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Milton's Inward Liberty: A Reading of Christian Liberty from the Prose to Paradise Lost, by Filippo Falcone.

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Filippo Falcone. *Milton's Inward Liberty: A Reading of Christian Liberty from the Prose to Paradise Lost*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014. xvii+ 199pp. ISBN 13: 9781625641908. \$26.00 (paper).

By Samuel Smith

When this book arrived from the *Milton Quarterly* office, I nearly decided to return it with the afternoon mail after my first cursory look at it. That would have been a mistake.

My initial response flouted the old cliché: don't judge a book by its cover. The cover photo—misty woodland and mountain landscape with luminous autumn foliage, location unidentified, and the author's name in cursive font under the subtitle—had me suspecting, and expecting, something more like a devotional book than a work of scholarship. And both the author and the publisher were utterly unknown to me (Falcone is an Italian scholar—this book is his revised dissertation; Pickwick Publications turns out to be the scholarly imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, specializing in Christian scholarship, broadly defined). Then the back cover, which continues the front cover photo, features three blurbs, the first of which identifies the book as "a refreshing throwback to an era when Christian scholarship was allowed to be Christian scholarship, not a propaganda tool wielded in the service of a liberal social agenda"—this only increased my suspicion.

Fortunately my disinclination to read the book was reversed by the final blurb (from Noam Reisner), which as it turns out defies the genre by accurately assessing the book in just two sentences:

Filippo Falcone's theological study of Milton's complex spiritual investment in inward liberty is a tour de force of scholarship, insight, and simple, unassuming intelligence and wisdom. Milton studies have sorely needed, for a very long time now, a theological study of this caliber—one that is conducted with deep sympathy for Milton's overt Christian beliefs, and rightly views those beliefs as the affective key to appreciating the intellectual rigor of Milton's major poetry.

"Tour de force" perhaps exaggerates Falcone's scholarship in this book, but his work is substantial, and "simple, unassuming intelligence and wisdom" does indeed characterize his tone and approach. Describing Falcone's reading of *Paradise Lost* as one "conducted with deep sympathy for Milton's overt Christian beliefs," Reisner identifies a reading *with* the grain of Milton's apparent spiritual and theological commitments, and implies that Falcone offers a reading *against* the grain of much of our most celebrated current Milton scholarship.

The cogency of Falcone's analysis of Milton's prose and *Paradise Lost* derives primarily from his sharp focus on Milton's foundational understanding of liberty as an inward spiritual reality effected by faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross: "A single act of grace, the cross signified the substitutionary provision of righteousness for man, with the transfer of the believer from a condition of slavery to self-seeking compulsion to the freedom of love-informed adult sonship" (11). This makes the regenerate life of obedient conduct possible: the liberated "son" becomes free to live virtuously, motivated by love of God, neighbor, truth, and justice. (Although Falcone does not offer a reading of *Paradise Regained*, he implicitly understands that poem to offer an example of what the regenerate life looks like, as the

“son” who believes in the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ receives grace sufficient to live as obediently as the Son who overcomes temptation in the wilderness.) Whoever has faith in the one man whom Milton repeatedly calls “our Savior” is released from the bondage of a fallen compulsion to serve the self. Such a one is restored to right reason and the guidance of charity. All external freedoms—political, domestic, ecclesiastical—require, and follow from, the internal freedom restored by grace: “Grace not only restores man to his original freedom by doing away with the source of enslavement, but it grants even greater freedom by according the status of God’s adult son to the believer” (30). This is Falcone’s thesis, and for the most part he successfully demonstrates that this theological principle serves as the primary driver for the narrative of *Paradise Lost*. And he contextualizes this argument by briefly delineating how Milton’s prose tracts repeatedly foreground this principle in the context of both the magisterial Reformers and the radical reformers with whom Milton is more closely aligned (most notably Roger Williams, General Baptists, and Quakers).

Taking his cue from Milton’s epic, Falcone begins his analysis of *Paradise Lost* with a chapter on Satan, showing how that character presents the antithesis of a genuine Christian liberty: self-enslavement to the ego. While Satan can escape an external prison such as hell, his perpetual choosing to serve his own interests above that of any other (or Other) constructs an inward prison from which he cannot escape. Satan’s rejection of grace, and the gratitude such grace solicits, deprives him of the freedom that would prevent his tragedy—a tragedy that marks the nature of his ambivalence:

. . . we should not ask ourselves whether Satan is good or evil only to conclude that he is caught in a tension between the two, nor should we ask ourselves whether he stands for absolute liberty against conventional order or for merely disruptive antinomianism. We should ask ourselves whether or not Satan is free. Satan is not free. As such, his character is not positive or negative, but tragic. . . . The tragedy rests in his failure to choose true liberty (inward filial fellowship with God) over self. It rests in the surrender of free reason to enslaving self-seeking affections.

