Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education
Vol. XV, Issue No. 5, July-2018, ISSN 2230-7540

A View on Genesis Myth and the Seventeenth Century English Literature

Dr. Raju T. Malagimani*

Lecturer, S.D.M. (Shri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara) P.U. College, Honnavar, Karnataka

Abstract – This section of the present paper covers a critical survey of English literature of the 17th century that relates to the genesis myth, the Christianity, the Bible, the Church of England and Puritanism. The 17th century English literature may best be described as the age from Donne to Dryden, covering such great writers as Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Pope, the Metaphysical Poets, Banyan and finally Milton.

----------X----------

Playwrights of the early seventeenth century were fashioning language into a supreme theatrical medium; other poets were submitting lyric, satire and elegy to a searching re-examination. The most brilliant of these figures was John Donne (1572-1631). They even questioned the church dogmas.

Donne's was a life of passionate intellectual and personal drama. Reared as a Roman Catholic in a Protestant nation state, aware of being part of a group often summoned to suffering and martyrdom, Donne called the basis of his creed in doubt and read and questioned his way towards a hard-won, restless Anglicanism

Donne was not just a bookish recluse, but a great sermonist, theologian, (catholic in taste and a critic of Protestantism) and metaphysician. He was a popular preacher and mighty poet of salvation. It is said,

Wit as ingenuity - the creation of far-fetched arguments or conceits - was a prized rhetorical achievement, and Donne's skill earned him the highest praise from his contemporaries. For later critics such as Dryden and Dr.Johnson however, men working in different modes of literary decorum, such effects supposedly revealed a lack of taste which earned Donne and his followers the misleading name of 'metaphysical'. They were accused of linking together grotesque, recondite ideas, and so failing to achieve the central and classical voice of broad human experience. It took later generations of critics, first Coleridge and then T.S. Eliot, to rediscover, in Donne's poetry the thought of a complex and very masculine brain, one which dwelt on the nature of its own perceptions and, by bringing a passionately critical intellect to bear on the traditions of rhetoric, revealed its force through the quality of its wit.(Penguin History 162)

Donne's elegies and satires are simply great. A lyric like 'To his Mistress Going to Bed' explores man's discovering of his self with women. In the Satires, Donne was concerned to develop what some contemporaries thought they had discovered in Latin satire: the harsh tones of classical moral outrage.

With 'Satire III', such skepticism becomes a matter of intense personal seriousness, for this is the work in which Donne criticized the aberrations of all Christian sects in his search for 'true religion'.

Donne's essays The Progress of the Soul and Anniversaries speak of his Christian themes.

What Donne was here concerned to achieve, however, was a contrast between the powers of Christian innocence imagined in his ideal of Elizabeth Drury and the decay of a corrupt, fallen world.

In the Anniversaries, Donne set his face against the empirical investigation of nature that was soon to prove,if not the final answer to these questions, then at least their most powerful reply. He suggests that to let oneself be 'taught by sense, and fantasy' is only to pile up useless and pedantic confusion

Donne's answer to this predicament was 'fideism': not sharper telescopes but intenser prayer, not knowledge but virtue, not science but faith. When the soul, shot like a bullet from a rusted gun, courses through the celestial spheres, Donne shows it does not stop to question their movement but hurtles to the seat of all knowledge -the bosom of God.

Donne's sermons are the greatest of his prose works, but were preceded by a number of pieces which show Donne involved in both the personal quest for religious experience and the worldly pursuit of profitable employment.

And it is the obsession with death and the last things that characterizes Donne's mature religious works. The Devotions on Emergent Occasions (published 1624) were written when Donne's doctors had declared him too ill to read, let alone compose. The afflicted body houses a soaring mind however. Donne's emotions range over the fear of solitude and physical disintegration, the relation between sickness and sin, sin and death. The entire universe is raided for images because man himself — John Donne — is an image of the universe, an epitome, a microcosm. It is this belief that underlies the most famous passage in Donne's prose as he writes:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends, or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee (Donne, qtSanders. 198)

The moment of union is perceived but, as is appropriate for a sickbed meditation, is perceived in the instant of its dissolution.

