William Riley Parker's *Milton* and Friends

I

READERS of William Riley Parker's monumental *Milton, a Biography* (2 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), will notice repeated suggestions of the poet's affinity with Quakerism. To claim that Milton reached a position closer to Quakerism than any other persuasion is not new, but for the definitive biography to advance this opinion is to invite further serious consideration of it. A leading review finds in Parker's work "the solidity and ripeness of judgment which ought to be the reward of a lifetime given to Milton studies".[1] The biography cannot be turned aside as containing speculative first thoughts, yet Parker does not develop Milton's affinity with Quakerism as far as he might. His statement is that Milton, who began as a Trinitarian and Calvinist, ended as "a unique combination of semi-Arian, Arminian, Anabaptist, anti-Sabbatarian, Mortalist, semi-Quaker, 'Divorcer', and polygamist".[2] These views had formed before the Restoration and are therefore present in the great epics of Christian fundamentals. The confusing, perhaps contradictory, list of attributes contains the names of but two worshipping bodies of consequence. Milton had no formal attachment to either, but each claimed his serious attention in some degree. Of the Anabaptists Parker reports only that Milton said they were not heretics and deserved toleration. In fact he seems to have regarded them as fanatics along with Familists and Antinomians but, according to C. E. Whiting, "Milton doctrinally was very much in agreement with them".[3] However this may be, he was more a defender of their rights to belief than an adherent of their principles: we find personal repentance and profession of faith at the heart of *Paradise Lost*, but not leading to baptism into church fellowship as an essential of religion. His doctrine of regeneration is less formal but more demand-

1 *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 31, 1968, p. 1224.
2 William Riley Parker, *Milton, a Biography* (Oxford, 1968), I, 496.
3 C. E. Whiting, *Studies in English Puritanism* (London, 1931), p. 87.

ing than that, depending for its cogency on Adam's inner transformation through knowledge and illumination.

Quakerism suggests more strongly the religious assumptions, indeed the very principle of poetic activity, found in *Paradise Lost*. To some extent Baptist and Quaker spirituality intermingled, but the more mystical strain in Quakerism has a place in *Paradise Lost* that is unmistakably distinct from Baptist teaching. It is to this that Parker draws attention. Referring to the *Christian Doctrine*, Milton's central and most co-ordinated statement of his position, he finds Biblical literalism attended by a "somewhat extreme application of Protestant individualism".[1] When seeking guidance in matters of difficulty, "Scripture is ultimately to be referred to the Spirit and the unwritten word".[2] This was very much the practice of early Friends, and Parker comments: "at such moments [Milton] believes, with George Fox and other Quakers, in the efficacy of the 'inner light'."[3] It was his way of heralding the new era of spirit acknowledged by many Puritan separatists, by Cambridge Platonists, by certain metaphysical poets and by a variety of devotional writers. In each the aspirant was to seek the truth himself, believing that beneath circumstantial differences lies an essential unity of love. Milton proclaims as strongly as did Fox, but with less literalism than Bunyan, the obligation to seek this truth using as much scriptural guidance as experience confirmed. Liberty of prophesying was necessary because the Bible's text might be corrupt and human reason is fallible, while the spiritual man is not easily deceived when he attends to the emerging truth within. Antinomian dangers do not invalidate the method. Differences of opinion are to be tolerated until God reveals by the Holy Spirit the full truth of his love to all. Here Parker comments, "Milton's faith in 'inner light' is close to the Quaker position".[4] He quotes with approval Francis Peck who "conjectured that 'in his latter days' Milton 'was more a Quaker than anything else'."[5] This is surprising to hear of the Christian-Humanist

1 Parker, I, 497.

2 *Ibid.*, I, 497.

3 *Ibid.*, I, 497.

4 *Ibid.*, II, 1058.

5 *Ibid.*, II, 1091. The reference is to Francis Peck, *New Memoirs* (1740), pp. 274–275.

practitioner of the high art of epic, but there is greater substance in it than Parker's remarks disclose. We may ask how close to Quakerism Milton actually came.

Undoubtedly curiosity in matters of religious reform took Milton among the multitudes attending Francis Howgill's and Edward Burrough's 'threshing meetings' at the Bull and Mouth in Aldersgate. But it is less likely that he frequented the retired meetings kept by those who fully accepted the message of Quakerism. His vital contacts were with individual Quakers whom he knew and respected, certainly with Thomas Ellwood and his circle, both in London and in Buckinghamshire. Milton's educated fastidiousness prevented him joining a movement fed by popular enthusiasm, even if he could agree with all its tenets. He never publicly endorsed Quakerism so far as we know. In this he is like the Cambridge Platonist Henry More whose converse with Quaker leaders sprang from genuine spiritual attraction to their message but was tempered by intellectual doubts. More could respect the Cambridge educated quietist Isaac Penington but not the powerfully inspired prophet George Fox. There is no record of Milton's opinion of Fox, Nayler and other leaders, or even of such startling conversions to Quakerism as that of the Leveller John Lilburne in 1656, the year before his death. As a leading Cromwellian independent observer resident in London throughout the Commonwealth, Milton had ample opportunity to form an impression of many Quaker personalities. If at first they were peripheral to his main concern in the campaign for full reformation of religion and affairs of state, at least their growing numbers and influence would have been in evidence. As hopes of a true theocratic state slipped away, the new community of worship, separated from the corrupt world, would be looked at seriously. How could the veteran reformer resist the thrust of such prophetic religion as the first Quakers brought to London? We may argue that their teachings gave force to the religious inwardness actuating his greatest poetry. Illuminist religion entered his poetry to salvage the stricken spirit of man and renew Puritan fervour for apostolic Christianity. With the Restoration Milton's disappointed hopes in outward reformation were replaced by a doctrine of the inner light that makes for righteousness, long nurtured and first hinted at in his early writings and

