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Abstract

"Of Milton's interests in contemporary affairs," says J.B. Broadbent, "one of the strongest – and most typical of his period – was geography." Indeed, when confronting the countless placenames and allusions in *Paradise Lost*, there can be no ignoring the prominent role that geography plays in the poem, especially in its description of Hell. By infusing this description with cartographic references, Milton takes his place in the long line of epic poets that descends from Homer and Virgil. But his participation in the epic tradition is by no means static since he uses it for purposes relevant to seventeenth-century England. In *Paradise Lost*, the depiction of Hell appears to be part of a theological apology. More than just attempting to emulate the epic tradition, Milton employs that tradition to ultimately promote belief in an actual Hell as a rejection of the growing claim among certain radical Protestant sects that Hell was merely an internal state.

Comments

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"What matter where?"
Epic Geography and the Defense of Hell in
Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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2006-2007 Penn Humanities Forum on Travel
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“Of Milton’s interests in contemporary affairs,” says J.B. Broadbent, “one of the strongest – and most typical of his period – was geography.”¹ Indeed, when confronting the countless placenames and allusions in *Paradise Lost*, there can be no ignoring the prominent role that geography plays in the poem, especially in its description of Hell. By infusing this description with cartographic references, Milton takes his place in the long line of epic poets that descends from Homer and Virgil. But his participation in the epic tradition is by no means static since he uses it for purposes relevant to seventeenth-century England. In *Paradise Lost*, the depiction of Hell appears to be part of a theological apology. More than just attempting to emulate the epic tradition, Milton employs that tradition to ultimately promote belief in an actual Hell as a rejection of the growing claim among certain radical Protestant sects that Hell was merely an internal state.

It is relatively easy to see that *Paradise Lost* is exceedingly conscious of the epic tradition. Milton – who had already mastered the pastoral elegy, masque, sonnet, and a number of other literary modes – had some choices to make in deciding what form his masterpiece would take. As C.S. Lewis tells us in his celebrated *Preface*, the issue of form would have been the initial concern of any serious poet in Milton’s time. “The first question [Milton] asked himself,” says Lewis, “was ... ‘What *kind* of poem do I want to make’ – to which of the great pre-existing *kinds* ... do I intend to contribute?”² After some consideration (and a foray into drama with the unrealized *Adam Unparadis’d*), Milton at last settled on the epic poem for his form, and he answers Lewis’s question definitively in the first few lines of *Paradise Lost*: “Sing

¹ Broadbent, J.B. “Milton’s Paradise”. *Modern Philology*, Vol. 51, No. 3. (Feb., 1954)., 160

² Lewis, C.S. *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. Oxford UP: Oxford, 1942., 2

Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top/ Of Oreb or of Sinai didst inspire/ That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed.”³ This introduction is, of course, an epic invocation and runs parallel to the *Odyssey*'s “Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways” and the *Aeneid*'s “Tell me the reason, Muse: what was the wound/ to her divinity.”⁴ The trained seventeenth-century reader without doubt would have immediately recognized this parallel. As the poem progresses and we descend quickly into Hell, the relationship between *Paradise Lost* and the classical epics is strengthened.

As the epic tradition requires, Milton saturates his description of Hell with geographical allusions. The classical works place an enormous amount of importance on toponyms, which give them a sense of mythical depth. One finds that the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* are virtual catalogues of the most important locations in the ancient world. For instance, as Odysseus views the land of the dead, Homer tells us that he espies Tityos, who “had manhandled Leto, the honored consort/ of Zeus, as she went through spacious Panopeus, toward Pytho.”⁵ And Virgil, in like fashion, refers to the “kingdom of Caspia,” the “land of Lake Maeotis,” and the “seven mouths of Nile” in his discussion of the underworld.⁶ In these two excerpts, the poets allude to ancient cities, divine sanctuaries, mountains, and seas that really existed and would have been familiar to their intended audiences.⁷ More than just adding mythic gravitas to their

³ *Paradise Lost* I.6-10

⁴ *Odyssey* I.1, *Aeneid* I.13-14

⁵ *Odyssey* XI.580-581

⁶ *Aeneid* VI.1057-1060

⁷ Lattimore, Richmond. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Perennial Classics: New York, 1967., 370, 372: Lattimore tells us that Panopeus was an ancient city in Phokis, and Pytho was an Apollonian sanctuary on Mount Parnassos; Mandelbaum, Allen. *The Aeneid of Virgil*. U of California P: Los Angeles, 1981., 365, 385: Mandelbaum says that Caspia is the region surrounding the Caspian Sea, and Lake Maeotis is the ancient name for the Sea of Azov.

poems, these allusions enhance the believability of their stories and make their heroes seem more real. Moreover, we see not only that there is a general precedent in the epic tradition for copious geographical allusions, but that there is a specific precedent for such allusions in descriptions of Hell. Milton follows suit. “All else is deep snow and ice,” he explains as the devils survey the dungeon of their torment. “A gulf profound as that Serbonian bog/ Betwixt Damiata and Mount Casius old/ Where armies whole have sunk.”⁸ The Egyptian city, mountain, and region of quicksand here referred to were all actual places, and the mention of them seems somehow to connect Hell with reality.⁹ In so doing, the poem recalls the epic tradition as it did with its invocation. Geography is a central component of the epic, and in realizing this, we must also highlight one final and crucial feature of the epic tradition as examined thus far: allusions in an epic are germane to the poet’s era. Thus, the allusions in *classical* epic poems predominantly refer, as we would expect, to *classical* places and myths. They refer to the locations and values that are important to their original audience. In this regard, *Paradise Lost* is no different.