It is for his sermons that Donne is best known as a writer of religious prose. In the Jacobean period especially, occupied by preachers of great distinction, the pulpit gained extraordinary influence as a focus of spiritual thought and the dissemination of ideas. Led by the king, the court itself relished the finesse of religious analysis, and connoisseurs of style and content memorized sermons and took notes on a form of literature that was both popular and learned. Donne's contribution should not be seen in isolation.

The courtiers addressed by Donne in many of his sermons were also the recipients of verses by Ben Jonson (1572—1637), and it is a measure of Jonson's stature that, in addition to being one of the leading playwrights of the age, he was also its most influential court poet.

Jonson's royalist vision is, along with his distinctive reworking of classical sources, an element in the work of Robert Herrick (1591-1674). Yet Herrick's voice is his own, as is his belatedly Elizabethan Arcadia 'of Maypoles, hock-carts, wassails, wakes' to which, in Hesperides (1648), he brought the refining contrivance of wit and sensuality

In 'Ask me no more' by Thomas Carew (1594/5—1640), beauty's fading roses are enshrined in his mistress's cheek, yet compared to Herrick there is a coldly fastidious and urbane contrivance in many of Carew's lyrics. His 'Elegy on the Death of Dr Donne, Dean of St Paul's, nonetheless remains the most judicious critique of the master the age produced.

The religious lyrics of George Herbert (1593-1633), first published posthumously in The Temple (1633) and frequently reprinted, are 'a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my master: in whose service, I have now found perfect freedom'. Herbert's lyrics are thus, the fruits of a profound engagement with the rites, beliefs and personal demands of the national church as the believer, deeply influenced by the High Anglican community, established by Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding, discovers the unworldly depths of his vocation.

A great many of Herbert's poems, especially those of spiritual doubt, were written in the period that led up to his time of crisis between 1628 and 1629. What he had to forgo in the pursuit of faith — pride in intellect and birth, and worldly pleasure - is shown in 'The Pearl', the poem of a man who has surrendered all in response to God. The following year Herbert was ordained, and his public career and private pilgrimage came to their conclusion in the three years he spent as an Anglican minister in rural Bemerton, near Salisbury. Here he embodied the ideal set out in his prose work A Priest to the Temple (1652), his chaste yet ceremonious piety marking a high point in Anglican spirituality before the decades of open religious conflict.

It was widely recognized by contemporaries that in so wholly dedicating his muse to Christ, Herbert had fashioned a body of poetry which, in its power and scope, deserved an honourable place beside the Scriptures themselves. The Temple was hugely influential and widely imitated. None took its substance more to heart than Henry Vaughan (1621). In 1650, Vaughan issued one of the most intense accounts of spiritual awakening in 17th-century poetry: his SilexScintillans('The Flashing Flintstone'), republished in a revised form in 1655. Sustaining all these lyrics is a tremulous intimation of supernatural joy, the rapture of a man who, having glimpsed the radiance of eternity amid spiritual darkness, is inspired to speak in tongues.

To another poet Eden remained open, a shining field of 'Orient and Immortal Wheat'. The poems of Thomas Traherne (1637—74), along with his finer prose work Centuries of Meditation, were rediscovered at the start of this century and present an image of the mystic's recovery of childhood innocence and light, the felicity of a man who has shunned the baits of the world and recaptured 'the Highest Reason' in a blissful union with God in nature. If Traherne's verse is sometimes undisciplined in its enthusiasm, it remains extraordinarily potent in its joy. Nonetheless, in 'Solitude' he wrote a moving study of mystic vision occluded.

