

## Predestination and freedom in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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### Abstract

John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) offers a highly creative seventeenth-century reconstruction of the doctrine of predestination, a reconstruction which both anticipates modern theological developments and sheds important light on the history of predestinarian thought. Moving beyond the framework of post-Reformation controversies, the poem emphasises both the freedom and the universality of electing grace, and the eternally decisive role of human freedom in salvation. The poem erases the distinction between an eternal election of some human beings and an eternal rejection of others, portraying reprobation instead as the temporal self-condemnation of those who wilfully reject their own election and so exclude themselves from salvation. While election is grounded in the gracious will of God, reprobation is thus grounded in the fluid sphere of human decision. Highlighting this sphere of human decision, the poem depicts the freedom of human beings to actualise the future as itself the object of divine predestination. While presenting its own unique vision of predestination, *Paradise Lost* thus moves towards the influential and distinctively modern formulations of later thinkers like Schleiermacher and Barth.

Modern attempts to reformulate the idea of divine predestination continue to engage critically and constructively with the predestinarian theologies of the post-Reformation era.<sup>1</sup> But modern theologians have almost entirely neglected one of the seventeenth century's most striking and creative accounts of predestination: namely, the depiction of predestination in John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667).<sup>2</sup> The poem's third book presents a heavenly dialogue between God the Father and his Son, with the two divine protagonists discussing the fall of humanity and the plan of salvation. In this

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Anthony Hassall and Justin Ireland for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> All citations of *Paradise Lost* are from *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952–55). Citations of Milton's prose are from *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), hereafter cited as CPW; and from *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank A. Patterson et al., 18 vols in 21 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–38), hereafter cited as CM.

theologically rich scene, Milton presents a thoroughgoing reconstruction of the traditional post-Reformation doctrine of predestination, a reconstruction which emphasises both the freedom and the universality of electing grace. Milton radically undermines the traditional idea of double predestination, by denying the existence of any divine decree of reprobation, and by affirming instead that reprobation is a temporal and provisional act of the human will, by which some human beings – in spite of their election – freely choose and actualise their own condemnation. This account of predestination in *Paradise Lost* consistently accentuates the decisive role of human freedom, even to the extent of depicting creaturely freedom itself as the ultimate object of God's gracious decree.

### Universal election

The entire heavenly dialogue in the third book of *Paradise Lost* may be viewed as a dramatic portrayal of predestination. The world has just been created, and God the Father exercises his foreknowledge, bending 'his eye' towards earth in order 'to view' both 'His own works and their works' (3.58–9). He looks upon 'Our two first Parents', who are enjoying the 'blissful solitude' of their 'happie Garden', and reaping the 'immortal fruits of joy and love' (3.64–9). Already this punning omen of 'fruits' hints at God's foresight of the fall. Foreseeing Satan's strategy to visit earth and to attempt the destruction of Adam and Eve, God tells his Son:

Man will heark'n to his glozing lyes,  
And easily transgress the sole Command,  
Sole pledge of his obedience: So will fall  
Hee and his faithless Progenie. (3.93–6)

Having foreseen the fall, the Father immediately declares his gracious intent to restore humanity: 'Man . . . shall find Grace' (3.131). And reflecting the Father's will and character, the Son shines as a visible expression of the grace of God:

Beyond compare the Son of God was seen  
Most glorious, in him all his Father shon  
Substantially exprest, and in his face  
Divine compassion visibly appeerd,  
Love without end, and without measure Grace. (3.138–42)

Praising the Father's 'gracious' promise 'that Man should find Grace' (3.144–5), the Son himself pleads with the Father for the salvation of humanity,

described as God's 'youngest Son' and his 'lov'd' creature (3.151). The Father replies that the Son has perfectly expressed his own predestined plan:

O Son, in whom my Soul hath chief delight,  
Son of my bosom, Son who art alone  
My Word, my wisdom, and effectual might,  
All hast thou spok'n as my thoughts are, all  
As my Eternal purpose hath decreed. (3.168–72)

The entire scene so far is, then, a depiction of the 'Eternal purpose' which God has 'decreed'. Before human beings have any need of salvation, before they have fallen, God has already planned their salvation. This is the essential point of the idea of predestination as it was understood in post-Reformation theology: the grace of salvation is not an afterthought, but a gift of God which precedes even the need for salvation. The heavenly colloquy in *Paradise Lost* especially highlights the gracious character of God's decree for humanity. God has eternally purposed to turn towards humanity, his 'creature late so lov'd' (3.151), in grace. From the outset, predestination in the poem is thus an act of God's grace.

