

The Tree of Knowledge

"Summer makes a silence after spring," said Vita Sackville–West in *The Land*. And indeed, spring is disorderly and promiscuous in its ways. Spring has always been thought of as a time of rebirth and renewal, a time when poppies bloom from petty stalks and new fawns are brought forth from fertile fields of grass. And from the first birth in a new world comes an innocent karma, an innocent mind, an innocent being. It knows nothing of the world around it, not of cruelty, nor of pain, nor of suffering. For like man on the date of his first birth, it has only knowledge of its own existence. But man stepped beyond his innocence – he was unequivocally tempted by the forces of evil, and in the blank slate which was his mind was written the first words from the Tree of Knowledge. From his first sin, man's own disobedience led him on an eternal quest for knowledge and the power to understand. For John Milton's own *Paradise Lost* chronicles the epic fall of man, a fall which, like the ever recapitulating pattern of the seasons, reverberates in the modern quotidian life of man. Just as man first left his innocence for the plum¹ of knowledge, every year millions of students each follow the same process, myself included. When spring has faded, students enter summer with a new innocence, devoid of previous hardships. But just as man falls so will the student – they will both alike root themselves at the foot of the Tree of Knowledge and feast themselves on its delightfully forbidden fruits.

1 In the sense of a reward. The actual Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is rumored to be an apple.

Every year begins a new beginning; a new life. Not unlike a hibernating bear who awakes from her dreamless sleep hungry for the fruits of a new season, man awakens in a similar yet different season, starving for the fruits of knowledge. For although every year the pattern is exactly the same, it is never the less unrecognizably different – the new wetness of man's appetite draws a blanket over his mind; he must have what he wants. Man's own natural thirst for knowledge appears well before his original sin, from the time he seeks knowledge of a time before his existence from the Angel Raphael. He inquires the angel further with his increasing "desire to hear...the full relation" (V, 555) In his quest for answers, man will eventually become tempted by the Tree of Knowledge, a tree which although demonstrating his defiance of the Lord, also represents his will to gain wisdom. Man is thus so warned by the same angel that knowledge, "is as food, and needs no less her temperance over appetite, to know in measure what the mind may well contain." (VIII, 126) But man is unable to heed this warning for his thirst is unquenchable. His desire for knowledge causes him to commit the first sin – knowledge abruptly halts his innocent spring paradise and he is commanded to "[Depart] from this happy place, [their] sweet Recess..." (XI, 315) Yet he willingly submits to these commands for he knows that he is now free to act as he wishes – because of his new knowledge he has become his own ruler and he is now free to pursue the knowledge which he desires. Furthermore he is told that he "hast attained the sum of wisdom," (XII, 576) by Raphael [an angel], himself. This firm statement confirms the power and knowledge that man has gained. For all of man's actions since initial creation have been motivated by a craving for wisdom. It is not a sin to think about a bad thing but only to act upon that thought; man's original sin is only the final point at which man affirms his desires by disobeying God and eating from the Tree of

Knowledge.

As a student involved in the apex of my studies, I, too have been witness to a similar pattern of seasons. For every year – every school year – begins a new life, a new beginning. Just as a blossoming poppy radiates itself amongst a field of new grass and leaves no passer-by untouched, it, too, will once again return to its primeval state, anchored in the earth, to live and to wait twice twenty six fortnights for the chance to bloom again – a student will just the same submit to the cyclic pattern that has been placed before him in order to gain the knowledge he feels he deserves. I, at the beginning of my summer was relieved to be out of school. My mind forgot what it was to be a student: I simply lived as any other man lived, without regard to where I was or where I was going; one might say it was a certain innocence of mind, others that it was a forced departure. But, never the less, I soon found myself longing once again for knowledge, for wisdom. I embarked on a quest to educate myself further independantly, and soon enough I found myself staring, not ten weeks later, into the gates of Los Altos High School, the great Tree of Knowledge. For it was the greatest tree of them all, the tree of man. And just as man's design was to only comprehend what he must know, my mind never the less seems every year to be filled "in measure what [my] mind may well contain." (VII, 128) But soon enough after year's end my mind escapes its retreat and reverts back to its previous state: a state of peaceful calm not unlike the lost innocence of man. Soon enough this yearning for knowledge, as if it is an ingrained part of my soul, forces me back to destiny. And, in the end, I do give in to that need for knowledge and once again set the entire process into motion. For it is indeed difficult to resist what is only a natural urge for discovery; an ingrain urge for to understand the work around me,

an urge for knowledge.

Both man and student are similar in their innocence and quest for knowledge. Man in his purest state sins by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The student on the other hand, while in a pleasing state of peacefulness, pushes himself to continue his quest for knowledge. For the student seeking wisdom has been cursed to the everlasting torment of his forefather's first sin. For both men different but alike in their quest seek the freedom to discover and learn, the freedom of knowledge – it is their one and only destiny. For just as man was attracted to knowledge and thus caught in the eternal cycle of rebirth, so am I. For indeed although John Milton sings of a *Paradise Lost*, it is in this voice that he describes the day to day man stuck in the perpetual pattern of the seasons. Although man has fallen because of temptation, he has opened up new doors for himself through his everlasting journey of understanding. For because of man's fall, one day a world will be raised from the "conflagrant mass...New Heavens, new Earth...founded in righteousness...and eternal bliss." (XII, 548). Man's desire for knowledge will one day become satisfied – when that happens, earth should be recreated in heaven's image. For although knowledge is important, it is also paramount not to get lost in the process – for perhaps true wisdom lurks in the place we least expect to find it.