The epic poem has as its main concern the seventeenth-century world in which Milton lived, and its version of the epic form reflects this. We notice, for instance, that what often appears to be a classical allusion is in fact a Christian one. Perhaps the most famous example of this phenomenon occurs in the opening invocation mentioned earlier. Upon close inspection, we recognize that the “Heav’nly Muse” here called upon is not Calliope or Clio as we might at first assume. Instead, this is the Muse of Oreb or of Sinai; this is none other than the Holy Spirit who bestowed the

⁸ *Paradise Lost* II.591-594

⁹ Teskey, Gordon, ed. *A Norton Critical Edition: Paradise Lost*. W.W. Norton and Co.: London, 2005., 555, 557, 578

Decalogue upon mankind and who, in Milton's view, continues to operate in the world.¹⁰ To a seventeenth-century Protestant English audience, the invocation of a classical Muse might in itself have seemed somewhat irrelevant to their everyday lives, but an invocation of the Christian Holy Spirit most definitely would not have. We also notice that a considerable number of the geographical references are contemporary ones that no classical poet could ever have made. Talk of "Ternate and Tidore" in Indonesia, "the Cape [of Good Hope]," and "Lapland" would have been impossible for Homer and Virgil, but for Milton and his contemporaries, such toponyms could be heard from time to time at the docks and market squares.¹¹ Similarly, Milton compares the appearance of Satan voyaging across Chaos to the appearance of a large sailing fleet "stemming nightly toward the pole," and he does so assuming that his audience will know what he is talking about.¹² From start to finish, Milton's version of the epic tradition is updated, often referring to the latest discoveries, travels, and scientific developments. Indeed, as Broadbent tells us, "We notice that his materials were not, as a classical tradition of scholarship had implied, predominantly antique but included the medieval, the Elizabethan, and the distinctively seventeenth century."¹³ We presently come to see Milton first and foremost as a poet of his own time, not as some dusty classicist constantly looking over his shoulder at a bygone era. *Paradise Lost* is meant to bear a relevant message for the poet's countrymen, geographical references and all. So we must now ask just

¹⁰ Teskey., 3

¹¹ *Paradise Lost* II.639, 641, 665

¹² Ibid. II.642

¹³ Broadbent, 160

what that message is, and answering this question will require a look at how allusions to geography and travel function for readers in Milton's era.

The seventeenth century was marked by a rise in English exploration and an interest in travel literature. It was an age of great discovery and colonization for the nation, and *Paradise Lost* was undoubtedly influenced by the zeitgeist. Richard Hakluyt's *Divers Voyages touching the discoverie of America* was published in 1582, on the eve of the 1600s, and his highly influential "Discourse of Western Planting" followed shortly thereafter in 1584.¹⁴ At the time of the composition of *Paradise Lost*, Roanoke had come and gone, and Jamestown was several decades old. The seventeenth-century attitude toward geography and travel becomes more interesting when we consider Broadbent's discussion of exploration:

Paradise itself was to the Elizabethans both a literary tradition and a geographical hypothesis ... But places actually like this were being discovered and settled to east and west throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; when they came across such fertile districts the explorers often described them as 'paradises'; and many travelers to the East sought, with reasonable confidence, for the very site of Eden.¹⁵

Even more compelling is Andrew Hadfield's observation that by the time of Samuel Purchas, the English vision of exploration, especially pertaining to the New World, had become apocalyptic. Milton's generation was charged with saving America from

¹⁴ Hadfield, Andrew. *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance 1545-1625*. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998., 97

¹⁵ Broadbent, 160

the “Satanic behaviour of the Catholic Spanish.”¹⁶ As an interesting detail, Hadfield adds that the Spanish were seen as being most diabolical when forcing the captive Indians to mine precious minerals for them. “Mining was commonly an image of Hell,” he says, and “most famously in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.”¹⁷ This is all to highlight the fact that when Milton makes such allusions, readers would have recalled contemporary events that they were discussing in their courts, taverns, and homes. Here we now seem to come to a fuller understanding of the epic tradition. As we have seen, if Homer speaks of Panopeus and Virgil of Caspia, then their audiences begin (even if only in a flight of verisimilitude) to imagine the visions of the underworld in the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* as real. Similarly, if Milton mentions, say, “Damasco” or a “new world” in his discussion of Hell, it is likely that the seventeenth-century reader would have turned inward to ask the pertinent and crucial question: Does Hell exist as these places exist?¹⁸ Is it as real as they are? It seems the poet might have had very good reasons for wanting the reader to ask such questions.

