the reader's attention. Sensabaugh (1946) paints the picture of an aging and disillusioned Milton; the reply by Samuel (1949) suggests an interpretation of Christ's statements that fits Milton's previously voiced views on the purpose and contents of education. Classic monographic studies are Schultz (1955) on *Milton and Forbidden Knowledge*, Svendsen (1956) on *Milton and Science*, and Jacobus (1976) on *Sudden Apprehension. Aspects of Knowledge in Paradise Lost*.

quoted words, “to justify the ways of God to men” (1, 26), that is to explain the justice of the fall not as an isolated event but as a part of an overarching divine scheme.

Importantly, these teachings of the prophetic poet do not only aim at providing theological education for his readers, but they have important and far-reaching ramifications for many social and political issues of seventeenth-century England.⁶ In this paper, I would like to focus precisely on one of these ramifications, namely the necessity to abolish licensing and thereby political censorship, by exploring the theological foundation (as developed in *Paradise Lost*) of Milton’s conception of human knowledge in the transition from the pre- to the post-lapsarian state. In particular, there are two aspects that I would like to discuss in more detail: first, the general assumption underlying Milton’s argument in the passage from the *Areopagitica* quoted previously, namely the notion that knowledge is natural and therefore to some degree even necessary for humankind; second, the idea that the possibility of evil is the precondition for human freedom and at the same time the reason why human virtue is subject to continuous testing, or trial.

1) *Knowledge is constitutive of human nature and necessary for human beings in order to fulfil their part in the economy of creation.*

In Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton presents a reworking and interpretation of the first chapters of *Genesis*, which narrate God’s creation of the earth and its inhabitants:

There wanted yet the master work, the end
Of all yet done: a creature who not prone
And brute as other creatures but endued
With sanctity of reason might erect
His stature and, upright with front serene,
Govern the rest, self-knowing, and from thence
Magnanimous to correspond with Heaven,
But grateful to acknowledge whence his goodness
Descends, thither with heart and voice and eyes
Directed in devotion to adore
And worship God supreme who made him chief
Of all His works. (7, 505-516, emphasis added)

⁶For a general analysis of how Milton used the poem to communicate political ideas and convictions, see the informative and illuminating essay by Barbara Lewalski. Against those who are inclined to regard *Paradise Lost* as a retreat from the political scene, Lewalski contends: “I mean to argue here that Milton’s poem is a more daring political gesture than we often realize, even as it is also a poem for the ages by a prophet poet who placed himself with (or above) Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, Tasso, and the rest. It undertakes a strenuous project of educating readers in the virtues, values, and attitudes that make a people worthy of liberty, and we need to recognize just how emphatic its political lessons were and are.” (2000: 140-141)

According to Milton's interpretation of the biblical story, man was explicitly created to know and to act on the basis of his knowledge, especially knowledge of himself, the other creatures and of heavenly things, as far as they are revealed to him through his "correspondence with heaven". Man is referred to as the "master work", the "end of all yet done", a creature endowed with reason and capable of acquiring knowledge, which is why he is placed in a position to "govern the rest, self-knowing". It is worth noting how Milton connects man's privilege of dominion with the privilege of knowledge: Adam receives the right to rule the earth directly from God, but Milton has God insist that Adam understand the reason why he holds this prerogative, namely his being created as an image of God, a rational being. However, man's outstanding position, signalled by his rationality and its attendant privileges – dominion over the earth and the possibility to communicate with heavenly beings – obliges him at the same time to be constantly aware of and to acknowledge his dependence on God as the ultimate source of all goodness. The gift of reason implies both the pleasure and the duty to know himself as well as to worship his creator.