The gracious character of predestination is vividly expressed when the Father proceeds to explain in detail his predestined plan:

Some I have chosen of peculiar grace  
Elect above the rest; so is my will:  
The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warn'd  
Thir sinful state, and to appease betimes  
Th' incens'd Deitie, while offerd Grace  
Invites; for I will clear thir senses dark,  
What may suffice, and soft'n stonie hearts  
To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.  
To prayer, repentance, and obedience due,  
Though but endeavor'd with sincere intent,  
Mine care shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.  
And I will place within them as a guide  
My Umpire Conscience, whom if they will hear,  
Light after light well us'd they shall attain,  
And to the end persisting, safe arrive. (3.183–97)

This is, theologically, a remarkable passage. Most importantly, it emphasises the sheer universality of grace. When the Father says that 'Some' are 'Elect above the rest', he may appear to be asserting the common post-Reformation distinction between election and reprobation. Both Reformed orthodox and

Arminian theologians agreed in affirming a notion of double predestination (*praedestinatio gemina*),<sup>3</sup> according to which God has eternally divided the human race into the elect on the one hand and the reprobate on the other.<sup>4</sup> The definition of William Ames is typical: 'There are two kinds of predestination, election and reprobation'.<sup>5</sup> In such a distinction between election and reprobation, the grace of God is restricted to a certain number of human beings, while the greater proportion of humanity is excluded from grace. This position probably lies behind John Bunyan's stark observation that only 'one of a thousand . . . Men' and 'for Women, one of ten thousand' are saved.<sup>6</sup>

In *Paradise Lost*, however, the Father's reference to certain individuals as 'Elect above the rest' cannot be regarded as a statement of double predestination.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, as Boyd Berry remarks, when the Father says that some are 'Elect above the rest', he is asserting 'that God extends election to all men', but that '[s]ome . . . are more elect than others'.<sup>8</sup> All human beings are eternally

<sup>3</sup> Thus the supralapsarian theologian William Twisse, *Riches of Gods love unto the vessells of mercy, consistent with his absolute hatred or reprobation of the vessells of wrath*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1653), vol. 2, p. 67, takes pleasure in observing that all Arminians affirm not only election but also reprobation.

<sup>4</sup> The most influential Reformed accounts of double predestination are John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 3.21–24 Theodore Beza, *Tabula praedestinationis* (Geneva, 1555); and William Perkins, *A golden chaine: or, a description of theologie* (London, 1591).

<sup>5</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. and trans. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), 1.25.17. Reformed orthodox theologians often argued that election cannot exist without reprobation: see for example Pierre du Moulin, *The anatomy of Arminianisme* (London, 1620), p. 83: 'Of . . . predestination there are two parts; the one is election, the other is reprobation, whereof the first doth necessarily lay downe the second: For, as often as some are chosen out of many, the rest are necessarily reprobated'. In the eighteenth century, this view was summed up by the Anglican Calvinist Augustus Toplady, *The Church of England vindicated from the charge of Arminianism* (London, 1769), p. 93: 'Election, without Reprobation, cannot stand: it must have the other leg, or it will tumble down'.

<sup>6</sup> John Bunyan, *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, ed. Roger Sharrock, 13 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–94), vol. 9, p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> The notion of double predestination has been detected in this passage by Maurice Kelley, 'The Theological Dogma of *Paradise Lost*, III, 173–202', *PMLA* 52 (1937), pp. 75–9. Kelley views the 'elect' as referring to generally elected believers, and 'the rest' simply as the reprobate unbelievers. In such an interpretation, God's gracious election is relegated to just two lines of the speech, with the following 18 lines speaking of 'the rest', i.e. the unbelievers. In this reading the whole passage's emphasis on divine grace is thus undermined.

<sup>8</sup> Boyd M. Berry, *Process of Speech: Puritan Religious Writing and Paradise Lost* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 255.

elected for salvation, but some individuals are 'Elect above the rest'. The universality of election is indicated by the way in which God describes 'the rest': they hear his 'call' to salvation (3.185); they are 'invite[d]' by 'offerd Grace' (3.187–8); their minds are enlightened and their hearts softened (3.188–90); they are brought by grace 'To prayer, repentance and obedience due' (3.191); they receive 'Light after light' to lead them to salvation (3.196); and if they follow this light and endure to the end, they will 'safe arrive' in the kingdom of God (3.197). Saving grace is thus clearly predestined for all human beings alike. The Son echoes this theology of universal grace when, responding to the Father, he describes grace as 'The speediest of thy winged messengers', which 'visit[s] all thy creatures', and comes 'to all' humanity (3.229–31).

