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## L'épreuve de Littérature- Poésie

Yann Tholoniati

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# L'ÉPREUVE DE LITTÉRATURE

## POÉSIE

par Yann Tholoniati

### A. Conseils méthodologiques

Un texte poétique a la réputation tenace d'être plus difficile qu'un extrait de pièce de théâtre, qui a lui-même tendance à être considéré comme plus difficile à étudier qu'un texte en prose. Tout lecteur de *Finnegans Wake* sera aisément convaincu qu'il n'en est rien, et que cette hiérarchie de la difficulté ne repose que sur des stéréotypes et des préjugés. Afin de tordre le cou aux idées reçues, et d'aider les candidats à la préparation des concours de recrutement aux postes d'enseignants du second degré et du supérieur, les conseils qui suivent ont pour objectif d'apporter des pistes pour explorer les textes poétiques. Mais ces sésames sont à considérer comme des passe-partout dans la mesure où bien des conseils prodigués ici peuvent être utilisés pour d'autres types de textes.

Je propose de partir du principe selon lequel tout texte engage un jeu avec le lecteur ou la lectrice. Il n'en va pas autrement du texte poétique, qui a des règles qui lui sont propres (le mètre, les rimes, par exemple). Mais les éléments de base d'un poème sont avant tout les mots, le choix des mots opéré par le poète. Les mots, et la façon dont ils sont organisés sur la page par la typographie, contiennent ce qui contribue à la production du sens du poème. Le texte poétique fait usage de toute une gamme de procédés visant à produire du sens au cours d'un échange communicationnel.

Il est possible de distinguer quatre grandes familles de poèmes. Cette distinction est bien sûr arbitraire, et bien des poèmes n'appartiennent pas exclusivement à une seule de ces familles, mais sont la somme de plusieurs tendances.

Il y a tout d'abord les poèmes qui racontent une histoire. Dans une certaine mesure, tout poème raconte une histoire, et, à ce titre, il est bon de s'interroger sur les événements qui marquent celle-ci. Comment ces événements sont-ils reliés ? Le lecteur pensera à se poser les questions concernant le lieu, la date, la manière dont ces événements se produisent, quelle est leur origine et quand, et/ou comment, ils prennent fin, le cas

échéant. La notion du suspens est primordiale : comment le poème crée-t-il un horizon d'attente chez le lecteur ? Y a-t-il des effets de surprise, des renversements de situation (péripiéties) ?

Une deuxième catégorie comprend les poèmes qui s'organisent autour d'une démonstration, d'un argumentaire. Ils commencent parfois par une question, un problème, un défi, un paradoxe... Le lecteur se demandera quelle est la situation initiale qui a fait surgir cette question, et étudiera les différentes étapes de la démonstration, les causes, les conséquences. Est-il possible de prévoir l'issue, y a-t-il, là aussi, une forme de suspens ? Et que peut-on dire des derniers vers : apportent-ils une réponse, ou bien ouvrent-ils sur une nouvelle dimension du problème ?

Le troisième ensemble regroupe les poèmes qui décrivent quelque chose – un phénomène, un paysage, un objet, une personne, etc. – qui comporte souvent une part énigmatique que le poète désire explorer.

Enfin, la dernière catégorie rassemble les poèmes qui décrivent l'évolution d'une ou de plusieurs émotions : le poète trace les flux et les reflux de cette émotion, son origine et son destin. Récit, démonstration, description, émotion, sont quatre dimensions à considérer.

Dans tous les cas, le poète joue avec le lecteur, sur ses attentes et son expérience émotionnelle et littéraire. Fréquemment, une fois lu, un poème invite à la relecture pour mieux apprécier l'entrelacs de ses péripiéties. Je rappelle qu'un poème n'appartient que rarement à une seule catégorie, et que, une fois qu'on a identifié l'une ou l'autre, il s'agit de prendre en compte ses modalités pour analyser le poème.

