

Milton's Poetic Inspiration in *Paradise Lost*

Se Keun Park

Dept. of General Education

<Abstract>

Milton's poetic inspiration is based on his firm Christian faith, so that it has the origin in the Holy Spirit who is a person of the Godhead. His inspiration, therefore, comes from the Holy Spirit rather than from the reasonings of the intellect or his own imagination, apart from the Greck Muse. There is the transition of his life from the physical eyes to the spiritual ones in his necessity of the inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Loss of all his property and blindness rendered more acute the sight of spiritual eyes.

He calls his inspiring power, the Holy Spirit, by the four various names according to the offices of the Holy Spirit; Heavenly Musc, Holy or Celestial Light, Urania, and Celestial Patroness. And these four names are connected with the types of Milton's inspiration. The function of Milton's inspiring power is to illumine and instruct his spiritual darkness, to dictate his verses to him, and to communicate with him. And the Holy Spirit as his inspiring power is so intimate with him and works within him concretely and practically as a real person.

실낙원에 나타난 밀턴의 시적영감

박 세 근
교양과정부

<요 약>

밀턴의 시적영감은 그의 독특한 기독교 신앙에 기초를 두게 되므로, 하나님의 신성의 한분이신 성령에 근원을 둔다. 그러므로 그의 영감은 그의 이성이나 상상 또는 희랍뮤즈에서 오는 것이 아니라, 성령으로부터 온다. 여기에는 그의 생애에 있어서, 육안으로부터 영안으로의 전환점에 변화가 생기는데 그 배경이 있다. 재산의 몰수와 눈이 멀게된 것은, 그의 영안을 더욱 밝혀 주게 된다.

그는 그의 영감을 불러 넣어 주는 성령을 그 성령의 하시는 일에 따라, 네 가지로 이름을 부쳤다. 즉 하늘에 계신 뮤즈, 성스러운 혹은 하늘의 빛, Urania, 그리고 하늘의 후진인 등이다. 밀턴의 영감은 성령께서 그를 영적암흑을 일깨어 주고 진리로 가르치며, 마음속에서 그의 시의 귀절을 속삭여 주며, 그와 영적교제를 하는 것으로 그의 시의 방향이 이끌어진다. 여기서 성령은 그의 가까이에서, 매우 친밀하게, 나치한 사람의 친구처럼 구체적으로 일 하신다.

I. Introduction

Inspiration, in general, might be defined as influences arousing creative activity in litera-

ture, music, and art. In the poem, especially, it is the urge that sets a poet to work. This kind of inspiration is the poetic inspiration. There have been two theories of the origins of this urge. According to the first theory,

inspiration comes from outside the poet, while on the authority of the second one, it comes from within a poet. Alex Preminger points out the fact that the data on which this first concept is based comes from literature and anthropology, while the data for the second from psychology.⁽¹⁾

Shakespeare in his sonnet 38 takes pride in his Muse in the poetic creativity. But the most significant and serious expression of the idea of inspiration in English poetry of the 17th century is found in Milton's invocation in Book I III VII and X of *Paradise Lost*. In case of Milton, his inspiration belongs to the first theory. Milton's inspiration comes from outside human beings, so to speak, from God. Therefore his Muse is the divine one who is thought to come from God and visit him. Milton's inspiration comes from the Christian God, for his belief is based on Christianity. Milton shows us the fact that God as the inspiring power manifests Himself in the third person of God—the Holy Spirit which is the Spirit of God. He, in his invocation, calls upon the help of the Holy Spirit for composing the poem. It suggests that he is inspired by the Holy Spirit. We should find out the reason why Milton needed and longed for the instruction of the Holy Spirit to write *Paradise Lost*.

When Milton lost eyesight as well as all his property, he had nothing and nobody to rely on in this world at all. His physical blindness is being compensated by spiritual vision. When his eyes aimed at the world, he had no opportunity to open spiritual eyes widely and did not feel the urgent need. But he became freed from the bondage of the secular world consequent on the loss of all his property and physical blindness, he felt the necessity of open spiritual eyes heartily than ever before.

The another reason for Milton's necessity of

the inspiration by the Holy Spirit is that he realized that the divine matters such as the creation of the universe, God's Providence and Will are beyond human reach.

Milton uses the various names of the Holy Spirit as the source of his inspiration according to the variety of the offices of the Holy Spirit; Heavenly Muse, Celestial(Holy) Light, Urania, and Celestial Patroness.

