Glossing ‘Of’ & ‘man’ in the Invocation of Paradise Lost and the Gothic mode.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay

Milton’s Invocation in his Paradise Lost Book I has been much commented upon. Any reader of Paradise Lost as a complex text in twelve Books has to first reckon with the Invocation. It is in the Invocation that Milton sets out the tenor of his epic. Glossing the Invocation is needed if we are to appreciate the drama of this epic. This author had written on the “esse” of Satan in this Journal’s previous issue¹. But now it is felt that Satan cannot be understood without engaging with the tropes and the Biblical allusions within the Invocation. Here it is important to note that the art of glossing literary texts is now extinct and yet the praxis of literature is not a task for the impatient². Etymologies matter as also the painful unearthing of allusions. Paradise Lost is an Early Modern text and demands Renaissance-humanist readings. Such readings are to be found in the glosses to the Invocation in standard editions like the one edited by Orgel and Goldberg. Students the world over rely on Scott Elledge’s Norton’s authoritative edition of Paradise Lost. The Norton edition of Paradise Lost is a sufficient introduction to the critical corpus that a neophyte approaching Paradise Lost needs to know. The following annotations of the first four words of the Invocation consciously avoids repeating the glosses already found in either Elledge’s or of Orgel and Goldberg’s editions of Paradise Lost. Through glossing the Invocation afresh

¹ See “The Esse of Milton's Satan in Paradise Lost.” published in the previous issue of this journal.

² See Robert Browning’s A Grammarian’s Funeral for the art of literary scholarship. Browning fluctuates between the serious and the farcical. This is the truth about all meticulous literary and linguistic scholarship.
this author wants to simultaneously revive the old literary tradition of glossing and emphasise the Indianness of the *act* of glossing. All the Major *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* have been glossed by stalwarts like Adi Shankaracharya; Sri Ramanujacharya and nearer to our times, by the likes of Swami Gambhirananda and more simply, by Swami Nikhilananda. While the Western world can ignore the art of glossing; we Indians need to remind ourselves that glossing is a very ancient Indian tradition and thus worthy of revisiting now. So eschewing the format of the traditional essay this paper will annotate two words from the *Invocation’s* (lines 1-26 of *Paradise Lost* Book I) first few words with the emphasis mentioned above: the glosses take for granted the reader’s familiarity with Elledge’s annotations and Orgel and Goldberg’s glosses. To gloss more than two words will be beyond the scope of this Journal and the concomitant constraints of space.

**Line 1. Of man’s first disobedience …**

The Latinate structure of the sentence has been noted by previous commentators and a cursory glance at online etymology dictionaries will make explicit the ancient roots of the words “Of” and “Man” and the need to dwell on these two words will become evident once we register their etymologies:

Old English *of*, unstressed form of *æf* (prep., adv.) "away, away from," from Proto-Germanic *af* (cognates: Old Norse *af*, Old Frisian *af*, of "of," Dutch *af* "off, down," German ab "off, from, down"), from PIE *apo- "off, away" ...

Primary sense in Old English still was "away," but shifted in Middle English with use of the word to translate Latin *de*, *ex*, and especially Old French *de*, which had come to be the substitute for the genitive case. (Harper, "Online Etymology Dictionary," regarding 'of'.)
It is this ancient Franco-Latin root of “of” qua *de* situates the epic within the Gothic mode of writing. The main mode of *Paradise Lost* is the Gothic mode. The idea of the mode of *Paradise Lost* is borrowed from Leslie Fiedler who in a very different context spoke of the main mode of American literature being the Gothic mode (Fiedler 29). The use of the word “of” at the beginning of the epic by Milton squarely sets the epic as a Gothic epic. To term Milton’s style as Baroque is to water down the power of Milton’s description of Hell and his construction of Satan. Satan is the Father of all Evil, not merely Biblically but more as a force of *irrepression/refoulement* (used in the Lacanian sense) and of the Freudian *Id*. If one does not appreciate the use of the word “of” then one would later on miss the force of the epic as being purely anarchical and one which proceeds from being proto-Gothic to being a full-blown Gothic masterpiece. Even Milton’s much touted *grand style* begins with his use of the word “of” right at the beginning of the epic. Further, the etymology of the word “of” as shown differentiates this epic from all others before it as being purely written in the Gothic mode. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* are not written in the Gothic mode. The Latinate structure of the first sentence of *Paradise Lost* is of less importance than has been attributed to it. *Paradise Lost* through its use of the word “of” in the first line becomes the proto-type of contemporary horror texts. *Paradise Lost’s* when accessed today, in the late 2015, should signal to the reader that it was Milton who opened up the space for later writers of cult horror fiction like Peter Blatty’s portrayal of evil in *The Exorcist* (1971). Satan and his minions in *Paradise Lost* are much the same supernatural beings that we find in contemporary horror literature. His essays on Satan in this journal and earlier on evil in *Prabuddha Bharata* will be expanded into a book where this idea will be elaborated. See his "Prolegomenon to the Study of Evil." *Prabuddha Bharata* 118. April (2013): 278+. Print & Web. & his "The Discussion of Evil in Christianity." *Prabuddha Bharata* 118.9 (September 2013): 540-42. Print & Web. In short, without the use of the word
“of” at the beginning of *Paradise Lost* we would not have the rich corpus of horror fiction we have today.

