Milton unbound

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Controversy and Reinterpretation

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Preface and acknowledgments

This book began in Beijing, China in 1987. My students there lent human substance to what had been previously only a hypothetical proposition: that many of us in the United States were teaching or being taught a badly skewed version of Milton. The Milton to whom the students at Peking University responded was, as Joan Bennett has described him, a radical humanist, who not only hated tyranny and superstition but who, unlike more quiescent intellectuals and artists, put himself on the line fighting against them. That last is important, since Milton's ethics, social agenda, and, I shall argue, artistic and aesthetic expressions imply each other and express an open-ended tolerance, in the societal and structural senses of that term.

My students in China, then struggling with rigorous state censorship, deeply admired *Areopagitica.* It has been argued recently that every grant of liberty rests on an implicit exclusion or limitation of that liberty. Freedom of expression is always already censorship. Yet these students understood, and brought me to understand, that while social policy may always set limits to freedom, differences in degree are of much greater practical moment than some theoretically minded Western Milton scholars seem willing to recognize. Milton, for all his idealism, was a practical man, and a practical champion of liberty. The students at Peking University revered him for that. Living under a totalitarian regime is in some ways an excellent preparation for Milton studies, especially when the government is willing to end one's life for advocating too stubbornly a larger degree of individual liberty or for challenging the absolutist ideology by which it governs. Those were of course the conditions under which Milton lived much of his life, early and late.

I therefore found myself drawn to William Empson's *Milton's God,* which also begins, though to different effect, with the culture shock of teaching *Paradise Lost* in the East. I had long been taught to view

Empson's work as occasionally brilliant, but perverse and wrong-headed – because no one could seriously think that Milton would *really* question the ways of God to men. I do not endorse Empson's ultimate position – that Milton struggled sublimely to justify the inexcusably evil Christian God but failed because the Christian God is evil from his foundations. I am not morally certain enough to feel confident in such a claim, whereas Empson came to write his book already convinced that the Christian deity was a relic of Neolithic cruelty. For Empson, Milton's heresies could blunt only the harsher edges of Christianity, a gloomy opinion that, as I argue in the last chapter, in part reflects a mistaken understanding of the poetic implications of Milton's heretical materialism.

Like Empson, however, I do believe that the struggle of Milton's theodicy is genuine and that the poet presumes no certainty as to cosmic justice. The victory of *Paradise Lost*, to the extent Milton manages it, lies instead in helping us to accept the ambiguity, doubt, and indeterminacy constitutional of our lives, without succumbing to the fear that our existence is meaningless, or worse, malignant. The epic theodicy persuades us to make use of reasonable doubt to establish a place for benevolence and grace in our lives, and it does so most significantly by virtue of the very heresy that Empson was unwilling, perhaps stubbornly so, to admit into the epic narrative. Material indeterminacy and inconclusiveness, in the formlessness of chaos, are for Milton constitutional of the cosmos, of morality, and indeed are essential to the deity himself.

This investigation is largely concerned with internal or structural logic. Hence, in assessing Milton's humanism within a seventeenth-century context, I contend that the ramifications of his philosophy of matter are salient for comprehension of his political vision and poetic practice. In the case of Milton scholarship, on the other hand, the internal logic of what I call the paradigmatic Milton may be described as a closed dialectical circuit. The dialectical structure has helped a very misleading vision of the poet to prosper – the representation of Milton as a carping didact, aggressive misogynist, and poet of the emerging bourgeoisie.

Given my intention to lay out internal logic rather than to survey exhaustively Milton's works in their historical context or contemporary criticism of them, my argument inevitably neglects exceptions and inconsistencies to its twin theses. I have tried to acknowledge such exceptions as much as possible, however. Those exceptions that are

also my precursors cause even greater anxiety. Anyone who has worked in Milton studies for a few years will realize how easily others' perceptions and insights can become incorporated into one's own arguments. And like most of us, I write in dread of failing to acknowledge my debts. This dread is especially acute in the case of a book like this one, which not only has developed over a long time, but tends to be sharply critical of other work in the field and so should be correspondingly thorough and generous in acknowledgment. For the inevitable errors of omission, I apologize in advance, though I imagine that I will, quite properly, be called to account for them anyway.