In Milton's version, Adam, the first human being and future progenitor of the human race, receives the knowledge he needs in order to do his part in the divinely instituted economy of creation right at the beginning. When he awakens for the first time, Adam immediately voices his natural desire to know, in particular his own nature, his whereabouts and the cause of his existence. He addresses the natural world around him:

Tell if ye saw how came I thus, how here.
Not of myself: *by some great Maker, then,*
In goodness and in pow'r preeminent.
Tell me *how may I know Him, how adore*
From whom I have that thus I move and live
And feel that I am happier than I know. (8, 277-82, emphasis added)

Although Adam possesses reason, he does not yet possess knowledge.⁷ Interestingly, the phrasing of his plea for knowledge shows that he is indeed a rational *as well as* a humble creature, given that he uses the few facts he knows to conclude that all must be the work of "some great Maker". In this sense, Adam desires knowledge not in a spirit of curiosity – as he would do if he were driven by a self-referential desire to know solely for the sake of knowing or if he wished to obtain further proof of his Maker's omnipotence – but as a precondition for praising the creator

⁷See also Lewalski (1969) who argues that growth and intellectual growth in particular are part of the human experience according to Milton's interpretation of the pre-lapsarian state. This is corroborated, for instance, by Raphael's admonition: "God made thee perfect, not immutable" (5, 524). Perfection as conceptualised in *Paradise Lost* means precisely growth: "primal man's nature is shown to be complex and constantly developing, not simple and stable" (Lewalski 1969: 99).

and expressing his gratefulness. His wonder is intimately linked with admiration and reflects an informed awareness of his happy state. Since Adam is unable to acquire by himself such knowledge as he seeks, having no human teachers to rely on, God acts as a kind of archetypal teacher, giving Adam an initial education. First and foremost, he informs Adam of the freedom to do whatever pleases him *except* eating the fruits from “the tree whose operation brings / Knowledge of good and ill (which I have set / The pledge of thy obedience and thy faith)” (8, 323-325). Once this point has been made unmistakably clear, God engages in a friendly conversation with Adam, which – contrary to what it may seem at first – amounts to a first “trial” of human virtue.

The divine instruction which Adam receives consists, in other words, not only in an act of authorial exhortation but also in a demonstration of the creature’s rational capacity. In particular, human reason is shown to involve two complementary aspects: on the one hand, an intuitive or receptive faculty which allows Adam to name and discern the nature of the earth’s animals over whom he is supposed to exert dominion;⁸ on the other hand, a discursive ability which enables him to use his knowledge – whether acquired through “sudden apprehension” (8, 354) worked by God or through verbal instruction – in an appropriate manner.⁹ Applying rational deliberation to the newly acquired insights about God, himself and the other living creatures on earth, Adam is able to justify his desire for a suitable companion and to answer the mock objections brought forward by God.¹⁰ At the end of the debate, the divine interlocutor admits:

Thus far *to try thee*, Adam, I was pleased
And find thee knowing not of beasts alone
 Which thou hast rightly named but of thyself,
 Expressing well the spirit within thee free,
 My image, not imparted to the brute [...]
Good reason was thou freely shouldst dislike:
 And be so minded still! I, ere thou spok’st
 Knew it not good for Man to be alone

⁸ To seal Adam’s lordship over the earth, God wishes all the animals “to receive / From thee their names and pay thee fealty / With low subjection” (8, 343-345). Adam recalls that with natural ease “I named them as they passed and understood / Their nature: with such knowledge God endued / My sudden apprehension” (8, 352-354). For further analysis of the link between reason and language in this and other passages, see Leonard (1999).

⁹ Remarkably, Milton treats the naming episode with relative brevity in the space of 17 lines (8, 338-354) while the testing of Adam’s reasoning faculty extends over almost 100 lines (8, 355-451).

