

# Expressive Individualism, the Cult of the Artist as Genius, and Milton's Lucifer<sup>1</sup>

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I propose an 'intellectual genealogy' of the widespread contemporary lifestyle called 'expressive individualism', tracing it back first to the cult of the artist as genius, which flourished during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but which has been democratized and universalized in our time. I then trace it back one step further, somewhat surprisingly, to the altered depiction of Lucifer John Milton gives in his poem *Paradise Lost*. Milton's Lucifer rejects not only Jesus as the highest creature, he rejects the Father as father; he announces 'I know none before me; I am self-begot.' To the extent that we embrace the ethic of 'expressive individualism', therefore, we are implicitly committed to Milton's Lucifer as an archetype for human fulfilment, which I suggest, however, is a toxic model.

Although the following essay is literary-philosophical, it arose from a practical interest. I have been struck by how widespread today is the complaint about the 'inadequate father'. Of course a father may be inadequate in diverse ways, either absconding, absent and weak, or overbearing, bullying, and tyrannical, or some combination of these. Further, I am not restricting the term 'father' to its narrow biological sense, but using it rather as a metaphor

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for any institution or structure which an individual or a group feels should have been in place to guide, direct, and protect them in important situations, but did not do its job properly. Consequently they are willing to concede they are not all they could have been, but they insist it is not their fault, rather the fault of the 'father' who should have done his job better. This ties in with the fashionable appeal of 'victimhood'. Everybody today seems to want to cast themselves as a 'victim', for reasons similar to those mentioned above. If you are a 'victim', then there must be an 'oppressor' – and some 'parent' organization that should have guided, directed, and protected you against the oppressor, but again did not do its job adequately. Also with a 'victim' there is initially a presumption of innocence, while an 'oppressor' is presumed to be 'guilty'. It is striking how many individuals and groups around the world today choose to perceive themselves, and to present themselves to others, as 'victims'; this is a bit strange, because being a victim carries with it a faint whiff of shame. Other things being equal, it is more flattering to appear the victor or winner in a contest. Nevertheless, this has become a preferred characterization of our age, perhaps because it carries with it a rhetorical advantage that trumps all others. If you are able to cast yourself as a 'victim', and have others accept this, you disarm and neutralize criticism, not only of what you are, but of what you are currently doing – because the latter can be presented as a just 'compensation' for what you have suffered. As with guilt, there is no built-in quota or statute of limitations; this could continue indefinitely. This rhetoric was not as common thirty or forty years ago.

There is another relevant factor, the 'celebrity-liberationist' lifestyle that has been diffused into the general population since the 1960's and has become a default secular ethic of our time, replacing the traditional Judeo-Christian decalogue. The former is invoked as a justification for aggressively seeking fame and fortune, and making no attempt to conceal this; rather than worrying that such an attitude will cause offense, it is worn proudly and defiantly in the hope that others will identify with it, thereby branding the performer a cultural hero. This popular strategy towards fulfilment itself rests on a metaphysic of 'expressive individualism', a position that holds that the supreme ethical imperative to which other obligations must be subordinated is for each to bring forward their hidden noumenal core, the only source of value, into phenomenal appearances where it may be admired and benefit others and such that creation will for the first time be complete. This change in Western culture made possible by greater affluence and security represents a trickle-down phenomenon and democratization of the awe reserved for the artist revered as a genius during the nineteenth century, now spread to the entire population. We should all go on TV shows like the 'X Factor', or 'Britain's got Talent' to sing and dance our way to stardom. Anything that constrains this expansion, which interrupts or limits this transfer, is to be rejected as parental abuse, psychological repression, or cultural imperialism.

My thesis is as follows. Lucifer and Jesus may be used as 'archetypes' responding to a Father who makes extraordinary demands of his sons. The

one rebels, the other obeys. Through John Milton's altered portrait of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*, and the historical impact of this portrait on the 19th century cult of the artist as genius, and from that to the lifestyle of 'expressive individualism' that has become the default secular ethic of our own time, Lucifer and not Jesus has become the dominant archetype for the modern imagination denying or killing a father perceived as making a heavy, and perhaps excessive, demand. Through the Judaeo-Christian scriptures Jesus functions as a contrasting archetype, carrying forward an alternative response to a father making an extraordinary request.