The spiritual career of Richard Crashaw (1612/13—49) return to childhood was but a pilgrimage that took him from High Anglican circles in Cambridge through to a conversion to Roman Catholicism and

eventual death at Loretto. His Steps to the Temple (1646,1648) reveals the ' influence of both the Spanish mysticism and the intensely artificial rhetoric of the continental baroque style. Paradox, wit and a sensuousness, allied to spirituality, characterize poems like 'The Weeper', but if the artifice of such works occasionally seems taken to excess, Crashaw's 'Hymn' to Saint Theresa and 'The Flaming Heart' reveal the power of a poet

Drest in the glorious madness of a Muse,

Whose feet can walk the milky way. (Penguin History 181)

An altogether greater poet — the finest late flowering indeed of 'metaphysical' wit - is Andrew Marvell (1621-78). His erotic poems show particular aspects of his excellence. 'The Definition of Love', for example, derives its power from the dramatic contrast between the poet's frustrated ardour and the geometrical imagery, rational to the point of ruthlessness, with which he proves the impossibility of sexual fulfilment. A second love poem, the exquisite 'To his Coy Mistress', again shows Marvell juxtaposing passion and logic while bringing to its apogee one of the great themes of Renaissance classicism: the seizing of erotic pleasure before the onset of inevitable death. In what is perhaps the best-known 17th-century image of the triumph of time, the delicacy of Marvel'soctosyllabic couplets juxtaposes immensity and the specific, life and love, the macabre certainty of death and a power at once visionary and quietly ironic. He writes,

But at my back I always hear

Times winged Charriot hurrying near:

And yonder all before us lye Desarts of vast Eternity.

Thy Beauty shall no more be found;

Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound

My echoing Song: then worms shall try

That long preserv'd Virginity:

And your quaint Honourturn to dust;

And into ashes all my Lust

The Grave's a fine and private place,

But none I think do there embrace(Penguin History 183).

John Milton is the greatest of the 17th century English poets. At the centre of Milton's life and art lay an ineradicable sense of vocation, the commitment of a mighty Protestant and humanist scholar to his God, his nation and the national voice through which that God might speak. Perhaps no great poet ever prepared himself more arduously for his task. An autobiographical passage from his Latin Second Defence of the English People (1654) tells, how at home, and later at St Paul's School, Milton began that study of the classical and Christian inheritance by which, as he wrote in his pamphlet Of Education (1644), he hoped the scholar might take his place in the civic community and 'repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright'. These social and religious principles shaped his entire career.

Debarred from founding a heaven on earth, Milton sought the paradise within. In defeat, the poet was reborn. Between 1658 and 1663 he dictated his epic Paradise Lost, publishing it first as ten books in 1667 and then in a revised edition of twelve books in 1674. It is insufficient however to read Paradise Lost simply as a personal response to private circumstances. Though Milton could present himself as blind and persecuted in a bad world — and do so with all the heart-rending power of the lines that open his seventh book — it is proper to view the poem itself as a magnificently comprehensive answer to the range of demands which created the possibility of writing a vernacular epic in the first place.

Part of Milton's purpose is achieved through such an examination of the traditions within which he worked, while his subject itself was the mightiest and most urgent available to him: the reasons how and why sin came into the world, the origins of death and, by extension, the place of salvation within the universal history of fallen man. A poem about revolt from God, about sin and the Fall, the intention behind Paradise Lost is to bring some souls — Milton's 'fit audience though few' — to an awareness of God's merciful Providence not just on the level of reason but through the spiritual quickening great poetry can achieve. Paradise Lost thus works through the tradition of an encyclopaedic Christian humanism, extending it so as to investigate the moral and spiritual awareness of its audience. These are learned men and women, fallen but of good will, who live in a world where virtue and vice are inextricably tangled - a world where paradise has indeed been lost. To achieve this, the poet conducted them in a language of massive yet subtle resonance through Heaven, earth and the hell where the work begins.

In 1671 there appeared Paradise Regain'd. A Poem. In IV Books. to which is added Samson Agonistes. Paradise Regained is a brief biblical epic, much influenced by commentaries on the Book of Job. It is a slighter and more didactic work than Paradise Lost and more austere in style. It portrays Satan's tempting Christ in the wilderness in order to test the paradoxical nature of the second Adam, the God made man. Christ is portrayed as a figure who should conquer such temptations even as the first Adam succumbed to them. In this Christ

succeeds, but the conflict has little of the emotional power of the ninth book of Paradise Lost.

