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Happy Rural Seat: Book 4 of Paradise Lost

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Happy Rural Seat: Book 4 of Paradise Lost

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Abstract

Over many years, Dr. Leland Ryken has taught *Paradise Lost*. In this fireside chat, Ryken discusses his favorite book of the epic poem, Book 4, including the wisdom he has gained from it.

Keywords

Paradise Lost, Milton, Ryken, Book IV, Book 4, Paradise, Utopia, Eve's Love Song

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"Happy Rural Seat:"
Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*

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I begin with an anecdote growing out of my authorship of a series of reader's guides to the classics. The format of the hundred-page books is a main body of text supplemented by copious additional material in the margins in smaller font size. I always inform my editor and layout person that if there is too much marginalia, I can omit some of the entries. I laughed inwardly when I was summoned to the offices of Crossway Books (down the street from my college) because I had provided more marginal commentary for Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* than space allowed.

When teaching *Paradise Lost*, I regularly tell my students when we get to Book 4 that this is my favorite work of English literature. The superfluity of commentary on Book 4 in the reader's guide was a nice confirmation of my love of this text. The following remarks on Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* are intended as a fireside chat on the subject of why I absolutely adore this work of literature. I have welcomed the assignment of writing this informal essay because it has pushed me to codify what qualities make a work of literature rise to the level of "the best of the best" for me.

Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* only gradually and imperceptibly rose to its honored position in my thinking, but as I analyze the history of my involvement with it, I can see certain underground currents that had been at work for many years. I will speak personally in

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saying that my estimate of many of the *crème da le crème* works of literature in my life has been deeply influenced by how those works were presented to me by professors and literary critics. This is true for Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*.

At the start of my graduate education, I arrived (newly married) in Eugene, Oregon, with a month to fill with self-study before the beginning of the academic term. I prepared for an entry examination designed to determine whether a student could move directly to the Ph.D. program without needing to take an M.A. By God's providence, I found and purchased C. S. Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost* in the campus bookstore. Coupled with my reading of Milton's sonnets in a Douglas Bush edition, my reading of Lewis's book made me want to be a Miltonist. In particular, Lewis's close reading of Satan's approach to Paradise in Book 4 completely captivated me. To this day, I regard it as Lewis's very best piece of explication (rivaled only by his analysis of the structure of Shakespeare's sonnets in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*).

When I tell my students about my enthusiasm for Book 4, I share with them a piece of literary theory that was codified for me by a statement that Lewis makes in his essay "On Stories." One of my early breakthroughs in literary theory (occurring during my first year of teaching and clinched by certain theoretic writings of Lewis and Northrop Frye) was the conviction that literature constitutes a realm of the imagination that has its own ground rules and that differs decisively in its surface details from the real world in which we live. C. S. Lewis covers this in his classic essay on stories and offers *The Wind in the Willows* as an example of a fantasy story that is "a specimen of the most scandalous escapism" that might be expected to "unfit us for the harshness of reality and send us back to our daily lives unsettled and discontented" (*On Stories* 14). But the opposite is true: "the whole story, paradoxically enough, strengthens our relish for real life" (*On Stories* 14). Our excursion into the merely imagined "sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual" (*On Stories* 14).

I quote this to my students, and then I assert that for me this is preeminently true of Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*. My removal from real life to sojourn in an imagined paradise makes me more equipped to be God's person when I return to the real world. So my first answer to the question of what makes Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* an optimal experience for me is that I find it spiritually restorative and edifying. This is a way of saying (as I do to my classes) that, other things being equal in terms of literary quality, I find the songs of Zion better than the songs of Babylon.

I need to guard against leaving the impression that only Christian classics can rise to the elite circle of the greatest literary experiences or be spiritually edifying. I myself divide literature into three categories: the literature of Christian affirmation, the literature of clarification or common humanity, and the literature of unbelief. Literature from all three categories can be spiritual edifying to me (the latter two by clarifying the human situation to which the Christian faith speaks).