I am not 'doing' religion here; I am doing 'culture'. Every culture proposes to its members consciously or unconsciously certain archetypes for their self-realization. We have assumed that the dominant archetype for our culture for the past several hundred years has been Christian. It has not, it has been Luciferian. And the source is John Milton, who pulled off in a sense the 'perfect crime'. While parading as a Christian, he in fact supported Lucifer in his revolt against the 'inadequate' Father who had imposed a difficult task. Milton ratified and celebrated Lucifer's response; he crafted a positive and even compelling portrait of Lucifer and planted it in the Western psyche where it became the dominant archetype for the modern period. It is as if someone stole the family jewel, substituted a glass copy, and no one caught on or noticed the difference. Worse, because this 'jewel' corrupts and kills the wearer, rather than enhancing their beauty.

First a background story. The theme of the inadequate father finds its locus classicus in the Bible in the story of David and his son Absalom. Absalom has a sister, Tamar, and a half-brother Amnon. Amnon rapes Tamar. Absalom waits two full years for his father David to do something, but David does nothing. Absalom then kills Amnon himself and flees to his relatives. David could still reach him there, but again does nothing. Absalom stays away three years until finally 'the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon (II Sam 13:37-39). Absalom feels disgust for his father; David's yearning for Absalom is derived, beyond parental love, from guilt and self-loathing at his own lack of action. He cannot bring himself to confess this to Absalom, however, even though it is he who wants to be forgiven. When David finally admits Absalom into his presence after five years absence, all he can do is kiss him wordlessly. Absalom has done what David should have done, and David recognizes this; Absalom is the man David should have been, and is not. Although Absalom is officially the criminal, he is the morally superior. In this instance David is a coward, and wants to be allowed to remain a coward – and remain king! Absalom cannot accept this and rebels against his father. When David learns that against his orders Absalom has been killed in battle, he disgraces and humiliates himself by wailing all night in the presence of his troops, who then slink home as though they had lost rather than won.

In this article I concentrate on two points: the improbable historical connection between the Lucifer of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the cult of the

artist as genius during the 19th century, and second, the lifestyle that has been functioning as a kind of default ethic for about half a century now, described by the sociologist Robert Bellah and the philosopher Charles Taylor as 'expressive individualism'. I will start with 'expressive individualism', then go back to the origin of this tradition in Milton's altered portrait of Lucifer, and then show how this transfers to the portrait of the artist as a genius, that is, someone who imitates Lucifer in announcing 'I have none before me, I am self-begot'.

As far as I have determined, Robert Bellah was the first to coin the term 'expressive individualism' in his book *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and then in his contribution to a book he co-authored in 1990 entitled *The Good Society*. This term has recently been taken up and expanded by Charles Taylor in chapter 13 of his major work *A Secular Age* (2007) (pp. 473-504). Taylor follows Lionel Trilling in charting the romantic revolt against the neo-classical constraints, throwing off any subservience to external norms and formal rules, privileging first 'sincerity', meaning an external expression which mirrors and matches one's interior feelings, and then the more demanding Existential call for 'authenticity'. In *A Secular Age* Taylor explores in detail the life style of 'expressive individualism' as it descends from the Romantic movement, and has invaded the contemporary consumer culture. He addresses such issues as the sexual revolution, the call to openness and a toleration of divergent lifestyles, the concentration on self-fulfilment, the smorgasbord, pick-and-choose approach to religion, fashion, politics, education, marriage, and leisure time activities, which it is impossible to summarize here. I refer you to chapter 13 of his massive book to see how this lifestyle has become truly the default ethic of our time.

What exactly is 'expressive individualism'? It's the set of priorities that comes to us through the media, through television, movies, advertising, but also now through the newer technologies of videos, internet, Facebook, blogging, texting, twitter, etc. It was noticed first among the celebrities who serve as models for many of our youth. People become celebrities in various ways – forming a popular rock band, acting in commercials or TV soap-operas, becoming champions in sports, fashion models, stand-up comics, news announcers, or weather girls. The goal is to achieve name and face recognition. Once this is attained, they may branch out to other media possibilities to take full advantage of their 'bankable' status, go on world tours or start talk shows and become social pundits. The first obligation of course is to stay in the public eye, which is necessary for any entertainer. There is nothing wrong with this, but because of the need to hold the public attention in an increasingly competitive field, there is inevitably pressure to be novel, original, or different. This can lead to bizarre outfits, roles, and performances.