¹⁰ God first objects that Adam is not solitary on earth but enjoys the company of all various animals, to which the latter replies that he too needs one of his kind in order to be fully happy (see 8, 369-398). The second objection is more delicate to answer since God proposes his own model of “solitary” happiness. As in the previous case, Adam manages to pin down the flawed assumption thanks to his ability to discern the difference in nature between God and himself: “Thou in Thyself art perfect and in Thee / Is no deficiency found. Not so is Man / But in degree the cause of his desire / By conversation with his like to help / Or solace his defects.” (8, 415-419)

And no such company as then thou saw'st
Intended thee – *for trial only brought*,
To see how thou could'st judge of fit and meet. (8, 437-448, emphasis added)

By dramatising God's first testing of Adam's rational capacity, Milton provides an exemplary demonstration of how human beings ought to use reason and knowledge. If used well, they provide the means to rationalise desire and to justify the choice of a given alternative in a situation where more than one solution appears acceptable. As Adam's plea for a suitable companion shows, faced with a given desire, one must decide, *with good reason*, whether to pursue it or to restrain from enacting it. Thus, if there are certain kinds or areas of knowledge that are natural and necessary for Adam and hence for his future descendants, then this is due to the fact that human beings need rational criteria in order to be able to judge and govern their desires.¹¹ At the same time, the first dialogue between God and Adam serves to establish the boundaries of human knowledge through the prohibition to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In this way, Milton places the problem of knowledge within a delicate balance between legitimacy and illegitimacy from the very beginning of Adam's (and by implication: humankind's) existence. Even though knowledge is natural and necessary to man, as is his desire to know things concerning himself as well as heavenly things, there is one kind of forbidden knowledge which cannot be acquired without risking the original state of happiness.

2) *Trial of virtue is essential to human freedom because it means the actual possibility of evil without which the choice to do good would be meaningless.*

To a significant extent, Milton's justification of God's ways to men in *Paradise Lost* rests upon the correct understanding of the meaning and implications of this divinely instituted interdiction. As Satan, the chief among the fallen angels, plots his revenge on God, which he seeks to enact by corrupting the latter's most recent work of creation, Milton introduces into the story of the fall a novel and vital complication. In order to warn Adam and Eve of Satan's machinations, Milton's God sends one of his archangels, Raphael, on an educational mission to teach the couple, by the "terrible example" (6, 910) of the rebel angels' fall, that happiness – whether human or angelic – depends on obedience and, what is more important, that obedience is not to be taken for granted but is constantly put to trial and must be renewed over and over again. Interestingly, Milton does not present Raphael's narration as an unsolicited lesson but motivates

¹¹ On the naturalness of desire in the unfallen state and its intricate relation to the phenomenon of temptation, see Campbell (2014). For an analysis of Milton's staging of the process of human self-knowledge, see Fields (1968: esp. 395-396). According to Fields, "the story of Adam is the story of Everyman in self-realization" (395).

it with an inquiry on the human part. Encouraged by the friendly demeanour of the archangel, Adam raises the question (quite as if it had already been on his mind for some time): “But say, / What meant that caution joined, ‘if ye be found / Obedient’? Can we want obedience then / To him [...]?” (5, 512-515).¹² Raphael elucidates the divine “caution” in a twofold way: first, by explaining the underlying rationale (5, 519-543); and second, by illustrating the actual possibility of disobedience (hence of evil) with the help of his narrative relating the fall of the rebel angels (the remainder of Book 5 up to the end of Book 6). Humans and angels, as rational creatures, are created truly free and unless they freely choose to worship and serve God, they do not act according to the dignity of their respective natures, Raphael explains:

Attend! That thou art happy owe to God.
 That thou continuest such owe to thyself,
 That is, to thy obedience: therein stand!
 This was that caution giv’n thee. Be advised!
 God made thee *perfect, not immutable*,
 And good made he thee. But to persevere
 He left in thy pow’r, ordained thy will
 By nature free, not overruled by fate
 Inextricable or strict necessity.
 Our voluntary service He requires,
 Not our necessitated: such with Him
 Finds no acceptance, nor *can* find. For how
 Can hearts, not free, be *tried* whether they serve
 Willing or no, who will but what they must
 By destiny and can no other choose? (5, 520-534, emphasis added)

For rational creatures to *remain* in the state of happiness, they must freely choose to serve God, and the only way of guaranteeing that their service is indeed paid voluntarily is to have them face a real choice between obedience and disobedience, between good and evil, and to have them face that choice not once or twice but continuously. In other words, the notion of human freedom necessitates, according to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the actual possibility of evil.