made explicit in the poem *Samson Agonistes*, which Parker assigns to the period 1645–1648. This doctrine is more persuasively developed in a Christian context with Adam's consolation and redemption in *Paradise Lost*, the work begun in earnest about 1658 but not published until 1667. When Ellwood saw the manuscript in 1665, reading through "with the best attention", he would have taken satisfaction in its culmination when Michael informs Adam that there is a "paradise within thee, happier far" (XII, 587) replacing Eden lost by transgressing God's warning not to reach too high for knowledge.

The Cromwellian reformation had indeed reached too high, with many in the army, sects and parliament plucking forbidden fruit. A temperate enlightenment leading to quiet incorruptibility was needed to make good the lost promise of peace. In *Paradise Regained* Christ triumphs over Satan's wiles because illuminated within, as persecuted Quakers were triumphing in His way despite temptations to pride. Quakerism of the 1660s put before Milton a living model of inspired steadfastness in resisting official opposition, the Devil's party reinstated and suppressing God's chosen people. The ground was held without resort to Antinomian excess or bitterness. Satan's envy might thus be aroused by Quaker willingness to suffer without retaliation; here at last was a type of the religious hero integral with the national experience of revolution and reform. Milton, the discouraged pamphleteer, now vulnerable because blind and in danger of reprisal for his anti-monarchist and anti-prelatist views, could strongly identify with these heroic outcasts, though it would have been unwise to uphold them in any public statement. He in fact went into hiding, and Parker queries whether his protector was a Quaker, the "friend" who had a "concern" for his safety.[1] Quakers were not given to hiding themselves, but it is quite possible that Milton was on sufficiently good terms with some of them to be given this prudent care before the days of intimate association with Ellwood.

II

Thomas Ellwood's name is foremost in all discussions of Milton's contact with Friends, though he is unlikely to have

[1] *Ibid.*, II, 1083.

released in him the profound awareness of inner light found in *Paradise Lost*. The most literate of early Quaker autobiographers and something of a poet, Ellwood nevertheless lacked the spiritual sensitivity and fire so remarkably present in Quaker leaders of the first rank. As a loyal apostle, he was more effective in consolidating records of Quakerism than in advancing the movement itself. We should therefore not press the friendship with Milton as the poet's main access to mystical Quaker teaching as it is reflected in *Paradise Lost*. On the other hand, it is wrong to adopt the condescending attitude toward Ellwood found throughout Parker's work. Allowing that Ellwood's autobiography (1714) is a unique source of information for a full six years of Milton's mature life, Parker nevertheless slights its writer. He is unwilling to recognize the vivid realism of Ellwood's narrative in a period when full attention to human interaction in its physical setting was rare in the art. Ellwood is commended only to the extent that, were it not for *The History of the Life of Thomas Ellwood* "we would probably be forever ignorant of his residence at Chalfont St. Giles, and of the fact that *Paradise Lost* was criticized by a callow versifier in 1665".[1] "Callow versifier" unfortunately sets the tone of all Parker's comments on the association with Milton that began in March or April of 1662 and continued in various ways for several years. By citing their main activity in 1662–3 as afternoon tutoring in Latin, Parker implies that Milton gave more than he received, that Ellwood was merely a student and convenience to the sightless poet. Yet it is clear that Milton was fond of the young Quaker and stood ready to welcome him back after what some might regard as degrading imprisonment in Bridewell. Ellwood's crime had been that of worshipping according to conscience, and this Milton could only admire. In fact Ellwood was engaging in a later phase of the very religious reform that Milton had so energetically championed back in civil war days. Parker says little of how Ellwood must have sustained the disappointed Christian patriot through the tedious period when

[1] *Ibid.*, II, 1100. As J. Max Patrick points out in "The Influence of Thomas Ellwood Upon Milton's Epics" with few exceptions scholars from Milton's biographer David Masson to James Holly Hanford "have treated Ellwood with harsh, patronizing generosity". (*Essays in History and Literature Presented by Fellows of the Newberry Library to Stanley Pargellis*, ed. Heinz Bluhm, Chicago, 1965, p. 119.)