A second avenue toward understanding why Book 4 touches me so deeply has to do with a literary theory that I call "example theory." Example theory held an honored place in Renaissance poetics. In the noblest monument of that tradition (*An Apology for Poetry*), Sir Philip Sidney repeatedly references the idea that literature embodies human experience in examples that the author puts before us for contemplation and edification. Philosophy gives us the precept, claims Sidney, while literature "giveth...the example" (32). Several paragraphs later Sidney enlarges his claim for literature: "Now doth the peerless poet perform both" the function of the historian and the philosopher, "as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example" (33).

I have always used example theory as part of my pedagogy, and I do so without apology. To people who object that this is surely a simplistic view of literature, I reply, "This is simply how literature and especially narrative work."

According to Sir Philip Sidney, literature combines the particular and the universal, and that ties it completely with the concept of literature as a concrete universal. That was a hallmark of formalist criticism (New Criticism) that was in the ascendancy when I received my graduate education. I remember reading John Crowe Ransom's classic essay on literature entitled "The Concrete Universal." I tell my students that the examples that literature puts before us are universal as well as particularized. I clinch the point by saying that history and the news tell us what *happened*, while literature tells us what *happens*.

When I look at Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* in this light, I formulate a discussion question for my class. I assign it already on the day we spend on Book 3 and expect my students to have something to say by way of class discussion at the next class meeting. I make the claim that when composing Book 4 Milton portrayed not only how God *intended* Adam and Eve to live in the garden but also how God *intends* us to live today. So on the appointed day I stand in front of the board with my marker in hand and say, "Basing your answer on Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve's life in the garden, how does God intend human life to be lived?"

The answers are elevating. As I assimilate them, I feel enlarged. How does God intend us to live (assuming that Milton was right)? With every human need and appetite (including the sexual) satisfied. With work to give life purpose and meaning. With leisure to make life even richer. In continuous gratitude to God for his gifts. In harmony with nature and fellow humans. In continuous worship of God. With every earthly experience opening upward to God. A list like that reminds me of Madeleine L'Engle's dictum that "we don't want to feel less when we have finished a book; we want to feel that new possibilities of being have been opened to us" (116). I recall a television ad where children are asked, "Is *more* better, or is *less* better?" The answer: more is better. (One of the ads ends with a child chanting, "We want more, we want more, we want more.")

Likewise with literature: Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* leaves me with a sense of enlarged rather than diminished possibilities.

When I explicate the first description of Milton's paradisaical vision in Book 4, I call attention to Milton's vocabulary of superlatives: "all delight," "Nature's whole wealth," "yea more," "far more pleasant," "all trees," "noblest kind." I see the entire spirit of Book 4 in microcosm in this description of the physical beauty and abundance of the garden. In a book on the novel (*Fiction and the Shape of Belief*), Sheldon Sacks offered the opinion that a great work "modifies our very being and makes us feel ... we are not the same men and women we were when we began it" (253). Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* delivers the goods.

What else do I like about Book 4? I absolutely love the earthly paradise archetype. In fact, no archetype is dearer to my heart. Of course we will not go into orbit over archetypes if we are not attuned to archetypal criticism. I am so grateful that I entered graduate school when Northrop Frye was the reigning monarch of literary theory. I cannot imagine reading and teaching literature without attention to archetypes, and it strikes me as a colossal missed opportunity not to operate with archetypal criticism in one's arsenal of analytic tools.

Sometimes I take time to commend the earthly paradise to my students both as a literary phenomenon and a spiritual reality. The following are some of the things I say. The paradisaical archetype has a therapeutic value. Visiting paradise has a healing effect on the human psyche and is a beneficial escape from burdensome reality. Its function is partly to serve as an inspiration to the human spirit and be a redemptive image in our thinking. We need strong images of good in our minds; paradise is one of those images. Among other virtues, paradise is an image of beauty.