Bacon's Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral (1625), first issued as ten sequences of aphorisms in 1597, were finally enlarged to fifty-eight pieces. In the later editions, the style is more digressive, but an anti-Ciceronian brevity, a cold ruthlessness and even cynicism characterize these attempts at what, in The Advancement of Learning (1605), Bacon had seen as the necessity for an empirical enquiry into the 'culture of the mind'

Biography and didactic character writing combine with satire and good counsel in the works of Thomas Fuller (1608—61) who, in addition to being a biographer, was a preacher, essayist, wit and antiquary.

For another great prose stylist of the age, the Norwich doctor Sir Thomas Browne (1605—82), truth lay partly in the ideas of Bacon. Browne's Pseudodoxia Epidemica ('Vulgar Errors') of 1646 is in some degree a response to Bacon's call for a 'calendar' of common misunderstandings. Browne paid formal tribute to the Baconian ideal when he wrote he wished the book might have been the work of 'some co-operating advancers'. Fortunately, it is entirely his own - a collocation of massive erudition and curiosity which works through a critical use of authority, reason and experience. As Browne discusses if there are griffins in nature or whether 'Lampries have nine eies', so he reveals, as Coleridge wrote, 'the Humorist constantly mingling and flashing across the Philosopher'.

Such enquiries of Browne's were not purely materialistic since science, he believed, could work to the glory of God. 'Those highly magnify him, whose judicious enquiry into his Acts, and deliberate research into his Creation, return the duty of a devout and learned admiration.' This is 'The Religion of a Doctor' embodied in Browne's Religio Medici (first authorized edn 1643). The book is one of the supreme achievements of 17th-century English prose, and what animates the carefully contrived biblical parallelism and wide-ranging vocabulary is a soaring yet quizzical fideism that is in some respects comparable to Donne's. The resulting statement of faith is a portrait of a mind enamoured of paradox.

In Browne's Christian Morals (published 1716), the imaginative reach of the earlier works has been subdued by the influence of Christian stoicism and the maxims of the copybook.

For Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), the author of Holy Living (1650) and Holy Dying (1651), 'Contentedness in all estates is a duty of religion'

One of the most searching answers to contemporary problems of science and belief, language and truth, the state of nature and the nature of the state had been propounded as early as the 1640s. The Leviathan (published 1651) of Thomas Hobbes (1588—1679) is one of the great yet dangerous achievements of 17th-century English prose.

Some contemporary poets attempted the epic. Cowley's biblical Davideis(1656) however, lacking in narrative tension, is unfinished. Sir William Davenant's Gondibert (1651) tried to found epic on the drama, but any real interest the work might have is in his Discourse upon Gondibert and Hobbes's Answer of 1650.

Early in his career Dryden had written his Heroique Stanzas (1659) the death of Cromwell but, changing with the nation, in 1660 he composed his Astraea Redux.The most considerable early statement of Dryden's beliefs, however, is Annus Mirabilis of 1666. This poem uses the stanza form of Davenant's Gondibert, and celebrates the English victory in the First Dutch War, seeing this as the-work of a strong and newly united nation guided by Providence.

Marvell offered his praise to another Restoration satirist, Samuel Butler (1612-80), the author of Hudibras(1662). Butler's is an immensely long and intermittently brilliant three-part burlesque of heroic romance in which he satirizes those Puritan dogmatists whose abuse of language is a cover for minds working furiously to their own squalid advantage

The range of experiment in Restoration satire can be seen,again, in the work of John Oldham (1655-83). His best-known work, the Satyrs on the Jesuits (1679), is historically important as a miscellany, combining Elizabethan and Clevelandesque styles with classical imitation and mock-encomium.

This is a genre chiefly associated in the Restoration period with AphraBehn (?1640-89), the first professional woman of letters in England.Oroonoko (1688) forms the basis of Behn's reputation.