Au sein du poème, il y a d'autres éléments importants à prendre en considération. Tout d'abord le locuteur, appelé en anglais *speaker* ou *persona* (le mot grec qui signifie *masque*). En poésie, on n'utilise pas le terme de *narrateur*, qui est utilisé en prose, pour le roman ou la nouvelle. Le locuteur n'est pas le poète ; il est tout au plus une mise en scène (fictionnelle) de lui-même. Ceci est évident lorsque le locuteur se présente comme une femme alors que le poète est un homme, ou comme un peintre de la Renaissance (je songe à plusieurs monologues dramatiques de Robert Browning), ou comme un animal (Robert Burns fait parler un chien dans *The Two Dogs*), ou comme un ordinateur (comme dans un poème d'Edwin Morgan). Quel est le point de vue offert par ce locuteur, selon les circonstances évoquées dans le poème ?

Les répétitions (de sons, de mots, d'expressions, de phrases) ont pour but de souligner un élément essentiel du poème : quel rôle l'élément répété joue-t-il ? La répétition se produit-elle dans un contexte similaire ou dans un contexte différent, créant un effet d'ironie, par exemple ? Les effets de contraste, d'opposition, ont pour but de produire une tension entre divers éléments. L'orée et la clôture du poème, les premiers et les derniers vers, offrent parfois des effets d'écho, de miroir : se répondent-ils, ou bien fonctionnent-ils en opposition ? De plus, un poème s'organise souvent autour d'une image centrale, elle-même souvent présente dans le titre. Le titre fonctionne comme un clé interprétative et sa nature propre est elle aussi à commenter, ainsi que son rapport au poème. Enfin, *last but not least*, le mètre et le rythme sont à prendre en considération.

### **Le mètre et le rythme**

Rappelons brièvement les faits : si les poètes français comptent les syllabes (appelées *pièdes* – il y en a douze dans un alexandrin, par exemple), les poètes de langue anglaise

comptent ou plutôt écoutent un certain nombre de syllabes accentuées dans chaque vers. Ils font alterner ces syllabes accentuées, ces accents toniques (*stress, stressed syllable, beat*) avec une ou deux (le plus souvent) syllabes moins accentuées (*unstressed syllable, offbeat, slack*). Le vers anglais le plus classique est le vers blanc (utilisé par Milton dans *Paradise Lost*), *blank verse*, qui désigne une série de pentamètres iambiques non rimés. Comme l'indique ce nom, c'est un vers qui comporte cinq mesures (pentamètre), chaque mesure étant un iambe, autrement dit une séquence de deux syllabes dont la deuxième est plus accentuée que la première. Le lecteur fera bien de se familiariser avec des termes tels que *iamb, trochee, pyrrhic, spondee, anapest, dactyl*, bref, le vocabulaire technique propre au mètre poétique. Ces termes, et les phénomènes qu'ils recouvrent, ne sont pas des éléments subalternes ; au contraire, c'est par eux et grâce à eux que le poète produit un grand nombre d'effets de surprise que le lecteur est encouragé à reconnaître et à apprécier.

Un autre élément important consiste à distinguer le mètre du rythme. Le mètre désigne la mesure : en français, la mesure du mètre est le nombre de syllabes (douze syllabes pour un alexandrin) ; en anglais, la mesure est le nombre de syllabes accentuées. Un même mètre (une même mesure) recèle une grande quantité de rythmes différents. Un exemple français sera sans doute parlant. Prenons le célèbre poème de Victor Hugo tiré des *Contemplations* (1856), et intitulé par son incipit *Demain, dès l'aube*. Le premier quatrain est le suivant :

*Demain, dès l'aube, à l'heure où blanchit la campagne,  
Je partirai. Vois-tu, je sais que tu m'attends.  
J'irai par la forêt, j'irai par la montagne.  
Je ne puis demeurer loin de toi plus longtemps.*