The theological significance of this depiction of universal election can hardly be overstated. In resisting the division of predestination into election and reprobation, *Paradise Lost's* theology is sharply discontinuous with all the major post-Reformation theological traditions. The seventeenth-century predestinarian controversies among Reformed orthodox, Arminian and Amyraldian theologians centred on the question of the grounds of God's decision to elect some and reject others; but all such theologians shared the assumption that predestination formally consists of both a decree to elect and a decree to reject.<sup>9</sup> According to Arminius, for instance, scripture teaches that election 'has Reprobation as its opposite';<sup>10</sup> while a Reformed writer like William Perkins speaks of predestination 'either to salvation or condemnation'.<sup>11</sup> Exploring the contours of the controversy between Reformed orthodoxy and Arminianism, the Arminian theologian John Goodwin notes that both parties agree that there is 'both a Decree of Election, and a Decree also of Reprobation', both decrees being eternal and 'absolutely immutable'.<sup>12</sup> In departing from the assumption that predestination must formally be twofold, *Paradise Lost's* theology moves beyond the conceptual framework of post-Reformation predestinarian theology, offering a universalised vision of God's gracious election.

<sup>9</sup> Thus as Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 15, notes, even the hypothetical universalism of Amyraldism never claimed 'that nonelect individuals might actually believe'.

<sup>10</sup> Jacobus Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986), vol. 2, p. 226.

<sup>11</sup> *The workes of that famous and worthie minister of Christ, in the Universitie of Cambridge, M. W. Perkins*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1612–19), vol. 1, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> John Goodwin, *The agreement and distance of brethren* (London, 1652), p. 1.

In thus affirming the universality of election, *Paradise Lost* anticipates the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who would later criticise the line of thought that 'if everything is to be neat and logical, we must admit a foreordination by which some are predestined to damnation, as others to blessedness',<sup>13</sup> and who argued instead for a 'single divine foreordination to blessedness' which encompasses the entire human race.<sup>14</sup> For Schleiermacher, if 'the universality of redemption' is taken seriously, then election to salvation must also be understood 'quite universally'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in the twentieth century Karl Barth has argued that 'there is for man only . . . a predestination to [God's] kingdom and to blessedness and life'.<sup>16</sup> In such reformulations of predestinarian theology, the decree of predestination is seen to be wholly and radically a decree of grace. In the same way, the graciousness of predestination is radically asserted in *Paradise Lost*, such that the deepest intention of the Protestant idea of predestination is realised. This is one of the most significant and most strikingly 'modern' features of the poem's theology of predestination.

But in view of *Paradise Lost*'s account of the universality of God's gracious election, what is to be made of the poem's reference to certain individuals being more elect than others, 'Elect above the rest' (3.184)?<sup>17</sup> In the first place, as Dennis Danielson suggests, this may simply be a reference to the notion that certain individuals are chosen to perform special tasks in God's kingdom.<sup>18</sup> Such a view of special election was affirmed in Arminian theology, which distinguished between the election of individuals 'to perform some particular service' and the election of individuals 'to be . . . heirs of eternal life'.<sup>19</sup> Moïse Amyraut, too, writes that 'when God calls out some particular persons on some great and eminent employments . . . he

<sup>13</sup> F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 549.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 548–9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 560.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–77), II/2, pp. 172–3.

<sup>17</sup> On this complex feature of the poem's theology, see especially G. D. Hamilton, 'Milton's Defensive God: A Reappraisal', *Studies in Philology* 69 (1972), pp. 97–8; Berry, *Process of Speech*, pp. 254–6; Dennis R. Danielson, *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 82–5; and Stephen M. Fallon, "'Elect Above the Rest": Theology as Self-Representation in Milton', in *Milton and Heresy*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 93–116.

<sup>18</sup> Danielson, *Milton's Good God*, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> H. O. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1940–43), vol. 2, pp. 339–40, summarising the traditional Arminian position.

frequently confers [on them] more sensible influences of his grace and Spirit'; such influences of grace, he says, differ from the 'ordinary methods of the divine Spirit'.<sup>20</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, the specially elected individuals may likewise simply be those who are elected to 'great and eminent employments'; indeed, Stephen Fallon has suggested that the poem's account of special election may reflect Milton's own self-understanding as an individual specially singled out by God.<sup>21</sup>

Alternatively, the description of some as 'Elect above the rest' may refer to the differing degrees of grace (*gradus gratiae*) which God bestows on different people. Such a notion of degrees of grace was by no means restricted to Reformed orthodox theology in the post-Reformation era.<sup>22</sup> According to Arminius, God 'does not equally effect the conversion and salvation of all', even though he 'seriously will[s] the conversion and salvation of all';<sup>23</sup> and similarly the leading Arminian theologian Simon Episcopius speaks of 'a very great disparity of Grace according . . . to the most free dispensation of the divine will'.<sup>24</sup> In the same way, Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* affirms that God 'has not distributed grace equally' to all people.<sup>25</sup> According to the *De Doctrina*, God 'bestows grace on all, and if not equally upon each, at least sufficient to enable everyone to attain knowledge of the truth and salvation'.<sup>26</sup> *Paradise Lost*'s description of some people as 'Elect above the rest' seems similarly to refer to the differing degrees of grace which God freely bestows on different individuals. Such a concept of degrees of grace clearly does not undermine the universality or sufficiency of grace. All people are elected by grace, but some are 'super-elect'.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Moïse Amyraut, *A treatise concerning religions, in refutation of the opinion which accounts all indifferent* (London, 1660), p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Fallon, 'Elect Above the Rest', pp. 93–116.

