

JOHN S. TANNER. *Anxiety in Eden: A Kierkegaardian Reading of Paradise Lost*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. vii-viii; 209 pp. \$36.35.

Reviewed by Neal W. Kramer, Assistant Dean of General Education and Honors, Brigham Young University.

Readers of *BYU Studies* will recognize Professor John S. Tanner's name and interest in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* from an earlier article he published in these pages in 1984.¹ *Anxiety in Eden* continues Tanner's work on Milton, this time from the perspective of the work of the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. The book has already received much praise, including the Milton Society of America's James Holly Hanford award for most distinguished book of 1992.

There is good reason for readers of the journal to know about this valuable contribution to our understanding of important philosophical, psychological, and doctrinal issues associated with Milton's epic poem. Not only is Tanner's insight into the works of two great Christian writers of value, but the book also reflects his ability to combine the languages of the academy and the Spirit, of reason and faith.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell recently stated that "you and I should be fully qualified and certified in traditional education and its processes for [a] . . . very good reason: bilinguality." He went on to describe this special bilingualism for Latter-day Saints as being "truly educated and articulate as to secular knowledge but . . . also . . . educated and articulate in the things of the Spirit."² An important aspect of this kind of bilingualism, especially for scholars, is the ability to appropriately communicate, through their writings, things of the Spirit as well more secular insights from their individual disciplines. Latter-day Saint scholars have much to offer their various specialties if they can learn when and how to use the discourse of the Spirit to enlarge or enlighten their disciplines. Tanner's book is a fine example of how to write for a scholarly audience without compromising one's faith.

Anxiety in Eden presents an analysis of *Paradise Lost* employing ideas from Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*. Milton's

depiction of life in Eden before the Fall presents the reader with a fundamental dilemma. Were Adam and Eve free to partake of the forbidden fruit, or was their fall predetermined? Literary critics have often sought to answer this question in dogmatic terms. Adam and Eve were either entirely free to choose or entirely determined in their choice. Often this issue of prelapsarian capacity implies something innate to Adam and Eve that defines them not so much by the Fall as by who they were in Eden. Tanner's application of Kierkegaardian psychology provides a more complicated and yet more satisfying solution. Following Kierkegaard, Tanner "chart[s] an elusive *via media* between rigid necessity on the one hand and random spontaneity on the other" (29). This route leads to the insight that the Fall has a dual nature of its own. It is at once a leap forward and a fall downward, one that can be made only by free human beings. The motivation for such a leap lies in an "anxiety" at the core of being human. Anxiety about the future and about being human itself. Adam and Eve are therefore both anxious about falling and, by implication, anxious to fall. Thus Kierkegaard and Milton "interpret the Fall so as to expose and accommodate a baffling paradox implicit in Genesis: sin erupts as a radically free act, yet as an act somehow conditioned by the Temptation, which confers upon it psychological probability" (35). Tanner thereby presents Adam and Eve and their posterity as implicated in a fallen world but free to make their way back to God. His careful analysis of the psychology of anxiety leads to a remarkable interpretation of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*.

Critics of *Paradise Lost* have also been fascinated with Milton's portrayal of Satan. "Strong readers" (to use Harold Bloom's term) of the epic, like Shelley and Blake, have even asserted that Satan is the true hero of the poem. Tanner devotes two chapters to an interpretation of Satan's role in the Fall and an analysis of Satan's ontological status. The first of these chapters explains the connection between Satan and sin. In the epic, Milton presents sin as born "leap[ing] out of the sinister (left) side of Satan's head" (43). Thus sin does not emerge by degrees into existence but is always full grown, and sin has no intention of its own. Sinful intention arises from the will of Satan, a wicked being who is in open rebellion against God and who desires to destroy Adam and Eve

through sinfulness. This connection of sin with Satan provides a space within which Adam and Eve may be saved, for even after the Fall “they are uniquely individual agents” (55). They are not overdetermined by original sin; it is not embedded in their minds as it once was in the mind of Satan. “The poem thus presents Edenic evil as something humans both inherit and imitate” (61). The difference between Satan and humans becomes obvious: “We do not . . . condemn human sinners as utterly responsible but, rather, find hope for repentance in the fact that human evil is never wholly contingent upon the individual” as Satanic evil is entirely contingent upon himself (62–63).