(97)

This inward enslavement to self renders Satan incapable of love, and indeed he shows no evidence whatsoever of love toward any other character. Instead, he is ruled by hate. This intentionally reductionist reading of Satan’s character and role in *Paradise Lost* finds strong support in Milton’s text and provides the necessary foil for the representation of genuine liberty in Adam and Eve.

The experience of Adam and Eve—their trajectory from God-given freedom to self-enslavement and then to God-restored freedom—takes up the final (and longest) chapter of Falcone’s book. For anyone instructed in a Reformed tradition’s reading of St. Paul’s letters—I recall the theology of liberty from enslavement to sin provided by grace through faith (Eph. 2.8-10) preached by my father, an Evangelical pastor who would have been very much at home as a General Baptist—Falcone’s account will register familiarly. Since Milton’s major heterodoxies (an Arian Son, an *ex deo* creation) do not impinge significantly on this part of Milton’s narrative, Falcone’s reading provides us with the most likely “with the grain” understanding of Books 9-12 of *Paradise Lost*. His reading of the separation scene between Adam and Eve will

particularly interest Milton scholars, as this is where he most clearly differentiates his reading of Milton's Christian liberty as inward freedom from the compelling antinomian reading of this scene by Joan Bennett (*Reviving Liberty* [1989]). For Falcone, the separation scene initiates Eve's journey toward self-enslavement to her own ego—indeed, makes possible her vulnerability to the sophistry of Satan's temptation. When Eve worships the interdicted tree after tasting the fruit, and believes the tree to have freed her from her ignorance and lower status, “[h]er idolatry is idolatry of self and her slavery is, like Satan's, slavery to self” (141). God's provision of hope for redemption—the promised seed—responds to Eve's (and Adam's) tragedy with a grace “greater than all [her] sin”:

[Milton] has made every possible effort in books 9–11 to depict Eve's desire to know more than she could and should take as morally detestable and the fall with its consequences as absolutely tragic. The quality of grace, however, is such that it can improve that which God by his nature could not make any better when he called “Light out of darkness” (473) [sic]. The quality of grace can make Adam, and the new earth with him, happier in the end as it frees a now complete but enslaved man from the destitution his first disobedience has brought upon him and puts him in an immensely deeper relationship with God (as infinitely deeper is the expression of divine grace). (163)

This, then, is Milton's primary understanding of liberty: the freedom from sin and slavery to the self that God's grace provides to the faithful believer in God's goodness and promises. This is what makes possible the regenerate life of obedient “filial fellowship” modeled by the Son in *Paradise Regained*. And Filippo Falcone's unpretentious account of that liberty—“with deep sympathy for Milton's overt Christian beliefs”—is both compelling and refreshing.

My one caveat for readers of *Milton's Inward Liberty*: moments when Falcone's English reminds his reader that this is not his native tongue. Fortunately, most of these moments occur in the ten-page introduction (my partner asks, “Where were the publisher's editors?”). Some of these involve idioms, which are of course the most common lexicographical hazards for learners of other languages, but some slips are malaprops. The result is occasionally Dogberry-esque, as in this moment when “exposition” substitutes for “exposure”: “It [Satan's hatred] puts an end to the sorrow and laceration which the renewing exposition to the sun has produced, by repressing conscience” (102). Fortunately, such foibles are very few after the introduction, and for the most part Falcone's prose reads with a straightforward clarity that rewards a reader's time and effort. Readers might actually wish to begin with the opening chapter, forgoing the introduction, which briefly positions Falcone's study with predecessors on this theme, especially Benjamin Myers and Joan Bennett.

Filippo Falcone's commitment to understanding Milton on his own terms, with respect to Milton's indisputably devout Christian faith and the ways that faith shapes and informs his grand epic, results in a book that I will recommend to my students as a worthy introduction both to Milton's Christian faith and to the primary theological—even spiritual—stakes presented in the narrative of *Paradise Lost*. And I recommend *Milton's Inward Liberty* to the community of Milton scholars as a superb “refresher” course on the nature of that faith and the ways in which it informs and shapes the most crucial moments in Milton's epic.

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