



Avitus' Epic on the Fall

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Avitus' Epic on the Fall

Few themes in world literature have had as wide an appeal as the Fall of Man. In the light of research, Milton's *Paradise Lost* appears simply as the supreme and culminating wave on a floodtide of poetic treatment, and even the ebb-tide of subsequent activity is of great extent and importance. Up to the time when Milton's poem was published in 1667, nearly two hundred poets in ten languages had dealt with this same theme, and it has since been treated by another three score poets in an even wider range of languages.

The earliest extant poem that is more than a paraphrase of the Book of Genesis is a Latin epic of the 6th century A.D. Poetic treatment of the Old Testament had begun still earlier, in the 4th century, when Apollinaris the Elder, of Syria, and his son, confronted by an edict of Julian the Apostate forbidding Christians to teach the classics, proceeded to turn the narrative portions of the Old Testament into Greek epic verse, the Psalms into Pindaric odes, and the New Testament into Platonic dialogues. Virtually none of their work has survived to our own day, but the example proved a potent one for over a thousand years to come. The first significant fruit of the movement was a Latin epic¹ of 2,552 hexameter lines published

¹ *Alcimi Ecdicii Aviti Poematum de Mosaicae Historiae Gestis libri quinque*, in J.-P. MIGNE (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, Paris 1862, lix. 325-382. Also in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Auctorum Antiquissimorum* (ed. R. PEIPER), Berlin 1883, VI, 3.

MIGNE mentions some ten relevant Latin poems earlier than AVITUS. Three of these are noted as lost, viz., AURELIUS CLEMENS PRUDENTIUS, *De fabrica mundi*; SALVIANUS, *Hexaemeron*; and ANDREAS LUNDENSIS, *Hexaemeron*. The seven that are extant are: AURELIUS CLEMENS PRUDENTIUS, *Hymnus ante cibum* (*Patrologia Latina*, lix, 796-811); VALERIA FALTONIA PROBA, *Centones Virgiliani ad Testimonium Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (op. cit., xix, 804-818); S. HILARIUS Arelatensis Episcopus, *Metrum in Genesim* (op. cit., I, 1287-1292); PROSPERUS AQUITANUS, *Carmen de Providentia divina* (op. cit., lxi, 617-638); CLAUDIUS MARIUS VICTOR, *Commentariorum in Genesim libri tres* (op. cit., lxi, 937-970); DRACONTIUS, *Carmen de Deo* (op. cit., lx, 679-901); and CYPRIANUS GALLUS, *Liber in Genesim* (op. cit., xix, 346-378; the first 165 lines have also been ascribed to TERTULLIAN, to JUVENCUS and to SALVIANUS, and also appear, op. cit., ii, 1087-1088, as *Incerti Auctoris Genesim*). In MIGNE's *Patrologia Graeca* there are noted two further early examples, viz., *Peri kosmou*, by GREGORIUS NAZIANZENSIS (xxxvii, 415-423), and the lost *Enarrationes in opus sex dierum* by AMMONIUS (xcii, 1388).

Only three of the foregoing items have interest from the point of view of later epic development:

(a) VALERIA FALTONIA PROBA, *floruit* A.D. 400, wife of the proconsul Adelfius, develops in her opening invocation the very same sort of appeal for heavenly, rather than earthly, inspiration that was to mark the opening lines of almost all subsequent poets of the Fall, including MILTON:

Nunc, Deus Omnipotens, sacrum, precor, accipe carmen,
Aeternumque tui septemplex ora resolve
Spiritus, atque mei resera penetralia cordis:
Arcana ut possim vatis proba cuncta referre.
Non nunc ambrosium cura est mihi quaerere nectar,
Nec libet Aonio de vertice ducere musas . . .

(b) CLAUDIUS MARIUS VICTOR, a rhetor of Marseilles, *floruit* A.D. 426, shows great freedom in his psychological treatment of character. His Eve, for example, is a very human character, who urges Adam to kill the serpent with a rock.

(c) DRACONTIUS, the most distinguished Latin poet of Africa in the 5th century A.D., includes an eloquent description of the Garden of Eden, and this likewise became traditional.

in A.D. 507 by Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus, bishop at Vienne, a town on the Rhone in Central Gaul. Of Avitus himself, we know that his father Isicius was bishop of Vienne before him and that an elder brother Apollinaris was bishop of Valence, 35 miles farther down the Rhone. Both brothers were prominent champions of Trinitarian orthodoxy as against the Arian heresy of the Burgundians, who were the political masters of the region. Avitus was one of the chief writers of the time. Of his works, all in Latin, there are extant numerous letters, a number of sermons, some epigrams, a lengthy poem on chastity¹, and his sacred epic on the Fall.

A preface in prose, addressed to his brother, Bishop Apollinaris, stresses the point that the poem lacks final revision. It had been first drafted out many years before; the manuscript had been lost during the siege and capture of Vienne in 500 A.D.; and a part of it had been later re-discovered at the home of a friend. Avitus is reluctant to bring out a work that still requires long and arduous recasting, and blames its present publication on the affectionate importunities of his brother.

Analysis of the poem confirms its author's verdict all too well; for while it shows a poetic unity of intention, its integration is far from perfect. The single title for the whole work, *Poematum de Mosaicae Historiae Gestis libri V* is only vaguely descriptive, and there is no clear pattern in the sub-titles of its five books, viz.:

Book I. The Beginning of the World.

Book II. Original Sin.