<sup>22</sup> For Reformed orthodox examples, see William Day, *Man's destruction, prov'd to be of himself: in which, the Antinomian and Arminian errors are confuted* (London, 1713), p. 16; and du Moulin, *The anatomy of Arminianisme*, p. 83. The idea of degrees of grace was occasionally linked explicitly to bourgeois sentiments. See for example Henry Whiston, *A short treatise of the great worth and best kind of nobility* (London, 1661), p. 46: 'the Divine grace and blessing, though not tyed to any, doth most usually fall in some special manner upon those Families whose Ancestors have done worthily', so that 'Birth and Breeding' concur with 'special blessings from above'.

<sup>23</sup> Arminius, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 442.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Episcopius, *The confession or declaration of the ministers or pastors which in the United Provinces are called Remonstrants, concerning the chief points of Christian religion* (London, 1676), p. 207.

<sup>25</sup> CPW vol. 6, p. 192.

<sup>26</sup> CPW vol. 6, p. 192.

<sup>27</sup> Thus Berry, *Process of Speech*, 256, and Danielson, *Milton's Good God*, p. 83.

In this way the theology of predestination in *Paradise Lost* affirms not only the universality of grace, but also the freedom of God to distinguish between his elected creatures and to be more gracious to some than to others. The super-election of some people in distinction from others thus does not qualify the sheer graciousness of God to all humanity. Rather, it accentuates the gracious character of God's election, by offering an illustration of 'Grace in her greatest super-abundance'.<sup>28</sup>

### Reprobation

Notwithstanding this emphasis on the universality of electing grace, in *Paradise Lost* God the Father also adopts the theological language of reprobation, and affirms that some human beings will ultimately perish:

This my long sufferance and my day of Grace  
They who neglect and scorn, shall never taste;  
But hard be hard'nd, blind be blinded more,  
That they may stumble on, and deeper fall;  
And none but such from mercy I exclude. (3.198–202)

In spite of the fact that all people are elected by grace, this election does not negate human freedom. Individuals retain the power to reject the grace of God, to 'neglect and scorn' their own election, and in this way to choose their own reprobation. Here *Paradise Lost*'s theology anticipates Karl Barth's emphasis on the possibility of rejecting God's election. For Barth, each person possesses not only the 'promise' of election, but also the 'threat' of reprobation;<sup>29</sup> and following Barth, Otto Weber has spoken of 'the "impossible possibility" of human rejection of God's election',<sup>30</sup> and has argued that condemnation comes not by God's decision, but by 'resist[ing] God's decision'.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, in *Paradise Lost*, the fact that the wilfully 'hard' and 'blind' become increasingly 'hard'nd' and 'blinded' is due not to any reprobating divine agency, but to their own obstinate denial and rejection of God's gracious election.

The language of the 'blinding' and 'hardening' of sinners derives from scripture, and was consistently used in post-Reformation accounts of reprobation. Most Reformed orthodox writers defined the divine hardening of sinners as God's 'permission' (*permissio*), in which he simply 'passes

<sup>28</sup> This expression is used in a different connection by John Goodwin, *The banner of justification displayed* (London, 1659), p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 321.

<sup>30</sup> Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell L. Guder, 2 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981–83), vol. 1, p. 486.

<sup>31</sup> Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 478.

over' the reprobate, leaving them to their own devices.<sup>32</sup> Other Reformed theologians, however, remained closer to Calvin, who had denied the distinction between divine will and divine permission,<sup>33</sup> and had attributed the 'blinding' and 'hardening' of the reprobate to the immediate will of God.<sup>34</sup> William Perkins thus asserts that 'God is not onely a bare permissive agent in an evill worke, but a powerfull effectour of the same'.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Arminian theologians sought to place the full responsibility for 'blinding' and 'hardening' on the wilful disobedience of the sinners themselves. According to Episcopius, for instance, the wilfully rebellious are 'blind[ed]' and 'harden[ed]' only when God delivers them 'unto their own corrupt desires', so that they are really self-blinded and self-hardened.<sup>36</sup> And John Goodwin writes that 'God never *hardneth* any man', but he withdraws his prevenient grace from those 'who first voluntarily *harden* themselves, and are *obstinately* disobedient'.<sup>37</sup> Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* adopts a similar Arminian interpretation, emphasising the sufficiency and universality of grace: 'God, to show the glory of his long-suffering and justice, excludes no man from the way of repentance and eternal salvation, unless that man has continued to reject and despise the offer of grace, and of grace sufficient for salvation, until it is too late.'<sup>38</sup>