Along with an increasing level of interest in travel literature and hatred for the Spanish, Milton’s century was fraught with Christian radicalism. By the poet’s time, for instance, antinomianism – the belief that Christians are exempt from the moral law by virtue of God’s limitless grace – seemed to be eroding the core values of the faith. As Christopher Hill tells us, Sir Thomas More had long ago accused “the Protestant emphasis on the motive of the heart” of being particularly vulnerable to antinomianism.¹⁹ This emphasis on the heart consequently translated into a more

¹⁶ Hadfield, 132

¹⁷ Ibid., 94

¹⁸ *Paradise Lost* I.584, II.403

¹⁹ qtd. in Hill, Christopher. *Milton and the English Revolution*. Faber and Faber: London, 1977., 306

general emphasis on one's internal states, and the focus on internal states was what really began to eat away at Christian orthodoxy in England. Hill documents more innocent claims like Sir Walter Raleigh's (himself a significant contributor to the travel culture) that "the matter is not great which way we turn our faces, so the heart stand right."²⁰ But Hill also reveals that a formidable host of Ranters, Familists, and other radicals came to believe that "the Fall, the Second Coming, the Last Judgment and the end of the world were all events which take place on earth within the individual conscience."²¹ It was but a short distance from these views to believing that nearly the whole of Christianity was merely a set of mental affairs. Hell, as one of the more disagreeable components of the Christian faith, by no means escaped this treatment.

As with other significant tenets of Christianity, many radicals believed that Hell was metaphorical – a proper name for an internal state, rather than a real place. Even as early as the Elizabethan era, "Familists had been accused of reducing ... the devil ... and hell to allegories."²² During the English Revolution, Milton would have witnessed some groups of radicals (who were under the influence of the German mystic Jacob Boehme) denying the existence of an actual Hell, and by the time *Paradise Lost* is on the poet's lips, several prominent English thinkers had relegated Hell to a mere manifestation of the conscience.²³ Perhaps one of the more famous examples of an unorthodox view of Hell can be found in Christopher Marlowe's great drama, *Doctor Faustus*. Mephistopheles's celebrated line, "Why, this is hell, nor am I

²⁰ qtd. in Hill, 306.

²¹ Ibid., 309

²² Ibid, 308

²³ Hill, 308-309

out of it” – which seems to imply, among other things, that Hell is where the head is – was just the kind of radical thinking that would have been prevalent in many seventeenth-century minds.²⁴ Indeed, Hill confirms that “the view that hell is an internal state rather than a geographical location” was “a view which we know was current in the circle of Raleigh-Hariot-Marlowe.”²⁵ Having seen the various brands of theology on the market in Milton’s time, we can imagine that the hard-line Protestant was eager to express his own views. With the seventeenth-century radicals, the liberalism of the Reformation had gone a bit too far. Milton was ready to defend the core doctrines of faith, including the existence of Hell, against their heresies.

While it might be true that Milton exhibited significant radical tendencies, he nevertheless ultimately and overtly rejected the idea that Hell was simply a figment of the mind. It does seem that Milton endorsed, to a considerable extent, the idea that internal states play a prominent role in the Christian faith. After all, in Book XII of *Paradise Lost*, the archangel Michael intimates to Adam that if he adorns his newly-acquired knowledge with the Christian virtues, “Then wilt thou not be loath/ To leave this Paradise but shalt possess/ A paradise within thee, happier far.”²⁶ At the same time, however, the passage does not imply that Paradise only ever existed in the mind, but rather describes the new state in which Adam finds himself. The passage thus perhaps reveals more about Milton’s belief in the *felix culpa* than it does about any radical views he might have held. It is true, however, that Hell and Satan in *Paradise Lost* are more fraught with psychological trappings than, say, the Hell and Satan we find in Dante’s *Commedia*. Certainly, Satan’s tortured musings seem to lend credence

²⁴ *Doctor Faustus* I.74

²⁵ Hill, 310

²⁶ *Paradise Lost* XII.585-587

to the emphasis by the radicals on internal states. But here we would do well to keep straight in our minds (as Stanley Fish notably did) the juxtaposition between the damned and the divine. To this end, John Carey rightly points out that Satan's dominant characteristic throughout *Paradise Lost* is a sense of internal "'depth'" compared to which the Father, the Son, and the Angels "exist simply and transparently at the level of the words they speak."²⁷ Carey emphasizes the fact that Satan's thoughts are labyrinthine and convoluted, and this aspect of the Father of Lies should not be surprising. With this in mind, we turn to discover that it is delusional Satan who utters a claim that best sums up the position of the radicals:

The mind is its own place and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same ...?²⁸

If we recognize Milton's contempt for Satan, then the Devil's claim becomes rather laughable, if not heretically sinister. As a consequence, instead of confirming Mephistopheles's stance, Satan's claim becomes a response in opposition to it. It *does* "matter where," Milton seems to be saying to Marlowe and others by putting these words in Satan's mouth. Hell is not just an internal state of mind, but is ultimately a real external location, and to believe otherwise is to be damned. We must make no mistake: Milton "skirted very near to the radical doctrine which saw heaven and hell *merely* as internal states," Hill asserts, "but he never denied their geographical existence, for which the Bible was his authority."²⁹ Indeed, Milton does declare in *De*

²⁷ Carey, John. "Milton's Satan". *The Cambridge Companion to Milton: Second Edition*. Dennis Danielson, ed. Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1999., 162

²⁸ *Paradise Lost* I.254-256

²⁹ Hill, 311

Doctrina Christiana, “Locus inferni videtur esse extra hunc mundum,” and he bases this claim on verses from Luke, Matthew, and Revelation.³⁰ The poet thus unequivocally endorsed the existence of a real external Hell, and here the discussion of his depictions of Hell comes full circle.