Book III. The Judgement of God.

Book IV. The Deluge.

Book V. The Crossing of the Red Sea.

The opening lines of Book I and the closing lines of Book V, however, make it clear that Avitus, like Milton, has in mind the one great theme of human depravity and ultimate redemption. The poem begins:

Quidquid agit varios humana in gente labores,
Unde brevem carpunt mortalia tempora vitam,
Vel quod polluti vitiantur origine mores,
Quos aliena premunt priscorum facta parentum,
Addatur quanquam nostra de parte reatus,
Quod tamen amisso dudum peccatur honore,
Ascribam tibi, prime pater, qui semine mortis
Tollis succiduae vitalia germina proli.
Et licet hoc totum Christus persolverit in se,
Contraxit quantum percussa in stirpe propago:
Attamen auctoris vitio, qui debita lethi
Instituit, morbosque suis ac funera misit,
Vivit peccati moribunda in carne cicatrix².

And at the close of the poem, referring to the Red Sea crossing and the fate of Pharaoh, he concludes:

¹ *De Consolatoria Laude Castitatis*, dedicated to his sister Fuscina, who was a nun.

² AVITUS, I, 1-13. For English translation, see below, p.228.

Inclytus egregium solemnī carmine ductor
 Describit factum, toto quod psallitur orbe,
 Cum purgata sacris deletur culpa fluentis,
 Emittitque novam parientis lymp̄ha lavacri
 Prolem, post veteres quos edidit Eva reatus.
 De qua sermonem praemisso carmine sumpsit,
 Luctificos replicat tenuis dum pagina lapsus.
 Si quid triste fruit, dictum est quod paupere versu,
 Terserit hoc sacri memorabilis unda triumphī,
 Gaudia quo resonant, crimen quo tollitur omne
 Per lavacrum, vivitque novus pereunto veterno:
 Quo pona consurgunt, quo noxia facta necantur,
 Israel verus sacris quo tingitur undis,
 Consona quo resonat persultans turba tropaeum,
 Quo praecurrentis complentur dona figurae,
 Quae pius explicuit per quinque volumina vates,
 Nosque tubam stipula sequimur, numerumque tenentes
 Petimus hoc tenui cymbae nunc littore portum¹.

A brief summary will indicate the attempts of Avitus to organize his poem about this theme. Book I describes the creation of the world, including man and woman, who are placed in the Garden and warned by God against eating from the Forbidden Tree. In Book II, Satan assumes the form of a serpent and successfully tempts Eve. She in turn seduces Adam. In Book III, God passes judgement on the guilty pair and announces that the earth and all its creatures will rapidly deteriorate as the result of man's fall and will consequently suffer numerous punitive disasters, ending in general destruction. Book IV describes the Flood as one of these visitations on a wicked world; but the poet stresses also the idea that the deliverance of Noah is a symbol of human salvation to come. Book V tells of the rescue of the Israelites and the death of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Avitus makes it clear that this event is symbolic of baptism, with its death of the old man and its saving of the soul, thus restoring the race that had been lost through the Fall. The inclusion, in Books IV and V, of subject-matter so unusual as the Flood and the Red Sea story, is explicable on at least two grounds: (i) that they lend themselves to vivid poetic treatment, and (ii) that by employing the allegorical method of scriptural interpretation inaugurated by Philo and further developed by Origen, Avitus can use these stories as symbols of Doom and Redemption, as a presentation of that great sequel to the Fall which completes and rounds out the Church's view of human history. It may be remembered that the Flood and the Crossing of the Red Sea are the chief episodes described by Milton in Books XI and XII respectively of *Paradise Lost*. Whereas Milton, however, keeps them within the framework of his action in Eden by having them revealed to Adam by Michael, Avitus presents them chronologically, as later historical developments issuing from the

¹ AVITUS, V, 702-719. For English translation, see below, pp.241-242.

Fall. That he came close to the other, more dramatic device, is shown by his having God foretell to Adam, in Book III, such disasters as the murder of Abel by Cain.

The Latin style of Avitus, while not distinguished, is reasonably correct, and is strongly influenced by Vergil. This extends to the repetition of phrases, e.g., "O terque quaterque beati" (Avitus, V, 547, and Vergil's *Aeneid*, I, 94), and "Hic ver adsiduum" (Avitus, I, 222, and Vergil, *Georgics*, II, 149). Even a whole sentence, addressed by Meliboeus to Tityrus in the First *Eclogue*, — "Non equidem invideo, miror magis" — is lifted bodily and ascribed by Avitus to the Serpent in its speech with Eve (II, 157).

Two important questions may well be raised in connection with this poem: (1) To what extent does Avitus show originality in using the materials of the *Genesis*-story? (2) What evidence is there that Milton was familiar with Avitus?

As already intimated in analysing the structure of his epic, Avitus has shown considerable freedom of treatment. This is of three kinds: (i) straight expansion of Scripture by the multiplication of minor details; (ii) the imaginative addition of elements not in Scripture and sometimes even in contradiction to the Biblical version; and (iii) the intrusion of didactic passages. Good examples of extensive amplification are as follows:

- (1) The formation of man from the dust of the ground is described in minute anatomical detail, both internal and external. (I, 73-127).
- (2) There is an extensive description of the Garden of Eden. The river Gihon is identified with the Nile, and this serves as an excuse for an account of the annual inundation in Egypt. (I, 193-298).
- (3) The dialogue between Eve and the Serpent is very much amplified. (II, 136-251).
- (4) Pharaoh's army, in pursuit of the Israelites, is described in great detail. (V. 497-525).

