

Milton and the Terrorist Mind

Speech by Dr Simon Haines to the Lowy Institute for International Policy

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I realize that it's rather unusual to ask an international policy audience to think about the topic of the terrorist mind in terms not even of psychology but of poetry. What interest can poetry really have in such a context? What I want to talk about today is certain contours of the mind as they appear in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: not just any old poem, that is, but the great epic poem of our language, our *Aeneid*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*. Actually Milton's initial plan was to write his work on the fall of man as a tragedy, not an epic. But political life intervened, against his will, and he spent 15 years, many of them in a senior diplomatic post, writing treatises, pamphlets and propaganda in support of the Republic, the Revolution and liberal political principles (opposing censorship, the divorce laws, bishops), working for the advent of the great society in God's chosen nation, as he saw it. He didn't return to poetry and his great theme until he was 50 years old and blind, having buried two wives and his only son, living once again under an understandably unsympathetic restored monarchy, having seen the collapse of all he had argued, hoped and sacrificed for. The impersonal stance of drama wasn't right under these circumstances. Milton needed a prophetic voice, something of the propagandist, if his 10,000-line masterpiece ("no man ever wished it longer", said Dr Johnson) was truly going to "justify the ways of God to man" and assert His Providence. Because of course Milton now had to justify his own life, especially to himself. This poem had to make the truth, not just announce it.

And it had to be the whole truth. The real-time narrative opens with the great council of the fallen angels in Hell; tracks their leader, Satan, on his journey out of Hell, its gates guarded by Sin and Death, and across the cosmos to Eden; and then shows us the temptation, fall and expulsion from Eden of Eve and Adam, the short-lived triumph of Satan and the rebels and the arrival of Sin and Death in the world. But there are long flashback passages, which couldn't have worked in tragedy, telling the stories of the Creation and the war in Heaven, with anticipations of the events of the Old and New Testaments, and of the second coming and the last judgment. This is the whole *moral* cosmos: and in such a world-view the whole cosmos *is* moral. This is Milton's brief history of time. And if *he's* right, *everything's* going to be all right.

So why is it wrong now? Where did it all *go* wrong? The answer has to start with Satan, no matter how crucial and interesting the motivations and psychology of Adam and Eve later. His actions, prompted by his motivations, set in motion this whole enormous machinery of sin, death and damnation. He and the other fallen angels experience the greatest loss: not just of Paradise, like Adam and Eve, or of the prospect of Heaven, like damned human souls: but of the reality of Heaven itself. As God explains, one third of a perfect race, the angels, have become imperfect, and their consequent demotion has created a space in Heaven which God plans to fill by promoting into it the members of an *imperfect* race, humanity: who are nevertheless perfectible. Our salvation justifies the fall of Adam and Eve, but it must also justify a greater and prior fall: that of Satan. Why did he do what he did? To answer this question Milton must explore the Satanic mind.

The ancient Jewish and Christian traditions didn't give him much material to work with. The Hebrew word "Satan" goes back to an ancient binary (or Manichaeic) conception of the universe. It means "adversary", or more literally, "one who plots *against* another". But that's pretty much all you get in Isaiah, Genesis, the Psalms, the apocryphal books, rabbinical commentaries and so on. There's some use of the terms for pride, envy and ambition, and some mention of the wish to rise above God in importance. But this wasn't nearly enough for Milton; much of the *raison d'être* of his poem had to lie in whatever deeper or fuller motivation he could find in this stark figure. Even the Mephistopheles character from the medieval Faust story used by Marlowe was just another "adversary", and a minor one at that. But—Faust himself was a different matter. Milton in effect fused this more pitiful human figure with his demonic adversary. The result is a kind of thought-experiment, an archangel-sized scheme or blueprint of a human emotional aggregation. He did it so powerfully that many readers, following the lead of Blake and Shelley, believed him to be unconsciously in sympathy with this Faustian Satan and hostile to God, whose portrait they found repulsive. Milton "was of the Devil's party, without knowing it". Milton would have regarded this as nonsense, but it has a grain of truth, and it's been an extremely influential and popular view. Milton clearly did look within himself in trying to understand Satan's mind, while of course he could not do this with God's.