II. Milton's Necessity of the Holy Spirit as the Source of Milton's Inspiration

We should observe Milton's life in order to find out the reason why he needed and longed for the instruction of the Holy Spirit to write *Paradise Lost*. The life of Milton falls conveniently into three divisions. There is a period of youthful education and apprenticeship, which culminates in the writing of *Lycidas* (1637) and Milton's foreign travels (1638-39). There is a period of prose and controversy (1640-60), when all his verses were occasional, and when his major preoccupations were political and social; and finally, there are the last fourteen years of his life, when he returned to literature, a mature and embittered *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*(1671). I focus my attention on the second and the third period of Milton's life for my argument. In the second period, he devoted his life to political and social activities. It seems that his mind at that time was occupied with more secular passion and ambition than with sacred devotion and wishfulness. Through his antiprelatical tract, we can see that Milton was led by passion rather than by faith. He began by publishing antiprelatical tracts, against the government of the church by bishops. These are rough, knockabout, name-calling tracts in the style of the times, which take a popular

(1) Alex Preminger, ed. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 396.

position on a relatively popular issue.

In spite of his ardent devotion to political and social activities, the consequence was void of fruit. After the execution of Charles I, in 1649, he published a series of Latin disputations against Continental critics of the regime, defending the actions of Parliament in executing Charles. In the middle of this work, he went blind, as the result of eyestrain continued over many years. In 1660, the whole political movement for which Milton had sacrificed so much, went to smash. Though Milton boldly published pamphlets in its support to the very last minute, the good old cause was defeated, and Charles II recalled from his travels. For a time under the Restoration, Milton was imprisoned and in danger of his life; but friends intervened, and he escaped with a fine and the loss of most of his property.

In 1663, Milton married his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull; and in blindness, poverty, defeat, and relative isolation, he set about completing *Paradise Lost* which he had first pictured in the mind many years before. Milton's absorption in political and social affairs meddled with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for his heart and soul had no room for reception of the Holy Spirit during the second period. In the following passages we can see the fact that Milton realized that the Holy Spirit abides with pure heart.

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st;
(I. 17-19)

The moment he lost eyesight as well as all his property, the time had come to Milton, when he could cleanse his heart and soul out of the world and selfishness. When his eyes aimed at the world, he had no opportunity to open his spiritual eyes widely and did not feel the urgent need. Rather, he cannot open his eyes spiritually because of the interference

from the social and political entanglements. However, when Milton became freed from the bondages of the secular world, he felt the necessity of open spiritual eyes more heartily than ever before. Therefore he calls upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit earnestly.

Thus with the year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of ev'n or morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
Presented with a universal blank
Of nature's works to me expunged and razed,
And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
So much the rather thou celestial Light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
of things invisible to mortal sight.

(III. 40-55)

The more Milton severs his connexions with the world, the more he feels the necessity of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and can be led by the Holy Spirit. Blindness of the outer eyes rendered more acute the sight of inner eyes. Here we can see Milton's transition from the physical eyes to the spiritual eyes. Like Diekhoff's statement, Milton's eyesight lies not in his physical eyes alone, but in God's leading and Providence.⁽²⁾ And it means that Milton's poem comes to be led by the spiritual instruction.

Next, another reason for Milton's necessity of the inspiration by the Holy Spirit is that he realized that the divine matters such as the creation of the universe, God's Providence and Will are beyond human reach:

So much the rather thou celestial Light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

(III. 51-55)

(2) John S. Diekhoff, *Milton on Himself* (London: Cohen & West Ltd., 1965), p. 103.

Milton understood that there were the things invisible to human eyesight, and that he could argue about the divine matters only when he was instructed by the Holy Spirit. He believes that the Holy Spirit, his inspiring power, abides with the true wisdom and almighty God. He, therefore, calls upon the Holy Spirit to instruct him the truth and enable him to compose the poem in which he intends to "assert Eternal Providence and justify the ways of God to men":

The meaning, not the name I call: for thou
Nor of the muses nine, nor on the top
Of old Olympus dwell'st, but heav'nly born
Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,
Thou with eternal Wisdom didst converse,
Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
In presence of Almighty Father, pleased
With thy celestial song.

(VII. 5-12)

Milton therefore disdains the Greek Muse who is one of the nine Greek goddesses, for he believes that she is merely a product from human imagination. We can see his attitude towards the Greek Muse in the following passages.

But drive far off the barbarous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his revelers, the race
Of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard
In Rhodope, where woods and rocks had ears
To rapture, till the savage clamor drowned
Both harp and voice; nor could the Muse defend
Her son. So fail not thou, who thee implores:
For thou art heav'nly, she an empty dream.