of necessity he lived apart. Thus isolated from public affairs, was there not a sympathetic and protective fellowship between them? Did not Ellwood benefit from Milton's interpretation of London's continuing religious turmoil and find understanding in his own struggle for religious self-determination? At times Milton may have been more supporting than Isaac Penington, whose persecutors kept him for long periods in prison. Like Penington, he would have been adept in situations where misunderstandings with fathers had arisen, as was Ellwood's case. That the ideal forms of fatherhood and sonship were in his mind is evident from *Paradise Lost*, an amity Milton had not enjoyed himself. The question of Ellwood's poetic talent is therefore secondary to that of companionship in adversity and the welcome similarity of outlook in matters of religious liberty. In discussions of how Truth suffered anew in an era of repression, it is likely that there came an affinity and respect of unusual quality. It is further likely that in 1665 Ellwood was more than simply instrumental in Milton's taking refuge from the London plague. That Milton's cottage at Chalfont St. Giles lay only a mile distant from the Penington's house, a Quaker gathering place, suggests freedom of religious converse that brought Milton still closer to Friends. The poet had many acquaintances in later life but with which of them is there any record of a relationship so fundamental and mutually satisfying as that with Ellwood appears to have been? Milton showed the manuscript of *Paradise Lost* to the Quaker because he recognized his literary judgment and alertness to the deepest spiritual issues. It is remarkable that someone who had been so attacked for his dissident opinions could trust completely in a declared member of that persecuted sect.

Nevertheless Ellwood's critical comment on first reading *Paradise Lost* has generated adverse opinion that radiates on the entire friendship. In our time of professional literary criticism, the words "Thou hast said much here of Paradise lost, but what hast thou to say of Paradise found?" are easily twisted to appear naive and insensitive.[1] Other remarks on Ellwood's literary standing have not helped us to accept this comment for the insight it gives. His "slow-moving pedestrian style" in *The Sacred History* and the

[1] Thomas Ellwood, *History* (London, 1906). p. 199.

suspicion of being no stylist aroused by the 1712 introduction to *Davideis*, which declared willingness to "walk in the middle way; where the safest walking is, and where I shall be sure to find virtue . . . "[1] are held against him. Ellwood's seeming timidity is easily contrasted with Milton's vow that his epic "with no middle flight intends to soar/ . . . while it persues/Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rime" (I, 14–16). But in the mid-seventeenth century, with practical religion foremost, Ellwood's criticism was not naive, nor was his own literary emphasis cause for censure. Milton could respect someone mainly concerned with the guidance of souls, and he took Ellwood seriously, stating that *Paradise Regained* had been written "owing to you: for you put it into my Head".[2] No other poem of his sets so positive a spiritual example. The epic of Christ withstanding Satan's temptation proves that the just man, inwardly guided by the Holy Spirit, can maintain the paradise within despite every open or subtle attack upon him. Ellwood asked *Paradise Lost* simply for the practical application of regenerate faith, as

[1] L. M. Wright, *The Literary Life of the Early Friends* (New York, 1932), pp. 115, 141.

[2] Ellwood, *History*, p. 200. In "The Influence of Thomas Ellwood Upon Milton's Epics", J. Max Patrick rightly argues a cordial, mutually worthwhile relationship between Milton and Ellwood in which the younger man's critical opinions are seen as "serious, sincere, and literally accurate". (123) As a didactic writer Ellwood was sure of his position and did not adulate Milton. "To the Reader" prefacing *Davideis* indicates that he might have regarded Milton's epic as too embellished and fanciful to help the ordinary reader grasp the essentials of Christian redemption. Knowing the uneducated as he did, a greater simplicity was wanted. Turning to *Paradise Regained*, Patrick observes that, however it was composed, the title "would emphasize a belief that the spiritual and mental victory of Jesus over His tempting adversary was the all-important seed which bore the ultimate fruit of the Crucifixion and the Redemption, and that this spiritual triumph was therefore, in a sense, more significant than the physical event on the Cross". (131) This suggests a practical immediacy that could be approved by Ellwood, who was going through the most intense religious testing of his life.

In "Milton and Thomas Ellwood", Elizabeth T. McLaughlin argues further that Ellwood "understood and highly valued Milton's work" (*Milton Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1967, 17). As evidence of regard and trust she cites Ellwood's epitaph "Upon the excellently-learned John Milton" and Milton turning over to Ellwood for safekeeping Cromwell's letters of state and other matters of management. This article is answered by J. Max Patrick in "Milton and Thomas Ellwood—a Reconsideration" (*Milton Newsletter*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1968), where he doubts the story of Milton's turning over Cromwell's papers to Ellwood and points out some misconceptions about his article. Elizabeth McLaughlin responds in a further note.

any serious follower of Fox's mysticism-in-the-world would feel obliged to do. He singled out Milton's solution to the dilemma of holding to a just and loving God amidst the disillusions of a collapsed commonwealth, and he asked for poetic evidence that the inner paradise found is real, substantial, and lasting. Lacking the context of earnest religious discussion we do not know what else Ellwood said or how Milton replied, but it is certain that they considered at length how the inner light is the hope of renewed life, not merely a phantasm as apt to heat the brains of fanatics as return serious seekers to essential Christianity.

