

Transformational Qualities of Agricultural Labour in Milton's Paradise Lost

Maraya Cooper

Abstract: This essay explores the connection between Eden's ecological evolution and Adam and Eve's stewardship of paradise as a necessary function of the pair's spiritual journey in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). In this world, Eden is an ever-growing garden that requires diligent care, rather than a perfected and stable utopia. Considering agricultural labour as one of God's Socratic teaching methods alongside the metaphorical dimensions of ecological regeneration in a postlapsarian world, the essay reveals how Adam and Eve strengthen their relationship with God through nature. Milton reminds readers about the importance of environmental stewardship as he spotlights the transcendental link between humans and the natural world.

According to John Milton, Eden is not a static paradise but a garden in constant need of tending. To begin with, the epic poet draws on the Book of Genesis, emphasizing Adam and Eve's "dominion over ... the earth" as stewardship (Gen. 1.26). Given Milton's focus on the dynamic utopian landscape, ecocriticism remains prevalent in the discourse engaging with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Some scholars, such as Sarah Smith, view Milton's use of the georgic poetic mode as the presence of seventeenth-century revolutionary environmentalism. Others position Milton's ecocritical approach within a historical context--Mary Fenton notes the connection between the degradation of Eden and deforestation during the English Civil War. With consideration to the analysis of various eco-Milton scholars, this paper will further explore how Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve, as the farmers of Eden, emphasizes his theodicy, wherein God's inherently virtuous authority

coincides with His bestowing of sufficient free will to humans. Using Fenton's term "sylvan pastoral" as both an epistemological and theological tool that links agricultural labour with psychological development (243), Milton encapsulates the spiritual journey of Adam and Eve within an environmental framework. With this in mind, I argue that Adam and Eve's agricultural labour within Eden reveals paradise not as a stagnant place of repose but as a space in a constant state of process and progress. *Paradise Lost* can be read as a symbolic evolutionary poem in which Adam and Eve deal directly with the consequences of moral degradation, and then embrace transformational qualities associated with repentance.

For Milton, the postlapsarian world should be understood simply as another stage in the evolution of spiritual elevation. The existence of all things can be explained through *ex deo*: creation out of God. For this reason, God is also present in ecological processes, such as "death, destruction, and decomposition" (Ott 11). Examining the creation of "chaos and suffering" serves as a suitable spiritual lesson for humanity, especially in association with the evolutionary dimension of ecology (Ott 15). Eco-scholar Taylor J. Ott taps into a central theological debate about the fabrication of sorrow, presenting "chaos and suffering" as "intrinsic to creation" and positioning *Paradise Lost* within the Calvinist framework, wherein God predestines the salvation of a select few and ordains the rest of humanity to damnation. I disagree, however, that Milton's depiction of death indicates the predisposition of suffering. To view suffering as predetermined suggests that God's authority emanates from His will rather than His reason, and thus undermines the authorial theodicy concerning free will. With God's benevolence in mind, the postlapsarian world certainly has the possibility for goodness. The fall, which unleashes death, does not dissolve the capacity for spiritual elevation. Instead, just as environmental regeneration is the direct result of death, the fall provides a means of rebirth. At the end of Book 12, Milton underscores a new beginning for human beings: "the world [is] all before them" (Milton

12.645). By creating a direct link between the pre- and postlapsarian world, Milton offers a sense of theological coherence when considering the presence of free will and God's relationship to humans.

Adam and Eve's agricultural education is at the heart of their "spiritual reformation" (Fenton 261). Milton's intersection at both the realism of agricultural labour in the georgic poetic mode and the idyllic countryside leisure in the pastoral poetic mode leads to Fenton's notion of the sylvan pastoral. Sylvan pastoralism reflects the "symbiotic relationship" between humans and nature (261), frames nature in "the foreground" of the spiritual journey (262), and "[illuminates] ... questions of agency" (263). Milton uses the sylvan pastoral to forge Adam and Eve's moral characteristics "through the process of ... engaging [with] the natural world" (243-4). By positioning this labour as a means to "[facilitate] intellectual and emotional growth," Adam and Eve each cultivate their subconscious and explore notions of free will (268). Milton's focus on environmental ethics, through the lens of sylvan pastoralism, becomes a vehicle to "advance his own theology" (244). In paradise, Adam and Eve's education stems from a place of nurture rather than punishment, thereby revealing their God-given freedom to distinguish good from evil for themselves.