Thus, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which embodies and symbolises God’s single prohibition, represents a constant trial to Adam and Eve’s virtue – not, however, a

¹² Adam repeatedly addresses Raphael with epithets that define his role as a heavenly teacher, for instance “[d]ivine instructor” (5, 546), “[d]ivine Interpreter” (7, 72) and “divine / Historian” (8, 6-7); for a more detailed analysis of the role of Raphael, see Reeves (1997). Interestingly, Raphael briefly alludes to Adam’s future role as the first teacher of mankind: “that posterity / Informed by thee might know” (7, 638-639).

temptation meant to seduce them, which is how Satan interprets its presence in the Garden of Eden.¹³ In the logic of *Paradise Lost*, the tree functions as a guarantee of human freedom and it provides the human couple with a continuous occasion to show their obedience and their capacity to withstand the possibility of doing evil. It follows from this observation that, according to Milton's interpretation of the prohibition, trial is not exclusive to the post-lapsarian state; rather, it is an indispensable element already present in the paradisaic stage, as God's initial testing of Adam's capacity to reason on the basis of self-knowledge testifies. Yet trial before the fall differs significantly from trial after the fall and the impact of "Man's first disobedience" on the nature of this essential element of human freedom remains to be clarified.

To illuminate this point, it is necessary to consider the constellation of factors determining the human creature. As a matter of fact, man's position in the hierarchy of being is defined by two (rather than just one) aspects: his rationality and his deeds. Through reason, man is capable of establishing a relation to truth and to being; through his actions, he is placed in a certain relation to goodness. Importantly, these two aspects are mutually related in a two-directional manner: in the ideal (i.e. original) state, man's reason governs his decisions (and thus his actions) just as man's actions define the parameters of his reasoning. In other words, one's knowledge of reality is a decisive factor when judging desires and making decisions, and one's active participation in goodness shapes one's perception and evaluation of reality. The underlying reason for this reciprocal impact is that man's actions circumscribe the space of actual experience while his rationality opens up the realm of possibility (hence the necessity to choose, namely between possible ways of action). Thomas Blackburn has shown that Adam and Eve have knowledge of evil *before the fall* but only in the form of "conceptual" knowledge rather than through their own experience: "the Fall does not consist of an access of knowledge, as we usually conceive of it, but of a shift in the mode of man's knowledge of good and evil".¹⁴ In the light of this insight, it becomes clear that the prohibition is not about forbidden knowledge in an objective sense but about a foundational experience involving a failure on the part of human reason (namely a misjudgement) and subsequently an illegitimate action which has a disinhibiting effect and impairs man's capacity to distinguish good from evil precisely because the realm of

¹³ The distinction is very subtle and it must be admitted that one cannot exclude the possibility that the tree *was* meant as a temptation, as Campbell's subtle discussion of the notion of temptation in *Paradise Lost* makes clear (2014). On the necessity of trial before the fall, see also Reichert (1981).

¹⁴ Blackburn 1971: 126. And further: "In the state of innocence, Adam and Eve live a total *experience* of good; their knowledge of evil, on the other hand, is conceptual. They know the word *evil*, what it meant when the state so named has been actualized elsewhere [i.e. for the rebel angels], and what act could cause it to be actualized in their own existence. But so long as they remain faithful to God's command, evil remains only a potentiality in their lives: good alone is known as actual and innocence is preserved. When Adam and Eve fall, however, this actual-potential polarity is destroyed. By their disobedience evil is actualized as a part of their direct personal experience." (Blackburn 1971: 126, emphasis in the original)

actual experience by now includes both.¹⁵ Before the fall, Adam and Eve knew of evil as a theoretical or abstract concept, but as a pure object of knowledge it affected neither their cognitive capacity nor the rationality of their choices. Doing and experiencing good informed human reason in such a way as to dispose the human creature to acquire true knowledge and to choose well. After the fall, by contrast, evil as well as good form part of the human experience and affect reason both as a source of knowledge (evil manifesting itself, for instance, in the form of error) and as a ruler of desire (in this case, manifesting itself in the shape of unreasonable decisions or sinful actions).