In the same way, in *Paradise Lost* Milton's account of the blinding and hardening of those who reject grace is grounded in the poet's profound conviction of both the universality of election and the freedom of human beings to determine their own futures. The decisiveness of the human will is especially highlighted by the contrasting wordplay between 'cleer' and 'soft'n' on the one hand (3.188–9), and 'hard'nd' and 'blinded' on the other (3.200). God is the subject of the former verbs – 'I will cleer thir senses . . . and soft'n stonie hearts' – so that the illumining of the mind and the softening of the heart, which make salvation possible, are attributed solely to divine grace. But in contrast, the subjects of 'hard'nd' and 'blinded'

<sup>32</sup> See for example Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Geneva, 1617), 4.10; and Thomas Watson, *A body of practical divinity* (London, 1692), p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, trans. John King, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1847), vol. 1, p. 144; and *Institutes*, 3.23.8.

<sup>34</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.1: 'hardening is not less under the immediate hand of God than mercy'.

<sup>35</sup> Perkins, *Workes*, vol. 1, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Episcopius, *The confession or declaration*, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> John Goodwin, *An exposition of the ninth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans* (London, 1653), p. 214; on the withdrawal of prevenient grace, see p. 217: 'God never withdraws that preventing or exciting grace, which is given unto every man, from any man, untill the man himself by voluntariness of sinning provoketh him to it'.

<sup>38</sup> CPW vol. 6, p. 194.

are simply the 'hard' and the 'blind': 'But hard be hard'nd, blind be blinded more'. Divine action is thus grammatically excluded from this account of reprobation. The blinding of the mind and the hardening of the heart are solely the work of the human agents who choose and thereby actualise their own reprobation. God's grace is predestined for and bestowed on all people. But the individual always remains free to reject grace and so to perish.

Even in this context, then, where *Paradise Lost* speaks of the possibility of condemnation, its real emphasis is on the freely offered grace of God. Indeed, the whole heavenly dialogue in Book 3 is not even peripherally concerned with condemnation, but only with a positive statement of the way in which 'Man should find Grace' (3.145). Even when the Father makes passing reference to the condemnation of some human beings, the subject-matter of his speech is still 'my day of Grace' (3.198). Most importantly, the emphasis here is on the inclusiveness and universality of grace. Even the line 'And none but such from mercy I exclude' (3.202) is a statement of the inclusiveness of mercy. No one is excluded from mercy, except those who wilfully refuse to be included, and thus exclude themselves. Their exclusion rests solely on their own act, and not on any divine decree.

In *Paradise Lost*, reprobation is therefore not an act of the divine will, but an act of the human will. It is not, as in Reformed orthodox theology, an eternal decree which statically fixes the fate of some human beings, but it is rather a temporal decision made by human beings, and as such it can never be a once-for-all, irreversible decision. Even those 'hard'nd' and 'blinded' individuals, who 'stumble on, and deeper fall', are never in principle beyond the possibility of salvation<sup>39</sup> – as Milton says in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, reprobation can always be 'rescinded by repentance' (*reprobationem resipiscentia rescindi*).<sup>40</sup> Certain people are among the reprobate only to the extent that they persist in their stubborn self-reprobation, and in the rejection of God's electing grace. Once again, *Paradise Lost* here anticipates Schleiermacher's influential reformulation of the idea of predestination. In Schleiermacher's theology, the reprobate are understood simply as those who 'at any particular moment' are 'not yet to be regarded as chosen'.<sup>41</sup> In this conception, reprobation is taken down from a pretemporal realm and is

<sup>39</sup> Such a position is flatly rejected by Perkins, *Workes*, vol. 1, p. 99: 'both the election and reprobation of God stand immutable, so that neither the Elect can become reprobates, nor the reprobates elect; and consequently neither these [can] be saved, nor they condemned'.

<sup>40</sup> CM vol. 14, pp. 144–5.

<sup>41</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, p. 548. Similarly, see Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon et al., 3 vols (London: Lutterworth, 1949–62), vol. 1, p. 330: the 'temporary rejection' of certain people is rescinded 'as soon as they repent'.

instead grounded in the concrete sphere of human decision and history.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, according to Barth 'there is no election which cannot be followed by rejection', and 'no rejection which cannot be followed by election'; predestination is thus not 'a rigid and static law', but rather 'an act which occurs in the very midst of time'.<sup>43</sup> So also, in *Paradise Lost* the self-reprobaton of certain individuals is a process which takes place in history, and which in principle always remains open to the possibility of the triumph of grace. Edward Wagenknecht has thus rightly remarked that although *Paradise Lost* does not advocate universal salvation, the poem's theology 'obviously trie[s] to make it as difficult as possible to be damned'.<sup>44</sup> As those who have been eternally elected by God, all the 'hard'nd' and 'blinded' remain potentially among those who will, 'to the end persisting, safe arrive' (3.197). In Barth's words, there remains always 'the possibility of transition' from life as 'a rejected man' to life as 'an elect man'.<sup>45</sup>