Now for the use of the word “man”:

Old English *man, mann* "human being, person (male or female); brave man, hero; servant, vassal," from Proto-Germanic *manwaz* (cognates: Old Saxon, Swedish, Dutch, Old High German *man*, German *Mann*, Old Norse *maðr*, Danish *mand*, Gothic *manna* "man"), from PIE root *man-* (1) "man" (cognates: Sanskrit *manuh*, Avestan *manu-*, Old Church Slavonic *mozi*, Russian *muzh* "man, male").

Plural *men* (German *Männer*) shows effects of i-mutation. Sometimes connected to root *men-* "to think" … which would make the ground sense of *man* "one who has intelligence," but not all linguists accept this. Liberman, for instance, writes, "Most probably *man* 'human being' is a secularized divine name" from Mannus [Tacitus, "Germania," chap. 2], "believed to be the progenitor of the human race." … Sense of "adult male" is late (c. 1000); Old English used *wer* and *wif* to distinguish the sexes, but *wer* began to disappear late 13c. and was replaced by man. Universal sense of the word remains in *mankind* and *manslaughter*. (Harper, "Online Etymology Dictionary," regarding 'man'.)

Milton was a Christian and a Puritan at that. Yet from his acts of interpretation, we can be sure that he practised a form of hermeneutical reading of the Bible. He was not naïve to think that future readers would understand his use of the word “man” as being specifically indicative of Adam. It is our naivété to think that just because Milton will go on to write of a

---

3 He interprets the Bible throughout his huge body of works. And this much before hermeneutics became fashionable within the domain of Biblical Studies.
greater man restoring for us our freedom or the wrong done by the first man Adam (line 4 *Paradise Lost*, Book I); he does not consider that Adam is what the etymology of the word “man” quoted above indicates rather than being Adam. Literature is synecdoche and never corresponds to the literal meaning of a word, if such a monstrous error is possible! Milton’s man is not Adam by a long shot. Man here is not also all mankind; man according to Milton is the being in *the here and the now* who struggles with issues of self-actualisation --- in this specific case of ir repression in the form of disobedience. Man is the prototype of Satan for Milton could have never seen Satan but seen only man around him --- this is an inversion of the New Testament’s claim regarding us having never seen God but only our fellow wo/men. The key to understanding “man” here is to understand “man” within the context of obedience and disobedience. This “man” willingly disobeys and thus makes way for the disobedience of Satan in the epic. Satan predates man but within the final structure of the epic man prefigures Satan. Thus “Of man’s disobedience…” establishes the poem within the aforementioned Gothic mode which we can prove is the main mode of the European Renaissance. For instance, the sparkling comedies of Shakespeare are ironically (or as synecdoche) some of the best tragedies ever written. Is it not tragic that a woman has to bed with a donkey in Shakespeare’s plays where in his Forest of Arden all *beings* are denuded of agency and volition in *the here and the now*? To return to *Paradise Lost*, Adam is a sinner and sins by his disobedience. But if we take into consideration the etymology of “man”, it will become clear that man derives from the sense of being a divinity secularised (*see* the etymology quote above), and therefore is the original Gothic being who will perforce disobey all hierarchies. Also even if we fixate on “man” as used here by Milton as Adam, then too we must remember the mutations of the name in the beginning of the Bible. Within the various versions of *Genesis* in the Bible, we find a gradual shift where the name Adam transforms itself from being “a generic noun” to “a proper name”; this shift in normativity “presupposes
the drama” of later chapters in *Genesis* (Brodie 165). The drama includes incest, breaking of taboos and the annihilation of purity. Does one need to say more to prove that *Paradise Lost* is the ultimate cult horror classic and not merely the generic progenitor of cult horror literature and movies?

**Works Cited**


**Disclaimer:** This essay is made available to you free of cost for private use. Any reference to this should be cited as per current guidelines. Subhasis Chattopadhyay is a tenured Assistant
Professor in English and writes on the gothic and separately, on religion. This article has been already published in a journal.

http://tinyurl.com/ocvlz or,

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wZ4_AifTAAsf4ydG5qQUEUQD0YcAZHr8eO6HwYiHfQ/edit?usp=sharing