Further, Ellwood's question is perfectly acceptable in view of the misgivings Milton deliberately or inadvertently wrote into Books XI and XII, closing *Paradise Lost*. These renderings of Biblical history clearly show the disillusionment, even pessimism, felt when Cromwell's holy experiment was finally cancelled at the Restoration. For Milton, man's reasoned ability to follow the will of God toward the regeneration of society was put in doubt. Indeed the mystical turn of this poem indicates a crisis of reason in theocentric society. Now the best that could be hoped was that the living seed in individuals might find nurture in the pure baptism of spirit. This is the "Protestant individualism" about which Parker speaks.[1] Specifically, it is the well-known teaching of George Fox that people's hearts had to be stirred "before the Seed of God was raised out of the earth".[2] The Seed of God, the Christ within manifesting himself by slow, painful stages in history, is the theme of Milton's closing books. But the Quaker reader must have wondered whether the shaking and overturning in human affairs Michael requires Adam to behold are not almost greater than the nourished seed could overcome. "Supernal Grace contending/With sinfulness of Men" (XI, 359–60), seems a doubtful contest as Adam is overwhelmed by visions of disease, despair and death in their worst forms, of wantonness, corruption and organized violence, against which a lonely minority of "just men", the rare types of Christ, stand firm in the sight of God. Remaining steadfast as Noah did is Milton's last hope in a degenerate age:

> So all shall turn degenerat, all deprav'd,
> Justice and Temperance, Truth and Faith forgot;

[1] Parker, I, 497.
[2] George Fox, *Journal* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 22.

> One Man except, the onely Son of light
> In a dark Age, against example good,
> Against allurement, custom, and a World
> Offended: fearless of reproach and scorn,
> Or violence, hee of their wicked wayes
> Shall them admonish, and before them set
> The paths of righteousness, how much more safe,
> And full of peace, denouncing wrauth to come
> On thir impenitence; and shall returne
> Of them derided, but of God observd
> The one just Man alive . . .
>
> (XI, 806–18)

With such depressing visions past, Adam in the closing lines of Book XI joyfully perceives the new covenant upon Noah's miraculous preservation: the precious seed is carried forward and light shines out from the rainbow's "colourd streaks in Heaven" (XI, 879), "His triple-coloured Bow, whereon to look/And call to mind his Cov'nant" (XI, 897–8). But in Book XII, portraying the Seed's pilgrimage from the flood to the birth of Christ, deterrents to righteousness and true faith are again daunting. Adam receives the full impact of what his and Eve's disobedience will mean in man's historical struggle to restore right relationships through freely choosing to do the will of God. He is told of rebellion, of mass confusion, tyranny and idolatry, of the Jews' weary wanderings as generation by generation the Seed moves toward its destined fruition. The ordeal of Abraham's race is indeed painful reading as we pass "From shadowie Types to Truth, from Flesh to Spirit" (XII, 303), from restrictive law to grace and from constricting fear to freedom in Jesus. Milton's historical circumstances allowed him to feel the rigours of these centuries of spiritual combat, of hopes dashed and revived, with the Seed always guiding onward, though its human carriers falter. Ever-present Satan tempts the unwary to deviate, but Christ sacrifices himself to restore the reign of spirit "fresh as the dawning light" (XII, 423), remaining spiritually present until the last judgment. Milton describes the instructed Adam as "Replete with joy and wonder" (XII, 469) upon hearing of the atonement and just completion of history; further he is promised that "over wrauth Grace shall abound" (XII, 478), that the spirit will dwell among men in love, that strength will be found to resist Satan's attacks and that the afflicted may

expect sustaining inward consolations. But the words came hard; Milton knew the human recalcitrance against which spirit must work. Yet in writing hopefully of inward experience, he might well have had in mind Friends' unique ability to endure sufferings in witness to the Truth for few others stood the test, Nonconformist clergy notwithstanding. Here were just men living in depraved society, "oft supported so as shall amaze/Thir proudest persecuters" (XII, 496–7). The example was of inestimable value for the poet.

Having written these admiring lines, he was again reminded of all that was worst in the religious contentions then raging: there is a long passage on the decadence of religion—"grievous wolves" displacing true teachers to kill the spirit with secular power "themselves appropriating/the Spirit of God, promisd alike and giv'n/To all Beleevers . . ." (XII, 518–20). Conscience was outraged, the spirit within forced into false conformity to requirements of the state church and true liberty of prophesying lost. It was cause for sorrow that Christians suffered this declension, but none rose above it more triumphantly than Friends in London whom Milton might have taken as a model of right guidance when he wrote:

> for on Earth
> Who against Faith and Conscience can be heard
> Infallible? yet many will presume:
> Whence heavie persecution shall arise
> On all who in the worship persevere
> Of Spirit and Truth; the rest, farr greater part,
> Will deem in outward Rites and specious formes
> Religion satisfi'd; Truth shall retire
> Bestuck with slandrous darts, and works of Faith
> Rarely be found: so shall the World goe on,
> To good malignant, to bad men benigne,
> Under her own waight groaning, till the day
> Appeer of respiration to the just,
> And vengeance to the wicked, at return
> Of him so lately promisd to thy aid
> The Womans seed . . .
>
> (XII, 528–43)

Those who worshipped according to "Spirit and Truth" indeed suffered cruel harassment, but Truth did not altogether retire and, if anything, works of faith flourished as never before. Had Milton pictured his age too pessimistically

when in fact Christ "was come to teach people himself by his power and spirit to bring them off all the world's ways and teachers to his own free teaching . . . ?"[1] As Ellwood testified, a special people had gathered to worship as Friends in a commonwealth of the spirit. Younger and fresher than Milton, he could show that if the promised land had not been entered by all England's scattered Christians, at least a persisting few had learned with revived Adam that:

> to obey is best,
> And love with feare the onely God, to walk
> As in his presence, ever to observe
> His providence, and on him sole depend,
> Merciful over all his works, with good
> Still overcoming evil, and by small
> Accomplishing great things, by things deemd weak
> Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise
> By simply meek; that suffering for Truths sake
> Is fortitude to highest victorie,
> And to the faithful Death the Gate of Life.
> (XII, 561–571)

No one knew better than Milton the sweetness of hopes near to realization, but the relative youth of most Friends would make it difficult for them to fully understand his despair when those hopes seemed lost. Hence the note of resignation uncharacteristic of them.

