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THE PERFIDY OF THE DEVILS' COUNCIL

by William J. Knightley

There are two familiar and equally probable readings of the devils' debate in council that opens the second book of *Paradise Lost*. By the far more easy reading, it may be perceived that the devils have a surpassing command of whatever political arts men subsequently have learned and relied upon to present falsehood as truth, or more accurately, to make the worse appear the better cause. This view appears now to have become a commonplace in modern studies of the poem that have unmasked Satan's pretensions and exposed the synchophantic acclaim of his fallen peers. Certain critics, notably Broadbent, Kermode, Allen, and Cope, have demonstrated the gauzy fabric of Satan's kingdom against the solid brilliance of Heaven; and it would be out of place to reconsider here the proofs of their demonstrations. It is sufficient to point out that no reader today can be in the least deceived by the sophistry of Hell, no matter how grudgingly he may admire its more than human skill. Yet in this last admission there may lie an implicit sense of compounded deceptions, because of the way in which the devils explore, refashion, and seek continually for a purpose in their experience. Moloch, oversimplifying Satan's reasons for disregarding the obvious conditions of their fall, imagines an easy ascent and perpetual inroads to alarm Heaven. As he has persuaded himself, the war in Heaven is proof of the devils' ability to make war, consequently the attack may be renewed with impunity and continue without fear of anything worse than annihilation. Belial too, with urbane diplomacy, blinks the obvious. He assumes that the change in their condition argues unprecedented change in God's will. In consequence, he will await the chance that absolute Justice may relent; or, that failing, he imagines the devils of themselves may adjust to their fiery torments and by becoming like the heat, cease to feel it. Mammon, attracted to this last alternative, proposes to escape God entirely and "live to ourselves" that "our torments also may in length of time/Become our Elements." To this point the devils' argument has amply

demonstrated St. Augustine's view of evil as a tendency toward non-being; it has also demonstrated the patent falsity of the devils' assumptions. Yet Beelzebub's concluding speech is of a different sort. The scheme it proposes is soundly realistic, even dynamic; it corrects the fantasies of the other demons' arguments; and it takes into consideration all known conditions of the devils' torments. As for its falsity, this appears to be no more than a mildly theatrical deception whereby Beelzebub is made to propose a scheme devised originally by Satan. Once the reader has understood the shabbiness of this imposture, he is free to believe he has discovered all that is false within Hell.

Yet by a somewhat more worldly reading the devils' imaginings, despite their impostures, may be understood to possess a degree of truth. In Satan's first speech at the opening of the council we find, for example, the view followed by the other devils, that the infernal kingdom, if only in a negative sense, rivals Heaven. In Hell, as Satan argues, there can be no envy, no wrathful strife, no ambition, no covetousness. And the debate that follows is an ambitious effort to visualize the creation of Satan's rival kingdom. Beginning with Moloch's wish to see perpetuated that moment when Satan's host was at the high tide of its endeavor the debate soars to the much more comprehensive dream proposed by Beelzebub. Ridiculing those who would sit conjuring kingdoms, Beelzebub does not however deny their desire for an infernal empire; nor does he describe that empire in the limited sense that Belial and Mammon conceive of it; he maintains rather that Satan's power may be indefinitely extended either by laying waste or seizing God's new creation or by seducing "some new Race call'd *Man*" to the devils' party. And although he scorns the crudity and materialism of his fellows' projects, his own designs do not preclude theirs. His appears at first to be a simple extension of the boundaries of Hell, but it is to be ultimately a kingdom of the mind which the lesser devils may objectify as they wish. As a kingdom of the mind Hell is real enough, but a creation of the mind depends in such a way upon other realities that there is no question of its existing apart from them. Since Satan's empire is to be a negation of God's kingdom, Hell will have the endlessly negative capability of proving that God "In highth or depth, still first and last will Reign/Sole King, and of his Kingdom lose no part. . ."

We may note that Beelzebub's proposal, although it is put forward with evident scorn for what he calls the dreams of his fellows is itself a qualified return to Moloch's call for vengeance. Moloch, for example, has argued for perpetual inroads which, he has said, "if not Victory is yet Revenge." And he, like Beelzebub, has argued that the least power the devils possess is the power to disturb Heaven. The torments of Hell too, they both look upon as potential armories that will enable them to lay waste or ravage the periphery of God's kingdom. Both demons show a like desire, regardless of the consequences, to perpetuate the defiance that provoked their expulsion from Heaven. Beelzebub, unlike Moloch, knows their loss of Heaven is irreparable; but he sees a certain advantage in the loss, for now the addition of hostility, hate, reluctance, and slow revenge can intensify their continuing posture of defiance. Hellish torments can breed untamed defiance; and defiance, which has brought the devils these present torments, can bring like torments to others whose desire for revenge will continue the cycle of defiance and defeat. One can say in general that Moloch and Beelzebub, who concentrate their attention on maintaining a *status quo* and on perpetuating the war with Heaven, have doomed themselves to endless defeat while Belial and Mammon, who look more closely to maintaining the effects of that defeat, have doomed themselves to wait endlessly in vain hope of change. Since defiance and defeat are, in Hell at least, isonomic, there is a fundamental sameness to the devils' proposals. The effect of these repetitions is to impart a sinuous movement to the debate as it coils back upon itself in a continuous generation of courbes that do not fashion a perfect circle (a conventional symbol of the divine) but which nevertheless imitate and suggest it.