The garden is a transformative space that lends itself to a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, acting as an educational environment for Adam and Eve's spiritual subconscious. From its conception in the prelapsarian world, Eden "is a liminal transformative place" in which the pair are entrusted with environmental stewardship as a means to explore and develop their identity (Fenton 266). The meditative act of gardening works similarly to practicing faith as a "daily work of body and mind" (Milton 4.618); indeed, gardening requires a significant amount of repetition, patience to manage the slow growth process, and in most cases, an increasingly intuitive sense of nature. Moreover, God's Socratic teaching methods—such as His discussions of the value of "fellowship" with Adam (Milton 8.442) and His warnings against Eve's "vain desire"

for her own reflection (4.466)—extend to agricultural labour within Eden. Just as God presents pointed questions to foster moral education, Adam and Eve’s work within the garden allows them to practice their own decision-making within the boundaries set by Him. Through a metaphorical lens, Adam and Eve’s assignment as caretakers within Eden represents how the “pastoral conjoins inseparably the material and the spiritual” as agricultural labour cultivates moral education, thereby shaping the pair’s understanding of right reason—the moral conscience instilled by God that emphasizes free will (Fenton 244). Instead of positioning Eden as a permanently idyllic setting, Milton illustrates paradise, like faith, as undergoing a continuous process of transformation.

Milton portrays the couple’s own unruliness as a symbolic transition in their spiritual journey within Eden. Like Adam and Eve, the “overgrown” and “wild” transformative setting is unrefined (Milton 4.136). The couple’s spiritual ignorance is underscored by Adam, who lets his “passion sway / [his] judgment” (8.635–6), and Eve, who childishly elevates beauty as the ultimate virtue (4.93). The pair’s divine task to “prune [the] growing plants” is a metaphor for the cultivation of Adam and Eve’s own moral maturation (4.438). As the “work [outgrows] / the hands’ dispatch of two” and the transformative setting surpasses the stewards’ level of maturity, Milton signals the evolution of their spiritual journey (9.202–3). This mismanagement of the symbiotic relationship between Adam and Eve and their environment spotlights the pair’s spiritual ignorance. The garden’s unswerving growth, even after “loping,” “pruning,” or “binding,” indicates the couple’s initial lesson in the process of regeneration (9.209–11). In other words, the rigorous ecological maintenance of Eden reflects the pair’s challenging path towards metaphysical transformations and reveals their unwillingness to connect with nature.

Adam and Eve’s dismissal of tending the garden, a necessary condition of the spiritual process, can be understood as the cause of separation between the pre- and postlapsarian worlds. The couple’s imminent downfall

lingers between the lines of Eve's vernacular in Book 9, in which she describes the once "delightful" (4.436) assignment of "[tending to] plant, herb and flow'r" (9.205) as now an "irksome toil" (9.242). Her language of efficiency, as per her suggestion to "divide [their] labors" to maximize the couple's garden maintenance, threatens the process of paradise by overpowering the environment rather than unifying humans and nature (9.214). Indeed, her motion towards individualism reflects Satan's own moral degradation—his devilish ambition prevents his participation in fellowship and renders him an outsider within paradise (4.60). Eve's ignorance about the garden's requirements establishes that there is no way to circumvent the journey to spiritual maturation. Moreover, her disconnection from the environment subverts her "intellectual and emotional growth" and leaves her defenseless to the devil's temptation (Fenton 286). Thus, Satan's promise of expedient elevation ignores the process of spiritual growth and exposes moral degradation as a direct consequence of disregarding the ecological dimension of the spiritual journey.

Unlike Virgil's fallen perspective in the *Georgics*, in which the georgic mode symbolizes the darker side of humanity, Milton initially fashions the evolution of agriculture as adaptable, paralleling the shift in the spiritual journey of Adam and Eve. In Book 10, Milton shifts from seventeenth-century idyllic sylvan poetry to Virgil's symbolic use of the georgic in relation to Classical Roman wartime revolutionary politics; this reframing of nature transports Adam and Eve to the postlapsarian world. Rural landscapes that once signified the peace and simplicity of untainted life are portrayed with "growing miseries" and "fierce antipathy" (10.709–15). Eden, now a hostile environment with animals intent on devouring each other, resembles the "violent realm of war" within Virgil's *Georgics* (Nelson et. al 367). Once the couple consume the forbidden fruit, the earth and the couple come to "share the same wound" (Smith 51); after all, Adam and Eve are rooted in their environment. Therefore, these debased ecological alterations to the postlapsarian world are "a

reflection of humanity's fallen state" (Smith 51). Moreover, considering the use of sylvan pastoralism, as it illustrates the educational purposes of agriculture, the hostile environment should be understood as a modified assignment for spiritual enlightenment.