I was struck by the title of the most recent album by Lady Gaga, 'I was born this way'. I think his title speaks to us on several levels. The first level goes back to when we first heard this expression, when our mother told us not to make fun of or stare at a handicapped person, because 'they did not choose to be that way; they were born that way'. I think Lady Gaga is tapping into

this understanding. She is saying 'If my outfits strike you as odd, or my videos offend you, well, you can't make fun of or criticize me. I didn't choose to be this way, I was born this way. I thus had no choice about it; it was a gift or a fate to which I was condemned.' I think, however, there is also a second message beyond the first understanding, and this is more aggressive or defiant: 'the most important thing a person can do is to bring their hidden essence to the surface for all to see, that is, to transfer this interior core to the light of day, out in the open, through an act of self-expansion, actualization, or fulfilment. Thus, not only is what I am doing not wrong, it is emphatically right; in fact, it is what we all should be doing. *Not* to do so would a moral flaw, a renegeing on a moral obligation. The supreme moral obligation in fact, to which all others should be subordinated, is to bring this inner core to expression, to the surface, to make it exterior and public. Hence the title, 'Expressive Individualism'.

This can take a less attractive form. In September, 2011 in the US Open Tennis Championships at Flushing Meadows, NY, Serena Williams was playing Samantha Stosur of Australia in the women's finals. Serena lost the first set and was falling behind in the second. When she hit a hard forehand she gave a celebratory shout, but was deducted a point for having disturbed her opponent's concentration before the point was over. When she lost the game, at the change-over she verbally abused the umpire, who was a lady from Greece. She was then given a code violation. According to the paper, her response was: 'Code violation? I expressed who I am. We're in America, last time I checked.' I'm not picking Serena Williams out from the crowd, but rather taking her to be representative of a much wider group. I would suggest that whenever any of us feels embarrassed by a form of behaviour, and can see no other way out, we fall back on some form of expressive individualism as a way of deflecting criticism and exonerating ourselves. We resort to a series of one-liners or sound-bites such as 'It felt natural', or 'It seemed like a good idea at the time'. It has become our go-to ethic when we are in a jam, under stress, or simply want to exculpate ourselves from some questionable behaviour. I think it is also significant that Serena identified America as the country where this ethic has become a law of the land which needs no further justification. As Frank Sinatra sang, America is the superior country because here each of us can do it 'my way'. It seems there is now no 'right way' or 'wrong way', there is only 'your way'. Consequences are of no further importance. The supreme moral obligation, in fact, is to discover 'your way'; and once this is done your action requires no further apology or justification – because that's all there is.

Where did this lifestyle come from? Did it fall from the skies? Or can we identify an historical event that served as a precedent for what is now so widespread?

Before there was Elvis, there was Lord Byron. Before there was John Updike, there was William Wordsworth. Before there was William Faulkner, there was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Before there were the generals Patton, Montgomery, and MacArthur, there were Napoleon, Wellington, and Lord Nelson. Before there was Jimmy Hendrix and Eric Clapton, there were Beetho-

ven and Mozart. Before there was J. D. Salinger, there was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In short, there was the Romantic revolt. Napoleon burst upon the scene as the iconic Romantic hero, because he succeeded in destroying one world – the *Ancien Régime* of kings and nobles – and creating another – the Republic – in extending the scope and ideals of the French Revolution to all of Europe. Byron modelled himself on Napoleon; he died fighting for the liberation of Greece from the Turks. The Brontë sisters popularized the Bryonic hero through the characters of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, through which he has become a familiar stereotype in hundreds of novels – the so-called ‘Gothic novel’ – and later movies. There is an interesting return toward the Luciferian in Bram Stoker’s character of Dracula. Dracula is not a devil, but a vampire. He preys upon human beings, and he turns them into vampires as well.

Our culture is, whether we know it or not, a Romantic culture, indeed, a revolutionary culture, that is, one predicated on the rejection of neo-classical restrictions. And the gem, the diamond, in the center of the Romantic revolt is the idea of the artistic genius. He is the engine that makes this movement go, he is the essential foundation on which the revolution is premised. Genius is a prominent topic in German academic philosophy from Immanuel Kant to Arthur Schopenhauer. German culture, from Lessing’s manifesto in his *Laocoon*, defines itself as ‘Romantic’, over against the dominant neo-classical French culture of Corneille, Racine, and Moliere coming out of Versailles. But where did the idea of ‘artistic genius’ come from? What was *its* source, and what does it really refer to? To answer these questions we must take one step further back. We must return to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

*Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, is a poem that tells the story of the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and before that the rebellion by Lucifer and his like-minded angels, the combat with Michael and the loyal angels, to which we have a one-line reference in the book of revelation, their defeat, and subsequent casting out of heaven (Rev. 12: 7-9) Thus the book of Genesis does not mention the revolt by the angels, and the Bible as a whole says almost nothing about it. It is the Greek Fathers of the early Church, chiefly Origen and Irenaeus, who developed the story of Lucifer to explain how there could be devils who tempt humanity and to seduce them to share their fate in Hell.