Still, the fact that this is a thought experiment or pattern of concepts rather than a dramatic human character makes it all the more useful for our purposes. The

extracts from the poem I'm going to put briefly up on the screen, just to give a taste of its language and appearance, include all the key passages about Satan's mind. We see him unyielding in his defiance (1); determined in his very despair to oppose God and be a free ruler in Hell (2); enviously and vengefully looking down on Man (3, 4, top of 5); having his moment of regret and remorse before resolving to be evil (5, 6); reacting to the original exaltation of the Messiah by God with envy and pride (7); and finally turning spitefully once again on his vulnerable victims (8).

[passages quoted are as follows: Book 1 lines 96-126, 159-191, 254-263; Book 2 lines 345-385; Book 3 lines 552-5; Book 4 lines 9-110, 358-517; Book 5 lines 603-666, 775-797, 853-864; Book 9 lines 119-178]

List of key concepts drawn from these passages:

disdain, indignity
injured merit, impairment
shame
fixedness (of will, mind)

repentance
conscience
remorse

despair (annihilation of hope)

gratitude, (in)capacity to feel

rage
malice
spite
revenge

envy
ambition

self-creation
freedom
choice
equal rights

pride

This is where the shape of Satan's mind emerges, from larger groups of concepts developed by Milton to elaborate and justify the highly compressed trio of envy, pride and ambition.

So starting at the top, "disdain", from the Latin *de-dignare*, means to de-dignify or reduce someone's worth or merit, literally to inflict *indignity*. Satan both feels disdain for others and feels disdained himself. "Impaired" is from *impeiorare*, meaning to make worse, to diminish, mar or injure, while "merit" means in Latin to earn one's share: so that "injured merit" is a diminished share. "Shame" in its ancient Germanic roots means something like exposure: being shown up or revealed as lesser than another or lesser than one was before in terms of the repute, honour or esteem in which one is held by others. We shouldn't underestimate the power of such an honour ethic even in some contemporary societies. Shame, significantly, is seen by Milton as a self-perpetuating emotion. Satan cannot repent because to reveal oneself in doing that would be to manifest precisely the diminished status which caused the shame to begin with. This vicious feedback loop results in a kind of immutability or fixedness of will: a mind permanently oriented towards or locked in by its own predicament: a mind that is its own cage.

This cage made its most famous appearance in English literature just a few years later, in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The two pilgrims find a man in an iron cage who says he cannot *repent*, literally cannot punish himself, cannot feel angry with himself, or open himself to his own chastisement. The heart is locked even to itself. The conscience can still be heard and even felt but not acted on. So it turns into the biting of remorse which must be endured but can't be cured ("remorse" means "biting"). "My heart's so hardened I cannot repent", said Marlowe's Faustus. Now in Bunyan this iron cage is called "despair"; *sperare* is to hope, and *de-sperare* is the annihilation of hope. In this condition your heart is shut. You are condemned to know how it would be to open it and yet to be prevented from doing so—by yourself. Milton explores this dreadful condition further in his brilliant analysis of gratitude, which Satan understands and yet cannot feel towards his creator. "A grateful mind/ By owing owes not, but still pays, at once indebted and discharged". He can only *feel* gratitude for being created *as* a burdensome debt, a perpetual heavy owing; but he *understands* that it should be an *act*, a positive act of payment which discharges the debt in the very moment of incurring it. The self-conscious inability to *be* not just *feel* grateful is part of despair; if Satan could really *be* grateful, which would be a genuine liberation, he wouldn't have rebelled and wouldn't be in the iron cage.

This condition leads the mind directly into the next group of emotions. Being trapped like this means being completely enraged, as if foaming at the mouth (the Latin for rage is *rabies*). We direct such a rage at anyone we see: but above all at the disdained object, the one in favour of which we were disdained ourselves. In Satan's case this object is the human race, destined by God to occupy his rightful space in the homeland from which he is exiled. Towards them (us) he feels malice, *malitia*, the quality of having active or harmful *malus*, badness or evil; and the comparative form of *malus*, meaning "worse" or "more bad", is *peior*, which as we've seen gives us "impair". Evil in Satan is the wish to impair or disfigure others as one feels oneself impaired or disfigured. He also calls this motive "revenge" and "spite". The Latin root forms of "revenge" mean literally "speaking force back" (*re-vim-dicere*), powerfully flinging words back against someone; but by Milton's time it meant what it still does, returning harm for harm: in Satan's case harming God, who harmed him, by harming humanity. Spite is from de-spite, or *de-spicere*, meaning "look down upon with malicious intent" or intent to harm: imagine someone in ambush up a tree, or looking down at an insect before stepping on it, or looking down from an aircraft or high hill on a vulnerable target.