Comme chacun peut s'en assurer, chaque vers est un alexandrin, mais à chaque vers, les pieds sont regroupés d'une façon différente. Par le jeu de la ponctuation, le premier vers est structuré en 2 + 2 (avec un léger débordement du fait de la liaison) + 8 ; le deuxième a pour structure : 4 + 2 + 6 ; le troisième, 6 + 6 (avec un fort effet de parallélisme dû à la répétition) ; et le dernier, 12. Autrement dit, dans chaque vers, le mètre est toujours le même (douze pieds), mais il reçoit, dans chaque vers, une réalisation rythmique différente. Ajoutons qu'au-delà de la découpe strictement mathématique, il y a toute une gamme de nuances possibles, comme c'est le cas de la ponctuation forte du point après *partirai*, qui indique un quasi-contre-rejet et met le sujet associé au verbe inchoatif en évidence, à la différence de la fluidité des virgules (vers 1 et 3) qui accompagnent les blocs syntaxiques, ou du vers 4, qui recèle deux sous-parties : d'abord le sujet et le verbe, puis les compléments associant la distance temporelle et spatiale qui s'organise autour de l'être aimé et absent.

Le rythme dépend de quatre grands paramètres : le mètre, l'organisation des rimes, la forme du poème (avec ou sans strophes, et de quelle ampleur), et enfin la typographie (qui comprend la ponctuation, dont il est nécessaire de pouvoir nommer les différents signes). Si l'on prend le cas des rimes, on peut interpréter l'usage de rimes croisées (ABAB) dans l'extrait de *Demain, dès l'aube* comme indiquant, par leur alternance, l'alternance des pas du locuteur qui s'est mis en marche, de façon déterminée, en direction de son but. Si un poème contient quatorze vers, il y a fort à parier qu'il s'agit d'un sonnet,

qui contient une structure interne spécifique. Les signes de ponctuation, ralentissant ou accélérant le tempo, créant des effets de surprise ou de révélation, sont naturellement à commenter. Enfin, la typographie désigne la mise en scène du texte, avec des majuscules, de l'italique, l'isolement visuel de certains passages, etc. Cette mise en page peut aussi appeler des commentaires.

Il est évident que la possession, et l'usage, d'un vocabulaire technique aussi exact que précis, en anglais, sont nécessaires au cours de cet exercice (*a sonnet, a stanza, couplet rhymes, a hyphen ≠ a dash*, etc.). De même qu'un médecin se doit de pouvoir nommer les parties du corps humain, ou un botaniste de savoir désigner les plantes qu'il étudie, le poéticien doit avoir à sa disposition un vocabulaire adapté lui permettant de décrire avec précision les phénomènes littéraires sous son analyse. Car c'est l'analyse qui est visée en effet, et non la paraphrase, ni une liste de figures de style. Chaque figure de style identifiée sert un effet particulier : quel est-il et comment entre-t-il en interaction avec les autres éléments du texte ? Enfin, il arrive qu'on hésite devant telle ou telle interprétation : il est alors recommandé de formuler une hypothèse, une suggestion, la plus étayée possible au moyen des éléments qui ont été repérés dans le texte. Il est aussi possible d'indiquer que différents sens ne s'excluent pas, mais fonctionnent en parallèle.

### **Bibliographie**

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## H. Commentaire dirigé : *Paradise Lost*, de John Milton

Consigne : *Comment on the following extract, paying attention to Milton's imaginative scope.*

- [...] *Him the Almighty Power*  
 45 *Hurled headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky,  
 With hideous ruin and combustion, down  
 To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
 In adamantine chains and penal fire,  
 Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms.*  
 50 *Nine times the space that measures day and night  
 To mortal men, he, with his horrid crew,  
 Lay vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf,  
 Confounded, though immortal. But his doom  
 Reserved him to more wrath; for now the thought*  
 55 *Both of lost happiness and lasting pain  
 Torments him: round he throws his baleful eyes,  
 That witnessed huge affliction and dismay,  
 Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate.  
 At once, as far as Angels ken, he views*  
 60 *The dismal situation waste and wild.  
 A dungeon horrible, on all sides round,  
 As one great furnace flamed; yet from those flames  
 No light; but rather darkness visible  
 Served only to discover sights of woe,*  
 65 *Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
 And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
 That comes to all, but torture without end  
 Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed  
 With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed.*  
 70 *Such place Eternal Justice has prepared  
 For those rebellious; here their prison ordained  
 In utter darkness, and their portion set,  
 As far removed from God and light of Heaven  
 As from the centre thrice to th' utmost pole.*  
 75 *Oh how unlike the place from whence they fell!  
 There the companions of his fall, o'erwhelmed  
 With floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire,  
 He soon discerns; and, weltering by his side,  
 One next himself in power, and next in crime,*  
 80 *Long after known in Palestine, and named  
 Beelzebub. To whom th' Arch-Enemy,  
 And thence in Heaven called Satan, with bold words  
 Breaking the horrid silence, thus began: —*

