

The *esse* of Milton's Satan.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay

The question of the identity of Satan in *Paradise Lost* as also in *Paradise Regained* leads us to the study of ancient Near Eastern cultures¹:

The Hebrew noun *śāṭān* signifies an "adversary" ... "lest in the battle he become an adversary "*śāṭān*" to us" (1 *Samuel* 29:4); ... "the Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite" (1 *Kings* 11:23; cf. v. 25). The verb *śāṭan* also means "accuse" or "resist." ... Satan functions as an adversary against God's people either by attempting to seduce them to do evil or by accusing them before God for their sins. But in each case Satan's power is limited and he acts only within God's permissive will... The intertestamental literature (*Apocrypha*, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, and *Pseudepigrapha*) says considerably more about Satan than the OT does... In these writings Satan also goes under several other names... 'the devil' (*Wisdom* 2:24), 'the evil one' (*Testament of Job* 43:5), Mastema (e.g., *Jubilees* 10:8), Sammael (e.g., *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 1:8), Satanail (e.g., *2 Enoch* 18:3), and Semyaz (e.g., *1 Enoch* 6:3). [Italics mine] (Fuller 340)

To *become* Satan is a concept we find in *Numbers* 22 where Yahweh's wrath against the augur Balaam was manifested through an angel who said to Balaam that he came "to be a *śāṭān* to you [Balaam]" (Fuller 340). Therefore within Jewish theodicy we must account for the fact that Satan is a state of being² rather than a unique self-actualised individual; Satan is

¹ See Pritchard, James B., ed. *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011. Print. This is a classic anthology of sources about the Ancient Near East. Without accessing this text, it is difficult to understand the geography and historicity of the Ancient Near East. Without this knowledge one cannot understand the origins of Satan as a historical construct.

² Satan is more of a process of a metamorphosis which we can only hint at. To be Satan is to take up antagonistic positions against monoliths, shibboleths and even, all that which prevents us from being liberated. Ironically Satan may seem to Catholic theologians as a force defined within the domain of liberation theology.

an existential force brought into being by God's sovereignty who volitionally is anti-*dasein* in the here and the now. He is rather non-being:

...that must be our cure--

To be no more. Sad cure! for who would lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through eternity,
To perish rather, swallowed up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated Night,
Devoid of sense and motion? (*PL* Bk II 145-51)

So that which is "no more", is to be Satan. The act of being Satan is to reverse the *refoulement originaire* or primal repression to the extent that "desire [which is Satan] is free to diversify through the network of sign-relations, but it can also become trapped in fixed representations deriving from and promulgating social repression (*répression*). (Holland 56 - 57)". But the danger lies in our trapping Satan in fixed representations expressed through Christian ideologies of sin and the privation of the good³, that which in classical Christian exegesis is called *privatio boni*. This entrapment of Satan within fixed representations is partly the result of Milton's own artistry; his portraiture of Satan is in no way uncertain:

Perplexed and troubled at his bad success

The Tempter stood, nor had what to reply,

Discovered in his fraud, thrown from his hope,

³ Evil "is not a substance at all..." (Augustine 90). This is dissimilar to St. Thomas of Aquinas's understanding of evil. For Aquinas' understanding of evil see Aquinas, Thomas. *The De Malo of Thomas Aquinas: With Facing-page Translation by Richard Regan*. Trans. Richard Regan. Ed. Brian Davies. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print. One of the best discussions on Satan and evil has been done by Carl Gustav Jung in his "Foreword to Werblowski's 'Lucifer and Prometheus'." *Psychology and Religion: West and East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969. 311-15. Print.

So oft, and the persuasive Rhetoric

That sleek't his tongue, and won so much on *Eve*...

...[Satan] self deceived

And rash, before-hand had no better weighed

The strength he was to cope with, or his own:

But as a man who had been matchless held

In cunning, over-reach't where least he thought...

So Satan, whom repulse upon repulse

Met ever; and to shameful silence brought,

Yet gives not o're though desperate of success,

And his vain importunity pursues. (*PR* Bk IV 1- 24)

Satan is christened a tempter, a self-deceived being and in *Paradise Lost* Book I he is represented as gigantic and harmful as Leviathan⁴ (*PL* Bk I 201). This pejorative portrayal blinds us to the fact that Satan, as has been remarked above, is not an entity *per se*, but is a force defined by nihilism and non-being. Readers access and assess Satan through the sort of hermeneutics constructed from Kantian moral categorical imperatives of the absolute good and absolutely corrupt, as either Satan's advocate or Satan's accuser (Steadman 253). In their cultural work as interpreters of the fictional character of Satan, critics fail to assess Satan as a purely metaphysical non-real force. We tend to anthropomorphise Satan as real; Satan is as

⁴ "...in the beautiful but dark Leviathan [simile] which give[s] Satan a ponderous aura of hidden danger but also of deception and illusion, and in the tone and imagery of the poetry throughout, which gives the impression of futile movement and inexorability as it weighs in our view Satan's former glory with his present shame." (Reisner 34)

real as the concept of the *being* in classical Buddhism⁵. This gloss on Satan is an invitation for scholars to rethink the character of Satan as an abstraction arising out of the historicity of the ancient Near East. Milton rereads Bible's Yahweh as saying:

And by my Word, begotten Son, by thee

This I perform, speak thou, and be it done:

My overshadowing Spirit and might with thee

I send along, ride forth, and bid the Deep

Within appointed bounds be Heav'n and Earth,

Boundless the Deep, because I am who fill

Infinite, nor vacuous the space.