In his second chapter on Satan, Tanner stresses an even greater gulf between Satan and humanity. The very essence of Satan’s being is despair, while we humans have good reason, even in the face of the catastrophic Fall, to hope for a better future. Adam and Eve’s sinful leap is also a leap of faith. Satan’s is not. Satan’s rhetoric in *Paradise Lost* reveals him to be a dogmatic individualist. He neither subordinates nor submits himself to anyone, especially not to God. Tanner, following Kierkegaard, explores how this individualism can lead only to isolation, absence, and dolor. Satan’s “ontological individualism offers not freedom, but mere arbitrariness, not security, but despair” (162).

Satan’s bondage manifests itself in numerous ways throughout the epic, but Tanner’s interpretation stresses Satan’s despair as he confronts God’s creations: the natural world and Adam and Eve. Satan’s deepest-felt response to natural beauty is his desire to negate or destroy it. Satan rebelled against God to assert his ontological independence. To admire the beauty of God’s creation is to admire God, which is to deny Satan’s individualism. So Satan, temporarily awestruck by beauty, almost immediately must try to destroy it. Rather than love Eve, he seeks to drag her into his own sin-drenched separation: “Eve’s comeliness is terrible because it is God-given; her beauty attests the even more terrible beauty of the Lord who fashioned her” (159). Satan affirms only his power to destroy and therefore announces his inability to recognize the life-granting powers of God, to whom one must be subordinate in order to obtain a fullness of joy. In God’s absence, Satan suffers the despair of disconnected individualism and can only be diminished. He is no hero, only the victim of his own foolish desire to be independent.

The contribution of this scholarly interpretation is heightened by Tanner's ability to speak the language of faith. Many scholars, I believe, are originally drawn to Milton or Kierkegaard because they find these writers' deep commitment to Christian principles spiritually sympathetic. That has certainly been my own experience. However, as the demands of scholarship overtake earlier enthusiasm, scholarly writing often requires one to relinquish the faithful sympathy that originally vitalized such study. In one sense, the demand that the scholar avoid being overtly confessional is good. To get bogged down in the polemics of confession and apology often results in neglecting the richness of textual analysis and interpretation that characterizes excellent literary study. In another sense, however, to deny for the sake of academic convention the religious power of individual works or the spiritual motivation of the critic can also be intellectually dishonest. Nevertheless, in the secular world of modern scholarship finding even the slightest space in which to aver faith is amazingly difficult. And in the study of religious figures, it can be especially demanding since one's colleagues are particularly alert to the nuances of testimony. Tanner's creation and use of such spaces is noteworthy indeed.

One such space is Tanner's obvious choice, clear from the first page, to allow his subjects to express their own "high and holy religious passion" unencumbered by immediately secularizing or minimizing interpretation (7). If Milton's language soars to spiritual heights or Kierkegaard's words invite readers to examine more thoroughly the deepest recesses of conscience, Tanner unleashes their spirit. He then supports having done so with critical (and spiritual) insights: "Milton and Kierkegaard learn to sing like Homer and reason like Hegel, respectively, in order to bear witness to Christianity's unknown God. They baptize epic poetry and dialectical philosophy and bring them, still dripping wet, to the Christian God" (9). Both these introductory passages carry the style and tone of literary critical language. Tanner is crisp, insightful, and passionate in his account. But he is also respectful of belief. His criticism expands his subjects' expression of faith. And the ease with which he navigates the difficult shoals of epic and dialectic in relation to their concomitant expressions of testimony reveals Tanner's own religious intellect as well. For he could not generate

such insightful critical images of belief without beliefs of his own to inform his choices.