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), livre I, vers 44-83.

### **Annexe n° 1 : William Blake on John Milton**

*Note: The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.*

William Blake, *The Voice of the Devil in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, Mary Lynn Johnson et John E. Grant, New York, Norton, 1979, p. 88.

### **Annexe n° 2 : An extract from a lecture by Samuel Coleridge**

*The language and versification of the Paradise Lost are peculiar in being so much more necessarily correspondent to each than those in any other poem or poet. The connexion of the sentences and the position of the words are exquisitely artificial; but the position is rather according to the logic of passion or universal logic, than to the logic of grammar. Milton attempted to make the English language obey the logic of passion as perfectly as the Greek and Latin. Hence the occasional harshness in the construction.*

*Sublimity is the pre-eminent characteristic of the Paradise Lost. [...] There is a greatness arising from images of effort and daring, and also from those of moral endurance; in Milton both are united. The fallen angels are human passions, invested with a dramatic reality.*

Samuel Coleridge, *Lecture X in Lectures of 1818, Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, Thomas Middleton Raysor, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1936, p. 157-165.

### Annexe n° 3 : Some personal notes by Virginia Woolf

« Though I am not the only person in Sussex who reads Milton, I mean to write down my impressions of *Paradise Lost* while I am about it. "Impressions" fairly well describes the sort of thing left in my mind. I have left many riddles unread. I have slipped on too easily to taste the full flavour. However, I see, & agree to some extent in believing, that this full flavour is the reward of highest scholarship. I am struck by the extreme difference between this poem & any other. It lies, I think, in the sublime aloofness & impersonality of the emotions... The substance of Milton is all made of wonderful, beautiful, & masterly descriptions of angels, bodies, battles, flights, dwelling places. He deals in horror & immensity & squalor & sublimity, but never in the passions of the human heart. Has any great poem ever let in so little light upon one's own joys & sorrows? [...] What poetry! [...] The inexpressible fineness of the style, in which shade after shade is perceptible, would alone keep one gazing into it, long after the surface business in progress has been despatched. Deep down one catches still further combinations, rejections, felicities, & masteries. Moreover, though there is nothing like *Lady Macbeth's* terror or *Hamlet's* cry, no pity or sympathy or intuition, the figures are majestic; in them is summed up much of what men thought of our place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion. »

Virginia Woolf, *Diary entry for Tuesday, Sept. 10, 1918*, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, volume II : 1912-1918, Andrew McNellie, London, The Hogarth Press, 1987, p. 5.

#### I. Proposition de corrigé

Superheroes existed long before the invention of cinema and comic books. Hercules, in Greek mythology, is a case in point. The first book of *Paradise Lost* (composed by John Milton and first published in 1667) pits Satan against God and describes the fall of the devil. Lines 44-55 deal with his physical fall, and Satan then discovers the new place where he is doomed to live (or is he really?). The title of the poem has a surprising ring: although we tend to think immediately of Adam and Eve (and they will appear later on), paradise is lost first for Satan. In his rewriting of the Biblical myth, expounded in the Book of Genesis, how does Milton endeavour to make the reader grasp what is simply beyond human imagination—a mythical and infinite universe, and Hell? In the first part of this commentary, I shall analyse the physical as well as the metaphysical implications of the fall. Then I shall examine how Hell is gradually perceived by Satan. Finally, I shall study various aspects of the Miltonian imagination.