(IV. 32-39)

III. Various Names of the Holy Spirit as Milton's Inspiring Power

1. Heavenly Muse

Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
In the beginning how the heav'ns and earth
Rose out of chaos: or if Sion hill

Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

(I. 6-16)

Milton used four kinds of different names for the Holy Spirit as the power of his inspiration. First, he used it as Heavenly Muse. He suggested that it was a heavenly being who inspired Moses who has been believed to be the author of the first five books of the Bible. And, then, by whom was Moses inspired? According to Christian theology, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit. We, therefore, can see the fact that Milton's heavenly Muse suggests the Holy Spirit. Scott Elledge says that the Holy Spirit may not refer to the same being as the Heavenly Muse, but the difference, if any, is slight.⁽³⁾ M. Macmillan explains that Milton's Muse may be considered as personification of divine inspiration.⁽⁴⁾ It is obvious that Milton cannot ask for inspiration from one of the goddesses of Greek mythology, for he is a Christian. He therefore invents a new Muse, whom he supposes to have inspired Moses. Furthermore he makes this point clear by saying "chiefly thou Spirit":

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;

(I. 17-23)

2. Holy or Celestial Light

Second, it was called as Holy Light or Celestial Light. Here Milton used the term, Holy Light, intending to suggest the Holy Spirit, for the holy light can be the symbol to lighten the darkness of man's mind or spirit:

(3) Scott Elledge, ed., *Paradise Lost* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), p.6.

(4) M. Macmillan, ed., *Milton's Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p.33.

Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,
 Or of th' Eternal coeternal beam
 May I express thee unblamed? Since God is light,
 And never but in unapproached light
 Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee,
 Bright effluence of bright essence increate.

(III. 1-6)

However, in fact, if Milton's holy Light to irradiate his mind or spirit is the first offspring of God's creation literally, he will fall into a theological contradiction, that is, any light of God's creation can instruct or inspire man like the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Milton's holy Light implies the Holy Spirit who knows things invisible to man's eyesight. We can here see that he suggests one of the functions of the Holy Spirit to illumine human mind. In case of Milton, he believes that the holy Light, the Holy Spirit, shall illumine his mind in the course of writing the poem. He therefore describes the light as a sovran vital lamp' (III. 22) different from any light in the world. And the light which has an overwhelming power shines him inwardly and enables him to see and tell of things which no human eyes can see:

So much the rather thou celestial Light
 Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
 Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
 Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
 Of things invisible to mortal sight.

(III. 51-55)

3. Urania

In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
 And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
 Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn
 Purples the east: still govern thou my song,
 Urania, and fit audience find, though few.

(VII. 27-31)

Third, the Holy Spirit as the inspiring power of Milton was called as Urania. In the above passages, Milton represents the Holy Spirit as a person who comes to him and controls his verses. Urania means the heavenly Muse in Greek. We can see that being a Christian,

Milton cannot but suggests that Urania is the name for God the Holy Spirit in the doctrine of the Trinity which holds that there are three Persons in the one Godhead. Milton who was influenced by the Renaissance uses dictions, metaphors and allusions by the side of Hellism, but his themes and thought in *Paradise Lost* are on the side of Hebraism based on his Christianity. Like Elledge's statement, Milton's Muse or Urania is the Holy Spirit who inspired Moses and other religious poets and prophets in the Christian tradition, and Milton believed literally in the Holy Spirit's being or powers of performance and called the Spirit of God Urania or heavenly Muse for the more lovelier word in the literary diction.⁽⁵⁾

4. Celestial Patroness

Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
 Her nightly visitation unimplored,
 And dictates to me slumb'ring, or inspires
 Easy my unpremeditated verse:

(IX. 21-24)

Fourth, Milton called the Holy Spirit as his celestial patroness. He suggests that he can communicate with the Holy Spirit who becomes his supporter who dictates and inspire his verses near at hand in the course of composing the poem.

III. The Types or Milton's Inspiration

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
 Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
 Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
 Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
 Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss
 And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support:

(I. 17-23)

In the Chapter III we can observe how the Holy Spirit as the inspiring power works in Milton's mind or soul. First, the function of Milton's inspiring power, the Holy Spirit, is to

(5) Scott Elledge, ed., *Paradise Lost* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), p. 150.

instruct him and illumine his spiritual darkness. Milton uses several metaphors which stand for the Holy Spirit, his superhuman inspiring guide, for example, 'thy sovran vital lamp' (III.22), 'thy piercing ray' (III.24), and 'the Eternal coeternal beam' (III.2). The lamp or ray or beam is the thing which enlightens darkness. He suggests that as a lamp enlightens spatial darkness, so the Holy Spirit irradiates spiritual one of himself as a poet. How, then, the Holy Spirit as Milton's inspiring power does work to him actually?