Happily, there are many debts of which I am quite conscious. As I already indicated, the book began as an article, entitled "Uninventing Milton," eight years ago in Beijing, China, and I feel deep gratitude to my colleagues and former students there. I started to write "Uninventing Milton" as I was struggling to complete the introduction to my first book, which was then about to go into production. That introduction and the article make some of the same points, as indeed does this book. In general, the opinions presented in *Matter of Glory* concerning the workings of Milton's cosmos have not changed, and this study assumes and builds on that work. I hope that this overlap will be seen as continuity and development rather than as repetition.

"Uninventing Milton" was published in 1990, and I am indebted to Janel Mueller of the University of Chicago, who was then just beginning her tenure as editor of *Modern Philology* and who made the decision to publish that rather unusual piece. She also accompanied her editorial decision with generous encouragement and wise advice. In 1990–91, an NEH fellowship, in combination with a grant from the Research Institute of the University of Texas, Austin, allowed me the time to build upon the article toward a book-length study, and let me find a way to make the argument pivot so that I might offer a positive, alternative vision of the poet rather than simply criticize the existing one. Christopher Hill and John Carey read parts of the study at this point and offered encouragement and direction. Most of the crucial fellowship year was spent at the Alexander Turnbull Library, the research arm of the National Library of New Zealand. The head librarian Margaret Caldwell, her associate Philip Ranier, and the rest of the staff at the Turnbull were unfailingly generous and helpful as I drew on their extraordinary Milton collection, and were, moreover, unquestioningly accepting of an egregiously American visitor during the Gulf War. I also feel a deep sense of gratitude to Lydia Wevers,

Alastair Bisley, Brian and Ann Opie – as well as to their children – for friendship, generosity, affection, and encouragement while I was living and working in Wellington.

My greatest debt as a student of Milton continues to be to William Kerrigan. I can on occasion dissent from his published views only because his teaching, and what is more important, his passion for the truth, have set an example that encouraged me to do so. More specifically, I want to thank Stephen M. Fallon, J. Martin Evans, Wayne A. Rebhorn, and Leah S. Marcus, who all read a large part of the manuscript at an early stage and offered useful, detailed advice that helped me improve what I had already written. They also gave me a renewed sense of direction as I was bringing the work to its conclusion. Mark Womack, Dolora Wojciehowski, Joseph Wittreich, Lydia Wevers, Beth Rothermel, Maurice Kelley, George Boulukos, and Michael Bauman all read chapters and improved them with their comments. Lance Bertelsen advised me on book design and cover art and I have gratefully followed his advice. The portrait of Milton is reproduced courtesy of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Research assistant Daniel Rose caught many errors at the final stage. Most telling was the abiding collaborative effort of Stephen B. Dobranski, who over several years read each chapter, made detailed comments, and suggested new sources for me to consult.

Although this book begins by citing William Empson and Christopher Hill, it also owes much to other Milton scholars. The archetype of historically reliable and industrious Milton scholarship is David Masson, whose massive biography often influences what follows. Only in comparison with Masson could William R. Parker's learned and detailed study seem somehow slight and idiosyncratic. I also am indebted to the work of James Holly Hanford, Denis Saurat, E. M. W. Tillyard, John Milton French, Don Wolfe, Helen Darbishire, Merritt Hughes, and Alastair Fowler. Finally, I want to go on record with the opinion that Maurice Kelley's work on *de doctrina Christiana* is the single most significant and underappreciated contribution to twentieth-century Milton studies. Over years of studying Milton's theological opinions, I have come to rely on Kelley as being almost unfailingly accurate and just in his conclusions. Sadly, the same cannot always be said of those who have over the years disputed them.

Abbreviations

CW	*The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank H. Patterson, 18 vols. (New York, 1931–38).
CP	*The Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven, 1953–82).
Masson	David Masson, *Life of John Milton*, 6 vols. (1874–81; reprint, Gloucester, MA, 1965).
Parker	William R. Parker, *Milton: A Life*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1968).