This is a crucial point of linkage to the original core Satanic terms. "Envy", in Latin *in-videre*, also means literally "looking maliciously in upon", like a prospective home invader peering in through a window, or in the case of the despairing man in the cage peering out through the bars, at what he wants for himself. (In-vasion or *going in upon*, *in-vadere*, is the usual next step, incidentally. First you look in, then you go in: envy, invade.) What's important here is that the cage is itself *made* of this kind of envious wanting, a desire which creates the impossibility of its own satisfaction.

Meanwhile "ambition", *ambi-ire*, as anyone who watches born politicians in action at any level will know very well, means literally "going around", circulating, seeking out others' good opinion, feeding one's pathological need not to be disdained. Being in the cage is the worst of all states for such a mind; its owner is condemned to look out at a world which his own desire to walk around in actually prevents him from walking around in. And of course the ambitious mind doesn't only want to *work* the room: it wants to be the *centre* of the room—or better still, of the whole cosmos. Satan the ungrateful one cannot bear having been created or having the Messiah set

above him; he wants to think of himself as the self-created centre of his own world. Using a political language Milton would have known well, that of the more extreme revolutionaries of the 1640s, Satan says that all angels are “equals by right”: but what he really wants is to “reign” himself, to represent himself as “choosing” Hell itself as somewhere he can rule.

This brings us to the last concept. “Pride” had since ancient times and in many languages meant splendour, magnificence, gallantry, bravery: but in its pathological deformation it had also meant an inordinate or arrogant self-esteem, an overwhelming—nowadays we might even say psychotic—preoccupation with one’s own condition, status or state of mind. The wish to be more important than God was all that Milton had been given by the tradition, but he enriched this, the worst of all Christian sins, by picturing Satan not only as the atheist (indeed an early existentialist), who refuses to accept the idea of a Creator and sees creation as the solitary achievement of itself by each being: but also as the anti-Christ, someone whose refusal to accept the Messiah as God’s preferred agent or Christ as His incarnation actually defines him at his core as both anti-Christian and anti-Jewish. It’s worth remembering, however, that the hero of Milton’s other great late poem, *Samson Agonistes*, was in effect a suicide bomber, and he was certainly neither anti-Jewish nor anti-Christian. It’s the quality of being defined at the very core of one’s being by a religious or quasi-religious fanaticism that sets the Satans and Samsons apart, not the specifics of their theology or doctrine.

So there is our concept cluster. Feeling disdain for others and *disdained* oneself; feeling impaired and shamed; feeling despair and the evacuation of hope; possessing an angry and frustrated wish to bring death to the weak, whose pleasant condition one envies, in order to revenge oneself upon the strong, their protectors, by whom one feels belittled and dispossessed; feeling an overwhelming preoccupation with one’s own condition and status; and finally possessing fanatical religious or quasi-religious sentiments as fundamental to this overall condition of mind. It does seem at least worth considering that the great epic of the English language may be founded on a careful and consistent portrait, grounded in Milton’s own experience and circumstances, including as an apologist for regicide, of what we might recognise as an extremist, terrorist pathology of an ideological or fundamentalist kind.