The epic tradition and the theological defense of Hell link up in *Paradise Lost*: the one employs relevant geographical allusions in order to be compelling and convincing, and the other is what we are being compelled and convinced by Milton to believe. As Broadbent tells us, Milton’s obsession with geography is consummated in his connecting “the extemporal and cosmic action of his epic with the present-day world by means of more, and more detailed, geographical references than ever Donne or even Marlowe had used.”³¹ In fact, perhaps it is exactly the difference of belief between Milton and Marlowe that accounts for this difference in the quantity and quality of their geographical references. This does not mean, of course, that Milton calls us to believe in the specific “[r]ocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death” whither he places them in Hell.³² In fact, we need not even believe that Hell has any such features at all. These are admitted artistic liberties. It does mean, however, that Milton calls us to believe in Hell and Satan (and Heaven and God and ...) as *real, external* entities, whatever their actual appearance might be, and his geographical allusions draw upon myriad times and places to support this belief, as does Christianity itself. Thus, in a larger sense, to convince all readers (radical or not) of the realities of the Christian faith as the poet sees them is the fundamental mission of *Paradise Lost* as it exists in the epic tradition.

³⁰ *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.33: “Hell appears to be situated beyond the limits of this universe.”

³¹ Broadbent, 160

³² *Paradise Lost* II.621

In the end, we have seen how Milton emulates the epic tradition of Homer and Virgil; we have seen how he updates what is ancient in order to make it relevant to the seventeenth century; and we have seen how a defense of Hell, facilitated by geographical allusions, is the topic of relevance. In so doing, we come to understand *Paradise Lost* a more concrete way, and we begin detect the much vaster scope of Milton's desires for his poem. Among these, none can be greater than the desire he ultimately expresses to the Christian Muse:

“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.

... for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view,

Nor the deep tract of Hell”³³

³³*Paradise Lost*, I.22-28

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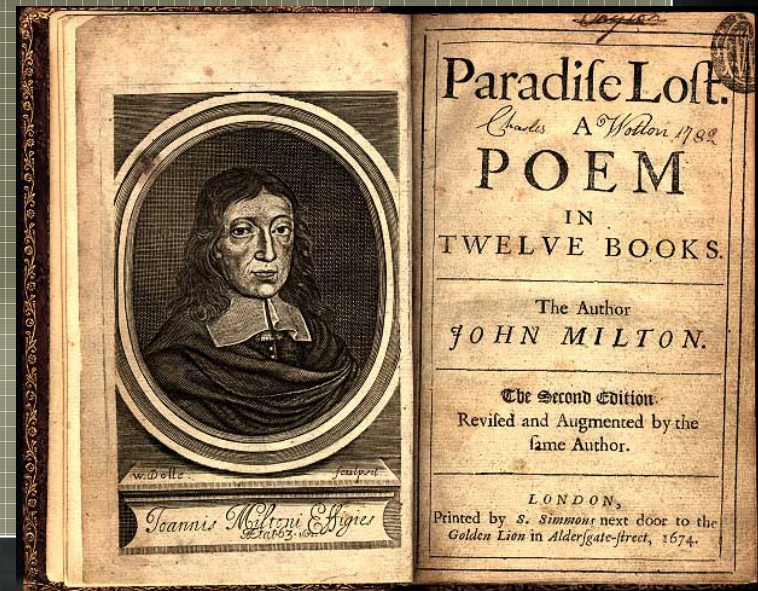
“What matter where?”

