John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is not an allegory. Milton gives to his Adam and Eve a richness that prevents either from referring to a single discrete and namable reality. This same richness that precludes pure symbolism allows for a great range of suggested meanings and connections. The universality of great poetry is in part this very ability to point beyond itself to other ideas and other works, and to enter into a conversation with them. Thus, we must take the suggestions of great poets seriously, and follow them to the universal discussion.

It is in this spirit, then, that we can examine Adam and Eve not only as individuals or as Man and Woman, but also as elements of the soul, as parts of our thinking, knowing, and loving that exist in unity and give us life. Of course Adam and Eve are not only this, but if Milton is truly a great poet, then they are also this. We must trust that if he does not have Plato at his ear, then at least he has him in the room when he writes “justify the ways of God to men.” Milton cannot write without hearing Plato’s justice in the ordered soul, and this voice must echo with more or less reverberation in Milton’s own work. If Adam and Eve’s marriage reminds us of the workings of the soul, we can assume Milton’s active cue. His poetic suggestions are meaningful and serious, and if they lead us to reality that does not fit with our own thinking and experience, then we must either question that poetry or bring ourselves to meet it.

Adam and Eve’s marriage is the life or Paradise, and the end of the mar-

---

riage is the loss of Paradise itself. Bliss and woe depend on integrity. Similarly, the poem itself stands or falls on the strength of this central image.

Milton suggests in his language and in his argument that Adam and Eve are united unto Wisdom; in it, all their individual possibilities for beauty, grace, contemplation, and strength converge and become actual. The Wisdom that is of all things “truly fair,” is the defining feature of life in Paradise.

One may object, however, that the very passage that establishes Wisdom as that principle virtue which comprehends all others (IV.488, quoted above), also attributes it to Adam alone. If this is true, if Adam is complete alone, then what is the addition of Eve? Of what worth is Eve’s lesser (and perhaps false) beauty to Adam, if he already has Wisdom, which alone is “truly fair”? If Adam holds Wisdom without Eve, then Eve’s dowry is merely a fatal flaw, an artificial weakness Milton binds to Adam to explain his sin. Is she as indispensable in explaining union as she may seem to be in explaining the fall?

Before we can answer, we must set out more clearly what Adam and Eve point to. We see them first walking together in the garden, “Not equal, as their sex not equal seem’d; / For contemplation hee and valour formed, for softness shee and sweet attractive grace” (IV.296). Milton says later that Adam looked over Eve and “beheld / Beauty” (V.13). Milton portrays Adam as the thinker, the active seeker, the beholder, the strong. His motion is outward, to grasp and form.

Eve’s role is more passive. She receives Adam’s thought as she yields to his seeking. She is the beheld, and her excellence is her softness. Adam is not only the drive of Reason, and Eve is not only the receptiveness of beauty, but it is impossible to talk about Adam and Eve’s significance without these two ideas.

Part of the difficulty in determining which lays claim to what lies in the fact that Adam and Eve are so closely joined in the language of certain passages: Eve yields to Adam when she sees “how beauty is excell’d by manly grace and Wisdom, which alone is truly fair.”

Milton suggests unity by the grammar of the section; “manly” modifies “grace.” Eve was made for “grace” but “manly,” that belongs to Adam. Thus, Adam’s quality is grafted onto the previous description of Eve, who is made for “sweet attractive grace.” Manly grace is no longer his, but theirs, since they
are grafted together. Furthermore, “Manly grace” and “Wisdom” receive the
ambiguously singular: “which is.” Which is? Manly grace alone is truly fair?
Or Wisdom alone? Or perhaps a composite? Manly grace belongs to Eve, and
is, with Wisdom, truly fair. And to complicate matters (or perhaps to simplify
them) Reason and Beauty are married in another composite term, “truly fair.”
Milton’s language seems to suggest that both Eve and Adam have a part in
Wisdom, and that perhaps Eve submits beauty not to a wisdom that Adam
alone holds, but rather to the Wisdom that both achieve together.