Citations of Milton's poetry employ standard abbreviations and are taken from *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1952). These citations, and citations of the works listed above, will appear parenthetically in the body of the text. Notes will be used for most other references, with each chapter's initial citation of any given work appearing in full detail.

Translations

Translations of Milton's Latin poetry are my own. Latin and Greek words or passages will appear only for emphasis or when the argument relies on them directly.

Contents

CHAPTER I

Introduction: the invented Milton

> If you realize that Milton was really worried about the official subject of his poem, you find the poetry very genuine.
>
> William Empson[1]

In 1961, William Empson in the controversial *Milton's God* challenged what he called the growing "neo-Christian" bias of scholars, blaming it for overstatement of Milton's orthodoxy and understatement of the sincerity of his epic theodicy. Empson claimed that the epic's "struggling" and "searching" outside the limits of the "traditional Christian" faith is the "chief source of its fascination and poignancy."[2] In making this claim, he was responding rather pointedly to works like C. S. Lewis's *Preface to Paradise Lost*, which placed the epic firmly within Christianity's "great central tradition."[3] Despite Empson's challenge, Lewis's basic reading has increasingly dominated, though with certain crucial refinements, and Empson's views have been dismissed and even derided. There have been striking exceptions to this general trend, however, most substantially Christopher Hill's historically detailed presentation of Milton as a "radical Protestant heretic."[4]

Professor Hill introduced his study by endorsing Empson's complaint that neo-Christian critics have attempted to "annex Milton" on behalf of orthodoxy. He then went on to condemn the reflexive pedantry of much recent scholarship:

> There is the immensely productive Milton industry, largely in the United States of America, a great part of whose vast output appears to be concerned less with what Milton wrote (still less with enjoyment of what Milton wrote) than with the views of Professor Blank on the views of Professor Schrank on the views of Professor Rank.[5]

Empson's and Hill's complaints are in combination the basis of the first half of this book, which, while it does not pretend to be an exhaustive

survey of recent Milton scholarship, nevertheless offers a critique of the logic of contemporary critical practice. The arid debate to which Hill refers – and chapter 3 argues that deflation of literary delight particularly distinguishes contemporary criticism – diverts attention from the fact that we Blanks, Schranks, and Ranks, despite very real differences, have managed to agree on a basis for disagreement. The subject of that underlying agreement I call the invented Milton, a rhetorical artifact or paradigm foundational to contemporary Milton scholarship.

I use the term "paradigm" with the work of historian of science Thomas Kuhn in mind. In Kuhn's analysis, a paradigm is "an accepted model or pattern," one that serves as "an object for further articulation and specification."[6] Such a paradigm enjoys its status because it successfully solves problems or a problem that "the group of practitioners has come to recognize as acute."[7] By the 1960s, the "acute" problem for "practitioners" of Milton criticism was that of Satan's appeal in *Paradise Lost*. The old controversy over Satan's heroism had become a worn, dead-end debate, yet it continued to consume enormous amounts of critical energy and attention, generating a certain amount of heat but very little light. During a period when intense impatience with the status quo pervaded American culture, especially in the academy, Milton scholarship was obviously going nowhere.

The invention that ameliorated this acute problem was set forth in Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin*.[8] By deploying reader-response theory to acknowledge and then defuse the problem of Satan's appeal, Fish inaugurated a period in Milton criticism analogous to what Kuhn describes as "normal science," a condition in which practitioners expend their labors to extend and deepen a working paradigm rather than rehash fundamental issues that it resolved.[9] Over the last quarter-century, many practitioners of Milton criticism have attempted, as the title of a recent collection suggests, to "re-member" Milton according to the form and pressure of contemporary intellectual preoccupations.[10] The great post-Romantic impasse had been overcome, and the practice of Milton criticism became progressive, ironically enough, at the very moment when postmodern skeptics were calling the idea of progress into question.

