

THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan greets hell in one of the most lapidary passages in all literature: says so much – so concisely – so precisely. Milton almost scares you. The Devil says 'goodbye' to heaven.

“Farewell happy fields where joy forever dwells: then he says ‘hello’ to hell – hail horrors, hail infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell receive thy new possessor: One who brings a mind not to be changed by place or time. The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven or Hell, a Hell of Heaven. What matter where, if I be still the same, ... (P.L., i)

Some years ago, wandering a country graveyard, I was puzzled to find the first line of that soliloquy carved on one of the marble slabs. Underneath the man's name and his date of birth and death, and I have often thought how much these two bare, bony facts leave unsaid, how they seem to make, at once, a skeleton of the dead; well, at any rate – beneath the man's name and date were those three words from Milton – so lovely in their pastoral simplicity: “Farewell happy fields.”

On the surface, they seemed so appropriate to the grave setting. For stretching out from that family cemetery, in all directions spread fertile farmlands, “happy fields,” fields that had happily produced, for many generations of this man's kin, not only food but also wealth. These fields, these farmlands, had sustained his father and his father's father, and would sustain his children after him. I discovered later that the crops raised here had also sent him back to England for his education; which might explain the Milton on his tomb.

So, on the surface of this slab of marble, “Farewell happy fields,” seemed an appropriate enough epitaph, especially for a country squire, departing with proud humility from his beloved place.

But one wondered what, indeed, was behind or beneath those three seemingly lovely words. Had this 19th century planter-lawyer placed them there out of ignorance of their context – ignorance of the lines that followed – or was it out of cunning – cunning confession possibly? Or was it his wife who was a scholar – knew what the old boy really was? Or was it a son, also educated in England, who, for the many who passed his father's grave would maintain the public image – the old genteel surface, the aristocratic veneer – “Farewell happy fields” but for the few

who might know the lines below, describe, confess, with all candor, the rottenness, the hell that lay buried below – “Hail infernal world! Receive thy new possessor.”

I cannot help but feel that the man himself, or his beloved next-of-kin (maybe me) who inherited, not only his lands, but himself from him, planned these three words on his gravestone, knowing full well they introduced Satan’s greeting to hell, in Milton’s Paradise Lost.

If so, how clever. Probably the cleverest tombstone I’ve ever seen – in a long career of tombstone hopping. How diabolically cunning, maintaining on the surface, even in death, the old illusion, the gracious, joyous face, the family was able, for generations, to keep before the world: “Farewell happy fields,” but for those who really knew the family, knew them well, knew them as they knew themselves, knew that beneath, left unwritten of course was:

Hail horrors, hail Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell receive thy new possessor:
One who brings a mind not to be chang’d by Place or Time. The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell Heav’n. What matter where, if I be still the same

So I stood there, and I wondered, and I wondered, and I wondered... is this the way the man viewed himself? Or, more likely – is this the way the family saw him? Or saw themselves, because they were bone of his bone, blood of his blood, and could no more help inheriting him than they could inheriting his?

Had he, indeed, been a stubborn old man, with a “A mind not to be changed,” who, long before his death, had said “Farewell,” had left these “happy fields,” not in “Place or Time,” but in his mind, for “The mind is its own place.” So, had he by his own will, had he turned what could have been a “Heaven” into “Hell”? Had he turned these fertile fields and lovely valleys, these farmlands that were his home, had the old boy turned them into an “infernal world,” for himself, and filled them with “horrors” for his family, so that if he or they roamed the world, even to death, “what matter where, if I be still the same.”

Yes, it makes very little difference where you are. In the best of circumstances, with everything basically – it makes so little difference – for Milton was right – “the mind is its own place.” (1) I can take any set of circumstances and turn them into Heave or into Hell; so, in the first place you and I, in whatever time or place we find ourselves, are perfectly capable of turning what ought to be a Heaven into a living Hell. We can take those “happy fields,” –of health, prosperity, etc., and turn them into an “Infernal world.” We can take an almost ideal

situation, loving family – devoted friends – promising career – superb education –etc., where “Joy” surely ought to forever dwell, and transform it into “profoundest Hell.”

And we can do this, because “The mind is its own place.” Surprisingly independent of the place you dwell – and you can make the mind’s place what you will –heave or hell.

And you do not have to wait until you die to say, “Goodbye, happy fields,” and “Hell-0 Infernal world.” Hell is greeted long before the grave.

I remember asking a prosperous farmer’s wife once, what her husband was raising” “Out there,” she said, pointing to beautiful green fields, “he raises cotton, but at home he raises hell.” She smiled – but – she said it seriously, and sadly, and it was all too true, even though the man had no obvious vices. In fact, he was rather prim. In profession, he was a pious man. In practice, he was something else again. He was a stubborn hater, resentful without real cause – bitter – possessing “a mind not to be changed.” He was a man carefully cultivating, raising up a crop of hell, amidst what should have been, could so easily have been, “happy fields,” by teaching his sons to his sons to hate like him. He taught his boys to hate the world that fed them, to hate the mother who loved them, and then, finally, a fact he realized too late, (he taught them sell) to hate him so that if they had had the mind to do it, having inherited his meanness along with his property could have put on his tombstone: “Farewell happy fields. Hail profoundest Hell. Receive thy new possessor.”

But, in the second place – since “The mind is its own place,” it can also “make a Heav’n of Hell,” and often does that too. How strangely pathetic that in all our noble war on poverty our affluent often look back on their years of poverty with pleasant memories.

I know a man who, though his business life turns to “horrors,” though his office may become an “Infernal world,” though the pressures of a day seem to make his own life “profoundest Hell,” he can’t wait to get home to his wife, for whatever may happen to him outside his house, all’s well. For he’s married to a woman who knows him, knows him through and through, knows him better than he knows himself, but still believes in him, still trusts him, still cares. In short, he married to a woman who loves him. And he’s not too stubborn to admit it. He can’t explain it. The one thing he knows is that he doesn’t deserve it. But there she is, and she loves him, and that’s all the old boy has to know. They’ve been through some “horrors” together, that’s the truth; some sickness, some trouble, some sorrow. But these two

have never raised up Hell together. In ways really quite unknown to them, they have somehow always known how to make, how to cultivate, their bit, their small patch of Heaven, even in the midst of torment. "The mind is its own place" and can, indeed, make a "Heav'n (out) of Hell." I've seen it done, more than once. You see it is also true that men and women greet heaven long before they get there. It is a matter of choice – there are those who never have to say, "Farewell, happy fields" for life unto death is and remains a very happy field for them.

Let us pray:

O Lord Christ, so many of us are stubbornly raising only hell in what could well be our only chance for a small patch of heaven.

In our mind's place, we are so quick to hate, where we could be loving. In our minds, we are so quick to suspect, where we could be trusting, so quick to take, where we could share.

Is it because, in our mind's place, we do not trust ourselves, no longer trusting thee? Is that why in meanness, we make mock of kindness, think tenderness is weakness, and cannot live in peace?

Yet thou, O Christ, still believest in us, who do not believe in ourselves. Thou still givest us responsibility, as though we were responsible.

So let us be what thou seest in us. Give us the grace to change our mind's place, to be responsible and free, to change Hell into Heaven, and even, by faith, to be happy in the fields of the Lord.

This we ask for thy love's sake.
Amen.