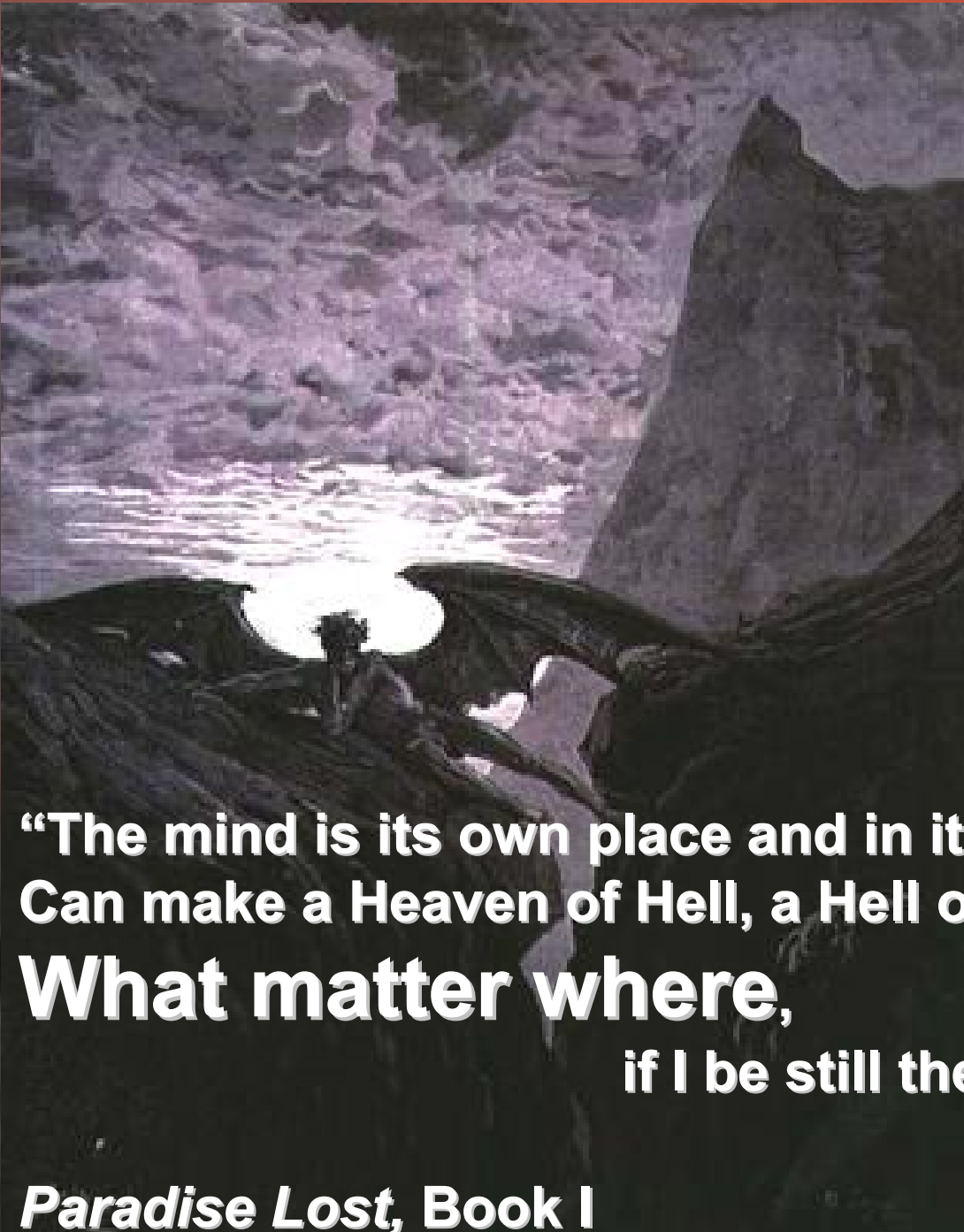
Epic Geography and

the Defense of Hell

in Milton's

***Paradise
Lost***





**“The mind is its own place and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where,
if I be still the same ...?”**

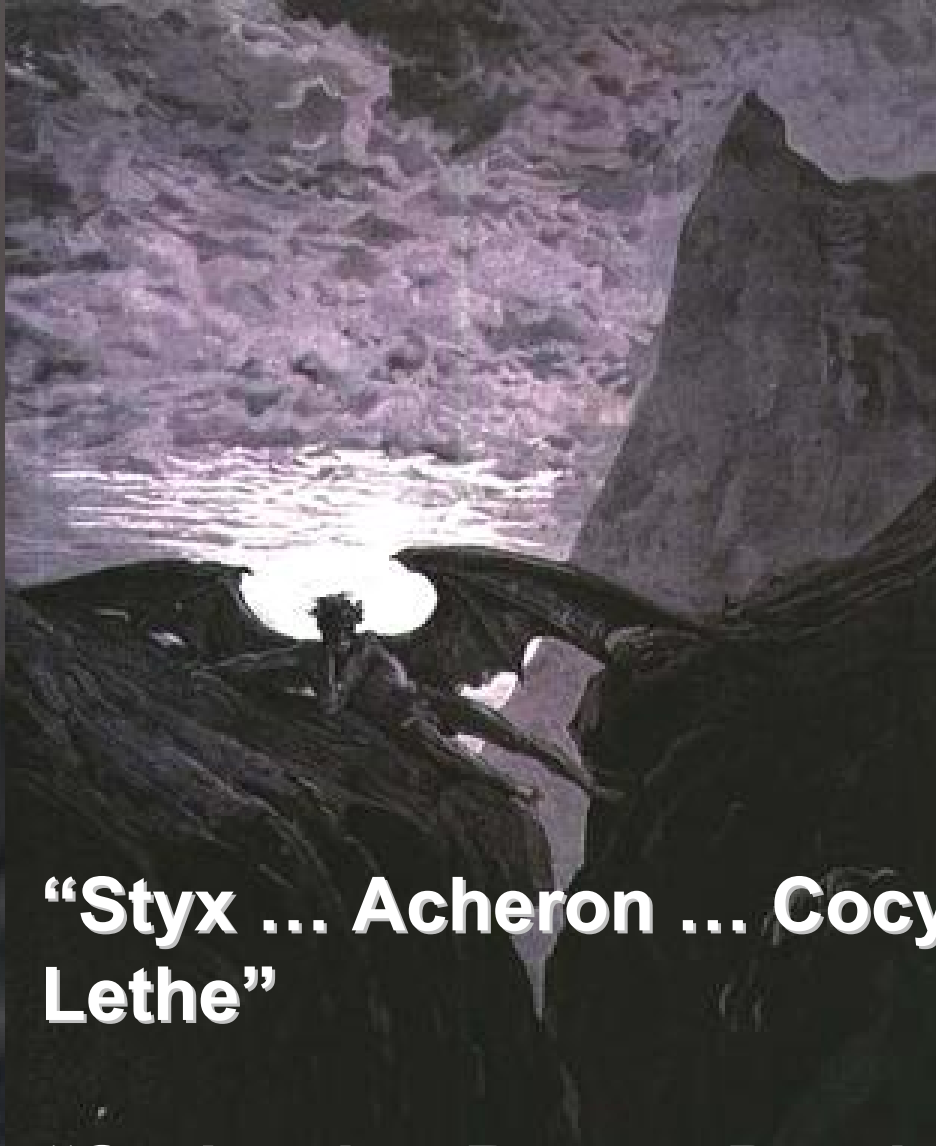
Paradise Lost, Book I

I. Epic Geography



The Epic Form

- The great pre-existing kinds
- The *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*
- Emphasis on geography