Considering the evolution of labour in the postlapsarian world, sylvan pastoralism within *Paradise Lost* harmonizes moral education and regeneration to mend Adam and Eve's spiritual deterioration. The gloomy postlapsarian world, filled with antipathy and the mourning of paradise, is reborn through hope and the spirit of prayer:

Thus they in lowliest plight repentant stood
Praying for from mercy-seat above
Prevenient grace descending had removed
The stony from their hearts and made new flesh
Regenerate grow instead that sighs now breathed
(Milton 11.1-5)

First, the passage draws a parallel between "repentant" and "regenerate." Through a theological lens, regeneration is both an ecological and spiritual process. Beyond the prelapsarian training of moral values and attitudes, God bestows the pair with a subconscious understanding about repentance through the process of ecological regeneration. Ultimately, their prior cultivation of right reason leads Adam and Eve to the idea of repentance on their own. Their prelapsarian moral training works like a preparatory stage in the ecological evolution of their spiritual journey. Moreover, their agricultural training, through which they understand the process of renewal after death, reminds Adam and Eve of their ability to "strengthen themselves from within by thinking of their links to God through nature" (Fenton 264). In other words, sylvan pastoralism enlightens not only the process by which untainted human beings develop moral maturation, but it also refines spiritual lessons deriving from Adam and Eve's transgressions. Through repentance, like the ecological process of regeneration, Adam and Eve discover they can restore their relationship with God. The ecological dimension of *Paradise Lost* demonstrates the

logic of the fall in accordance with God's Socratic teaching methods, positioning the interconnection between humans and the environment as essential for the rediscovery of paradise.

This exploration of Adam and Eve's agricultural labour within Eden argues that by situating paradise as an evolutionary process that is in a constant state of regeneration, readers can better understand Milton's use of the georgic mode in exploring Adam and Eve's journey of spiritual maturation. Indeed, Milton's poetry continues to remind us of the ethereal connection between humans and ecological systems. Adam and Eve's consequential moral decline, followed by transformational repentance, signals the evolutionary symbolism throughout the text. Milton positions his vision of Eden within the bounds of his theodicy, which reveals a direct link between the fall and Adam and Eve's God-given free will. The fall, while a result of their ignorance of the forthcoming turmoil following the consumption of the forbidden fruit, becomes both a symbol of free will and a stage in the couple's spiritual maturation. After all, God gives them the choice to consume the forbidden fruit. But more importantly, their georgic labour acts as a preparation for the fall in the prelapsarian world, cultivating their moral conscience through their agricultural duties. Adam and Eve's experience as farmers is what leads them to discover repentance, or redemption, through their understanding of environmental regeneration. By tapping into their sense of right reason, a function of God's Socratic teachings, the couple are equipped to handle the consequences of the postlapsarian world. Milton reveals then, that by denying the interconnection of humans and nature, humans risk becoming entirely unrooted from a plethora of theological knowledge—leaving us to fend for ourselves within a postlapsarian world.

Works Cited

- Fenton, Mary. "Chapter Seven: John Milton's Sylvan Pastorals and the Theatrical and Godly Individual." *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation*, edited by Jeffrey S. Theis, vol. 46, no. 2, Duquesne UP, 2012, pp. 243–289, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1094-348X.2012.00327>.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost* (1667). Edited by Gordon Teskey, 2nd ed., Norton, 2020.
- Nelson, Stephanie, et al. "Hesiod, Virgil, and the Georgic Tradition." *The Oxford Handbook of Hesiod*, Oxford UP, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190209032.013.46>.
- Ott, Taylor J. "Destructive Activity in an Ecological Ethics of Co-Creation." *Studia Philosophiae Christianae*, vol. 56, no. 3, UKSW, 2020, pp. 73–100, <https://doi.org/10.21697/spch.2020.56.3.04>.
- Smith, Sarah. "The Ecology of Chaos in Paradise Lost." *Milton Studies*, vol. 59, Penn State UP, 2018, pp. 31–55, <https://doi.org/10.5325/miltonstudies.59.2018.0031>.
- The Bible*. Authorized King James Version, edited by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford UP, 1997.
- Virgil*. The Georgics of Virgil. United States, J.R. Osgood, trans. Waters Preston H., 1881.