But it is an image of additional things as well. It is an image of longing, in multiple ways. On the one hand, paradise represents nostalgia for a lost past. Is it beneficial to think about that? Yes—it forces us to be realistic about our present situation. To long for the irretrievably lost is part of life. In class I quote from Chad Walsh's book on utopia:

I believe man once lived in utopia, but does no longer, and that he is always trying to return. The name of his first utopia was Eden.... It is a part of our heritage. We want to go back. The flaming swords of angels bar the way.... We are haunted by memories of the original garden and that lost innocence. . . . The poor thing we commonly call our 'human nature' was not our first nature; it is a pathological condition.... We are Displaced Persons, but our old homeland burns and glows in our hearts. (30)

In this regard we can appropriately speak of the clarifying value of paradise.

But if paradise represents nostalgia and regret over a lost past, it is also an image of hope. It is an image of the good life toward which we can aspire. It is in the nature of literature to awaken longings, and whenever we find a work of literature that arouses the right longings, we have found a treasure.

The archetypal earthly paradise is the original green world of the imagination. It is what Northrop Frye called myth—the oldest and simplest forms of literature. As the prototypical earthly paradise (the Garden of Eden) became displaced in the direction of realism (according to Frye's scheme), it became pastoral. The garden of Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* belongs to the pastoral tradition, too. I remember being so impressed by a small book entitled *Milton's Pastoral Vision* that I wrote a letter of admiration to its author (John Knott of the University of Michigan). As I read Book 4, my imagination keeps reaching out to and drawing in the green world as I have encountered it in much of the literature that I teach.

I believe that our experience of many of our favorite works of literature is rooted in our personal background. I grew up on a farm in Iowa, and as I often remark, "it shows." This was reinforced for me when I served as an editor of a huge reference book entitled *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. As the editors were parceling out topics to dozens of scholars, it suddenly occurred to

them that they needed to claim treasured topics for themselves. I claimed seventy topics. When I looked at my list the next day, I laughed inwardly: nearly all of the images I had chosen were nature images. I tell my classes that I am perhaps the only person in the world who regards Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* as a great nature poem.

What else does Book 4 possess that pushes it into my elite circle of very favorite works? It has a copia (I am inclined to say superfluity) of both technique and content. The word *density* is perhaps the right term. My favorite literary works are generally works with which there is (as I tell my students) "so much to do."

A Rykenism in my classes is a formula that C. S. Lewis coined to describe complexity and density of poetic texture. In his masterful introduction to Edmund Spenser in an anthology of English literature, Lewis felt a need to garner interest for the kind of poem *The Faerie Queene* is with readers who are accustomed to the poetry of John Donne and William Shakespeare. So Lewis served notice on his readers that when they sit down to read *The Faerie Queene* they should not expect "the phrase by phrase deliciousness" ("Edmund Spenser" 102) that Shakespeare's sonnets possess. "Line by line deliciousness" is a cliché in my classes, and Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* possesses it preeminently.

This complexity and multilayered quality exists on both a global level and the minute level of poetic texture. To illustrate the latter, I will explore Eve's love song later in this article. At the global level, we can start by placing Book 4 in the overall design of Milton's epic.

The portrayal of life in Paradise (the label I give to our day on Book 4 on my syllabus) is part of a grand system of contrasts and foils that Milton orchestrates in *Paradise Lost*. A scholar from a bygone era named M. M. Mahood noted that Milton delays our arrival in Paradise until the middle of the epic as part of a careful strategy. The placement of Paradise in the middle of Milton's epic mirrors its essential qualities—a protected and still center, even "womb-like" (Mahood 180-181). By the time we reach Paradise, we experience it as a welcome contrast to the chaos of

Hell (Books 1 and 2) and as a more accessible earthly version of the transcendent perfection of Heaven (Book 3).