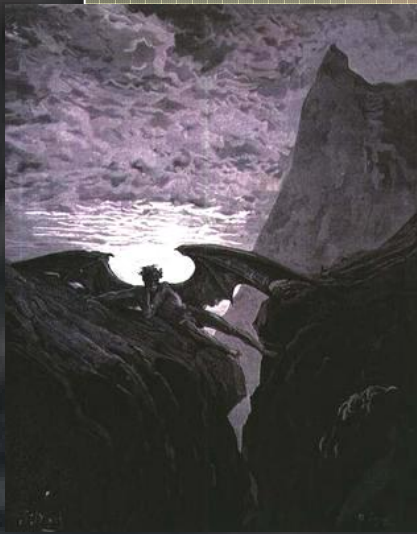


**“Styx ... Acheron ... Cocytus ... Phlegethon ...
Lethe”**

“Serbonian Bog ... Damiata ... Mount Casius”

Updating the Epic

- 17th century geography
 - “Ternate and Tidore”
 - “the Cape”
 - “Lapland”



II. The 17th Century



17th Century Travel

- **Interest in travel and exploration**
- **Hakluyt, Roanoke, and Jamestown**
- **Searching for legendary locations**

“Paradise itself was to the Elizabethans both a literary tradition and a geographical hypothesis ... But places actually like this were being discovered and settled to east and west throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; when they came across such fertile districts the explorers often described them as ‘paradises’; and many travelers to the East sought, with reasonable confidence, for the very site of Eden.”

J.B. Broadbent - “Milton’s Paradise,” 1954



Is Hell real?

The background of the slide features a blurred, artistic photograph of a sunset or sunrise. The sky is a mix of warm orange, yellow, and red tones, while the water below is dark and textured. A semi-transparent grid pattern is overlaid on the entire image. Centered on this background is the text "Why do you ask, Milton?" in a bold, black, serif font.

Why do you ask, Milton?

III. Christian Radicalism



Rise of Radicalism

- **Surge in the diversity of sects**
- **A host of 'isms'**
- **Interiority**

**“the Protestant emphasis
on the motive of the heart”**

Saint Thomas More (1478-1535)



