

CHAPTER III

THE RENAISSANCE HUMANISM IN PARADISE LOST

Before discussing about humanism in Paradise Lost, we should understand first the meaning of humanism itself because the definition of the word "humanism" in the Renaissance is different from its definition today. Humanism in the twentieth century means a system that is concerned with ethical standards and with the study of mankind. Humanism in the Renaissance means a view of life that while devoutly accepting the existence of God, shares many of the intellectual attitudes of the ancient pagan world.⁴ The difference is that humanism nowadays has nothing to do with theology while in the Renaissance humanism has a direct relationship with Christianity. The Renaissance humanists believe in the existence and in the intervention of God in life, but they also believe in their own strength to choose their own ways, the ways which they think to be the best way freely. They reject the view of predestination and the orthodox doctrines which are unreasonable to their mind. They adore the full being of man. This attitude can be seen as the influence of their study of the classics. They absorb the philosophy of life that had made Greek and Roman great...and use it to help them live better, more responsible lives.⁵

What one writes often shows his inner feeling and thought.

⁴ John R. Hale and the Editors of TIME - LIFE Books, Renaissance (Nederland, 1973), p. 13.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

We cannot separate a work from its author. Milton, no doubt, is a humanist.⁶ Therefore, we will not wonder if his grand epic, Paradise Lost, reflects his humanistic view of life.⁷ However, this humanistic philosophy is so significant in the epic that the reader will recognize it even without knowing before hand that Milton is a humanist.

The blending of the Christian doctrines and the classics is one characteristic of the Renaissance humanism.⁸ In the Middle Ages, people do not place any philosophy at the same level with Christian doctrines. Some church fathers like Tertullian and Jerome even reject all "worldly" philosophy.⁹ The Renaissance humanists are different. They adore the classics. In fact, they try to synthesize the Christian belief with the philosophy and the values of mythology.

For Christian humanists (of the Renaissance), there was no antithesis between classical wisdom and the Christian religion; the natural reason of the Greeks and Romans was the help-mate of Christian faith and morality, since reason itself was a divine gift to all men....¹⁰

In Paradise Lost Milton links religious and moral truth with myth. Christian faith is of course the basic foundation of the poem, but the allusions from mythology complete its

⁶ See: G.B. Harrison, ed. Major British Writers (New York, 1959), I, 401 and 406.

⁷ Ibid., p. 403.

⁸ Ibid., p. 406.

⁹ Lowry .

¹⁰ Harrison, p. 406.

greatness. The rich choice of classical mythology in this poem is not amazing since Milton is considered the best classical scholar of all English poet.¹¹ Paradise Lost contains many mythical allusions. As an example I choose a few lines at random here to show the use of myth in the poem:

Those other two equall'd with me in Fate,
So were I equall'd with them in renown,
Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides,
And Tiresias and Phineus Prophets old.

(III, ll. 33 - 36)

In these four lines Milton uses four mythical allusions to compare his "fate" with those of the classical stories. The four men are blind; Thamyris¹² and Maeonides are poets like him; Tiresias, although blind, is well-known for his wisdom¹³ like Milton who is wise (?) because he understands man's position in the universe; and Phineus, a blind king who advises the Argonauts on how to pass the Symplegades (dangerous rocky islands)¹⁴ like Milton who is also a leader in the time of Cromwell, advising man on how to pass the trial that is given by God. Another more striking example can be seen in his description about Satan, embodied in the serpent. Here Milton suggests the loveliness of "the serpent" by comparing it to Hermione and Cadmus when they are changed to serpents in Iilyra,¹⁵ to Aescupalius, the god of medicine who has the form

¹¹ Ibid., p. 408.

¹² Bulfinch, Bulfinch's Mythology (New York, 1979), p. 191.

¹³ Ibid., p. 183.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 130 - 131.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 94.

of a serpent too,¹⁶ or to the one to which Jupiter Ammon, the father of Alexander the Great transforms, or to the one Jupiter Capitoline, the father of Scipio who defeats Hannibal changes (IX, ll. 505 - 510).

The other symptom of the inseparability of myth and reality in Paradise Lost is the relationship between man, Satan, angels, and God.¹⁷ In real life, man does not talk with animals, angels, Satan, or God. But in Paradise Lost, just like in the mythology, Adam talks with Raphael, God, the Son, and Michael; Eve talks to Satan embodied in the serpent, and to the Son; the Son talks to Adam and Eve; Satan talks not only to his followers, but also to unfallen angels, to Eve, to Chaos, to Sin, and to Death. This shows how much the influence of mythology to Milton is.

Another characteristic of the Renaissance humanism is the adoration for man. The Renaissance humanists believe what the classical men believe that the full being of man is beautiful, admirable, and perfect. Unlike the Medieval men who see everything as gloomy and uninteresting, they admire the beauty of man's body and appearance. Milton adores the beauty of Adam and Eve in his epic. He makes them appear godly, a characteristic which will surely be a shock for a Medieval man. Milton describes our first parents as:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native Honour clad
In naked Majesty...

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 298.

¹⁷ Earl Kiner, The Restoration Mode from Milton to Dryden (New Jersey, 1974), pp. 252 - 253.

...their looks Divine
 the image of their glorious Maker shone.
 (IV, ll. 283 - 292)

Adam is seen as one handsome man with broad shoulders. Eve's beauty is compared to flowers and goddesses of the classics. One of the most well remembered event in this epic, Eve's behavior which resembles that of Narcissus when she sees her own reflection on the water points out how beautiful human appearance is, for Eve is fallen in love with her own reflection rather madly that Adam who also falls in love with her beautiful appearance has to "cried's aloud" for her return to him.