In their dispensation as the new Jews spiritual, Friends could bear hardships without complaint and live from inward power rather than by theocratic compulsion. Milton realized something of the kind as the best solution to the religious problems in the Puritan fold. This he clearly shows in portraying the chastened and instructed Adam; but there lingers a sense of how hard the Puritan way had been, a heavy sense of acrimony and near defeat complicating the message of *Paradise Lost*. Beginning negatively, it is as if he saw human behaviour as almost incapable of bearing out the religious promise he knew to be true but which he had found only through successive retrenchments. Having a deep knowledge of political defeat and spoilation, he needed all his spiritual resources to write as positively as he did. Ellwood, also a student of scripture, might well have wished the poetic rendering of Christian history to be more emphatic

[1] George Fox, *Journal* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 104.

about the regenerate man's entering a new life to which he was adequate. This we do not actually see in *Paradise Lost* where all is promise and potential in the seed, with Adam and Eve still too fresh in their repentance to prove its worth by their deeds. But the renewed Adam is figuratively Christ, the supreme just man whose inner strength withstands all testing, an existential proof that Ellwood had good reason to request a review of the inner experience of that redeeming man. In this way *Paradise Regained* is a fitting sequel to *Paradise Lost* whose unfinished business a Quaker would be quick to detect. Adam had his moments of rapt elevation, of mystical joy, but as Quaker leaders well knew, such evidence of grace might prove deceptive had it not stood the test of time and adverse encounter. Milton surely looked to the example of Christ's spirituality when writing of Michael's

> onely add
> Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,
> Add Vertue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,
> By name to come calld Charitie, the soul
> Of all the rest . . .
>
> (XII, 581–5)

This can be read as Quaker realism, the measure of living situations through which men and women must pass strengthened to meet future temptations. These words were intended to uphold such as Ellwood; but because of a felt urgency for them, the promise of *Paradise Lost* was not enough by itself. Something more definite had to be known as reassurance of a stable position to be reached when weak human nature had at last been transformed in the seed. What more convincing model of loving steadfastness could there be than Christ himself in whom all was restored? Why not offer his inner life as the dramatic paradigm of that spirituality so ardently sought by those who knew that religion must stand up in the world? Seen this way, Ellwood's question about paradise found takes on immediate practicality: Christ the perfected man among men is the one compelling presence in the confusions of Restoration Christianity. Modern literary criticism allows too little for the life-centredness of this poetic teaching. In answer to need, Milton and Ellwood went about the basic work of remodelling a religion and morality that the most critical might accept.

They laboured to make Christianity again fully relevant to the changed human situation, and no better way to renew conviction than by the moving effect of poetry. Milton's epics survey the possibilities for a godly inner peace that accorded with the facts of society in the post-rebellion era. How to unite men under Christ was the central problem; it might be that only a remnant would be capable of the arduous inner work, and that those heeding the message of revival would be few. The first Friends were not so pessimistic about numbers, though they quickly settled into the habits of a sect. Milton looked not at all for adherents but for imaginative enlightenment. No poet was better placed to perform a complex work of spiritual analysis, practical and imaginative interpretation, but he could not do it alone. Who if not Ellwood brought Milton to admit that something important had been left unsaid in *Paradise Lost* and that he could remedy the defect?

Whatever the comparative literary merit of *Paradise Regained*, it is the necessary sequel to *Paradise Lost* showing the possibility of Christian perseverence in an evil world. Brave opening lines carry a resonance to which any literate Quaker would have at once responded:

> I who ere while the happy Garden sung,
> By one mans disobedience lost, now sing
> Recoverd Paradise to all mankind,
> By one mans firm obedience fully tri'd
> Through all temptation, and the Tempter foild
> In all his wiles, defeated and repulst,
> And Eden rais'd in the wast Wilderness.
>
> (I, 1–7)

"Recovered Paradise to all mankind" was the Quaker promise as adapted in Milton's language, renewed inner persons entering a holy experiment to overcome darkness. The First Publishers of Truth meant what they said about raising the witness of God in the midst of a scattered nation: "Mind the light and dwell in it and it will keep you a-top of all the world" advised Fox in Epistle 203 (1661). Only a distinctive people determined to live with the essentials of faith could have any effect in a situation so confused and divided. "All men's and women's strength is in the Power of God which goes over the Power of Darkness" Fox wrote in Epistle 208 (1661). How many references there are in

Paradise Lost to the renewing power of light: the poem abounds in them from the general invocation (I, 22–3), to the moving invocation to Book III ("Hail holy Light, ofspring of Heav'n first-born"), the cave of light and darkness opening Book VI, to the creation of natural light in Book VII (243f) and the gradual emergence from moral darkness by Adam and Eve's illumination after the fall (XI, 328f), together with many lesser instances. Indeed this recurrent imagery, often more concentrated than its Biblical sources, is basic to the poem; light overcoming darkness no less than carries Milton's fundamental message of renewal throughout.[1] The literary embodiment may have seemed obscure to some, but there was in fact little gap between Milton's invocation of light and language inspiring deep moments in Friends' meetings for worship, the fullest practical outcome of this line of development the seventeenth century has to show.