Another instance where Tanner makes room for faith is his discussion of the fall of Adam and Eve. The conventional approach to either Milton or Kierkegaard's use of the Fall is simply to account for it in terms of mythology. And while talk of Christian mythology is sensible in numerous contexts, it often implies a disconnection between critic and text. That is, the Fall becomes an object only for scholarly analysis, leaving no room for discussion of how such scholarship might increase understanding of human experience through a study of this subject and relevant texts. Such scholarship minimizes any awareness that understanding the Fall might improve our lives.

Such is not the case with Tanner's treatment of the Fall. Take, for example, the following sentence where Tanner addresses the complex relation between progression, transgression, and the Fall: "Only humans, however, 'grow' in another way; only humans transgress, breaking out of a moral sphere by becoming evil" (26). To some, it may appear that Tanner's use of the special terms "grow" and "transgress" is fairly innocuous. However, part of what is at stake, I would contend, in the selection of both terms is knowledge of the gospel vouchsafed by the Restoration. To see in the Fall potentially progressive as well as regressive consequences, implied in this text by "grow," places the analysis in a particular theological framework, one supported by Milton's understanding and augmented by spiritual insight gained from the doctrines of the latter-day restoration (see 2 Ne. 2:4-27). The same is true of the word "transgression." To present Adam and Eve as transgressing as opposed to "sinning" is not merely to replace a term with its synonym. Here Tanner invites us to consider, with intellectual rigor, a careful distinction with real theological and salvific consequences. The doctrines of the Restoration carefully and boldly distinguish between transgression and sin.³ Tanner invites his readers to do the same, to learn true gospel principles in connection with their study of traditional Christian writers. And yet this care is not sullied by boorish confession, designed to intimidate or threaten fellow scholars. Instead it presents opportunities for learning accompanied by a spirit of Christian goodwill.

There are other examples of similar choices throughout the text as Tanner grapples with the challenge of engaging great minds in conversation about salvation. Important as these choices are, however, Tanner must also come to grips with the desire to bear testimony. In a book about doctrines so fundamental to our understanding of the Savior's mission, how does one announce allegiance, as a scholar, to Jesus Christ? Much of *Anxiety in Eden* carries with it a feeling of despair. Part of that necessarily arises out of Tanner's involvement in Kierkegaard's melancholy philosophy, but some is generated by the awful reality of the pain we all feel at being separated from God through the Fall. I was curious as to how Tanner would turn us away from the disaster of the loss of Eden to the eternal hope we find in Christ. This he does in the concluding chapter entitled, "Anxiety and Salvation." In an endnote to this chapter, Tanner announces his fellowship with Milton (and Kierkegaard) in their mutual hope in a joyous reunion with the Savior. "I am most moved by the consolation the poem offers (through faith) in and for *this* world. But . . . I do not intend to dismiss or disparage as 'surrender to literalism' the hope offered by the promise of a Second Coming . . . or future heavenly bliss . . . or a literal resurrection. . . . These are not dead hopes for me or for Milton, who would surely concur with Paul: 'If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable' (1 Cor. 15:19)" (185-86).

Elder Maxwell has frequently spoken of meekness as a cardinal virtue of disciples. In the context of a scholarly essay, Tanner's faith as it manifests itself in the language of belief demonstrates meekness while it also heightens the quality of the interpretation. *Anxiety in Eden* engages fundamental questions about freedom and necessity, original sin, works and grace, and the nature of evil, offering important insights that only a careful comparison of Milton and Kierkegaard on these topics could generate. Its presentation, from beginning to end, exhibits the highest standards of literary criticism and philosophical reflection. That said, perhaps its most important strength is revealed in a remark by a colleague as we discussed the book: "If you read it carefully, it is obvious that a believing Mormon wrote it." I took the statement as high praise and commend *Anxiety in Eden* as an ideal example of Elder

Maxwell's notion of bilingualism, using the languages of scholarship and faith with true facility and genuine meekness.

NOTES

¹John S. Tanner, "Making a Mormon of Milton," *BYU Studies* 24 (spring 1984): 191-206.

²Neal A. Maxwell, "The Inexhaustible Gospel," *Ensign* 23 (April 1993): 72.

³Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:114.