#### *A physical and metaphysical fall*

The dismembered syntax of the first sentence is particularly expressive and imitative of the movement of the physical fall of Satan. The tremendous energy of the blow dealt by God to Satan can almost be felt through the mighty alliterations. The alliteration in [h] ("him", "hurled", "headlong") resembles the panting sound made by the powerful strugglers who are out of breath because of the tremendous fight. Those in [d] and



[t] (“-ty”, “hurled”, “head-”, “-deous”, “-stion”, “down / to”, “bottom-”, “di-”, “dwell”, “adamantine”, “chain”...) produce a rattling sound, that of Satan’s body being thrashed, shaken, beaten down, thrown out of heaven in a topsy-turvy way (losing a few teeth in the bargain?). The alliterations in [f] (“flaming from”), [l] (“Almighty”, “hurled”, “-long”, “flaming”, “-less”, “dwell”...) and [m] (“-mighty”, “flaming”, “com-”, “bottom-”) are part and parcel of the special effects conjured up by Milton to convey the feeling of the after-shock and of Satan’s unconscious body flying through the ether. Satan has lost control over his body (“headlong”), and the disrupted syntax (whose ‘normal’ word order would be: “the Almighty Power hurled him, who durst defy the Omnipotent to arms, headlong flaming...”) evokes his *membra disjecta*. The concrete words “ruin” and “combustion” are the complements of the abstract word “perdition”, which is given substance by its adjective “bottomless”, “the bottomless pit” evoking Hell. “Hideous” (l. 46) is almost a hypallage, in that it may also apply to Satan’s face and body.

The energy of the fall is rendered by means of three enjambments lines 44, 46 and 47, and the first instance hinges upon the inchoative and powerful verb “hurled”, accompanied by two alliterations in [h] (“hurled headlong”) and in [f] (“flaming from”). The verb “to hurl” conveys the idea that Satan is violently thrown away, like an object. Run-on-lines, as the name indicates, tend to speed up the tempo. The phenomenon is enhanced by three spatial conjunctions, “from” and “down / to” overlapping three lines, prolonging and projecting the movement of the fall in a forward thrust, which in turn acquires further momentum on the trisyllable coinage “bottomless”. “Bottomless” is one of the rare words in this excerpt that is given two stressed syllables. Indeed, to the stress on the first syllable is added one on the suffix: this is due to the iambic pattern of the line. Having two stresses in the same word has a double effect: first, the word is underlined, and, second, the almost infinite duration of Satan’s fall is suggested. The pace of the sentence is gradually slowed down by the comma after “perdition”, the adverb “there” (associated with the verb “to dwell”) which indicates the end of the trajectory, the comma after “fire”, the relative clause whose antecedent is the remote “Him” of line 44, and the double [d] (“durst defy”) and quadruple [t] (“durst”, “-tent to”), which end the fall with the hint at a brutal landing.

Figuratively, Satan, whose presence is only signalled by one pronoun (“Him”, in the first position), faces an awesome adversary embodied in verbal entities emphasising his surplus of strength (“Almighty Power” and “Omnipotent”). Lest one should forget that this being is God, he is therefore named twice and the redundant definitions (“mighty” meaning “powerful”) indicate that he simply cannot be defeated.

The length of time Satan remains unconscious is then expressed by means of a periphrasis: “Nine times the space that measures day and night / To mortal men” (50-1). The comparison is twofold here. First Milton implicitly measures time thanks to space, as a way of disorienting the reader, as well as allowing him to grasp the limitlessness (or the vastness) of the infinite universe inhabited by God, angels and fallen angels. The second element is put into relief by the enjambment, “To mortal men”. Mankind is the standard to which all these events are measured, in so far as all they will eventually bear an impact on mankind. It is also a way of dwarfing mankind (“mortal”). As Virginia Woolf writes, Milton, when dealing in “immensity”, “[sums up] much of what men thought of our place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion”.