Another complexity of the total design is that the perfection of Paradise is enclosed within the troubling framework of impending evil. The garden of the Christian tradition (starting with early Genesis) differs from the gardens of classical mythology by being conditional. Calypso's garden will always be there, but the Garden of Eden not only *could* be lost but *was* lost. Milton accordingly begins Book 4 with Satan's soliloquy, thereby enveloping his vision of paradisaical perfection within a framework of evil. I ask my classes to theorize about why Milton began the "feel good" book of *Paradise Lost* by reintroducing the scoundrel Satan into the story. All of our early glimpses of Paradise are mediated through the eyes and consciousness of Satan. We first approach Paradise in Book 4 as a traveling companion of Satan as he journeys from Hell to Earth. Our responses to this juxtaposition of good and evil in Book 4 are complex rather than single. Milton does not allow us to settle down for a relaxing stroll in a perfect garden. This merely confirms what is obvious throughout *Paradise Lost*, namely, that Milton has a lot of balls in the air.

Counteracting the simplicity of Milton's picture of life in a garden is the plethora of individual genres that he incorporated into Book 4. While writing this essay I dusted off Barbara Lewalski's book *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*. She mentions some twenty genres in her chapter on Book 4, and it is not hard to add to her list. For anyone who relishes literary genres, Book 4 offers a treasure trove.

Part of the alertness that Book 4 demands of us flows from its style, which I call an impressionistic style that requires us to fill in the details. One of many helpful points that C. S. Lewis makes about the descriptive style that Milton uses in his portrayal of Paradise is that "while seeming to describe his own imagination he must actually arouse ours" (*Preface* 49). What J. B. Broadbent says about this impressionistic style in regard to the portrayal of Satan and Hell is equally true of the pictures of

Paradise in Book 4: "The best thing is to accept [Milton's] abstractions as large labels; then reflect on our own experience of them. It is we who have to provide the examples, the particularity, the experience" (143).

I like to use the following line as a test case of this: "goodliest trees loaden with fairest fruit" (l. 147). I ask my students what trees and fruit they are sure were present in Paradise. When I answer that question for myself, I find myself remembering certain pictures and experiences of fruit from my childhood, and this fits Milton's strategy of encouraging us to reach back to a time when human experience itself was simpler and more innocent than it has been since the fall. Book 4 requires us as readers to supply much of the meaning from something that lies within us. I find this appealing.

Yet another aspect of the complexity of Book 4 is the important role that it plays in Milton's anti-epic strategy. It has become a commonplace of Milton criticism that a major part of what Milton was up to in *Paradise Lost* was to revamp the classical epic tradition that he inherited. I have found this so interesting that I have claimed it as a kind of sub-specialty in my life as a Miltonist (and I should perhaps add that I wrote my dissertation on *Paradise Lost*).

In kernel form, the situation is as follows: in writing what he conceived as a Christian epic, Milton inherited his genre and accompanying value structure from the classical tradition. As a critic named John Steadman has argued in multiple places, Milton viewed the inherited epic tradition as both a model to be emulated and a rival to be surpassed and refuted. In Steadman's formula, *Paradise Lost* is both epic and counter epic.

Many things went into Milton's anti-epic strategy, but certainly what happens in Book 4 is a lynchpin in the design. One aspect of it is that Milton replaced heroic (martial) values with pastoral values. The heroic values were physical strength, prowess in battle, conquest, boasting, success in warfare, and kingship as the reward for victory on the battlefield. Pastoral values include

contentment, the unaspiring mind, harmony with nature, the simple life, and moral perfection.

Another approach to the anti-epic element in Book 4 is to compare the image of the hero in the rival traditions. Milton never calls *Paradise Lost* an epic; it is always a *heroic poem*. That is why Steadman speaks of epic as a genre in search of a hero. Indeed, as we trace Milton's own comments about his epic ambitions from his college years to his actual beginning of composition around 1658, it is a history of Milton's changing views about who would be his hero. Heroic narrative (of which epic is a subspecies) is always a comment on what constitutes heroic or exemplary action.