The traditional story is that Lucifer was the highest creature, the most powerful, beautiful, and intelligent of the arch-angels. His name means ‘Light bearer’. Then the Father revealed to Lucifer his plan to create a race of humans and give them free will, even though he knew some would misuse it and thus condemn themselves to perdition. This would give the Father the chance to show his love for his creation by sending his own Son to suffer and die for them, thereby to rescue them from their otherwise unavoidable fate. He would take on a human nature which, because it was suited to be united with divinity, would necessarily become the highest creature, the acme of creation, consequently demoting Lucifer to the second spot. According to the Church Fathers, Lucifer’s pride prevented him from accepting this plan by

God the Father and prompted his rebellion. He would not bend the knee to Jesus. Instead he led his rebel angels in a 'palace revolt' against the Father, was defeated by Michael and the loyal angels in celestial combat, and cast down into hell. He subsequently continues his rebellion by devoting his energies to spitefully sabotaging the work of Jesus for the salvation of human kind, to entice us to join him in the hell he has created.

This is the story that John Milton received, but in *Paradise Lost* he made an important change. In his version, Lucifer rejects not only Jesus as the highest creature, he rejects the Father as father. The Father's demand is felt by Lucifer to be so heavy or unfair, the Father himself so inadequate, that there is no solution but to remove the Father entirely, to deny, reject, or kill him, and for Lucifer to announce that he has fathered himself. Milton thereby strengthens Lucifer's rebellion, he heightens Lucifer's alienation and radicalizes his estrangement in breathtaking fashion. He denies his creaturely status. In book five of *Paradise Lost* Satan asks:

'That we were form'd then saist thou? & the work  
Of secondarie hands, by task transferd  
From Father to his Son? strange point and new!  
When this creation was? rememberst thou  
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?  
We know no time when we were not as now;  
Know none before us, self-begot, self-rai'd  
By our own quick'ning power, when fatal course  
Had circl'd his full Orbe, the birth mature  
Of this our native Heav'n, Ethereal Sons.  
Our puissance is our own, our own right hand  
Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try  
Who is our equal'

Bk. 5, 854-866

This declaration confounds the understanding. How can a creature – indeed, the most intelligent of creatures – presume to make such an announcement? This is the first time in all of Western literature that a creature has dared pronounce such words. This is the blasphemy of blasphemies, a heresy so deep there is no name for it: a creature declaring himself to be god.

Milton gets away with it by putting it in the mouth of a devil; that way he can exploit and profit from its provocative potential for his poetic drama while at the same time washing his hands of any responsibility. After all, it is only a damned creature who is speaking this way. Had this been written a hundred years earlier, Milton would have been burned at the stake by Catholic and Protestant alike. So, why did he write it?

Milton had a problem. He was Oliver Cromwell's Latin secretary, fighting on the Puritan side in the English Civil War against King Charles I, but also against the monarchy *per se*; at the same time he is writing a poem about

the Prince of Heaven – Lucifer – rebelling against the King of Heaven – God the Father. Are we surprised that one influenced the other? Milton invests in Lucifer; in fact, he identifies with Lucifer. Lucifer is his stand-in in the story. Milton is doing the same thing against the earthly king that Lucifer is doing against the heavenly king. Naturally, he wants him to succeed; Milton encourages him, he roots him on. Lucifer is by far the most sympathetic figure in *Paradise Lost*; indeed, as several scholars have noted, Lucifer can be called the *hero* of *Paradise Lost*. William Blake caught the scent when he wrote that in *Paradise Lost* ‘Milton is ‘a great poet, and of the devil’s party’.