Though I uncircumscrib'd my self retire,

And put not forth my goodness, which is free

To act or not, Necessitie and Chance

Approach not me, and what I will is Fate. (*PL* Bk VII 163-73)

To understand Milton's Satan we need to understand Milton's *qua*, the Bible's conception the factuality of both God and Jesus. Whatever Jesus *is*, Satan is the exact opposite. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life eternal (*John* 14:6); Satan is *not* the way, the truth and the life eternal. Satan is a stain which fell like lightning (*Luke* 10:18) from the high heavens; Satan is a stain which poisons creation, he is that great dragon, the old serpent who is cast out of

⁵ The being does not exist in classical Buddhism. One of the thinkers to elucidate on the nature of the self, or non-being is the Yogacara Vasubandhu. See Vasubandhu. *Refutation of the Theory of a Self*. Trans. James Duerlinger. London: Routledge Curzon, 2006. Print. James Duerlinger's book's complete title is INDIAN BUDDHIST THEORIES OF PERSONS: Vasubandhu's "Refutation of the Theory of a Self"

God's Kingdom (*Revelations* Ch. 12, 7-12) for evermore. It is not sufficient to say that Satan is not what Jesus *is*. The comparison does not hold since Jesus is the expression of the Godhead, coeternal and consubstantial with God. In other words, God and his *Word* are infinite, while Satan is finite and is only capable of vaunting aloud (*PL* Bk I, 126 & *PL* Bk IV, 84) knowing fully well that he is a seducer whose only weapon is boasting (*PL* Bk IV, 85). One cannot access Milton's Satan without understanding Milton's faith. He was and remains a Christian writing of the mysteries of the Christian Faith for other Christians. It is another matter that literary critics interrogate Milton's Satan as a literary character, but then literary critics have reduced the Prophet Isaiah and later Job as types of the Suffering Servant that Jesus will be in the New Testament. Christianity foresees no reconciliation between Christ and His Kingdom post-parousia and Satan's reign during the end times. If one does not reckon this eternal antagonism between God and Satan, one cannot analyse the character of Satan. Satan's real nature is best understood by the following excerpt:

The idea that evil [Satan] is a privation does not really take anything away from the reality. A face without an eye is a horrible sight, [but] something quite real. If we admit that evil is a positive thing, having its own "counter-being" then we get into a form of Dualism that quite destroys just about any rational understanding of the universe. Evil is quite real and unacceptable. But evil is not as powerful as God. If we describe God (or Brahman) as a fullness of Being, as the Act of Being, rather than Being mixed with potency (not *ens* or *essentia*, but *esse*), then evil cannot be its opposite, as there is no real opposite of being, except a lack of being. Satan, in [Catholic] Theology, was a very high angel and should have been the wisest and most loving of creatures. In sinning, he did not cease to be a creature (he still has being), but the goodness, the love, the wisdom that should have been there are gone. The result is something absolutely

horrible. The adult who abuses a child is likewise a horror, as that adult should have done anything and everything to protect and help the child, but has done the unnameable thing. It is a deep and troubling mystery, but no match for the light of God and of the fullness of Being. (Anderson n.p.)

Satan is infinitely boring; to study God is to begin an affair with Love. Milton wanted us to come to God after understanding that Satan is only a historical contingency unfortunately manifested and too real to be not studied. Satan is open to scrutiny since there is really nothing to scrutinise⁶; Milton's only subject in his two epics is God whose ways are sufficiently inscrutable for misleading critics to think that Satan is a worthy topic of study. This last point opens up the debate whether Milton failed as a Puritan poet; his poetry is less edifying than a valorisation of Satan. No sane created being can valorise Satan or write so long on Satan. But these ruminations are beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶ He is just Martin Buber's *IT* in the me/you dyad.

Works Cited.

Anderson, Abbot Philip. "From Clear Creek." Message to the author. 12 Mar. 2015. E-mail. Abbot Philip Anderson is the Prior of Our Lady of Clear Creek Abbey in Hulbert, Oklahoma. He is a cloistered Benedictine monk and corresponds on theodicy with this author.

Aquinas, Thomas. *The De Malo of Thomas Aquinas: With Facing-page Translation by Richard Regan*. Trans. Richard Regan. Ed. Brian Davies. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.

Augustine. *Confessions and Enchiridion*. Ed. Albert Cook Outler. Trans. Albert Cook Outler. Paperback Reissue ed. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2006. Print.
THE LIBRARY OF CHRISTIAN CLASSICS.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner, 1958. Print.

Fuller, D. P. "Satan." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Everett E. Harrison, Ronald K. Harrison, William Sanford Laser, Gerald H. Wilson, and Edgar W. Smith Jr. 1979. Print. This is a slightly dated entry on Satan, but it is a very comprehensive survey of the character of Satan from both the Biblical angle and through Ancient Near Eastern Studies. This encyclopaedia is still the standard for Biblical Studies.

Holland, Eugene W. *DELEUZE AND GUATTARI'S ANTI-OEDIPUS: Introduction to Schizoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print. This is a very accessible introduction to the complex philosophy of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze.

Jung, C. G. "Foreword to Werblowski's 'Lucifer and Prometheus'" *Psychology and Religion: West and East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969. 311-15. Print.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost: And, Paradise Regained*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. New York: Signet Classic, 2001. Print.

Pritchard, James B., ed. *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*.

Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011. Print.

Reisner, Noam. *John Milton's "Paradise Lost": A Reading Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP,

2011. Print.

Steadman, John M. "The Idea of Satan as the Hero of "Paradise Lost"" *Proceedings of the*

American Philosophical Society 120.Symposium on John Milton (1976 August 13):

253-94. Print.

Vasubandhu. *Refutation of the Theory of a Self*. Trans. James Duerlinger. London: Routledge

Curzon, 2006. Print. James Duerlinger's book's complete title is INDIAN

BUDDHIST THEORIES OF PERSONS: Vasubandhu's "Refutation of the Theory
of a Self".