There are still more numerous instances where Avitus uses his own imagination:

- (1) He briefly touches on the nuptials of Adam and Eve, with the angels singing hymenaeal songs and with the stars as marriage torches. (I, 188-192).
- (2) He brings Satan in person to the Garden, and gives him a long speech of bitter envy in which he resolves to make mankind share his punishment in hell. (II, 89-116).
- (3) Satan, by supernatural power, assumes the form of a serpent. The serpent's deadly beauty is described in detail. (I, 118-135).
- (4) After Adam and Eve realize their guilt, Satan, in serpent form, addresses them insultingly and vanishes through the clouds. (II, 408-423).
- (5) God foretells to Adam the coming disasters of the world, including the death of Abel. (III, 177-194).
- (6) The deterioration of the world through diseases, storms, warfare and civil strife is portrayed. (III, 311-361).

- (7) Gabriel, rather than God, comes down and warns Noah to make an ark. (IV, 190-292).
- (8) Men make fun of Noah's undertaking. (IV, 306-336).
- (9) The animals voluntarily report for embarkation. (IV, 345-356).
- (10) Gabriel, rather than God, battens down the hatches on the ark. (IV, 418-424).
- (11) The failure of the raven to return to Noah is explained on the ground that it found plenty of floating corpses on which to perch and feed. (IV, 563-568).

Still more numerous are the didactic passages, often of great length, inserted by the poet-bishop:

- (1) The sleep of Adam during the creation of Eve is compared to the sleep of Christ in death, during which his bride, the Church, issued from his side. (I, 160-169).
- (2) A long passage is inserted on Lot's escape from Sodom, in order to compare Eve with Lot's wife and to point out how lucky Lot was that *his* wife hadn't time to persuade him to share her fate. (II, 276-407).
- (3) The tree of the Cross is contrasted with the tree of the Fall and even with the figtree from which the first garments came. (III, 17-23).
- (4) The serpent is contrasted with the brazen serpent and with the crucified Christ whom the latter symbolizes. (III, 24-26).
- (5) The sense of guilt of Adam and Eve is compared to the sense of guilt on the part of man at the Judgement Day. This gives Avitus a good opening for a vivid description of the torments of hell. (III, 32-65).
- (6) The story of Dives and Lazarus is brought in, in order that the unavailing repentance of Dives in hell may be cited as a warning. (III, 220-310).
- (7) The symbolism of the Good Shepherd, the Good Samaritan, and the father of the Prodigal is elaborated in proof of God's readiness to restore man. (III, 362-425).
- (8) The deafness of Noah's contemporaries to his warnings is contrasted with the ready repentance of Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah. (IV, 352-387).
- (9) The floating ark is likened to the Church in an age of warfare and persecution. (IV, 493-501).
- (10) The unreturning raven is compared to the Jews, who have not remained true to God's purposes. (IV, 569-578).
- (11) The rainbow is explained as a symbol of Christ as the intermediary between Heaven and Earth. (IV, 621-658).
- (12) The blood of the Paschal Lamb is compared with that of the Atonement. (V, 247-259).
- (13) The Red Sea episode is taken as a symbol of baptism. (V, 704-721).

Altogether, one may say that less than one-quarter of the total poem is a close paraphrase of the Old Testament.

Evidence that Milton was familiar with Avitus is either circumstantial or textual, and is not conclusive in either case.

The epic of Avitus was certainly accessible to him. It was printed as early as 1507, and had appeared in nine different editions¹ before Milton was born. It was popular with the grammar schools of the time. It may even have been studied at St. Paul's school while Milton was a pupil there; but this is only speculation.

Internal evidence from Milton's poems is more convincing, but even here one must be cautious. In the case of a poem that had been well known to Western Europe for over eleven centuries, relevant details in its treatment of the Eden story might easily have been mediated to Milton through other intervening authors. Thus the envious speech of Satan in sight of Eden and the elaborate description of the serpent are both found in Grotius's *Adamus Exsul* (which is a certain source of *Paradise Lost*) and need not be referred back to Avitus. Two passages in Avitus seem echoed in Milton's early Latin poetry, written at the age of 16 (cf. *Elegy III*, 49-50, with Avitus, I, 193-195, and *In Quintum Novembris*, 7-23, with Avitus, II, 56-76); but these again may be coincidental. The strongest evidence lies not in parallel conceptions but in a very close correspondence in phraseology, so close as to suggest verbal recollections on the part of the blind Milton. The three most striking of these happen to be among the most arresting of Milton's utterances:

- (1) "All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:" (*Paradise Lost*, I, 106-108).
Cf. with Avitus (again Satan speaking):
Non tamen in totum periit; pars magna retentat
Vim propriam summaque cluit virtute nocendi. (II, 95-96).
- (2) "And heav'nly Quires the Hymenaeon sung . . ." (*P.L.*, IV, 711).
Cf. with Avitus, I, 189-190:
Festivum dicebat hymen castoque pudori
Concinit angelicum iuncto modulamine carmen.
- (3) "Greedily she ingorged without restraint,
And knew not eating Death . . ." (*P.L.*, IX, 791-792).
Cf. with Avitus, II, 231-232:
Adnuit insidiis pomumque vorata momordit.
Dulce subit virus, capitur mors horrida pastu.

One such correspondence might be accidental, but the force of their combined evidence is strong.