III

The writings of Isaac Penington, Milton's other known Quaker contact, are a possible source for his mystical doctrine of the inner light. Parker does not consider that Milton was on intimate terms with the Quaker quietist, saying only that in arranging for Ellwood to be tutored the blind scholar "mentioned his regard for Isaac Penington".[2] Surely Milton was acquainted with Penington's numerous tracts which began appearing in 1649 and continued in the service of Quakerism after his conversion in 1658. If not before, then in 1665, when Milton was resident at Chalfont St. Giles, he must have got on terms with the persecuted saint whose family residence, the Grange, was within easy distance. Social contacts in Buckinghamshire in that period would have been limited for someone of Milton's stamp. We may suppose that he sought serious company in the Penington circle and that his converse was valued. The malicious

[1] Patristic and Platonic origins of light imagery are studied by W. B. Hunter in "The Meaning of 'Holy Light' in *Paradise Lost* III" (*Modern Language Notes*, LXXIV, 1959, 589–92). A broader spectrum of sources, including the mystical, appears in D. C. Allen's "Milton and the Descent to Light" (*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, LX, 1961, pp. 614–30), but light and darkness imagery in Puritan writings is yet to receive the attention it deserves.

[2] Parker, I, 580, II, 1092.

ejection of the Peningtons from their house in that year would have been no more surprising to him than Ellwood's imprisonment had been. Milton would have followed the fortunes of Buckinghamshire dissenting families from his time of residence at Horton (1635–38); among these no individual had become more prominent than the anti-monarchist Lord Mayor of London, Isaac Penington, who was instrumental in Milton's appointment as Latin Secretary to Cromwell's government. His Puritan son, the "long mournful and sorely distressed" Isaac Penington, laboured inwardly with questions of true reformation more subtle than the political activists of his father's generation had been able to understand. As early as 1650 he was writing in terms anticipating Quakerism; true spiritual discernment, he says, "may be a ground of silence and waiting for the light".[1] Penington's spiritual odyssey, set out in "A Brief Account of my Soul's Travel towards the Holy Land" (1668), is nothing less than a confession of paradise lost and regained. He had followed the promise of salvation through Calvinist fears of reprobation into antinomian excessive elevation of spirit; he had entered an Independent congregation (possibly learning of Milton through its minister John Goodwin) only to be broken and thwarted in all his religious hopes. The painful rebuilding brought him to the "pure seed", as Quakers expressed it. His extraordinary story was told as it unfolded, for Penington was one of those who find themselves to be enacting an allegory of religion in the age, living with special intensity what others pass through later and with less distress. Typically dwelling on the test of authenticity in religious experience and how right guidance might be attained, his life was an ongoing commentary on the varieties of Puritanism. By defining true religion as "inwardly felt and experienced in the life and power of it", he offered his pilgrimage as an example of the heights and depths through which the aspiring Christian might expect to pass.[2] Indeed the pilgrimage metaphor is as natural to Penington as it is to Bunyan, whose *Pilgrim's Progress* so brilliantly recalls the shared Puritan quest. More difficult and subtle for Penington, it carries him through a spiritual landscape with

[1] Isaac Penington, *A Voyce out of the thick Darkness* (London, 1650), p. 31.

[2] Isaac Penington, *Works* (Sherwoods, N.Y., 1863), IV, 502.

few easy landmarks: "there is nothing whereof Sion is built, but the likeness of it is in Babylon . . . ."[1] The quest lasts through a lifetime of motions in the spirit, some giving true direction, some deceiving and weakening resolve. Whichever way, they must be interpreted to serve the divinely appointed end lying beyond: only the most acute spiritual sensibility is adequate to the task. Penington's readers must have admired the development of this acuteness in him. With truth progressive and emergent, there could be no easy resting place in this life; as Milton foresaw for Adam, experience always held challenges to be met in the strength of known truths. Not instruction alone, but inward experience of what former Christians called grace was the trustworthy guide. If Puritan introspection sometimes opened pathological dangers, at its most balanced, new strengths arose with heightened sensitivity to the life within. Thus unpromising beginnings might lead to exemplary integration of the person, and such lives were watched with hopeful attention throughout the period. The "poor, needy, depending soul" grew in strength so long as free interpretation of the Gospel was maintained.[2] This is Penington's meaning of inner light, which may be imperilled by trying to fix it in a form of words. "And when I catch at any thing, or would be any thing, I lose the spring . . ." expresses the delicate adjustment of spirit to written word he sought and which Milton fully exemplifies in the illuminated passages of *Paradise Lost*.[3] Though not of so passive a temperament, Milton adjusted language and attitude toward the mystical openness Penington considered true wisdom. He did so when outward striving had reached its limit and the weight of history seemed crushingly heavy. The appeal to transcendent power working in the sensitive man is unmistakable; while Milton adheres more closely than Penington to scripture in his epic of regeneration, we cannot doubt that he had in mind living examples of the chastened and wise for his rendering of Adam and Christ. No doubt his own experience contributed, as several allusions to it indicate, but attention to those with whom God had wonderfully dealt is equally to the point. So various as they are, who could name them