Contemporary Milton scholarship cannot be described as uniform, of course, except in a rough way and at the most basic level. We currently enjoy unprecedented diversity of a sort, and in conforming to Fish's paradigm, we have, as Kuhn says, "solved problems that [practitioners] could scarcely have imagined and would never have undertaken without

commitment to the paradigm."[11] Furthermore, as the early citation of Professor Hill indicates, the invented Milton has not monopolized critical discourse. Useful studies, oblivious to or selectively critical of the paradigm, have recently appeared and been recognized for their substantial contributions to our understanding of Milton.[12]

Also, certain works that overtly submit to the paradigm – William Kerrigan's *The Sacred Complex*, for example – have deepened our understanding of John Milton in ways that actually tend to subvert it.[13] Hence, in an otherwise laudatory review of Kerrigan's book, the late Philip Gallagher objects to the "undercurrent of profound eccentricity in [*The Sacred Complex*'s] subtext ... that would seek by pathways at once subterranean and recondite to recapture Milton for the Saurats and Hills and – though Kerrigan would deny it – the Waldocks and Empsons of this world."[14] The sensitivity to an "undercurrent of profound eccentricity" is noteworthy if oddly phrased. One anticipates misgivings over the validity of Kerrigan's controversial, psychohistorical methodology. But the reference to Milton as if he were a trophy in an intellectual contest, combined with the denigration of critics like Empson and Hill (merely naming them is enough) suggests that, for some, disputes over critical methodology do not signify in comparison with what might be regarded as the cultural stakes – Milton's allegiance to an unproblematic, centrist orthodoxy.

If indeed the invented Milton has of late been ignored or implicitly challenged by some, and subverted from within by others, no one has successfully refuted Fish's main argument, not on its own terms. Nor have we found a fresh way to regard the poet, one that might displace the paradigm or at least provide an alternative to it. Though I do not deny the value of much recent Milton scholarship, or of the insights that over the last three decades the paradigm has made possible, I feel convinced that it is seriously mistaken and, what is worse, a pedagogical disaster. The purpose of the first half of this book, therefore, is to challenge the invented Milton. The second half is more constructive in its aims and attempts to demonstrate the benefit of uninventing Milton for our understanding of his works. Ultimately, I argue that Milton's poetry, though overtly patriarchal, reflects maternal influences to a greater extent than we have previously recognized, especially in its presentation of generative processes, including those of poetry and divine creation.

I thus begin with the premise that the consolidation and general

acceptance of what Empson called the "neo-Christian" position derive from the crystallizing impact of Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin*. First published in 1967, Fish's work appealed to the more restless among its contemporary audience in part because it followed an innovative interpretive strategy – associated with reader-response theory – that placed the reader in the center of the epic action or, rather, placed the center of the epic action in the reader. The consequence was a methodologically radical update of Lewis's reading of *Paradise Lost* as a literary monument to mainstream Christianity. With the advantage of hindsight, we can appreciate the tactical brilliance of *Surprised by Sin*. Along with its appeal to freethinkers appreciative of fresh critical methods, it also pleased their customary opponents, those more traditional scholars who saw Milton as a champion of Christian essentials. In an early instance of what has since become a familiar irony, *Surprised by Sin* initiated a confederation of factions in Milton studies by putting an apparently destabilizing hermeneutics to work for traditionalist interests.

Ultimately, this book concerns itself not with the reading of *Paradise Lost* presented in *Surprised by Sin*, but rather with a corporate, almost institutionalized, view of Milton and his works. For neither reader-response theory nor the generalship of a single critic has sustained expansion of the invented Milton. This growth owes instead to a remarkable agglomeration of diverse disciplinary interests. I am nonetheless committed to a refutation of Fish's seminal study, because its dexterous reading of the epic is still basic to our contemporary understanding of Milton's works and, sadly, of the man himself.