A general impression of the Latin poem's character may be gained from the following extracts in English translation. I have rendered the epic hexameters of the original by blank verse:

¹ The editions are as follows: Bologna, 1507; Paris, 1508; Cologne, 1509; Paris, 1510; Lyons, 1536; Paris, 1545; Lyons, 1562, 1589, 1604. There were still other editions in the 17th century.

TRANSLATED EXTRACTS

(a) I, 1-13

Whence various ills afflict the human race
 And whence our mortal times assign to life
 Its brevity — a lapse through character
 Corrupted at its source by our first parents
 And through the added trespass of ourselves
 In that, though honour perished long ago,
 We still persist in sinning — this my theme
 I dedicate to Thee, Father of Life,
 Who from the very seed of death dost rear
 New living offshoots for a dying race.
 And though Christ in Himself atoned for all
 By His engraftment on the afflicted stock,
 Yet through the fault of Adam, who incurred
 The primal debt of death and sore disease
 For him and all his seed, the fatal scar
 Of mortal sin lives ever in the flesh.

(Avitus then describes the creation of the universe, plants and animals, but much more briefly than in Scripture and without proceeding by days. God gives a lengthy speech on the importance of creating man.)

(b) I, 73-130

And having deigned to touch the brittle earth,
 He moistens dust and moulds it into mud
 And with rich wisdom fashions a new body.
 Just as a workman whose artistic skill
 Is to mould softened wax to yielding forms
 And fill out faces with his hand or fashion
 Bodies in plaster or compose the likeness
 Of a statue in the lump, even so now
 The Almighty Father kneads the yielding earth
 That is to take on life, and the soft mud
 He moulds to man. The citadel of the head
 He marks upon the lofty summit, fitting
 With senses rational the countenance,
 And piercing it with seven apertures
 Ready for smelling, hearing, sight and taste.
 The sense of touch will be the only judge
 That will be active through the entire body
 And spread its consciousness through all the members.
 The supple tongue is matched to the hollow palate
 That modulated language may resound
 Upon the smitten air, when it is forced
 In the sound-chamber as by plectrum-stroke.

From the broad body, lower down, the breast
Extends stout arms, ending in fingered palms.
Below the gullet comes the midmost belly,
Which with soft covering on either side
Protects the vitals. Twofold is the leg,
In order that man's walking may proceed
By bending knees and alternating step.
But elsewhere, as the one Creator builds it,
The neck, extending down from the skull's base,
Adds structures of vast sinew. Stiff with knobs,
The spine in close communication spreads
A double wickerwork of ordered ribs.
The inward parts are framed for life's new uses;
A natural shelter for the heart is made,
Whose hanging mass amid the crowded vitals
Is hidden deep. The lung is added, too,
Which feeds upon thin air, when, being given
Nostrils of gentle breathing, it takes in
And renders back again the atmosphere,
And then once more new inhalation knows.
The right side of the liver holds a fountain
That must with blood be quickened; thence the veins
Spread a blind river through the viscera.
To the left part, the spleen's rule is assigned,
By which, they say, the hair and cut nails grow.
These in the living body have their source,
Yet when they are cut off, they feel no pain;
From the spleen's power they renew their growth.

After the image of this novelty
Lay there completed, and the moulded mud
Arrived at every feature, then the clay
Was turned to flesh and in the muscles' midst
The hardened bones acquired oozy marrow.
Blood in the veins is poured, and ruddiness
Touches the pallid lips with living colour;
Then from the body's length all pallor flees
And blushing paints the snowy countenance.
Thus the whole man to living grows accustomed
After the due completion of his members,
While the warm, steaming vitals only wait
To gain a soul. This the Creator brings
From a pure source, and to the upright limbs
Imparts as a directing principle.
Out of His everlasting mouth He pours
The gentle breath, and breathes into the man;
And as the latter takes and draws it in,
He learns the breezes of repeated breathing.

Then, when intelligence had realized
 The experience of newborn consciousness
 And the pure light of reason had shone forth,
 The man arose, and walked upon the earth.

(The Creator warns Adam that he is to obey and worship God alone.
 On the sixth night, God imposes a heavy sleep on Adam and creates Eve
 from one of his ribs.)

(c) I, 160-169

A symbol of this sleep was manifest
 In that death which the incarnate Christ endured
 By His own choice. As He, about to die,
 Was hanging bound upon the lofty cross,
 Atoning for the sins of all the world,
 A licitor thrust a spear into His side.
 Out of the wound, straightway, gushed water forth,
 A living bath for nations there outpoured;
 Then also flowed a wave of blood, that sealed
 His testimony. Then He fell asleep;
 And as He lay at rest two nights, the Church,
 Issuing from His breast, became His bride.

(God tells them to be fruitful, and faithful to one another.)

(d) I, 188-192

Thus in alliance everlasting joining
 Their mutual vows, Marriage was making merry,
 And with chaste modesty of mien she chanted
 Angelic songs of blended harmony.
 Their bridal chamber was this Paradise;
 Their dowry was the glory of the world;
 And the stars waved their torches of glad flame.

(Preparatory to locating Eden, a description of the Hindoos of the East
 is given.)