Two hundred years later the romantic poets like Bryon, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly, and Coleridge reached back before the Enlightenment and neo-classical poets such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope to Milton. Unlike the neo-classical poets, Milton had the power to touch the emotions of awe, fascination, and danger – the Romantic sublime. They fed especially on his description of Lucifer: like Lucifer, the romantic poet is in rebellion against the neo-classical unities, the strictures upon poetic form and content; like Lucifer, the romantic poet forcefully rejects the cultural role of a servile ornament within a hierarchical order. He disdains the horizontal supports from royal or aristocratic patronage or from a bourgeois audience he disdains as philistine. The romantic poets in fact transferred Milton’s novel portrait of Lucifer from the angelic realm to the human, to fashion the new portrait of the artist as a genius; that is, they secularized Milton’s revised angelology. Heretofore an artist – a sculptor or a painter say – had been like a carpenter or plumber. He would have attached himself to a master and his workshop and progressed through a series of stages until he got his own license and could set himself up as an independent artisan. Now, however, the artist is declared a genius. The traditional vocation of art as mimetic – from the Greek word *mimesis* or based on imitation, of either the Platonic Form or the singular individual – is here o’erthrown; on the contrary, the artist now claims to be literally creative. It is no longer a metaphor: he brings into being something that has never existed before. In effect, he usurps the place of God. Effectively, he has killed the Father. With Lucifer he also declares ‘I know none before me; I am self-begot’.

One can trace the influence of Milton’s altered portrait of Lucifer beyond this.

According to Harold Bloom’s theory, each Romantic poet began his career with the feeling of having come late to the competition, and of being condemned to marginality and insignificance by the great works of his predecessors. He is spurred by this anxiety of influence or threat of definitive inferior status, to achieve ‘anteriority’ over his predecessors by increasing the radicality of his revolt, reaching a closer proximity to the Romantic sublime, and by his own Herculean achievement, turning the tables, reversing the direction of influence, and banishing his intimidating precursors to the marginality and oblivion from which he himself first suffered. In other words, he tries to eclipse and replace his predecessors in the same Romantic competition – to become *the* artistic genius. By this achievement he denies, rejects, and ‘kills’

the Father, John Milton, who inspired the whole Romantic revolt. He also rejects or 'kills' the later 'fathers', his own siblings, the other chicks in the nest, leaving only himself.

Those of you familiar with the work of René Girard, his theory of mimetic desire, will recognize how Girard's theory fits hand in glove with Bloom's account. For Girard we desire what we witness others desiring; that is, our desires do not naturally have a specific object but rather are underdetermined and must be socially educated. Once a youngster catches sight of what older children value and desire, he comes to value and desire the same thing himself, setting off an ultimately rivalrous competition that rises to ever-higher levels until violence breaks out. This is also true for adults. For Girard, this is the origin of culture in every proto-human society; the only hominids who survived such violence are those who discovered the 'scapegoating' mechanism, such that this violence that otherwise leads to a 'war of all against all' and threatens to destroy the group, comes to be directed towards a marginal figure who is somehow odd or different, and who thus can be held accountable for the disturbance. The execution and elimination of the scapegoat allows the group to return to peace. At this point the individual who was at first indicted as a villain and the cause of trouble is now exalted as a savior who by his death has overcome violence and reconciled the group. He is worshiped as a god, and his self-sacrifice and subsequent apotheosis are repeated in a regular ritual whenever a mimetic disturbance threatens to break out again. This is the origin of religious cult. According to Bloom, such rivalrous competition defines the relation of the Romantic poets one to another, each one stimulated by the daunting achievement of his precursor, and by his own superhuman efforts, hoping to banish this predecessor to the marginality and insignificance which he himself initially experienced.

What Bellah and Taylor call 'expressive individualism' represents a democratization and universalization of this transformation of the artist into a genius now to the population at large, or, moving from the other direction, the claim by the general population to share in the privileges and higher status heretofore reserved only for a few. We have a spread of the romantic rebellion from an elite to everyone. We are thereby encouraged to press our claim to a concealed divine or independent status, and by our subsequent performance and attitude to render our status no longer hidden. We can each now say, 'I know none before me. I am self-begot'.

To recapitulate: When the Father becomes sufficiently inadequate, when he imposes a burden we esteem too heavy and unfair, the only appropriate response is to remove or kill him. This response is prefigured and licensed by the portrait Milton gives of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*. It is then transferred from the angelic realm to the human realm through the depiction of the artist as genius during the 19th century, and then has become democratized and universalized in our era as the ethic of 'expressive individualism'. To the extent then that we embrace 'expressive individualism' as the default lifestyle of our time, we are implicitly committed to Milton's Lucifer as the

archetype of human fulfilment or self-realization, which I believe, however, to be a toxic model. This not only transforms a previously heretical comportment into a now-tolerated form of behaviour, it unveils and proclaims this as the no-longer-secret ideal of human development. In an inversion of the West's traditional set of primary symbols, what was previously the deepest and most offensive blasphemy is installed and spelled out as orthodoxy. In a clever and well-disguised terrorist raid on the religious temple, not only is an astounding desecration perpetrated but has succeeded in subtly insinuating itself as the new creed of the community.

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