The success of the invented Milton owes partly to epistemological skepticism over the validity of historical interpretation. Concern with scholarly accuracy and consistent use of historical evidence has come to seem uninformed and irrelevant compared with dense discussion of apparently more urgent theoretical issues.[15] Many of us have come to think that there is no such thing as an author's meaning, or indeed an author, except perhaps as negotiated within a particular community of readers.[16] Whatever interpretation best calculates and accommodates the interests of the most influential groups, and avoids positively alienating most others, becomes dominant. Given this state of affairs, I intend the term "invented" to be descriptive, not pejorative. Fish himself suggests it and means by it a rhetorically adept, and therefore politically viable (for him these modifiers are synonymous) adaptation to the features of an "interpretive community."[17] Under such conditions,

as in the case of presidential politics, vague banality and dull elaboration of the status quo are often the unfortunate consequences. Lance Bertelsen has wryly observed that those in our profession who manage to thrive under such conditions are generally those we call "smart": "in other words," says Bertelsen, "'smart' means today (with rhetorical adjustments) what 'dunce' meant to Pope – the aspiration to fulfill, through flexible and everchanging discursive practice, the will to literary power."[18]

There is no going back. Though few perhaps would push to the extreme represented by Roland Barthes, fewer still would deny the role of readers in negotiating meaning.[19] Communication is by definition a social phenomenon and literary interpretation is a special instance of human communication. But skepticism over the place of authors in determining meaning, and thus over the value of historical contextualization, derives not from a shift in focus away from authors and toward readers, who after all have no more authority than the author. Skepticism about the role played by authors (or readers) in determining meaning derives instead from assumptions about the role linguistic codes play in communication.

Philosophers from Aristotle to Derrida have studied language itself as if it were the basis of human communication. Under this assumption, communication boils down to the coding and decoding of messages between senders and receivers.[20] But, as exponents of deconstruction have argued, the upshot of post-Saussurean linguistics is that the interpretation of codes – understood as ever shifting semiotic systems of non-identity relationships – is logically without limits. And inasmuch as authors use codes, there is no way to establish what authors mean.

Human use of language, however, has developed into a conscious and sophisticated form of intentional behavior, something logically quite distinct from the codes that are typically its media. So far as we know, coding and decoding as a means of transferring information from sender to receiver does not belong particularly to humans – birds do it, bees do it, even educated machines do it. The significant difference between us and many of these other senders and receivers lies in our ability to communicate *without* the use of codes. Adam's "glance or toy / Of amorous intent," for example, can be communicative and "well understood" without any established precedent for the signs used or any conventionally agreed upon definitions (*PL* 9, 1034–35). In paradise as Milton presents it, intelligent animals, though they lack human language, still manage to communicate with humans.

If rational beings communicated solely through instinctively patterned movements or autonomically controlled, stimulus-sensitive secretions, there would of course be much less interpretive problematizing about messages or, strictly speaking, no interpretation at all – just information processing. The codes would be fixed and establishing meaning would be a function of them.

In communicating, however, most people outside the academy go beyond the limits of language use observed by a drone dancing in his hive. History and common experience tell us that, regardless of how cleverly those who trade in secrets scramble the code, they find it difficult to communicate messages to a select audience and still keep the relevant meaning hidden from others.[21] One look at the third base coach during a baseball game tells you that. Strangers utterly ignorant of each other's languages manage to make their intentions known and eventually to learn each other's codes, even without outside help. The attempt to account for human communication by obsessive resort to the code model is rather like an attempt to account for the elephant's ability to pick things up with its nose by invoking the sense of smell.[22] Those olfactory philosophers among us who might conclude that elephants therefore *cannot* pick things up with their noses are welcome to argue that pachyderms feed themselves by interpreting the odor of hay.

Chapter 2 takes up the vexed question of authorial intention, relevance, and historical context in more detail. Yet I should say that the theoretical premises of this book, per the arguments of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, are that there is no "necessary link between language and communication," and that therefore the looseness and indeterminacy of human codes do not render interpretation entirely an affair of politically or rhetorically adept invention. Intention and relevance – not the linguistic code – form the basis of human communication and interpretation.[23] A sentence like "the tank is half empty" can mean "stop and fill up before New York," or "the fish will die if we do not add water soon" or "I'm a pessimist," or "where have Corporal Smith and Gunner Jones gone?" and so on. As a matter of communication between people in particular situations, the relevant, intended meaning will generally be discernible. In line with the practice if not the theory of most Milton scholars, my argument assumes the principle that awareness of historical context allows us to attain a surprisingly strong sense of authorial intention and to discuss relevance with practical assurance. Given the relatively objective limits provided

by cultural convention, we can reasonably judge particular interpretations so improbable as to be mistaken and others so probable as to be correct. And my claim is that the invented Milton is a mistake, a big one.