(e) I, 210-257

Beyond the Hindoos, where the world begins,
 A sacred grove abides, whose citadel
 Is inaccessible to mortal man,
 Shut in by an eternal boundary.
 Since Adam, author of the first sin, fell
 And was expelled most rightly for his guilt
 Out of the happy seat, this holy earth
 Has had the angels as its ministers.
 Here winter never comes with change of season,
 Nor come the summer suns, replacing cold,
 As the high circles of the sky bring back

The warm year or the meadows white with frost
And bitter freezing. Here a constant spring
Maintains the tender mildness of the sky;
The fierce south wind is absent; yielding clouds
Pass ever from the blue's perennial calm.
Nor does the nature of the place need showers,
Which never come, but the contented shoots
Are dow'ed with their own dew. All of the ground
Is green forever, and the warm earth's face
Shines softly; grasses ever clothe the hills,
And leaves the trees; the trees are spread abroad
With flowers abundant and with juicy twigs.
Whatever a whole year with us begets,
There a brief month brings on to ripened fruit.
The lilies shine undrooping in the sun;
The violet from its heat endures no harm;
While the immortal favour of its face
Preserves the gentle beauty of the rose.
Thus neither winter nor the parching summer
Molest at all; mild autumn fills the year
With fruits; the spring with flowers; here as well,
Though rumour false assigns them to the Sabaeans,
Grow cinnamons, whose boughs the Phoenix gathers
When, at the end of life, he perishes
And then, his own successor, once again
Rises afresh from death that he has sought;
For, not content once only to be born,
His weary limbs renew their ancient power
And raise to youth the age by fire consumed.
The branches of this tree, exuding balms,
Provide an endless flow from its rich stem;
And if by chance a light wind stir its breath,
The whole rich forest, moved by whispering breezes,
Trembles throughout its leaves and healthful flowers,
Dispensing fragrant odours to the earth.
Here, from a lucent eddy, flows a spring
Whose gleaming light outshines the grace of silver
Or the chill beauty of the ice. Green pebbles
Sparkle upon the margins of the streams,
And all the gems that the world's ostentation
Gapes at with us lie scattered there as stones.
The fields in varied hues are decked, and paint
The meadows with a natural diadem.

(Avitus describes the four great rivers — Tigris, Euphrates, Geon or Nile, and Physon or Ganges — which have their source in Eden. God warns Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He ascends to Heaven. *Book II.* The state of innocence is described.)

(f) II, 35-276

Such blessings were the lot of these first creatures —
 The sacred primogenitors of our race —
 Until, in their first conflict, sin o'ercame them
 Through a deceiving enemy. The latter
 Had formerly been an angel; but in time,
 Kindled by pride to arrogant endeavours,
 On fire with his own crime, he came to think
 That he had made himself, his own creator;
 And so, conceiving frenzy in his heart,
 He then denied his Maker, and declared:
 "I shall achieve the title of a god
 And set my seat eternal in the heavens,
 Being in nature like the Most High God
 And not unequal in omnipotence."
 As he thus boasted, the Almighty Power
 Hurl'd him from Heaven, stripped of former honours.
 He, who had shone the foremost in the ranks
 Of all created things, now foremost paid
 The penalty of Judgement yet to come.
 A heavier doom indeed to him is due,
 At whose fall one may marvel, for the author
 Enhances still the crime; in an unknown sinner,
 The guilt is less; transgressions of the great
 Incur with greater evil greater blame.
 Since into hidden things he could project
 A keen intelligence, and could foresee
 Things yet to come, unlocking Nature's secrets,
 Without a doubt there yet survives in him
 An angelic essence as a fervent force.
 He is a monster horrible to tell of,
 And notable in portents. All dread deeds
 Committed through the length and breadth of earth
 Are taught by him; he guides the murderous hand,
 The wicked weapon; like a hidden robber,
 He carries on his fight through public crimes.
 Often he now assumes the guise of men,
 Now that of savage beasts, thus varying
 With cunning wiles his strange appearances.
 Sometimes he suddenly becomes a bird,
 That falsely flies; and honorable forms
 Again he takes; as a virgin fair in body
 He lures warm glances on to joys obscene.
 Often as gold he flashes to the greedy,
 Kindling their souls with love of treacherous wealth
 And then escaping their deluded grasp
 Like a vain phantom. Warranty of faith
 Or graceful form he grants to no man living.

But by whatever means he can succeed
To catch, and hold, and harm the human soul,
He assumes an outer semblance, false of face,
Most suitable for guile and hidden fraud.
To this cruel fiend, a greater power yet
Is granted: that he should present himself
A holy saint. Such is the force of nature
Bestowed of old on this created spirit,
Formed upright by its Maker but perverted
And turned to evil uses by itself.

Now when this fiend saw newly made mankind
Leading a happy life in a quiet home
Unvexed by dangers, ruling the subject world
Under accepted law with peaceful joy,
A spark of jealousy lit sudden passion
And fiery envy kindled into flame.
Recent in time, it happened, was the fall
In which he had been toppled from on high
And drawn his guilty followers headlong down.
Musing in heart on this his late defeat,
He mourns the more to mark that what he lost
Another now possesses. Then his shame
Is mixed with bitterness, and, from his soul
Unfolding woe, he sighs his anguish forth:

"What grief assails us that this sudden creature
Has risen here, and that a hated race
Grows greater by our downfall! Virtue once
Held me exalted; but behold me now
Rejected, driven out, while clay succeeds
To our angelic honour. Earth grasps heaven;
Dust, reared in a vile body, reigns, alas,
And power, transferred to man, is lost to us.
All is not lost, however, for pristine force
Of will survives, pre-eminent in valour
To accomplish evil. Neither does delay
Give any pleasure; I shall now advance
With joy to the assault on these, secure
In peace and ignorant simplicity
And hence unwary to oppose my weapons.
Better are they seduced while still alone,
Before they bring their fertile offspring forth
To spread through endless ages. Seed immortal
Must not be born of earth. Now at its source
Let the race perish, and its vanquished head,
Through his defeat, become the seed of death!
Let the beginnings of man's life bring forth
The risks of death! Let all in one be smitten!
The root that has been ruined will not make

A green and living tree-top. In my grief,
 At least this consolation can remain:
 That if I cannot mount to Heaven again,
 Heaven can be likewise closed to humankind.
 It will seem easier to have fall'n, if man,
 God's new creation, shall be likewise lost.
 Let him then be a comrade in my ruin,
 My mate in punishment, and let him share
 With all of us the flames that I foresee.
 No hard sort of deception shall I seek;
 I'll rather point him out the easy path
 In treading which, once, of my own accord,
 I tumbled headlong. The same arrogance
 That cast me from the kingdom in the sky
 Will drive man from the door of Paradise."
 Thus spake he, and he closed his speech with groans.

It happened that the serpent, wise in heart,
 Surpassed in subtlety all living things.
 His form the Wicked One above all others
 Decided to assume. His æry body,
 Changing to sudden serpent, he surrounds
 With viperous flesh, a snake with outstretched neck,
 Painting his gleaming throat to maculate,
 Roughening the sliding spirals of his flanks
 And arming all his back with bristling scales;
 As when, in the opening months of early spring,
 The summer in advance sends pleasant warmth
 After the numbing cold, from the old year
 The viper, now reviving, makes escape,
 And sloughs the dry skin from its slender body,
 And leaving its earthy covert, issues forth,
 Dreadful of form, in beauty to be feared.
 Its eyes flash awfully, as with sharpened sight
 It grows accustomed to the hoped-for sun
 And simulating mildness, in its throat
 Whispers the hisses of incessant song
 And from its mouth extends a triple tongue.

When therefore, bent on ill-persuading fraud,
 The Deceiver had put on a serpent's form,
 He hastened to the Garden; for by chance
 The happy young folk from a leafy branch
 Were plucking rosy apples. Then the serpent,
 Fearing that he could not seduce the man
 From the firm resolution of his mind
 By sly injected poison, soon proceeds
 With climbing coils to mount an upright tree;
 And having reached Eve's ear in subtle wise,

With gentle voice he gains an easy hearing:
"O blessed maiden, O most beautiful,
The grace of all the earth, whose radiant form
The bloom of rosy modesty adorns,
Thou art the destined mother of the race;
The great earth waits upon thy motherhood.
Thou art the first and certain joy of man,
His comfort, without whom he were not great.
Thus thy sweet spouse, to whom, as is ordained,
Thou wilt bear children, is by love of thee
Rightly made captive. A deserved abode
Is thine upon the peak of Paradise.
The very substance of the subject world
Trembles before thee. Whatsoever sky
And earth create and all the sea brings forth
In its great gulf are destined for thy use.
Nature denies thee nothing; see how power
Over all things is given to thy hand.
I envy not, indeed; I rather marvel.
As, none the less, free touch must be restrained
From one delightful tree, I long to know
Who with dread order has begrudged such gifts
And mingled hunger with the richest things."
These evil whispers formed a pleasing voice.
What folly closed thy mind with darkness then,
O woman, thus to parley with a snake,
Conversing with a brute? Is it not shameful
That beasts should speak as men? Dost thou endure
The monster, and vouchsafe him a reply?

When thus seductive Eve into her ears
Received the deadly poison and accepted
Praise without warrant, with vain lips she spoke,
Answering the snake: "O viper, with sweet words
Most charmingly endowed, thou art mistaken,
To think that God assigns us fasts, forbidding
To nourish these our bodies with rich food.
Our Maker has most readily provided
All of these things to be enjoyed at will,
For He has loosened all the reins of life.
Only these apples must we handle not;
The rest can satisfy with ample diet.
For the Creator, swearing with dread voice,
Said that if harmful freedom broke His law,
We should atone straightway for our offense
With a certain death. That which He meant by death,
Do thou now willingly explain to me,
Most learned serpent; to the uninstructed,
The meaning of this matter is not known."

Then did the cunning snake, master of death,
 Gladly teach death and speak to captive ears:
 "Woman, thou fear'st an empty term of terror.
 The sentence of swift death shall touch thee not.
 The envious Father has not given thee
 An equal lot with His, nor granted knowledge
 Of things supreme, reserved but for Himself.
 For what can it avail to apprehend
 Sheer beauty or perceive the universe,
 While the blind soul is wretchedly imprisoned?
 Nature has given equally thy senses
 And open eyes to brutes; one sun serves all;
 The beast is dowered with thy power of sight.
 Take rather my advice; mingle thy mind
 With those above in godhood, yea, extend
 Aspiring, keen intelligence to Heaven;
 Because this apple, which ye fear to touch,
 As being a thing forbidden, will empow'r you
 To know all things the Father has kept secret.
 Restrain not then at all thy touch withheld,
 Neither let captive pleasure long be bridled
 By this His law. For when thou shalt have tasted
 The juice divine, thine eyesight shall be purged,
 Making thee equal to the gods in vision,
 Knowing all holy things as well as harmful,
 Discerning just from wicked, false from true."