In the light of this analysis, the following distinction emerges. In the pre-lapsarian state, trial, as represented by the Tree of Knowledge, means the choice between, on the one hand, doing good and therefore having experience only of good (while evil, as testified to by Adam's reaction upon learning of the rebel angels, is almost unimaginable, a kind of abstract concept)¹⁶ and, on the other hand, doing and experiencing evil through the very act of disobedience (thereby losing the possibility to know/do *pure* good). As a consequence, the actuality of both good and evil inevitably shapes the circumstances under which man is forced to acquire knowledge and to take decisions after the fall. Essentially, this view of human knowledge informs also the prose tract on licensing from 1644, although Milton explores and dramatises the theological foundation only many years later in his epic poem.¹⁷ In the *Areopagitica*, he focuses rather on the implications of the first act of evil for humankind's individual and shared effort of recovering truth. Since it is no longer possible for fallen humankind to circumvent or evade evil (both falsity and sin), the challenge consists *not* in suppressing evil but in dealing with it in the *least damaging* manner:

Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned, that those confused seeds which were imposed upon Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixed. It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good *by evil*. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all

¹⁵ See Patrides (1962) on the standard interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge in the Christian Tradition, of which Milton forms part.

¹⁶ When Adam asks Raphael to narrate the circumstances of the rebel angels' fall, he muses that "[t]he full relation [...] must needs be strange" (5, 556); afterwards, he expresses his gratefulness for having been forewarned of Satan's desire for revenge because these are things "which human knowledge could not reach" (7, 75).

¹⁷ Milton planned and wrote his first great epic poem *Paradise Lost* in the period from 1650 to 1665, the first edition appeared in 1667 (see Lewalski 2000: 141).

her baits and seeming pleasures, *and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better*, he is the true warfaring Christian. (728, emphasis added)

As a consequence, trial in the post-lapsarian state stands for a choice between knowing evil *and* revelling in doing it, or, on the contrary, knowing evil and “yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better”. The difference, in other words, is between those who seek to reduce the impact of evil on their lives by exploring the fullness of fallen life merely *on a theoretical level*, that is by considering as many ideas and courses of action as possible *before* making a careful choice, and those who indiscriminately embrace every possible intellectual and moral experience, and thus welcome good *and* evil into the realm of their individual lived experience. With respect to the argument brought forward in Milton’s *Areopagitic* speech, Blackburn observes: “The unfallen Adam and Eve, in fact, are held up in *Areopagitica* as a model of morality for fallen man.”¹⁸ Paradoxical as it may seem, ever since humankind experienced evil for the first time, whereby evil was made a determining factor of the human condition, the descendants of Adam and Eve must come to terms with evil not by attempting to avoid it entirely, but by returning to the “model of morality” characteristic of the original state and thus by exposing themselves to evil *through rational consideration only*, not, however, through actual experience, namely by committing errors or sinful deeds time and again. The difficulty of post-lapsarian trial thus lies in the fact that humankind must attempt to identify and reject a part of reality, precisely because for them (qua descendants of fallen Adam and Eve) reality is made up equally of good and evil. To withstand trial successfully in this constellation means to resist a significant portion of reality and – on the basis of a rational consideration of the various theoretical and practical alternatives and subsequently of a careful choice – to turn those aspects of the world that are tainted by evil into a mere possibility again, into a potential yet declined option.