*Paradise Lost's* account of temporal and dynamic reprobation thus offers a powerful critique of the Reformed orthodox notion of a 'fixed number' of elect and reprobate individuals.<sup>46</sup> Calvin had written: 'God, by an eternal decree, fixed the number of those whom he is pleased to embrace in love, and [of those] on whom he is pleased to display his wrath';<sup>47</sup> while for Lucas Trelactius, '[t]he number of the Elect, and Reprobates . . . is certaine'.<sup>48</sup> According to the Westminster Confession, all those who are 'predestinated unto everlasting life' and 'foreordained to everlasting death' are 'particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so

<sup>42</sup> According to Wolhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991–98), vol. 3, p. 450, this development of 'a historical reference to human history for the thought of election' constitutes 'one of the most important and lasting achievements of Schleiermacher'. And Pannenberg's own treatment of election has given special prominence to the historicity of election.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, pp. 185–7.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *The Personality of Milton* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 141. On the speech under consideration (3.183–202), see also the penetrating observation of Berry, *Process of Speech*, p. 255: 'The last five lines make it clear that not all men make the right choices and progress, yet in a sense the impact of all that precedes these lines suggests . . . that all will safely arrive'.

<sup>45</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 322.

<sup>46</sup> In the twentieth century, Karl Barth forcefully repudiated the Reformed orthodox concept of a 'fixed number'. See *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 453–6; and *Church Dogmatics* II/2, pp. 421–3.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.17.

<sup>48</sup> Lucas Trelcatius, *A briefe institution of the common places of sacred divinitie* (London, 1610), p. 97.

certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished'.<sup>49</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, in contrast, God the Father denies the possibility of any such 'certain and definite number' by locating reprobation in the fluid and temporal sphere of human choice. He thus negates the dark idea that a 'fixed number' of reprobate individuals can only dread but not escape their certain condemnation. According to *Paradise Lost*, because there is no such 'fixed number', every person is potentially savable. So dynamic an approach to reprobation removes all numerical restrictions from grace, and highlights the universality of the plan of salvation – its *de jure* if not *de facto* universalism. Here *Paradise Lost* also anticipates the universal emphasis in the theology of Emil Brunner, who writes: 'Whoever excludes himself [from grace], is excluded; he who does not allow himself to be included, is not included. But he who allows himself to be included, he who believes, is "elect".'<sup>50</sup> In the same way, according to *Paradise Lost* all human beings are among the elect, but remain free to reject their own election and so to exclude themselves from the grace of God.

### Predestined freedom

I have been arguing that the theology of predestination in *Paradise Lost* is characterised both by an emphasis on the universality of grace and by a corresponding emphasis on the decisive role of human freedom. But at certain points, the poem's portrayal of predestination presses human freedom into the foreground in a still more radical and creative way. During the heavenly dialogue in Book 3, the Father says of humanity:

for so  
I formd them free, and free they must remain,  
Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change  
Thir nature, and revoke the high Decree  
Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordaind  
Thir freedom: they themselves ordaind thir fall. (3.123–8)

In describing the divine 'decree' as 'Eternal' and 'Unchangeable', the God of *Paradise Lost* uses language typical of both Reformed orthodox and Arminian theologians.<sup>51</sup> But while in post-Reformation theology the 'eternal and

<sup>49</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.3–4, in *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, 3 vols (New York: Harper, 1919), vol. 3, pp. 608–9.

<sup>50</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 320; original emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> For an example of this terminology in Reformed orthodox theology, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992–97), 4.3.3. For an Arminian example, see the

unchangeable decree' refers to God's election of human beings to salvation, in *Paradise Lost* the Father refers to an eternal and unchangeable decree of human freedom. This freedom is the focus of the eternal, decreeing will of God. Human freedom is 'form'd' by God, and constituted by a 'high Decree'. Its reality is grounded in an eternal, divine decision. In short, the Father makes human freedom, rather than human salvation, the object of predestination (*obiectum praedestinationis*).<sup>52</sup> As the object of the divine decree, human freedom is thus elevated to a status of eternal significance. It is depicted as the highest concern of the eternal will of God.

Further, while this freedom has been 'ordain'd' by God, according to *Paradise Lost* the human beings thus constituted as free agents 'themselves ordain'd thir fall'. The term 'ordained' was a commonplace of post-Reformation predestinarian discourse; but in a striking appropriation of this term, the Father shifts its reference from a divine to a human context. According to Reformed orthodoxy, the fall had been predetermined by the God who 'unchangeably ordain[s] whatsoever comes to pass'.<sup>53</sup> But according to the God of *Paradise Lost*, the fall has not been divinely ordained, but rather 'ordain'd' by the freedom of human beings.<sup>54</sup>

Earlier in the same speech, the theological term 'decree' is similarly taken from its usual context in predestinarian theology and appropriated as a description of human freedom:

As if Predestination over-rul'd  
Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree  
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed  
Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,  
Foreknowledge had no influence on thir fault,  
Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown. (3.114–19)

By the seventeenth century, the concept of an absolute decree (*decretum absolutum*) was widely associated with the Reformed orthodox view of

Arminian Articles, 1, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, p. 545, which speak of 'Deus aeterno et immutabili decreto'.