Milton's exaltation of man in Paradise Lost can also be recognized in the characterization of Satan, angels, and God. Milton gives human characters to them. All of them are seen as human beings (but with more power and knowledge than man) with good and bad characteristics.

The giving of human characters to Satan is not extraordinary in the Renaissance. Luca Signorelli is one of the examples of this with his famous picture, The Last Judgement. In the picture demons are drawn as human beings. Milton's Satan is hypocritical, proud, vindictive, ambitious, deceitful, stubborn, and hateful. But like man who is never one hundred percent good or one hundred percent bad, he does not have bad characters only. He is also determined, strong willed, and optimistic. He can cry, sigh, and regret his action like a man whose feeling is hurt and miserable.

¹³ Hale, p. 110.

In Paradise Lost, the angels have human characteristics too. They can be hungry, tired, sleepy, and embarrassed. We will not expect to find these characteristics in heavenly bodies like them, will we ?

"...Love not heav'nly Spirits, and how their Love
Express they, by looks only, or do they mix
Irradiance, virtual or immediate touch ?"

To whom the Angel with a smile that glow'd
Celestial rosy red...."

(VIII, ll. 615 - 619)

Milton's God, in a sense, has human characteristics besides His godly characters. He is worried to lose His throne. Can a superior being like Him fear of His own creation ? These few lines suggest that feeling:

"Let us advice, and to this hazard draw
With speed what force is left, and all employ
In our defence, lest unawares we lose
This our high place, our Sanctuary, our Hill."

(V, ll. 729 - 732)

Another human characteristic of God that can be found in Paradise Lost is humor. Milton's God is humorous when He teases Adam by asking the man why he is not satisfied with the animals companion nor with His companion. Actually as an omniscient God He understands that the animals companion cannot satisfied Adam because they are lower than the man, and that God is higher than the man. He needs an equal companion (VIII, 363 - 436).

The Renaissance men do not believe anymore in determinism. They believe that man is the one who controls his own "fate"; man is the one who is able to manipulate his destiny. But the Renaissance humanists, although are confident of themselves, are not the same with the Romantists who are overly confident

in themselves. The Renaissance men still accept the religious sense of man's littleness and sinful frailty besides their confidence in themselves.¹⁹ Milton shows this attitude also when he says through Adam that man is "a Rib, crooked by nature, bent...." Nevertheless, God creates man good. Man has free will (III, ll. 98 - 107, 123, V, ll. 524 - 528, VIII, ll. 640 - 643). Man can choose one thing from another. Man chooses to disobey God. The consequences of this choice are misery and death. Then God gives the Son (or the Son offers himself) to die for man's sin with a promise that whosoever believes in the Son will be saved. In this case, man also has choice. God does not force man to believe in the Son and be saved from the eternal death. Man is allowed to choose the other way round, but he has to bear the consequences of whatever he has chosen.

Man believes that he is not only able to control his own life but also his environment. He believes that God creates him to be the ruler of the earth. Unlike the Medieval man who thinks that nature is mysterious and frightening,²⁰ the Renaissance men feel that it is both a duty and a joy to explore and to overcome the environment. Milton treats Adam's naming the animals as indicating his lordship over them. He calls Adam and Eve the "Lords of the world". The power over the earth does not disappear as man has fallen, but it is now reduced and is limited. Man is permitted to control his environment with his initiative and his effort. Although man has to work hard to till the

¹⁹ Douglas Bush, English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century (London, 1979), p. 37.

²⁰ Edith Simon and the Editors of TIME - LIFE Books, The Reformation (Nederland, 1967), p. 11.

land, he will taste the sweet fruit of his work. He can be sick and faces dangers or trials but he will be protected and helped by God. He will die but there is life after death for him. It is also said that in this earth man may create a Paradise within himself which is "far better" than in Eden, and because of this "the earth shall be all Paradise" (XII. 463 - 465).

Every person is worthy before God. The Renaissance men, such as Martin Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin believe this. Luther also says that "the individual is as alone before the Almighty as a man facing the evening sky - nothing stands between him and God."²¹ Nothing here means the church, the institutions, the priests, the relics, the rituals, and other things. In Paradise Lost, Milton also shows this idea. He describes that Adam and Eve have a direct relationship with God. Even after the fall, man is still worthy in God's sight. God hears him if he prays to Him. Here Milton shows that if one sins against God, he can ask forgiveness from God by himself. He does not need to confess those sins to other people nor to pay indulgences. Everyone is as worthy as a priest before God.

Hard to belief may seem; yet this will Prayer,
Or one short sigh of human breath, up-borne
Ev'n to the Seat of God.

(XI, ll. 146 - 148)

...I saw him (God) placable and mild,
Bending his ear; persuasion in me grew
That I was heard with favour....

(XI, 151 - 153)

²¹ ibid., p. 173.

The Renaissance humanists love personal liberty.²² They do not want to have many dogmas and rituals in their religion. They urge simplicity of ritual, a direct relationship with God - the kind that Adam and Eve have in Eden. Erasmus, one famous Renaissance man, writes that dogmas should be reduced to "as few as possible, leaving opinion free to the rest."²³ Milton in his Paradise Lost has the same idea. He is mocking the Catholic Church with its relics, traditions, and rituals. He also does not agree with the Church of England which has been a compromise, a combination of Protestant doctrine with the traditional Catholic hierarchy and the Catholic ritual.²⁴ In Paradise Lost Milton also wants to show that the traditions and the elaborate ritual cannot buy the salvation of God because God does not value all of those, but He only counts the personal heart.

²² Maynard Mack, ed., Milton, (New York, 1961), p. 5.

²³ Simon., p. 37.

²⁴ Harrison., p. 402.