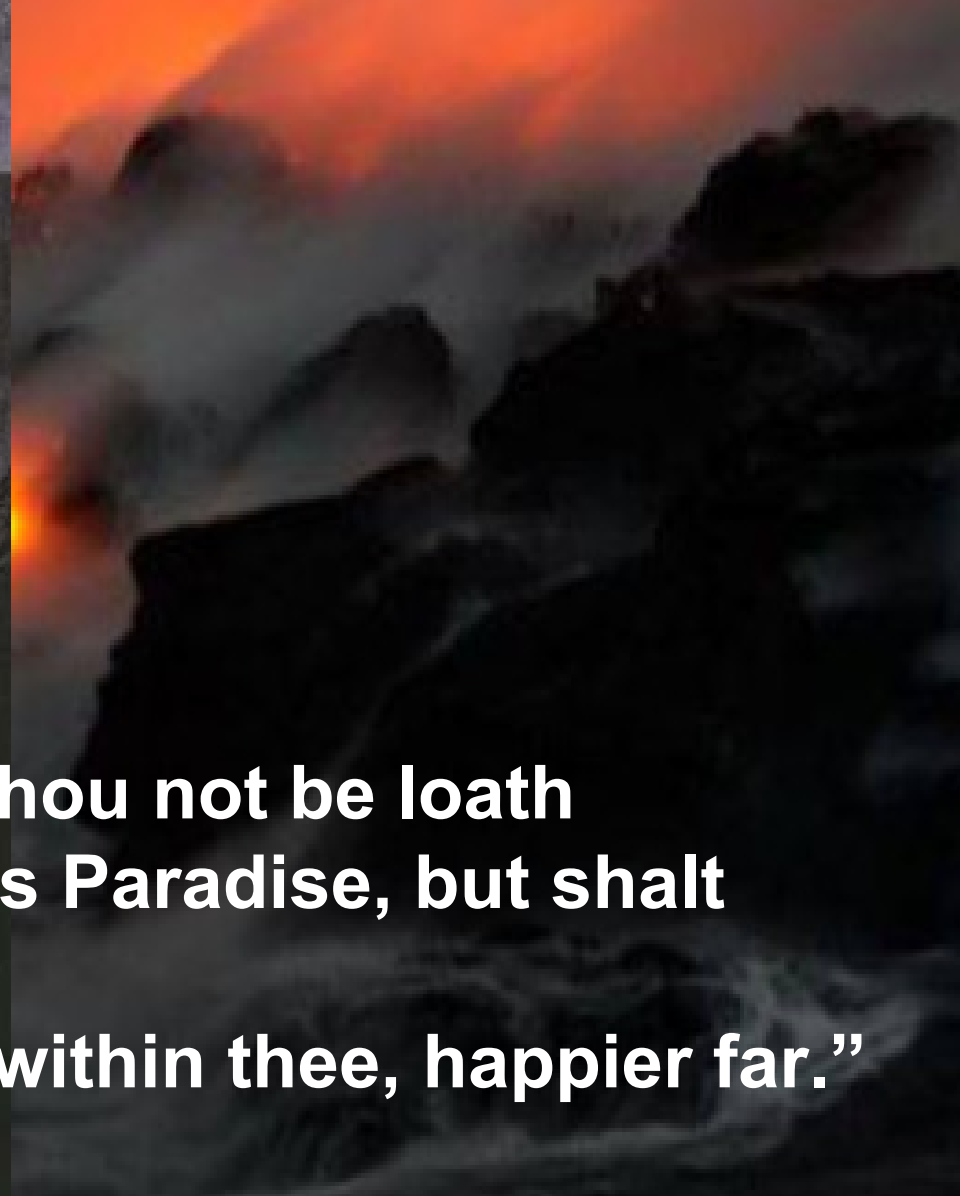
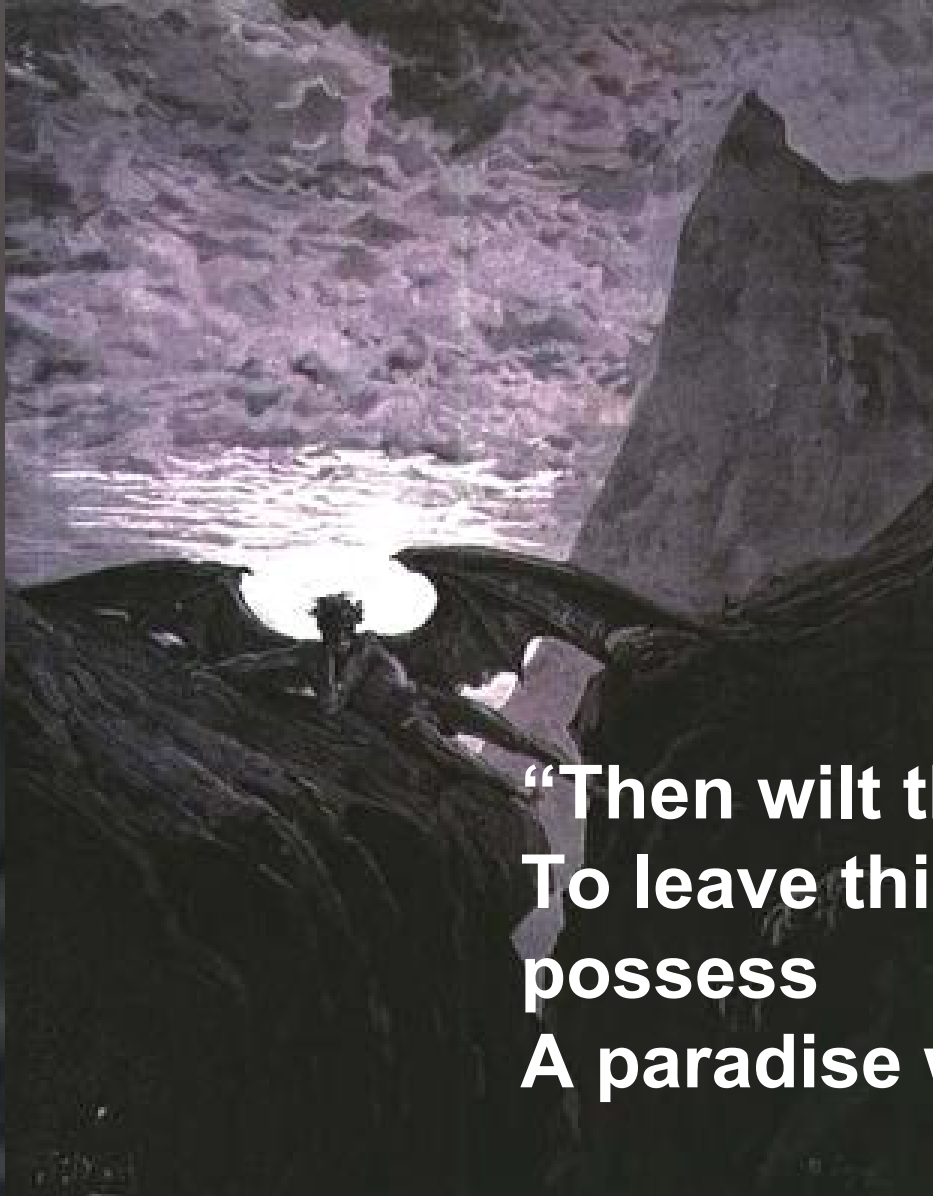