Now this is where I leave any pretensions to specialist knowledge behind. In fact some histories of terrorism (typically pre-9/11) have indeed attempted to link terrorist phenomena across the centuries in just these Satanic terms. First century Jewish anti-Roman groups (the original "Zealots"), certain medieval Shi-ites (the original "assassins"), 19th century anarchists and nihilists especially in Russia, 1970s neo-communist groups such as the Red Brigades or Red Army Faction, the separatist movements of Ireland, northern Spain and Sri Lanka, and Middle Eastern and Islamic groups from the Jewish Irgun just after the war to today's Hezbollah, Hamas, Al Qu'aeda, and Jemaah Islamiya: all, despite their huge national, cultural and temporal differences, could be seen as sharing some version of this pathology of despair, hatred, resentment and destruction. But recent work in political science (eg Robert Pape and others) and social psychology (Marc Sageman and others) has cast serious doubts on this Satanic model, arguing in the political science case that most terrorist acts have been carried out from quite rational, usually territorial motives, namely to expel a perceived invader from what is seen as a homeland by the systematic serial use of violence against vulnerable targets, causing publicity and fear; and from the latter or psychological point of view, that most terrorists are driven more by interpersonal bonds, within families or other social groups, than by psychologically deviant or extremist individual pathologies.

As far as the political argument is concerned, one might point out that Milton's angels were angry at being expelled from their homeland too; indeed I suspect that the very concept of a "homeland", a place from which one feels oneself to have been alienated, may itself often have become the iron cage imprisoning a terrorist's mind. As far as the social-psychological point is concerned: as with the rebel angels, the social network may often just be a larger and stronger cage, with everyone inside it co-operating to reinforce its bars. But these are only the earliest beginnings of an interesting argument one might have, putting the poetic insights in touch with the political and psychological ones.

Another kind of objection to this Satanic model of a "terrorist mind" is one I'd be much more likely to encounter amongst academic colleagues in the humanities. This is that Western minds, especially those of such contemporary Western leaders as President Bush, have in fact been predisposed by Milton himself to see terrorism this way, as a Satanic aberration, a deviant psychosis. Milton's portrait has sunk so

deeply into Christian consciousness, in which even secular western morality is grounded, that it still works as a prejudice, at a pre-judgment or unconscious level, to condition us into irrational and misinformed fears of and actions against an Islamic "other", or some other sub-set of the "forces of evil". Almost as if Milton himself were a kind of ayatollah. I suppose one thing I'd say to that is that when the Directors-General of ONA and ASIO tell us, as they have recently, that terrorist suicide attacks of the Bali and 9/11 type are probably going to be with us for some time, then maybe it might be better for our health to regard Milton as an analyst rather than a dogmatist. As someone we can really learn from about human propensities we too are subject to. Osama Bin Laden, Al Zarqawi and Abu Bakar Bashir are certainly not just "Satanic demons", and it wouldn't do any good to label them that way: but it may be that the cultures in which terrorist mind-sets if not terrorist minds are prone to flourish need injections of self-esteem, need moral and emotional antidotes to shame, despair, and anger, more than they need territory, cash or ideology. Terrorist campaigns peter out not because some set of demands has been met, or grievances addressed, but because the relative salience of those emotional contours in that culture has eroded away. How does this erosion process happen? How might damaging contours be replaced by healthy ones? How do we encourage shame and despair to turn into self-esteem?

But even Milton does have his limitations. Without Marlowe's Faustus, I suspect, we may not have had Milton's Satan at all: and even as it is his Satan isn't exactly a Macbeth or an Iago in terms of dramatic or human credibility. "Evil be thou my good", says Satan at his most defiant and grandiose. Milton constructs a cosmic and apocalyptic model of Evil with a capital "E", a model that has presumably contributed to more apocalyptic thinking in the world in general. Maybe a more salutary model is the tragic one Milton first thought of. Macbeth, for example, is called a "Hell-hound", sees life as "a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing", and ends up spurned as a "dead butcher". Iago is also called a dog and a devil, and is last seen as a tongue-tied prisoner who for all his malignance hasn't begun to fathom the depths of the great man he has destroyed. These tragic villains are in the end genuinely despicable, their small-time nihilism fully exposed. Satan's spite and destructive power are conceived in such grand *concepts*, the very thing that's made them so helpful to us today, that various people of a Romantic cast of mind mistake him for a grand *character*. Ironically enough, the portrait prompted widespread admiration

amongst writers of the French Revolution and Napoleonic generations, and became through them, especially Byron, the prototype for dozens or even hundreds of post-Romantic figures of the lonely and obsessive anti-social hero, from Childe Harold to Che Guevara. Maybe it would have been better for them to have been confronted not by the grandeur but by the banality of evil.

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