The credulous woman, with a yielding look,
 Marvels upon him as he promises
 Such gifts with whisper false. Now more and more
 She hesitates, and turns her sense aside,
 And sways uncertain thinking more towards death.
 When he perceived that she was vanquished now
 By an impending judgement, mentioning
 Once more the name and station of the gods,
 He pulled one apple down from all of those
 Upon the fatal tree; enveloped it
 In sweetest odour; recommended it
 For pleasing sight; and offered it to her
 As still she wavered. Neither does the woman,
 Evilly credulous, reject the gift,
 But takes the fatal apple in her hands,
 With open lips and nostrils scents the fruit,
 And ignorantly plays with death to come.

How often, as the apple nears her mouth,
 Does her right hand draw backward in remorse
 And trembling with the weight of reckless evil
 Retires and shuns the outcome of the crime!
 Nevertheless, she would be like the gods:

The poison of ambition has crept in.
Opposing love and terror drive her mind
Now hither and now thither. Arrogance
Sometimes assails the law, and now the law
Comes to the rescue. Thus the dubious wave
Of a divided mind seethes in its struggles.
Nor does the instigating serpent cease
From his deception, and he shows the food
To her thus hesitating, and complains
At her delay, yet all the while rejoices
At a ruin hanging headlong, soon to fall.

When she at length was vanquished, and had reached
The deadlier decision to essay
Eternal hunger through the food of crime,
To satisfy the serpent by the food
That she herself should take, she gave assent
To his dark ambush; greedily she bit
The apple then; sweet poison enters in,
And grim death is devoured as she eats.
Here first the cunning snake restrains his joy,
And savage victory conceals its triumph.

Adam meanwhile, the deed unknown, returning
From elsewhere in the Garden, joyfully,
Through the broad meadow's grass, came seeking now
The embraces and chaste kisses of his wife.
And her he met, in whom then rashness stirred up
Fell female frenzy in an audacious heart.
Thus she began to speak, for she still carried
The fatal fruit, half-eaten, in her hand
And offered it to her unhappy husband:
"Take food, sweet husband, from the seed of life,
Whose potency, perhaps, will make thee like
The Thunderer and equal to the gods.
I do not give this gift in ignorance,
But after due instruction. The first taste
Already lies within my vital parts,
With peril bold dissolving all debate.
Believe me willingly, it is a crime
For a man's mind to hesitate to do
What I, a woman, did. Thou wert afraid,
Perhaps, to go before me in this matter.
At least now follow me, and rouse thy spirits!
Why are thine eyes averted? Why delay
Successful enterprises, filching time
From all our honour that is now to come?"

Having thus spoken, she held out to him
The dish of conquering death; while perishing
In soul, they by their sin feed Death himself.

The unhappy man receives her whispered words
 Of evil counsel and is quite dislodged
 From his firm senses, nor does anxious fear
 Smite him with trembling hands, not even as much
 As when the woman shunned at first to taste.
 Rather, he follows swiftly; from the mouth
 Of her, his wretched wife, the unfirm man
 Seizes with firmness on a poisonous dower
 And fills his open throat with hostile food.
 His horrid maw had scarcely touched the apple
 With one bite, and its flavour scarce was tasted,
 When a sudden light shone forth around his head
 And gave him altered vision, drenched with sorrow.
 Man was not blind by nature. Form's perfection
 Owned not a face deprived of the use of sight.
 For blinder will you be, if not content
 To know alone the things a great Creator
 Has wished that you should know. The power of seeing
 Was given you for life. To gaze on death
 Comes of your own accord. So thus they groan
 Because their eyes are opened, for the fault
 Was clear now to the rebels, and their bodies
 Of obscene impulse had become aware.
 Then for the first they saw their nakedness.
 (Uncertain am I whether I should say
 That modesty was blotted out or born.)
 Now blushed a mind grown conscious of its guilt,
 And an imparted law of carnal will
 Fought in their members.

(A long passage narrates the parallel experience of Lot and his inquisitive wife.)

(g) II, 408-423

Then the victorious serpent, in glad triumph,
 Swaying his scaly head's empurpled crest,
 No longer hid his joy, till now concealed,
 But heaped harsh insults on the vanquished pair
 And railed against them thus: "Lo, there remains
 The godlike glory that I promised you!
 Believe me, all my knowledge is now yours;
 For I have shown you all, and guided you
 Through hidden ways; whatever cunning nature
 Refused to give, I have ordained for you.
 Hence I have consecrated you to me
 By an eternal lot. Neither has God,
 Although He formerly created you,
 Rights in you any more. Yes, let Him keep

The body once created by Himself.
The soul, which I have taught, is surely mine.
Mine is the greater part. To your Creator
You may owe much; but to your master, more."
He spake, and left them trembling in the gloom,
And his false body vanished through the clouds.

(Adam and Eve sew garments of fig-leaves to cover their shame.)