Milton replaced the warrior as hero with the Christian saint as hero. Where do we find this most overtly in *Paradise Lost*? In Book 4. In several of my courses the final assignment requires students to write an essay on how Milton's Christian faith influenced his handling of the classical epic tradition. I tell my students not to overlook Adam and Eve's virtuous life in the garden as a key component in Milton's anti-epic strategy. (Despite that suggestion, nearly all of my students fail to do enough with that aspect of the subject.)

What constitutes heroic action in *Paradise Lost*? Book 4 embodies numerous answers: obeying and worshiping God; living as the perfect married couple; working and playing as God designed; living in harmony with nature and people; living a life of gratitude and joy; praying; resisting temptation to evil. All of this sends me into orbit, which partly explains why Book 4 is my favorite work of literature. There is a kind of witness value to what Milton has done, and in class I sometimes quote from an essay by Michael Fixler that argues the thesis that "Milton conceived *Paradise Lost* as a form of devotional celebration" (168). I have long made the claim that virtually all of Milton's poetry can be read devotionally. On the first day that I spend on *Paradise Lost* in my courses, I quote the following sentence from a printed testimony made by someone when he joined Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia: "I was led to the Lord by

John Milton."¹

When we start thinking in terms of what Milton substituted for the warrior as hero (the martial theme), we quickly see that further far-reaching elements need to be added. By making the garden and family the scene of the main action, Milton transformed the military epic into a domestic epic. Of course this is one of numerous ways in which Milton's paradisaical vision in Book 4 is a thoroughly Puritan vision, and as a Puritan scholar I naturally relish this further dimension. The Puritans (and the Bible before them) also glorified the commonplace, in contrast to the aristocratic bias of classical epic and medieval romance. We might say that *Paradise Lost* does in an epic mode what the Old Testament story of Ruth achieves as a romantic idyll. And part of the significance of *that* is that the classical tradition viewed epic and idyll as contrasting genres, whereas Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* merges them. In the process, Eve becomes a full-fledged epic protagonist, sharing the task of cultivating the garden equally with Adam.

Much more might be said about Book 4 as part of Milton's revamping of classical epic, but I will be content with one more aspect. Much of what Milton did was to spiritualize what in the previous tradition had been material. Classical epic had a humanistic foundation, and it championed what today we call the success ethic. I would encapsulate Milton's revisionist agenda by quoting Proverbs 16:32, which asserts that "he who rules his spirit [is better than] he who takes a city" (*English Standard Version*). Classical epic and medieval romance valorize the warrior who takes a city. In Book 4, Milton defines epic virtue as Adam and Eve's ruling of their spirit in a garden existence.

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1. ¹ Supplied by courtesy of Philip Ryken, former pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. The specific aspect of *Paradise Lost* that led to this person's conversion was his sensing how much he shared with Milton's Satan and then, on the basis of what he knew to be an "unholy alliance," asking God to save him.

My favorite passage in Book 4 is Eve's love song. Here is the magical passage:

With thee conversing I forget all time;
 All seasons and their change, all please alike.
 Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
 With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
 When first on this delightful land he spreads
 His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flow'r,
 Glist'ring with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
 After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
 Of grateful ev'ning mild, then silent night
 With this her solemn bird and this fair moon,
 And these the gems of heav'n, her starry train:
 But neither breath of morn when she ascends
 With charm of earliest birds, nor rising sun
 On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, flow'r,
 Glist'ring with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
 Nor grateful ev'ning mild, nor silent night
 With this her solemn bird, nor walk by moon,
 Or glittering starlight without thee is sweet. (4.639-656)

This poem has loomed large in my literary life in multiple ways.

In my book *Realms of Gold: The Classics in Christian Perspective*, I begin each chapter by quoting a passage that epitomizes the masterwork that I will discuss in the chapter, and then I explicate the passage in such a way as to introduce the work as a whole. For my chapter on *Paradise Lost*, I chose Eve's love song to serve as my lead passage.