Conclusion

Against the biblical and theological background that informs Milton’s conception of human knowledge and its transformation caused by the fall, the urgency of his argument against licensing and censorship in the *Areopagitica* is thrown into sharp relief. From the beginning of man’s existence, created as a rational creature in the image of God, knowledge has been a constitutive part of human nature. His knowledge determines his position in the hierarchy of

¹⁸ Blackburn 1971: 133. Many scholars have pointed out that although Milton’s *Areopagitica* argues for the necessity of a free press, it does not argue for amorality (see e.g. Limouze 1980). Indeed, Milton rejects only one specific form of licensing, namely pre-publication licensing enacted by the state. At the same time, he encourages a form of moral self-regulation on the part of the author (see Limouze 1980: 112-114), and the need for post-publication debate in order to distinguish truth from falsity (see e.g. Dowling 2006: 282-283).

beings, his relation to other creatures on the one hand and to God on the other. Remarkably, Milton does not conceive of knowledge as a static phenomenon but as a dynamic process through which man increasingly comes to know himself, his state (whether pre- or post-lapsarian), his fellow creatures and partly heavenly things, provided that they were revealed to him. Knowledge is natural to man, and so is his desire for it. Yet ever since Adam and Eve's first disobedience transformed the nature of trial and replaced the pre-lapsarian freedom to know and choose good because it was contiguous with their experience of reality with the post-lapsarian freedom to know and choose good through a contrastive differentiation between good and evil, man cannot access knowledge of good without at least conceptual knowledge of evil. For this reason, Milton's second argument developed in the *Areopagitica* and concerned with the utility of all kinds of books, whether true or false, concludes as follows:

Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather, that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the *contemplation* of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure [...]. Since therefore *the knowledge and survey* of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the *scanning* of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we *more safely*, and *with less danger*, scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reasons? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read. (728-729, emphasis added)

According to this view, the practice of licensing and censorship as reintroduced and implemented by the Long Parliament of England inevitably has negative consequences for humankind's shared effort to identify and bring together the dispersed pieces of truth which in a fallen world are intimately mixed with falsehood and evil. Since good may be derived not only from good books (or ideas) but, by way of contrast and differentiation, also from bad books (or ideas), any attempt to remove falsehood (or at least certain manifestations of it) from the reach of the broader public will actually limit, rather than increase human liberty. This train of thought can be placed within Stephen Burt's analysis according to which the *Areopagitica* elaborates – along with a demonstration of the futility of actual censorship practices – a constructive justification for the freedom of the press and of expression by building upon an implied parallelism as established, for instance, by the title's reference to the *Areopagus*: “Paul's speech at Athens becomes Milton's demonstration of the necessity of argument, of the deep connection between true faith and inquiry” (Burt 1998: 26). From this “deep connection”, Milton is shown to draw his conclusions regarding the role of the state:

[C]ivil authority is to admit as one of its purposes (as, in fact, the highest purpose of all human institutions) the discovery and propagation of true religion; but, because we are fallen and must try truth by contraries, because we have no way to be sure beyond argument, and, perhaps, because we cannot know exactly what our beliefs are without arguing about them, government can best serve true religion through a policy of toleration and near-total press freedom. (Burt 1998: 28)

If the possibility or reality of evil, which includes the existence and availability of seditious, false or otherwise harmful books, is censored – though for the public good – such an attempt is doomed to fail and to reduce the freedom of those who are meant to be protected. To push Milton’s reasoning to its utmost consequence, one could say that the only time in human history when censorship was useful was precisely in the pre-lapsarian state, if one is inclined to see God’s prohibition as an act of benevolent censorship aiming at protecting his creatures from the knowledge of good *and* evil, or rather from the knowledge of good *by evil*. However, since man’s first disobedience and concomitant experience of evil, the grounds for censorship have collapsed because after man’s violation of God’s censored tree, human knowledge cannot be damaged, but at best (when purely theoretical) benefit from the acquaintance with evil. Milton’s polemical intervention against the Licensing Order of 1643 is a powerful and stimulating document of his belief in the theological and political relevance of an open intellectual and poetical space – a space which follows its own logic of discovery according to which the differentiation of good from evil is the end, not the beginning, of public debate.

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