So much the rather thou celestial Light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers,
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

(III.51-55)

In the above passages Milton says that his inspiring power irradiates his mind, and that the celestial Light which stands for the inspiring power shines inwardly. Here he suggests that the Holy Spirit as the inspiring power instructs and guides his mind and thought to the supernal truth which implies God's Providence. Matthew Arnold pointed out this fact that the Milton of poetry is the man of a devout prayer to the Holy Spirit who can enrich his poem with truth.⁽⁶⁾ We can see that Milton believes that the Holy Spirit can teach him truth, considering that he describes his inspiring power as the sister of eternal Wisdom in Book VII. 10. Milton, therefore, aspires to higher things than are possible through the Greek Muse, and his way of composing *Paradise Lost* must be a supernal illumination from the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, Milton invokes the dictation of his celestial patroness, for he believes that the Holy Spirit can dictate his verses to him:

If answerable style I can obtain

Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
Her nightly visitation unimplored,
And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires
Easy my unpremeditated verse:

(IV.20-24)

The dictation of the Holy Spirit to Milton, of course, is different from God's dictation of the Ten Commandments to Moses in that to Milton the Holy Spirit dictates God's Will or the direction of his verses through his mind instead of God's dictation of the Words of God at physical ears like Moses. William Barclay pointed out the fact that it is sometimes through our mind and thought that God speaks to us.⁽⁷⁾ And Milton suggests that the Holy Spirit as his inspiring power dictates to him like a person who is near at hand. We can assume that his verses may be chosen out of the Bible by the Holy Spirit's dictation, for though he became blind, he could recite from memory entire books of the Bible. This kind of dictation comes to control his verses:

In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn
Purples the east: still govern thou my song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few.

(VII.27-31)

Thirdly, Milton's inspiration has the origin in the spiritual communication with the Holy Spirit, his mighty inspiring power.

Yet not the more
Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt
Clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill,
Smit with the love of sacred song; but chief
Thee Sion and the flow'ry brooks beneath:
That wash thy hallowed feet, and warbling flow,
Nightly I visit:

(III.26-32)

Milton uses such symbols as can be found in some sacred songs. He suggests the place where he can meet the heavenly Muse who is the emblem of the Holy Spirit, and that it is

(6) Matthew Arnold, *Essays In Criticism* (London, Macmillan and Co Limited, 1969), p. 39.

(7) William Barclay, *Revelation of John* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1974), p. 28.

Sion. But the Sion does not mean a geographical name but implies his pure heart in the presence of God which the Holy Spirit wants to visit and dwell in, considering that he says in Book I. 17-19:

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart and pure
Instruct me, for thou know'st:

This spiritual communication is performed by Milton's visiting nightly and the nightly visitation of the Holy Spirit:

If answerable style I can obtain
Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
Her nightly visitation unimplored,
And dictates to me slumb'ring, or inspires
Easy my unpremeditated verse:

(K. 21-25)

How then Milton's visiting and being visited by the Holy Spirit can be done actually? This spiritual communication is performed through his invocation, as we can see in Book I. 12-13; 'I thence/ Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song.' And his invocation is not a formal invocation in a poem but a devout prayer to the Holy Spirit, uttered by Milton, like Elledge's statement,⁽⁸⁾

II. Conclusion

Milton's poetic inspiration in *Paradise Lost* is very far from the conventional one which has been thought to come from the Greek Muse. His inspiration is based on his firm Christian faith, so that it has the origin in the Holy Spirit who is a person of the Godhead. His inspiration, therefore, comes from the Holy Spirit rather than from the reasonings of the intellect or his own imagination, apart from the Greek Muse. And there is the background of his life in his necessity of the inspiration from the Holy Spirit; loss of all his property and blindness rendered more acute the sight of

spiritual eyes. This is his transition from the physical eyes to the spiritual ones.

Milton calls the Holy Spirit by the four various names according to the offices of the Holy Spirit as his inspiring power; Heavenly Muse, Holy or Celestial Light, Urania, and Celestial Patroness. And these four names are connected with the types of Milton's inspiration.

The function of Milton's inspiring power, the Holy Spirit, is to illumine and instruct his spiritual darkness, to dictate his verses to him, and to communicate with him. And his inspiring power, the Holy Spirit, is so intimate with him and works within him concretely and practically as a real person as compared with the Greek Muse, for Milton believed literally in the being or powers of performance of the Holy Spirit as his inspiring power. And, therefore, Milton's inspiring power, the Holy Spirit, works upon him through his mind and thought as an indwelling person. Milton's theme, therefore, in *Paradise Lost* led by the inspiration from the Holy Spirit comes to concentrate on elucidating the Will and Providence of God.

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(8) Scott Elledge, ed., *Paradise Lost* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company. Inc., 1975), p. 56.

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