Another anthropomorphic element is the description of Satan’s reaction. The expression “lay vanquished” insists on his powerlessness and is paralleled by the

description of the other demons' bodies: "weltering" suggests that they are no longer able to control their bodies. They are all physically exhausted, although still potentially quite harmful. As is indicated twice (lines 53 and 59), they retain their angelic nature, remain "immortal", and still possess superpowers, for instance in terms of sight ("as far as Angels ken").

The fall also has metaphysical consequences. Right after he wakes up, Satan is full of mischievous energy, concentrated in his eyes ("baleful"). The organisation of a hierarchy, mirroring that of heaven, gradually takes place: the casting involves Beelzebub, "One next himself in power, and next in crime", and the other rebel angels, among whom Satan holds pride of place, as his central position line 51 testifies. This moment clearly stages the birth of opposed values, such as Heaven ("ethereal sky")/ Hell, God/Satan, high/low, good/evil, happiness/sorrow. The scene develops Satan's psychology as well as the description of Hell: like a shooting star (l. 45), he falls from the sky, through space, onto the ground—or rather, into an indefinite space thereafter named Hell, designed and designated as a dungeon (l. 61). The main metaphysical revelation occurs lines 70-71 ("Such place Eternal Justice has prepared / For those rebellious"), implying that God had foreseen the rebellion and that Hell had been there all the time, unbeknownst to the angels.

### ***Hell, inside and outside***

Satan is undoubtedly a striking character. First, he is associated with fire from the outset ("flaming", "fire", "combustion"). But more specifically, it can be argued that Satan is described as a tragic hero. Indeed, his character displays all the features of the tragic hero as established by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Satan shows an excess of pride; his hubris is underlined in such phrases as "obdurate pride" (l. 58), "bold" (l. 82). Although he has been severely beaten, Satan has already regained confidence and boldness, and he is ready to wage war again. His is a malevolent character, full of "steadfast hate" (l. 58). His excess of confidence has brought about his defeat: he is the one "Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms" (l. 51), and his daring is his main feature. Like a tragic hero, he triggers contradictory feelings in the reader, pity and terror. Contrary to what Woolf thinks ("there is no pity or sympathy"), the reader may feel pity as he witnesses the battle which is fated to be lost before it has started because of the discrepancy between the forces present. But he may also feel pity because Satan's first response to his new whereabouts is a feeling of nostalgia: "the thought / Both of lost happiness and lasting pain / Torments him" (ll. 55-6). Psychological sadness and physiological distress are closely connected through the paronyms ("lost" / "last"). The reader witnesses Satan's "huge affliction and dismay" (l. 57). It is worth noting that if outwardly Satan boasts confidently, inwardly he is racked by inner torments: the character is not as simple as it might seem at first sight.

An obvious parallelism can be made between Satan's expulsion from paradise and the forthcoming fall of Adam and Eve. The idea of fate and tragedy looms large in the word "doom" (l. 53). As a consequence, the character of Satan elicits "mixed" (l. 58) feelings in the reader, feelings of pity and terror which are part and parcel of the elements of classical tragedy. One may therefore disagree with Woolf when she writes that Milton never explores "the passions of the human heart" and when she asks: "Has any great poem ever let in so little light upon one's own joys & sorrows?" Milton's Satan,

in Book 1 and particularly in Book 4, seems dauntingly human in his despair and in his pride. Contrary to Woolf, Coleridge discerns the pre-eminence of “the logic of passion” over “the logic of grammar” (the first sentence being a case in point).

The fact that Satan is given his name by people in Heaven (l. 82) suggests that he is already surrounded by a rumour that is both magical and notorious. The expression “Arch-Enemy” (l. 81) is a kind of nickname, the morphology of which (the juxtaposition of two words) mirrors the periphrasis referring to God (“the Almighty Power”, [l. 44]). Although the word “God” is only mentioned once, line 73, its ubiquitous and powerful presence is felt in various places, and God’s majesty is underlined by the use of capital letters: “Omnipotent”, “Angels”, “Eternal Justice”, “Heaven” (ll. 73 and 82). As Coleridge says, “Sublimity is the pre-eminent characteristic of the Paradise Lost. [...] There is a greatness arising from images of effort and daring”. This is also a feature of Hell, which is described as a new country.