Adam and Eve first appear shining with “Truth, Wisdom, Sanctitude, se-
vere and pure” (IV.293). Wisdom is something they do not hold or pursue on
their own. Indeed, Raphael warns Adam against a solitary contemplation. “So-
llicit not they thought with matters hid /… joy thou / In what [God] gives to
thee, this Paradise, / And thy fair Eve (VIII.167).” Reason is made to seek the
beauties before it, to be attracted and bound to those other senses that gather
and present beautiful images for its delight. Wisdom is not Reason alone, but
Reason intent on present beauties. Without Eve, Adam is the Mind that is just
as prone as unguided Fancy “to rove uncheck’t” (VIII.188). “Prime Wisdom,”
says Raphael, is “to know / That which before us lies in daily life” (VIII.188).

Adam’s gaze is too high unless Eve draws it downwards. His wonder be-
comes wisdom only when it is fastened on a present object. “Heaven is for thee
too high to know what passes there” (VIII.172); says Raphael. Adam is fruitless
unless he turns to “joy in….Eve” and so to be, with her, “lowly wise” (VIII.173).

Thus, it seems that Wisdom cannot belong to Adam alone. Eve is indis-
pendable. There is no Wisdom without her, and in particular, without her sub-
misson to Adam. Eve’s soft ringlets “impli’d / Subjection, required a gentle
sway, / and by her yielded, by him best received, / Yielded with coy submis-
sion, modest pride, / And sweet reluctant amorous delay (IV.307).” The excel-
ence of Eve is in yielding, and yet yielding with delay. “Nature herself, though
pure of sinful thought, / Wrought in her so, that seeing me, she turn’d [away]”
(VIII.506; This original turning away, flying to the image of herself, is a ten-
dency softened to mere “delay” under Adam’s sway. Her submission after delay
is proof of her willingness, since submission means nothing unless it is free.
Thus Adam seeks (going back to the Latin, require) more than requires. He
may not seize her except with a “gentle hand.”

And what is it for Adam to seize gently? He must always mind Eve. He must keep her in mind, and be drawn to her, as Raphael has said, but he must also mind her: guide, protect, and inform her. There must always be a balance between their individual strengths. Adam must rule without crushing, and be drawn without yielding completely. He complains to Raphael that “all higher knowledge” seems to leave him in Beauty’s presence. But Wisdom is not to blame. “Be not diffident / Of wisdom, she deserts thee not, if thou / Dismiss not her” (VIII.562), counsels Raphael, “Weigh with [Eve] thyself; / Then value” (VIII.571). The right amount of “well-managed self-esteem” will move Eve to “acknowledge [Adam] her Head; / And to realities yield all her shows” (VIII/574). Thus, balanced between two extremes, Adam minds Eve as the Beholder minds Beauty. He is drawn to her, and she submits to his gaze.

She submits to him also as a matter to form. His thoughts seek her out and form understanding, while her thoughts “find all repose” only in him (V.28). Adam is her perfection, bringing to birth the possibilities she holds. Adam calls their discourse “rational delight” (VIII.391). Eve loves this same Wisdom in which “high dispute” is solved “with conjugal caresses,” for “from his Lip / Not Words alone pleased her” (VIII.55). Adam and Eve’s union is the creation of life. Without Eve, Adam is sterile, he “interrupt[s] the sweet of life by roving from her” (VIII.184). And without Adam, Eve may be informed and beguiled by false guides, and her fruitfulness used to bear sin and death. Neither form nor matter by itself is life, but Wisdom, their union, is.