<sup>52</sup> In post-Reformation discourse, the term 'object of predestination' was used especially in the controversy between the infra- and supralapsarian parties within Reformed orthodoxy. See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), pp. 157–62.

<sup>53</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.1, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, p. 308. For Calvin's uncompromising statement on the foreordination of the fall, see *Institutes*, 3.23.7.

<sup>54</sup> Hamilton, 'Milton's Defensive God', 94–5, thus notes that in this passage of *Paradise Lost* God 'is skillfully using high Calvinist language to deny high Calvinist conclusions'.

predestination.<sup>55</sup> The Father's words here thus stand in continuity with anti-Calvinist polemic by asserting that no such 'absolute Decree' has compromised the freedom of Adam and Eve.<sup>56</sup> Rather, the only decree that has any bearing on the fall is that of Adam and Eve themselves: they 'decreed' their own revolt from God. Here any notion of a divine decree is deemed to be irrelevant to the fall, and the theological concept of 'decree' is shifted from the abstract realm of eternal mysteries to the concrete realm of human action and decision. Using the same terminology of 'decree', Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* also offers such a reformulation of predestinarian theology, when it argues that the reprobation of the disobedient 'lies not so much in the divine will, as in the obstinacy of their own minds; nor is it the decree of God, but rather of the reprobate themselves'.<sup>57</sup> According to the *De Doctrina*, the only 'decree' of reprobation is the decree of the human will. In this conception, it is not God who stands behind history with an all-determining 'absolute decree'. Rather, human freedom itself has the power to decree and to render the future certain.

According to *Paradise Lost*, God's endowment of human beings with radical freedom and autonomy is, even from the divine standpoint, unchangeable. Adam and Eve 'must remain' free, or else God himself 'must change/Thir nature' (3.125–6). Here the inviolable integrity of human freedom is closely connected to the immutability of God's own character: the enjambement – 'I else must change/Thir nature' – implicitly suggests that changes in either divine or human nature are equally inconceivable. The integrity and autonomy of human nature are such that God himself, having decreed and created human freedom, cannot compromise or alter it. With this freedom, this creaturely autonomy *vis-à-vis* God, human beings have 'decreed/Thir own revolt', 'ordaind thir fall', and predestined their own future.

God's remark that the fall would have been no less 'certain' if it had been 'unforeknown' may thus be taken to mean that, far from exercising any positive influence on the future, divine foreknowledge can only observe the 'certain' outcome of the human 'decree'. The same priority of human action over divine foreknowledge is suggested when God claims that Adam and Eve trespass 'without least impulse or shadow of Fate,/Or aught by mee immutable foreseen' (3.120–1). God's foresight is not logically prior to the

<sup>55</sup> For use of the term by Reformed orthodox theologians, see for example Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae*, 4.6, and Turretin, *Institutes*, 4.3.2.

<sup>56</sup> For examples of Arminian polemic against the concept of *decretum absolutum*, see [Anon.], *An antidote against some principal errors of the predestinarians* (London, 1696), p. 11, and Richard Burthogge, *Christianity a revealed mystery* (London, 1702), p. 41.

<sup>57</sup> CM vol. 14, pp. 154–5.

fall.<sup>58</sup> The event of the fall, in so far as it is an event of human freedom, possesses a real autonomy which stands apart even from divine knowledge. Adam and Eve decree their fall and, as a result, God foresees the fall. Strictly speaking, then, the fall itself takes place ‘without’ foreknowledge, ‘without’ any shadow of divine influence. Adam and Eve are thus truly ‘Authors to themselves in all’ (3.122). They are characterised by a staggering volitional autonomy which reaches back, as it were, even to the depths of eternity.

This account of foreknowledge (*praescientia*) stands in continuity with the theory of middle knowledge (*scientia media*) expounded by the Roman Catholic theologian Luis de Molina.<sup>59</sup> Seeking to uphold the liberty of human choice, Molina affirmed that between God’s knowledge of the possible on the one hand and the necessary on the other there lies a middle knowledge of those events which are brought about by the freedom of creatures. Such events are not determined by the divine will or foreknowledge, but only by the freedom of human agents; God foreknows such events because they will happen, not because he has made them happen.<sup>60</sup> Molina’s theory was at the centre of extensive controversy in the seventeenth century.<sup>61</sup> While Reformed orthodoxy rejected middle knowledge because it made the divine knowledge ‘uncertain and dependent on the Creature’,<sup>62</sup> Arminian theology appropriated Molinism in metaphysical support of its view of predestination and grace.<sup>63</sup> Not all Arminians, however, were comfortable attributing this kind of causal independence to human agents; Thomas Goad, for instance, anathematised the notion that events come to pass by ‘Casuality’, that is, ‘ex

<sup>58</sup> Similarly, see Arminius, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 368: ‘neither Prediction nor any Prescience induces a necessity of any thing that is afterwards to be (*futurae*); since they are posterior in nature and order to the thing that is future. For a thing does not come to pass because it has been foreknown or foretold; but it is foreknown and foretold because it is yet to come to pass’.