This imperfect circularity makes clear that the vanity of Hell is to be found in the devils' one uselessly repeated act of defiance. There is no possibility that they can ever impose their will on God, as Satan well knows, for it is he who first despairs the outcome. Yet at this point a distinction must be made between the demons' profitless expectations and the considerable profit which the reader, under Milton's disinterested guidance, can realize from the devils' experience. We must at first agree in part with those readers who would find cause for admiring certain qualities of mind and character displayed in the devils' council, for our ex-

pectations of dramatic action and characterization provoke us into discovering these qualities, just as our expectations of dynamic progression enable us to discover the ingenuity with which Satan's scheme comprehends the schemes of the lesser devils. We find it difficult, for example, not to admire the rhetorical skill of the speeches in Pandemonium. And we must conclude that in using the subtleties of a forensic style Milton at the same time developed them, so that his development, far from denying the usefulness of rhetoric, makes of it an exemplary representation of the *corruptionis optimum pessimae* which is the infamy of Hell. Knowing this we may therefore honestly admire, as Milton does, the flawed brilliance of the devils' debate, if at the same time we recognize its utter worthlessness to the devils themselves.

This sense of a disparity of values has led some critics to speak of Satan's kingdom as a parody of Heaven. But an attentive reading of the council scene, even to Satan's announced intent to "seek/Deliverance for us all," makes it clear that the conflicting values of the devils' debate go deeper than satire or parody. Milton's judgment on the council is entirely without irony except for that directed against mankind. He affirms Satan's boast that in Hell there is both unity and firm accord. Satan has argued that Hell possesses a certain

advantage then

To union, and firm Faith, and firm accord,
and Milton agrees:

O shame to men! Devil with Devil damn'd
Firm concord holds, men only disagree
Of Creatures rational . . .

If we understand this judgment in the broad sense, it is obvious that the fallen angels possess qualities which are intrinsically good. We know that Satan preserves much of his former luster just as we know that the demons can reason and can sing harmoniously. Yet whatever the particular value of these qualities, there remains the question of their meaning in the poetic scheme of things. In this respect Milton's judgment of the devils' concord is uniform with his practice of introducing the demons' virtues by calling attention to their base motives. The devils live in concord, he says, because they are damned; and they are damned because they are

in concord to disobey God: [to transpose the verse] Firm concord holds Devil with Devil damn'd. Similarly each of the fallen angels exists within the coils of another tautology. Moloch's fiery energy springs from his desperation; Belial's calm reasonableness from his sloth; Mammon's industry derives from his fear; and Beelzebub's princely dignity from his borrowed wisdom. Energy, reasonableness, industry, and dignity are without doubt good qualities; but the nature of their presence in Hell robs them of whatever extrinsic value they may have for the fallen angels. In the reader's judgment these qualities do nevertheless possess an appreciable value for man's moral instruction and the veiled purposes of divine providence:

men only disagree
Of Creatures rational, though under hope
Of heavenly Grace

which is the redeeming ground of virtue.

Still keeping to Milton's concluding judgment one can go on to note that by the time Satan begins preparations for his journey, his kingdom has been fashioned in exactly the manner he imagined. The host of fallen angels has reconstituted itself in Satan's image; and Hell in its entirety can be described in the same words Milton uses to describe Satan at the opening of the council. When the council ends Hell too, is

rais'd
To that bad eminence; and from despair
Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires
Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue
Vain War with Heav'n, and by success untaught
His proud imaginations thus display[s].

Satan's ambition, soaring to awesome proportions, is now manifest not only in his own person but in the body of his followers as well. In effect his character and mind becomes the alpha and omega of the infernal kingdom. For this reason many readers have noticed that Satan's enterprise bears a curious resemblance to the ministry of Christ. There is an obviously general similarity in the fact that Satan, like Christ, founds a kingdom which is "not of this world" in order to deliver the willing members of his body from the bonds of slavery. This nearness of Satan's work to the work of Christ, particularly since it anticipates events totally unknown to

Satan, is the measure of his brilliance as well as his perfidy. Something has been said earlier about the absence of irony in Milton's judgment of the Devil's kingdom; but it may be as well to explain here that since Satan has no model for his imagined deliverance, it is dramatically impossible to regard his invention either as conscious mockery or irreverent burlesque. By any standards it is a brilliant masterwork of the creative imagination, the more so since it is excelled in its scope only by the economy of Christ's redemptive mission. As the poem progresses the luster of Satan's project diminishes, eclipsed by the revelation of a coming redemption; but its initial brilliance remains in Book II, because it possesses the obscure yet genuinely prophetic marks of a divine inspiration. Even so, it is perfidious. It denies the real grounds of the truth to which it bears witness. In this respect Satan's ambition resembles the commonplace medieval instance of perfidy. According to the ordinary authorities of the middle ages, the "perfidious Jews" were those who denied Christ yet persisted in a letter-perfect observance of the Mosaic law. While the Mosaic law is true and unquestionably of divine inspiration, it is sterile when lived apart from the work of redemption it prophesies. Similarly, the work of Satan's council, which culminates in Satan's expressed desire to seek deliverance for his followers, rises to a genuine eminence. Despite its isolate sterility it bears the marks of its divine inspiration; it reveals the brilliance of that mind which next to God shone brightest in Heaven, and it prophesies both a deliverance and a return to the Heavenly kingdom.