Adam’s discourse with Eve concerning her dream of temptation provides another picture of marriage within the soul:

In the Soul
Are many lesser Faculties that serve
Reason as chief; among these Fancy next
Her office holds; of all external things,
Which the five senses represent,
She forms Imaginations, Airy shapes,
Which reason joining or disjoining, frames
All what we affirm or what we deny, and call
Our knowledge or opinion. (V.100)

Fancy presents possibilities, and Reason forms them into knowledge. But, when we sleep and Reason “retires into her private cell….Oft in her absence mimic fancy wakes / to imitate her; but disjoining shapes, / Wild work produces oft, and most in dramas, / Ill matching words and deeds long past or late” (V.100). Milton very deliberately uses the same terms when he describes Adam’s separation from Eve. He is “absent” from her. There is no principle to behold and inform her. Without the union in Adam, her beautiful, sensual variety becomes wild and disparate. She prophecies her own fall in her speech to Adam: “what we by day / Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind, / One night or two with wanton growth derides / Tending to wild (IX.209). Wisdom alone can draw, support, yield and shape into life and proper growth. And without Wisdom, there is only wildness, a nightmare in an untended garden.

Eve has a dream that foreshadows reality. But the fall Eve dreams about is a dream in itself; it is the consent of mimic Fancy before Adam’s waking consent. The real Fall happens when the Soul is awake. Adam consoles Eve: “Evil into the mind of God or Man / May come and go, so unapproved and leave / No spot or blame behind: Which gives me hope / That what in sleep thou didst abhor to dream,/ Waking thou never wilt consent to do” (V.116). Yet the dream must matter, for on waking, Eve abhors to have dreamed in sleep of that consent. “In sleep,” while sleeping, she did not abhor thus to dream. She has not sinned, but Evil has left its spot on her: she sheds tears not of relief, but of remorse.

She and Adam both wake to betrayal. Evil touches them in their sleep, and leaves a mark, an “addition strange” that begins to split them down the middle (V.116). While Adam is absent, Eve is enticed. It is her nature and her excellence to yield. Imagination, Fancy will be formed by something, whether Mind wakes or sleeps. But how not fall asleep? What safeguards are there for preserving Wisdom?

Milton answers us in the morning of the Fall. Eve, touched by a dream, tells Adam to let her go: “That thou shouldst doubt my firmness … I did not
expect to hear” (IX.279). But Eve is precisely not meant to be firm. Her excellence is in yielding. There is no Wisdom, if she attempts firmness; there is no Wisdom if Adam allows her. In one moment, the two switch roles, and Adam tells Eve, “to short absence I could yield” (IX.248).

Adam argues that Eve gives him no choice. His sway is gentle. He cannot force Eve: “Thy stay, not free, absents thee more” (IX.372). But is it so determined, that when Eve is firm, Adam must yield? Then she would already be lost to him: then a dream has already robbed him of life and Wisdom.

But Adam is not without choice. All is not lost until he lets Eve out of his sight. “Her long with ardent look his Eye pursued;” His Eye pursued, but he did not (IX.357). And herein lies the abdication; Adam was made to mind Eve, not to inform and guide her, but to behold her, to keep her in his mind. Wisdom requires that he be firm in seeking; not to follow is to lose Eve forever: “Hadst thou been firm and fixt in thy dissent, / Neither had thou transgressed, nor thou with me” (X.1160). Thus Adam, awake, allows Eve to fly. This abdication presages Adam’s fall just as surely as Eve’s dream presages hers. They will be severed; Wisdom will be lost.

Thus, Adam is without help when Eve returns. All alone and without Wisdom, he follows. But to seek Eve now is to seek too late, since the union they achieved is vitiated by their separate follies. From henceforth, they will walk together, but “wandering” and “solitary.”

Milton’s suggestion is clear. Adam and Eve fall together in the loss of Wisdom. Life falls to death, and the fruit is a divided soul. For this divided soul, harmony is lost in opposition. Sterile reason alternates with rank growth of Fancy, the intellect capitulates to sensuality or disdains it, Form holds harsh sway, or it does not rule at all. So without wisdom, qualities of mind and heart walk hand in hand but are not one.