**“Why, this is hell,
nor am I out of it”**

Mephistopheles - *Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I



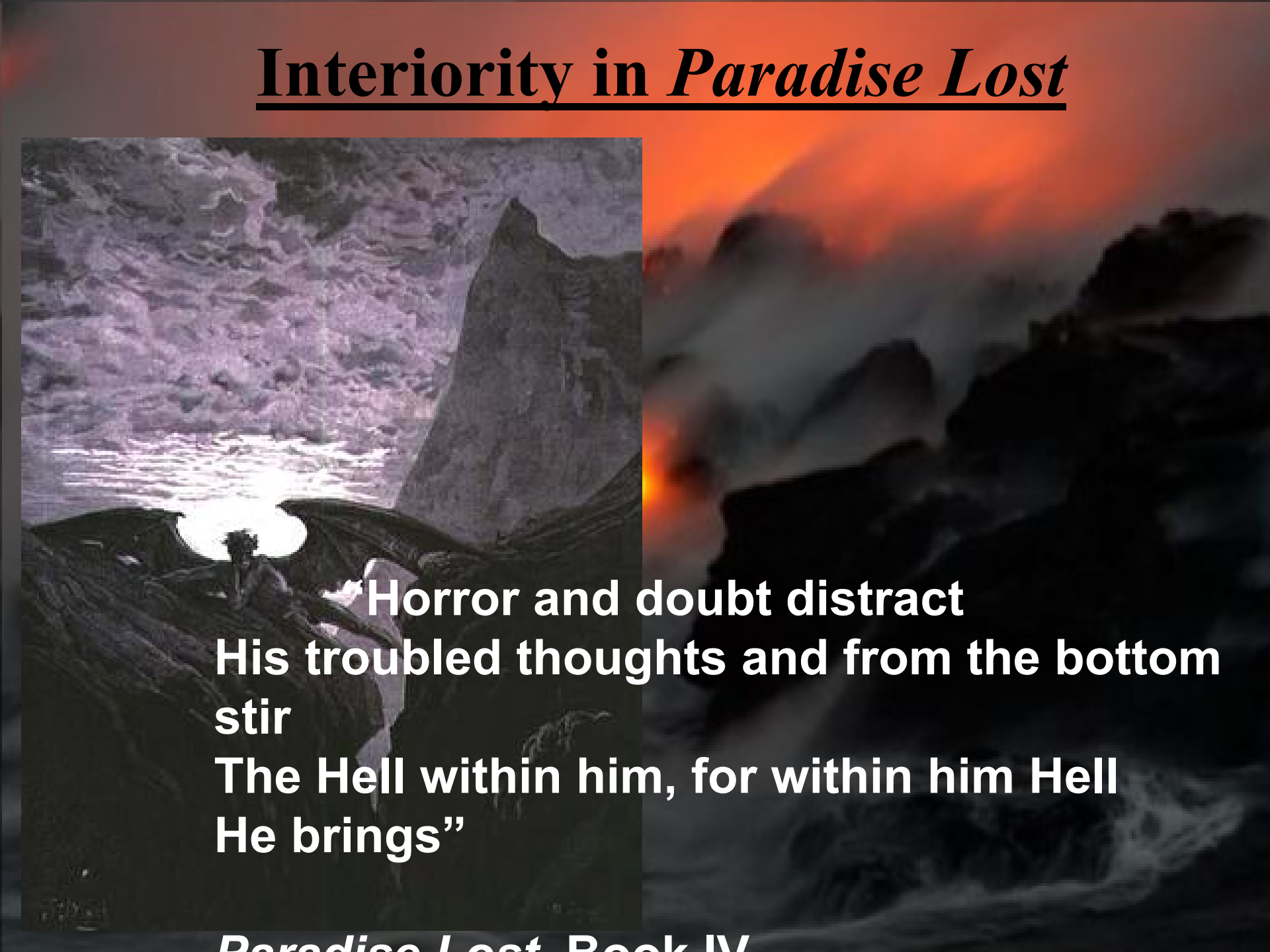
Interiority in *Paradise Lost*



**“Then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt
possess
A paradise within thee, happier far.”**

Paradise Lost, Book VII

Interiority in *Paradise Lost*



**“Horror and doubt distract
His troubled thoughts and from the bottom
stir
The Hell within him, for within him Hell
He brings”**

Paradise Lost, Book IV

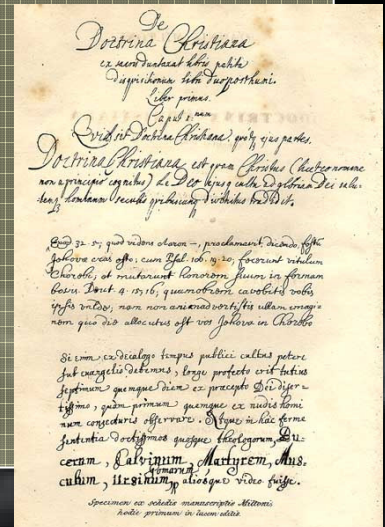
IV. The Defense of Hell





**“Locus inferni videtur esse
extra hunc mundum.”**
 (“Hell appears to be situated
beyond the limits of the universe.”)

***De Doctrina Christiana,*
Book I, Chapter 33**

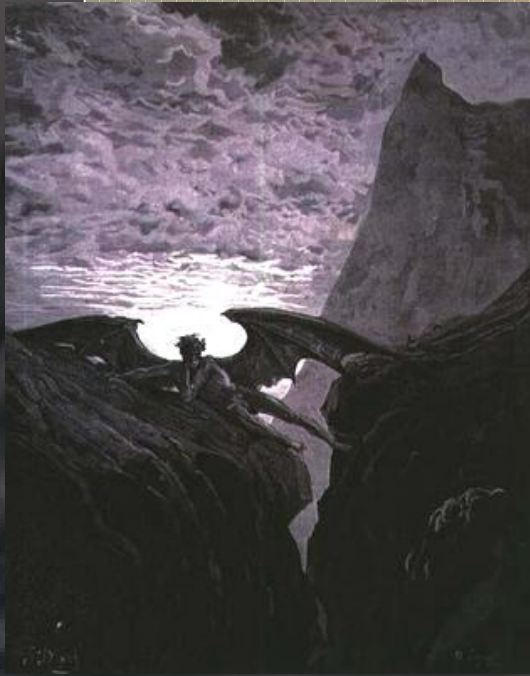




**“The mind is its own place and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where,
if I be still the same ...?”**

Paradise Lost, Book I

***It does* matter where!**



“What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the height of this great

argument

I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men.
... for Heav’n hides nothing from thy

view,

Nor the deep tract of **Hell**”

Paradise Lost, Book I