What are the chief characteristics of the widely accepted version of the author of *Paradise Lost*? According to Georgia Christopher's award-winning book (1982), one which Empson would have called "neo-Christian,"

> Stanley Fish has shown how *Paradise Lost* is constructed for evangelical purposes so as to elicit a pattern of alternating identification with and rejection of the characters, in order to convict the reader of sin.[24]

James Grantham Turner's New Historicist study of Milton's sexual attitudes (1987) offers the substantially identical observation that Milton effects the "deliberate entrapment of the audience in fallen responses, the better to guide them toward regeneration." If Turner sidesteps language like "convict" and "sin," his citation of "entrapment" in "fallen responses" as a major feature of Milton's art conforms to the customary reading.[25] He explicitly parts company with Fish only in his insistence that fallen readers' sexual experiences do allow them to understand Adam and Eve's erotic bliss. For this particular disagreement over readers' responses, however, it is difficult to see any basis other than self-gratulatory.[26]

In the same year as Turner, Marshall Grossman steered his theoretically inventive argument, which contemplates early modern self-fashioning in *Paradise Lost*, into a similar alignment with orthodoxy. He remarks that Milton's awakening of readers' capacities for active self-awareness is especially notable in their responses to Milton's God: "the difficulty of accepting the Father is, as Stanley Fish points out, a measure of our 'crookedness'. ... It is not so much the Father who is characterized in book III as the reader's relationship to the Godhead."[27]

Judging by these three influential and ostensibly quite different works of the last decade, *Paradise Lost* instructs rather easily duped and forgetful readers by repeatedly convicting them of sin or by obtruding measures of their crookedness. True, these studies have also branched out from the standard position. Yet, each of them accepts Fish's basic position as a premise: Milton provokes an emotional response (as in the similes or the depiction of God) and then, having established fallen engagement, dominates it. That New Historicist readings like those of

Turner and Grossman should fall in so readily behind the evangelical standard may seem surprising. Yet Fish's description of Christian didacticism anticipates the familiar New Historicist interpretive paradigm, in which subversion is a fantasy that can never be successfully realized. Authority, according to this model, clandestinely instigates rebellion, or at least the thought of it, as a pretext for the assertion and confirmation of power. Like evil and good in Augustinian theology and its Protestant derivatives, subversion and containment constitute only an appearance of dualism within a totalitarian system.[28]

To elicit his audience's awareness of its peccant condition and so validate the divine perspective, Milton allegedly exploits the disjunction between readers' fallen attitudes and standard, Protestant, ethical doctrine – comprising what one critic calls "catechetical formulations."[29] Christopher Kendrick's Marxian study (1986) describes such "didactic theology" as being in conflict with the epic's psychological effect:

> Theological and psychological genres appear to conflict with one another, and ... the dominant genre of the hexameron overrules affective drama, didactic theology retroactively canceling profane psychological motivations.[30]

This mouthful does no more than "to put into generic terms Stanley Fish's argument about the presentation of God," as Kendrick admits.[31]

When Fish comes to interpret *Areopagitica*, he returns Kendrick's favor, noting the congruity of their respective readings of that work too:

> On one point we are in agreement, that *Areopagitica* displays a double structure of discursive argument and anti-discursive eruptions that "uncenter" the overt rhetorical movement of the oration .... The chief difference is that whereas I see Milton continually undermining the forms within which he necessarily moves in order to make his tract a (self-consuming) emblem of its message, Kendrick sees contradictions that Milton does not control because they mark his implication in the ideological structure of emerging capitalism.[32]

For Kendrick, Milton's use of the vocabulary of commerce and monopoly in a tract claiming that truth is not a ware subject to such practices betrays his social contradiction, and thus his class stand.[33] Milton does not himself expose this implicit contradiction, says Kendrick, because of his alignment with the "revolutionary bourgeois class." To disclose the lie of bourgeois ideology would be a betrayal. What for Kendrick exemplifies Marx's concept of contradiction – an economic interest profiting from ideological posturing to the contrary –