What makes the discovery of Hell dramatic is that it is revealed through the eyes of Satan (ll. 55 and 59). Numerous run-on-lines (55, 59, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71...) convey the idea that Satan’s gaze is roaming in bewilderment as he discovers the “horrid” place. The word “horrid”, used twice in the excerpt, provides a connection between the new residents (l. 51) and the place (l. 83). The term literally bristles with meanings: rough, fearful, even execrable, and it suggests that an immediate harmony is struck between them. It has a different etymology from “horrible” (l. 61), which means to shudder, and, although the two adjectives sound alike, their difference and complementarity were well perceived in Milton’s time.

Several running metaphors go to show the nature of Hell. In chronological order, the first one appears line 48 (“adamantine chains and penal fire”) and is that of a prison, further delineated by a subtle chiasmus: in the middle of the line stand an adjective and a noun denoting imprisonment (“chains”, “penal”), whereas outside stand an adjective and a noun referring to two elements which cannot be easily defeated: the extreme solidity of the diamond (“adamantine”) and the elusive heat of fire. The chiasmic structure tends to induce a feeling of imprisonment. “Adamantine” has two stresses, and here the effect might be described as that of hammering down the chain (a sound-effect emphasized by the dental [d] and [t]).

Hell is described as a dungeon—the architectural position of the room being relevant to the imagined position of Hell in relation to Heaven, in people’s minds. It is an enclosed space, as the word “round”, repeated twice (ll. 56 and 61) suggests: Hell is Satan’s jailhouse cell, with “chains” (l. 48). It is at the same time a closed and vast space: Satan’s piercing gaze as an angel (“as far as angels ken” [l. 59]) stretches very far (“throws”), only to discover a wasteland. The description of Hell works on two levels, figurative and literal, or in other terms, connotative and denotative. For instance, the adjective “dismal” means “gloomy” and “depressing”; in similar fashion, “waste” means “barren” and “unfortunate”, and “wild” means “untamed” and suggests “anxiety” as well (as in the phrase “wild with fears”). Under the physical meanings of the terms lurks a moral description of the place.

A maritime metaphor is conveyed by the words “crew” (l. 51), “gulf” (l. 52), “deluge” (l. 69, evocative of one of God’s plagues), “floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire” (l. 77), “weltering” (l. 78). The fall is an odd Odyssey, casting a crew of demons tossed by a storm of fire. The fallen angels are condemned never to find a stable landing place, especially since Hell is a paradoxical location, combining opposite elements such

as water and fire ("floods... of... fire" [l. 77]). This new country seems to be poles apart from Heaven, as is suggested by the words "utter" (l. 72) and "utmost" (l. 74), which meant "outer" and "outmost" in Milton's time. The long-winded phrase "As far removed from God and light of Heaven / As from the centre thrice to th'utmost pole" indicates that Hell is situated on the margin of the known metaphysical universe.

As has been shown in the case of Satan (l. 55), physical condition and mental state are closely linked in Hell. Hell is compared to a "penal" settlement (l. 48), where torture is common practice ("torture without end / Still urges" [l. 67]), mostly by burning, as the insistence on the omnipresence of fire indicates. The aimless energy of the absolute construction of the verb "urges", as the place is self-enclosed, proves particularly distressing. Psychological torments consist in depriving the inmates of hope (l. 66). Again, a connection to mankind is made, by means of the unobtrusive "that comes to all" (l. 67), revealed after a run-on-line, but on which there is a punctuational pause.

What is particularly sublime in this description of an imagined place is the use of a notable oxymoron, line 63: "Darkness visible" is a powerful phrase, in its adjective/noun inversion. The contradiction between "darkness", which suggests blindness, and "visible", denoting sight, challenges the human imagination, which is led by Milton's own.

### ***Miltonian imagination***

Milton was an extraordinary man, who not only had an intimate knowledge of the Classics and the Bible, but also of European literature and culture, as he had travelled on the continent on several occasions. In this excerpt, all these elements are subtly interwoven into the plot so as to add a sense of the sublime to the situation.