[1] *Ibid.*, I, 338.
[2] *Ibid.*, II, 228.
[3] *Ibid.*, II, 287.

all—Francis Rous, Henry Vane, Cromwell himself, Puritan preachers, New Model Army chaplains, religious poets, Quakers and other sectarians? Of each of these Milton had opinions, now mostly lost to us. It would be misleading to single out Penington as the supreme example of the "one just man" in an age of upheaval in church and state: he was not central enough to this action to be thought so. But his religious experience, was anything but peripheral, and that it reinforced the succession of spiritual passages Milton adapted from the Bible is possible. If the Biblical message of promise is carried ever forward by human agents, these embodiments must always be identified and considered as an elect. Milton's epics accept a new spiritual meaning for the elect, and who if not Penington gave over his entire being to its emergence?

Without new historical evidence the exact relationship between Milton, Penington and the other Quakers in his orbit remains indistinct. The most we can say is that the doctrine of the holy spirit bound together several sorts of Puritan, and that Milton's later work is most certainly associated with Penington's in this way. There is a convergence of thought, though Milton could not follow the mystic in all particulars: he was no suffering pacifist, but the assumption that God leads those who inwardly learn his will by the spirit is identical. Milton felt elected to perform a great poetic work to edify the English nation; Penington had similarly written to his people lamenting with them and exhorting to repentance and reformation—"O England! wilt thou not be made clean? When shall it once be? Murmur not against the rods wherewith the Lord seeth good to chastise thee; but mourn over thy wickedness . . .".[1] This he believed was to aid the "building of his New Jerusalem, which, when he hath finished and brought forth, will dazzle the eyes of the whole earth".[2] But by 1659, when this was written, Penington had turned attention to the Quaker new Jerusalem, removed from politics and full-scale religious reconstruction. His commentary on the meaning and effect of revolution was thus completed; now a special godly people must gather, emptied of pride and purified to form a new worshipping community. As we have

[1] *Ibid.*, I, 352.
[2] *Ibid.*, I, 357.

said, its fortunes must have been of great interest to Milton, similarly withdrawn from the scene of revolutionary action. Successful Quakerism showed him that his Puritan-Humanist view of high calling could still be salvaged. By examining the inner man an explanation of his troubled quest might be found, in pride might appear the reasons for all his waywardness. *Paradise Lost* reconstructs mind and spirit as sufficient to stand though free to fall, but having fallen salvagable by instruction and inspiration that brings man to a higher spiritual awareness. Such awareness as Adam attains is "the summe/Of wisdom" (XII, 575–6), the product of grace activating his latent spiritual capacity. So it was with many who had come to rest in Quakerism after repeated disillusionments among churches and sects, Penington held that while the evils of schism and idolatry won dominion over the "pure, single, naked beginning" of true religion in his time, yet

> the Lord hath visited this poor, desolate seed, and hath been gathering it from all quarters; from amidst all empty forms on the one hand, and all vain, high notions on the other hand; and he will preserve it, overturning all his new enemies, as well as his old.

To this he adds, "No way, or particular act of worship, under the New Testament, is acceptable to God, without his spirit", the spirit communicating actively to relieve feelings of separation.[1] In silent waiting Friends had found a means to corporate renewal: "The true wisdom, the true light, the true knowledge of Christ, is like the manna in the wilderness; it daily comes down from heaven, and must daily be gathered fresh."[2] The seed's new springing is therefore by the spirit nourishing it with free abundance of light, a metaphor we have already found to be fundamental in *Paradise Lost* disclosing Milton's view of worship. The metaphor is continued by Penington who speaks of the new garden, the paradise within, in which God raises up "the plants of his own right hand, whom he watereth with the dews of heaven, and with the showers of his everlasting mercy and loving-kindness . . . ."[3] Penington's saved people

[1] *Ibid.*, I, 231.
[2] *Ibid.*, I, 496.
[3] *Ibid.*, I, 247.

in a broken nation are very like Adam in their humble submissiveness; they wait to be taught, no longer struggling to justify acts of the self or to gain advantage over rivals. "And our religion consists neither in willing nor running, but in waiting on the Spirit . . . ."[1] "And the unity being thus kept, all will come into one outwardly also at length, as the light grows in every one, and as every one grows into the light . . .".[2] There is no more basic adaptation to the seventeenth century crisis of faith than this, and we should not wonder that it appears in Milton's finest poem as well as in the mature teachings of Penington. But each realized the difficulty and extreme demands of what was being said; clearly only a prepared few would be able to follow the complexities of epic, as well as the sacramental way of life implied in the poem and made actual in the best of Quakerism. Milton's garden within was now the transmuted natural paradise of *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, infused by the grace of Christ and the Holy Spirit within Adam. For Penington the garden was that of the gathered meeting at his house in rural Buckinghamshire, a setting always liable to the breaking of unity by hostile incursions, as Ellwood describes them. But like Milton's Adam, Penington had reached a stage in which the restoring pattern of devotion quickly overcame hostile disruptions. This is evident from the sureness and resonance of his writings, even in the period of severest persecution. We might think of him answering his own ideal description of a Quaker in whom the flesh has been "brought down, the seed of life raised, and the soul subject to the pure, heavenly power, whose right it is to reign in the heart . . . ."[3] The persecution of worship could not change this any more than Milton was persuaded by his detractors that he had lost the gift of prophetic utterance.