(h) III, 27-65

Meanwhile the Father through the gentle walks
Of the green Garden came, to pleasure in
Soft breezes dropping dew from a clear sky.
Then presently the pair, with startled ears,
Became aware Jehovah was at hand;
And with sad eye they hate and fear the day
As a witness of their now detected sin.
For if, by chance, a deep, vast pit had opened,
Or earth had yawned before them with dark mouth,
They had not hesitated in their fright
To descend with a headlong leap. If doom of death
Were even then at hand, their eagerness
To cover up their shame would grasp at it.
To flames or water they would give themselves,
Or the avenging right hand would with sword assail
The breast with a cruel wound. The wretches thus,
As soon as they have earned it, yearn for death,
Although no formal sentence has imposed it.
So first things mark earth's last things, and foretell
How like grief will impend when earth's old age
Shall be consumed at last, when sudden brightness
Shall smite all things, when Heaven's trump shall peal,
At which a messenger shall terrify
The smitten world before the Judge shall come.
Then, when the Shepherd shall have sorted out
The pure lambs, He shall place the unlike goats
In another quarter, sundering them between
With Chaos, which an eddying gulf of fire
Shall fill with brimstone waves, a vivid lake,
Flooding with flame, from which a burning cloud,
Drawn in a storm, is said of old to have poured
Lightnings like raindrops on the sins of Sodom,
When the black night rained fires, and from the sky
Death fell on all sides through the sultry air.
Sent likewise from the fiery fount of Hell,
Grim rivers flowed in ages not their own.
But whom the Judge in that dread hour shall sentence
To live beyond mortality and burn

In everlasting torment, them a doom
 Far heavier shall withdraw from hoped-for death.
 And though it had been better for their bodies,
 Dissolved in death, to take eternal rest,
 The grave shall vomit forth the unwilling ones,
 Whose sole desire would be to die again
 And lose once more the sense of agony;
 But in the fiery furnace they shall go,
 Whose flame is destined so to burn its fuel
 That it shall slacken not forevermore.

(God passes sentence on the serpent, Eve, and Adam, and foretells disasters to come.)

(i) III, 195-208

The Father clothed them then with skins of goats
 And drove them from the seat of Paradise.
 Together on the earth they fell in prayer;
 Then rose, and entered on an empty world,
 And made a rapid survey of all things.
 And though they saw green fields and springs and rivers,
 Blooms many-hued and fruits of many sorts,
 Yet ugly seems the world when they compare
 Its best with Paradise. They gaze in dread
 At all they see, and, as man's custom is,
 They love the more the blessings they have lost.
 The soil is narrowed, and as they bewail
 The waning of the earth, the world's dread end,
 Though unperceived, now threatens none the less.
 The day itself grows dim; they allege the light
 Withdrawn from the very sun; in distant skies
 The stars groan, and the firmament is seen,
 Though it was formerly scarce apprehended.

(There follows the story of Dives and Lazarus. The unavailing repentance of Dives in Hell, like that of Adam, ought to be a warning to all of us.)

(j) III, 317-347

Then grim disease and various pain crept in;
 Corrupted with dread rankness, earth infused
 Some plants with deadly juices. Fierce wild beasts
 Then first began to rage; then valour stirred
 The fearful up to fight; claw, tooth, hoof, horn
 To weapons turned; the very elements
 Themselves broke primal laws, and all things strove
 To violate their faith with mortal man.
 The seas were blown upon by winds; waves rolled;
 The angry ocean in new frenzy surged;
 Then first in skies with horrid darkness hid,

Clouds, seeking to afflict man's painful toil,
 Poured volleyed hailstones from the stormy heaven,
 Begrudging harvests to the pallid earth.
 Nay, earth itself, grown hostile to itself,
 Changed for the worse the seed it had received.

These things the two first mortals then perceived.

As for the losses their posterity
 Would some day bear, none could enumerate,
 Not with a hundred tongues or a voice of iron,
 Nor even if the poet Mantua bore
 And Homer were to blend their varying strains.
 For who could tell such tumult? Who, in short,
 Could trace the floods of anguish that shall flow
 Down through the centuries? Men rage in arms;
 The earth is shaken with incessant fear;
 Streams of blood flow, and more is thirsted for.
 What shall I say of lofty cities, famed
 For their inhabitants, now turned to deserts?
 Of nations spilt by devastating rapine?
 Of a torn earth made empty of its offspring?
 Of masters humbled into servitude
 And servants in their turn made masters, soon
 To perish by the fate of war, the lot
 The race has still ordained for famous blood?

(Avitus cites the parables of the potter, the lost coin, the lost sheep, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan as proofs of Christ's readiness to restore man to the Paradise lost by Adam. *Book IV*. The human race gives itself up to lawlessness and evil, thus developing the original sin of mankind. The story of the Flood. The Ark is symbolic of the Church in a world of sin. *Book V*. The story of the death of the Egyptians and the deliverance of the Israelites at the Red Sea is taken as symbolic of baptism.)

(k) V, 704-721

This mighty deed their famous general¹
 Has hymned in a solemn song, that now is sung
 Throughout the world whene'er a mortal fault
 Is purged with sacred baptism and the streams
 Of that life-giving bath yield up new offspring
 In place of the guilty ones that Eve brought forth.
 Of her my slender page has made discourse
 In the foregoing poem, while it told
 The lamentable story of the Fall.
 If, in that theme, my poor verse has been sad,
 Let grief be swept away in this great wave
 Of memorable triumph, in which joy

¹ Moses, cf. *Genesis*, chap. xv.

Breaks forth exultant, every wrong is ended,
The new lives while the old life perishes,
Good things arise, iniquitous deeds are slain,
And the true Israel by the sacred sea
Bathes in salvation; a harmonious throng
Thus celebrates a glorious victory,
In limning which due symbols are supplied
By the devout prophet in five books of old,
Anticipating holy gifts to come.

His trumpet we have followed with our flute,
And now seek harbour for our slender bark.

WATSON KIRKCONNELL.