The passage also figures prominently in my courses. It is ideal for demonstrating the dynamics of lyric poetry, love poetry, and nature poetry. I use the poem in multiple courses to illustrate these things. A protégé of mine who had taken several of my courses professed concern when Eve's love song had not made an appearance in my Shakespeare course. He pressed me repeatedly

to find a place for it.

There is so much going on in this ostensibly simple poem that it is hard to know where to start. Perhaps I should start with the idea of simplicity. Throughout my career I have gotten a lot of mileage out of a formula that C. S. Lewis stated when criticizing the sixteenth-century humanists for losing the ability "to respond to the central, obvious appeal of a great work" (*Sixteenth* 26). Often before I delve into the complexity of a text, I ask my students what for them constitutes the simple, obvious appeal of the work (sometimes changing Lewis's word *central* to *simple*). The design of Eve's love song is simplicity personified: first Eve catalogs the features of the garden that she finds delightful in the presence of her beloved, and then she repeats the catalog, only to declare that none of the things that she found pleasant in Adam's presence are pleasant without him. When I teach the poem in class, I tell my students to circle the words *with thee*, *but*, and *without thee*.

A second thing that is simple about the poem is the imagery. The poem consists mainly of what I call the straight image (as contrasted to figurative language). None of the images is difficult. The poem names the simplest commonplaces of everyone's experience. The principle underlying the images, moreover, is that they are recognizable touchstones of pleasant aspects of nature. The poem uses the strategy of the golden lyric tradition of the sixteenth century. According to C. S. Lewis, that strategy consists of using words "that invite emotion and sensuous imagination" (*English* 506).

The simplicity of the poem also consists of the conventions of love poetry that it reenacts. It is a pastoral love lyric that praises the beloved through the medium of nature imagery. More specifically, the speaker praises the beloved as the source of her joy. Love poets have been doing all of these things from time immemorial.

But along with these reenactments of familiar rituals we find innovations. The poem is not only a love poem; it is also a nature

poem. In fact, I do not have a more favorite nature poem than this one. Eve's love poem is not only a love lyric embedded in an epic; it is a modification of a Petrarchan sonnet, constructed on the principle of an opening movement of eleven lines, a turn consisting of the word *but*, followed by seven lines that stand as a contrast to the opening movement. This is nothing less than a variation on the octave-sestet construction of the Italian sonnet. In the Petrarchan tradition, love sonnets are addressed by an adoring male to an idealized lady; this time a woman addresses the sonnet to a man. And not just any man: it is a wife addressing her husband and thereby fits into Milton's master plan of composing a domestic epic in praise of married love. Neither Dante nor Petrarch had addressed their spouse in their love poetry. In the Petrarchan tradition, love sonnets are monologues or soliloquys addressed to an absent lover; Eve's love song is part of a dialogue, reminiscent of the Song of Solomon (which exerted a strong and steady influence on Renaissance love poetry).

Eve's long song is a rhetorical tour de force as well as being a poetic touchstone. Repetition takes center stage, as nearly every image in the first part of poem is repeated in the second part. This comes through particularly in oral performance, and we would be hard pressed to find any passage of poetry that exceeds this one in aural effectiveness. Milton's "signature" flowing syntax is at its best in this passage. The rhythms of the passage are magical and haunting in their beauty.

The qualities of Eve's love song are ones that I have ascribed to Book 4 throughout this article. The formula that I often use for Milton in my classes is "the grand themes in the grand style." This is not the only kind of literature that I enjoy. Nonetheless, Milton is my favorite author, and Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* is my favorite work of English literature. A leading goal of the new journal *Resuscitating Paideia* is to show that specific works of literature can make a difference in people's lives. I trust that my readers will sense that Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* has *mattered* to me for a very long time.

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