In blindness he had opened the inner eye, giving a view of God's continuing revelation which alone was saving: "the issuings-forth of his fresh life", as Penington called it.[4] This is the epics' operative principle clearly stated in invocations and consistently followed throughout: the holy spirit

1 *Ibid.*, I, 278.
2 *Ibid.*, I, 469.
3 *Ibid.*, III, 225.
4 *Ibid.*, I, 497.

as the principal agent in writing poetry is the classical afflatus Puritanized. To open *Paradise Lost* Milton writes:

> And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost preferr
> Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,
> Instruct me . . .
>
> (I, 17–19)

And again in *Paradise Regained*:

> Thou Spirit who ledst this glorious Eremite
> Into the desert, his Victorious Field
> Against the Spiritual Foe, and broughtst him thence
> By proof th' undoubted Son of God, inspire,
> As thou art wont, my prompted Song else mute
>
> (I, 8–12)

That he should have been more cautious than Penington in giving the Holy Spirit pre-eminence in his thinking detracts little from its place in his greatest poems. Parker quotes passages from the *Christian Doctrine* showing the Son's primacy in the scheme of salvation, as indeed appears in the epic action of both poems. Milton was careful to specify that, where scripture is silent about the Holy Spirit's origin, caution is necessary.

> Discovering no warrant to consider this mysterious Being as equal to and identical with God, Milton concluded that it "was created or produced of the substance of God, not by a natural necessity, but by the free will of the Agent, probably before the foundations of the world were laid, but later than the Son, and far inferior to Him".[1]

The Holy Spirit is therefore an agent of both Father and Son aiding men "in the comprehension of spiritual things, interpreting the Gospel, guiding in prayer, and directing the exercise of Christian liberty".[2] Detailed comparisons of Milton's formal thinking with Penington's, which also contains a developed Christology, would reveal the poet's closer adherence to Scripture. Penington was more freely prophetic, in keeping with the left wing Puritanism which he wrote to uphold and to temper. When Milton wrote, it was to display the Holy Spirit in intricately ordered poetic imagery beyond what was necessary for Quaker prophets.

1 *Parker*, I, 485.
2 *Ibid.*, I, 485.

Interpenetrations of light and darkness, the seed, the fountain breaking open and other associated images give *Paradise Lost* a richness of verbal texture incomparable in the age. Between this epic and such records as we have of the rise of Quakerism there is the difference between artistic permanence and first attempts to find words for remarkable occurrences. It is a curious possibility that the best insights of Quakerism are enshrined in the mystical passages of Milton's epics. It may be that the medium of poetry released him from reluctances felt about the contentious claims made by sects and churches. Being non-partisan enabled him to appropriate their best and raise it up by the power of poetry. Poetry had always been his calling, and its freedom invited the fullest imaginative realization of truths coming to fruition in the lives of those he knew to be the regenerate. We do not go too far in concluding that this had been his own experience; when he writes simply that "God is Light" (III, 3), praying to "Celestial Light" to "Shine inward" (III, 52–3) in aid of his art, he affirms Quaker insight by its poetic enactment. This is as deeply felt as anything in Penington's tracts, and it is more enduring. The sense of search and discovery by "experiment" is consonant with the typical Quaker way. For poet and Quaker, inner experience was the final authority when radical doubt prevailed in religious affairs. Both writers saw the necessity of returning to the very origins of belief in authentic contact with its source, and to this necessity verbal elaboration is a secondary contributor. Milton was a craftsman of genius, Penington a gifted stylist. The first consideration was to be enlivened, as Adam had been inwardly awakened in recovering lost contact with God. Penington had suffered a fall into religious melancholy ("a most dreadful and terrible hell for many years");[1] induced by women, Nayler had fallen to pride and been regenerated in the spirit; even Fox had episodes of dry desolation. Is not Milton's Adam who struggles back into life the best seventeenth-century paradigm of this shared experience?

When he devised the smitten but illuminated Adam, Milton wrote from a mind stored with reading as wide as any in his age. Among the illuminated he had ranged from Plotinus to Jacob Boehme downward to the latest Ranter

[1] Isaac Penington, *Works*, I, 478.

effusion, passing appropriate qualification on them all. Yet the presence of Penington close to Milton's immediate circle must have counted strongly, though we cannot now say precisely how. Parker's biography holds to the known facts; we have speculated beyond them. Mystic and poet each grew to full adequacy in finding a way to reunify the scattered psyche without denying past hardship and disappointment. Each honestly struggled to comprehend the whole of experience when proposing solutions to doubt and fear. That Penington's and Milton's teachings converge so closely is to say that they penetrated to the fundamentals of illuminated spirituality. We can do no more than suggest that this was no accident, that the poet took strength from Penington's writings and that both drew upon a life-giving spirituality abroad in the age. If in any measure this was so, then Quakerism can be said to have contributed, more than by Ellwood's suggestion, to two of the greatest poems in world literature. If not, then poet and mystic each show the reliability of searching by all available means for what is lastingly true.

ANDREW W. BRINK