As a woman, living by her pen in a licentious age, Behn provided the market with what it would buy. A narrative such as The Nun, or The Fair Vow-Breaker (undated), for example, is a neatly contrived sensational tale embracing the hypocrisy of convent life, passion, bigamy and murder.

The Restoration drama of Dryden, Congreve, Wycherley and others briefly touched the issue of religion and ethics.

The Restoration was an important period of experimentation in the styles of continuous prose. Evelyn's immense Diary is a dignified reflection of his multifarious interests and was written partly for his descendants, but it is Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), writing in shorthand and for his own purposes, who is the supreme English diarist.

A number of spiritual autobiographies also date from this period. The Puritan concern with self-

examination and the workings of grace were a major force in this. The immense Reliquiae Baxterianae (1696) of Richard Baxter (1615-91) is a record of the efforts of a remarkably broad and critical mind to find a true, modest Puritanism with which to inspire others. Nonconformist spiritual autobiographies include the plain yet often vivid Journal (1694) of George Fox (1624-91), the founder of the Quakers, but of all these dissenting works the most powerful and perennially fascinating remains Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666), the spiritual history of one of the supreme masters of English prose, John Bunyan (1628-88).

Bunyan's use of a plain style is a measure of his spiritual integrity. 'God did not play in convincing of me,' he wrote in the Preface to Grace Abounding; 'the Devil did not play in tempting of me; neither did I play when I sunk into the bottomless pit, when the pangs of hell caught hold upon me: wherefor,e I may not play in my relating of them, but be plain and simple, and lay down the thing as it was.' The passionate simplicity of such prose is the vehicle of a man unshakeable in his conviction that he has been called from sin to grace and that God has summoned him to a spiritual mission. As Grace Abounding unfolds, so Bunyan's absolute and comprehensive understanding of the spiritual fever played along his pulses makes us aware that his is the voice of the central Puritan experience, of religious crisis set in an ordinary world of exact and truthful images:

Bunyan's directness, vivid colloquial exposition and idiomatic dialogue suggest his familiarity with the life of the literate poor and lower middle classes, even as his biblical cadences suggest the all-pervading force of Scripture. The small and sinning tradesman whose story is The Life and Death of MrBadman(1680) exists in a known world of pettiness leading to damnation. Some of the events in that millenarian vision The Holy War (1682) are modelled on occurrences in Bunyan's native Bedford, but it is in the first part of The Pilgrim's Progress, written in 1676 when Bunyan was ending a third term of imprisonment for his beliefs, that the tremendous forces of the Word within fused into his most enduring achievement.

In 1682, Dryden issued his Religio Laid ('A Layman's Religion'), a poem on a matter of crucial importance to him: the nature of religious authority. A new gravity is at once apparent with the mixture of scientific and religious imagery seen in the opening. As the thrust of the argument develops, so Dryden enhances the intellectual energy that flows through the varied rhythm of his couplets with philosophical history, confession and satire. He,thereby, exposes what he viewed as the shortcomings of deism, Roman Catholicism and extreme Puritanism. Intellectual modesty, a recognition of the un-knowableness of God and the belief that 'Common Quiet is Mankind's concern', lead Dryden, eventually, to the Anglican Church. He solves admirably the stylistic problems of being 'plain and natural, and yet majestick', and his solution deserves more praise than it sometimes receives. Nonetheless, Anglicanism was not the final answer to Dryden's theological problems, and in 1685, he was received into the Roman Church.

REFERENCES:

Coote, Stepehn: The Penguin Short History of English Literature. London: Penguin 1993. Print.

Genesis 1:1 in other translations.

Genesis Myth, Wikipedia.

Levenson, Genesis Myth Wikipedia.

Sanders, Andrew. English Literature. London: OUP, 2010. Print.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Raju T. Malagimani*

Lecturer, S.D.M. (Shri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara) P.U. College, Honnavar, Karnataka

rajumm.m12@gmail.com