<sup>59</sup> Molina’s major work, first published in 1588, is *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione*, ed. Johann Rabeneck (Onia: Collegium Maximum Societatis Jesu, 1953).

<sup>60</sup> On middle knowledge, see William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents: Aristotle to Suárez* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), pp. 169–206, and Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), vol. 3, pp. 417–32.

<sup>61</sup> See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 419–20.

<sup>62</sup> Edward Leigh, *A system or body of divinity* (London, 1662), 2.7.

<sup>63</sup> On Arminius’ appropriation of middle knowledge, see especially Eef Dekker, ‘Was Arminius a Molinist?’, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 (1996), pp. 337–52, and Richard A. Muller, ‘Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice: Arminius’s Gambit and the Reformed Response’, in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, 2 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 251–78.

improviso, beside the fore-thought'.<sup>64</sup> Goad's polemical description of middle knowledge serves as a useful explication of *Paradise Lost*. In the poem, the acts of human beings come about 'beside the fore-thought', independently of the divine knowledge and will. Indeed, in *Paradise Lost* the Father goes still further when he denies that human actions are 'by mee immutable foreseen' (3.121). Here the poem's theology even leans towards Socinianism, which used the theory of middle knowledge to deny that God possesses a full and certain knowledge of the future.<sup>65</sup> According to *Paradise Lost*, human freedom operates independently of the divine will to so great an extent that the divine knowledge of the future cannot even be described as 'immutable'. God's knowledge is subject to and influenced by the free actions of those creatures to whom he has granted freedom.

In *Paradise Lost*, the freedom of Adam and Eve is thus a freedom which God himself has decreed, so that at the deepest level the freely predestining grace of God retains its primacy. The freedom of human beings is a created and bestowed freedom. Its ground is in the will of the God who has graciously 'ordaind/Thir freedom' (3.127–8). In this way, God ordains and affirms the reality and the decisiveness of human choice.

## Conclusion

According to *Paradise Lost*, then, God has elected all people to participate in the grace of salvation. But God has also predestined the freedom of all human beings, leaving them free to accept or to reject their own election. In continuity with Arminian theology, *Paradise Lost* thus depicts the free will of human beings as ultimately the deciding factor in salvation. But the poem's universalism of electing grace far exceeds the universalistic features of both the Arminian and the Amyraldian theologies of the seventeenth century. While these traditions had carried over from Reformed orthodoxy the concept of an eternal distinction in God's decree between election and reprobation, in *Paradise Lost* this distinction is radically undermined, so that election is made fully universal, and reprobation is redefined as the temporal decision of those human beings who wilfully reject the grace of God. Reprobation is, in other words, historically rather than eternally conditioned – it is determined by the human will, not by the will of God. In this way,

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Goad, *Stimulus orthodoxus, sive Goadus redivivus: A disputation partly theological, partly metaphysical* (London, 1661), p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), p. 284, also suggests that this passage of *Paradise Lost* is close to Socinianism in denying the certainty of God's knowledge of the free acts of creatures. On the Socinian view of limited foreknowledge, see Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 424–30.

Milton portrays the election of all people as a divinely appointed actuality, and their reprobation as a self-appointed, mutable possibility. This theology of predestination invests the whole plan of salvation with a more profound emphasis on universal grace than Arminianism or Amyraldism had been able to achieve with their respective concepts of foreseen faith (*praevisa fides*) and hypothetical universalism (*l'universalisme hypothétique*) – concepts which had, in principle, done little to challenge the Reformed orthodox notion of an eternal decree that immutably fixes the condemnation of a certain number of human beings.

Alongside the universality of grace, at the heart of *Paradise Lost*'s theology of predestination stands the 'high mystery'<sup>66</sup> of the free human will, a will which decrees the future and authors its own fate. The poem's theology of predestination consistently presses the decisiveness of human freedom into the foreground, and views the human will as possessing, by the grace of God, an autonomy which allows it even to decree and to ordain its own future.

With this creative reconstruction of the traditional idea of predestination, Milton moves beyond the entire framework of post-Reformation predestinarian controversy, and presses towards a more historical, more universal and more anthropologically oriented vision of God's gracious election.

<sup>66</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.8, in Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, vol. 3, p. 610. Here of course the 'high mystery' refers to God's secret decree.