The first obvious thread of the intertextual network is Biblical: Milton rewrites and expands an episode taken from the Book of Genesis describing the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden, the creation of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the garden. Milton develops Satan's psychology and motives to such an extent that it may appear almost blasphemous to give this character such importance; hence Blake's wry note about Milton saying that "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it".

A second thread of textual allusions comes from Greek and Roman mythology. The fight between God and Satan, between the angels and the fallen angels, recalls the tremendous combats opposing Zeus and the other gods from Mount Olympus to the Titans, as told in Hesiod's *Theogony*. From a similar origin are the various descriptions of Hell to be found in the *Odyssey*, when Ulysses catches a glimpse of the Elysean fields, and in *The Aeneid*, when Aeneas descends into Hell. This echo is particularly palpable as *Paradise Lost* takes up the form of the Virgilian epic in twelve books. Finally, another literary influence is probably Dante's *Inferno*, from the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. On the gate surmounting the entrance of Hell can be read the following sentence: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* (Abandon all hope, ye who enter here, [III, 9]). These mythological and literary links may be proleptically related to the rest of the poem as the names of Adam and Eve unobtrusively appear: "Adam" is contained in "Adamantine", and Eve can be read three times in "never [...] never" (l. 66), "ever" (l. 69). A further connection leads towards human history itself: Beelzebub is "Long after known in

Palastine" (l. 80). Another prominent literary element here is the epic. The fight at the beginning—a beginning that starts in medias res—is described as a challenge ("defy... to arms" [l. 49]), and the periphrases used to designate God ("Almighty Power") and Satan ("Arch-Enemy") evoke the Homeric epithets used to describe Greek and Trojan heroes in the *Iliad*, the paradigm of all epic poems. Indeed, in Woolf's phrase, the "flavour" of *Paradise Lost* is "the reward of highest scholarship".

But what is perhaps most striking in Milton's imagination is the sheer energy which radiates over all. One can find vocal energy in the cry uttered by the speaker ("Oh how unlike the place from whence they fell" [l. 75]), and in the bold stress falling on the final syllable of the adjective "visible" (l. 63). Lexical energy can be found in the selection of terms related to superlative words and ideas ("utmost", "Omnipotent"). There is also the syntactical energy of the first sentence, particularly conveyed by run-on-lines and alliterations, and which is imitative of the *agôn* (a Greek term for "clash" in classical tragedy) between the divine powers. One can add the metrical energy conveyed by the elisions: "th'ethereal" (l. 46), "th'Omnipotent" (l. 49), "th'utmost" (l. 74), "o'erwhelmed" (l. 76), "th'Arch-Enemy" (l. 81) and the extra syllable of some feminine endings, as in "Power" (l. 44) and "Heaven" (l. 73)—devices that seem to cram even more sounds within the limited measure of the lines. Finally, rhythmic energy is obtained through occasional deviations from the iambic pattern. For instance, lines 81-83, the plosives ("Beelzebub", "bold", "Breaking", "began") literally explode in the trochee initiating the last line: "Breaking the horrid silence, thus began", showing that Satan has regained his stamina.

This excerpt offers a very graphic description of Satan's fall and of Hell, with extremes and contradictions producing what Coleridge calls "dramatic reality". Hell is imagined as a complex location occupying, both in terms of space and values, a place which is diametrically opposed to that of Heaven. Milton's blank verse is as bold as it is flexible, so as to suit all his purposes. His ambivalent treatment of Satan, depicted as a tragic hero with whom the reader may feel some empathy, has remained controversial: before Adam, Satan is perceived as the first human being who suffers from the wrath of God. Milton's poetry is not a retreat from the issues of the world: not only does it oblige the reader to rethink the origins of mankind, but it also leads him or her to run the risk of being in sympathy with the forces of evil—especially with Satan, whose indomitable energy might prove contagious. Among the Romantic poets, Robert Burns and George Byron were two devotees of Milton's sublime and terrible outcast.