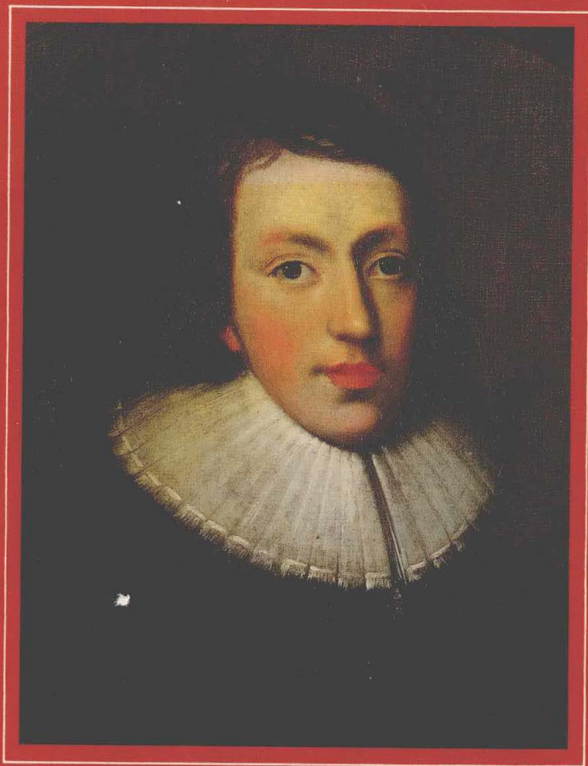




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JOHN
MILTON

THE OXFORD AUTHORS

JOHN MILTON

EDITED BY
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Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

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Extracts from *Second Defence of the English People* and
Christian Doctrine from *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*
(Vol. 6, ed. M. Kelley, Latin trans. J. Carey, and Vol. 4, ed. D. M. Wolfe)
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Milton, John, 1608–1674

John Milton.—(The Oxford authors).

I. Title II. Orgel, Stephen, 1933– III. Goldberg, Jonathan
828.409

ISBN 0–19–254188–9

ISBN 0–19–281379–X pbk

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Milton, John, 1608–1674.

[Selections. 1990]

John Milton/edited by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg.

p. cm.—(The Oxford authors)

Includes bibliographical references.

I. Orgel, Stephen. II. Goldberg, Jonathan. III. Title. IV. Series.
PR3552.074 1990 821'.4—dc20 90–34107

ISBN 0–19–254188–9

ISBN 0–19–281379–X (Pbk.)

Typeset by Promenade Graphics Ltd.

Printed in Great Britain by

Richard Clay Ltd.

Bungay, Suffolk

THE OXFORD AUTHO

General Editor: Frank Kermode

JOHN MILTON was born on 9 December 1608 in Cheapside, London. He published little until the appearance of *Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin* in 1646, when he was thirty-seven. By this time he was deeply committed to a political vocation, and became an articulate and increasingly indispensable spokesman for the Independent cause. He wrote the crucial justifications for the trial and execution of Charles I, and, as Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of State, was the voice of the English revolution to the world at large. After the failure of the Commonwealth he was briefly imprisoned; blind and in straitened circumstances he returned to poetry, and in 1667 published a ten-book version of *Paradise Lost*, his biblical epic written, as he put it, after 'long choosing, and beginning late'. In 1671, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* appeared, followed two years later by an expanded edition of his shorter poems. The canon was completed in 1674, the year of his death, with the appearance of the twelve-book *Paradise Lost*, which became a classic almost immediately. His influence on English poetry and criticism has been incalculable.

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Ἀμαβεῖ γεγραφαί χειρὶ τῷδε ὑλὲ εἰκόνα
 Φαίης τάχ' ἄν, πρὸς εἶδος αὐτοφύες βλέπων
 Τὸν δὲ ἐκτυπῶτὸν ἐκ ἐπιγυνοῦντες φίλοι
 Γελάτε φαῦλθ' δυσμίμημα ζωγράφου.

WM. sculp.

Poems 1645, frontispiece. Engraving by William Marshall. For the Greek epigram, see p. 162.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE spring of 1674, some six months before Milton died, and only a few months before the second edition of *Paradise Lost* appeared, John Dryden completed an opera, *The State of Innocence*; the Poet Laureate had chosen Milton's epic as the basis for his extravaganza. Operas were a distinctively modern genre in late seventeenth-century England, and their librettos were often derived from classic texts, including works that were coming to be claimed as English classics. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which had been rewritten by Davenant and Dryden in 1667, was playing in a rival operatic revision early in 1674, and Dryden had undertaken his opera in response to the success of that production. In choosing to base *The State of Innocence* on *Paradise Lost*, Dryden was declaring that Milton's poem had the status of a classic. The claim was an extraordinary one, for Milton was still living. If his epic seemed to come from an earlier age (in subsequent criticism and verse, Dryden would couple it with Homer and Virgil), Milton's name could not be dissociated from a recent and, from Dryden's perspective, threatening past—the years of the English Revolution that had seen Charles I deposed and executed in 1649 and the ascendancy of Oliver Cromwell. Thanks to his defence of regicide in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton had been appointed Cromwell's Latin Secretary. His position involved the handling of diplomatic correspondence, but he would have been best known for such tracts as *Eikonoklastes* (1649), with its point-for-point demolition of the royal image, and for the series of defences he had written in the 1650s in which he had made himself the spokesman for the revolution. Consequently, with the restoration of Charles II in 1660 Milton's life had been in danger.

Dryden's choice of *Paradise Lost* for his operatic libretto therefore was not an uncomplicated act of poetic homage: Charles II's Poet Laureate sought to recast Milton's poem to serve new poetic, and political, designs. Milton's only recorded response to Dryden's operatic plan was a comment on what might seem merely a question of poetic technique: Dryden's decision to recast Milton's blank verse as rhymed couplets. Milton is reported to have said, 'Well, Mr Dryden, it seems you have a mind to tag my points, and you have my leave to tag them.'¹

¹ William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), i. 635.

The old poet referred sardonically to Dryden's rhymes as the equivalent of fashionable metal stays, and went on to remark that some of his lines were 'so awkward and old-fashioned' that they could not be updated and might as well be left as Dryden found them.

Milton's response was not simply a recognition of changing poetic fashions. For the 1669 printing of the first edition of *Paradise Lost* (1667) he had provided an introductory note about his versification, describing his choice of blank verse as a political decision: it was to serve as an exemplary instance of 'ancient liberty recovered to Heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of Rhyming'. Milton's note, indeed, may well have been a reply to Dryden, who, in the dedication to his play, *The Rival Ladies* (1664), had insisted that the 'wild and lawless' imagination of a poet required the 'clogs' of rhyme to restrain and circumscribe it. The debate, which engaged a number of other authors, was continued, too, in the prefatory poem that Andrew Marvell provided for the 1674 edition of *Paradise Lost*. Alluding to the Poet Laureate and his fashionable 'tags', Marvell commended Milton for writing in blank verse. Dryden and Marvell were political opponents, taking sides that within a few years would be called Tory and Whig.

To begin with this episode is to be reminded of a number of things: that literary history is something constructed; that the question of classic and canonical status for a text is often a matter of contestation; that literary history cannot be separated either from history in the broader sense, or even from the more narrow sphere of party politics. If Dryden's choice of *Paradise Lost* as the basis for his operatic libretto functioned as an act of poetic recognition, it was also intended to serve as an attempt at poetic and political appropriation. It can stand as an initial instance in the afterlife of Milton's epic—the first of those rewritings through which literary history is constructed. But it does so in relation to other literary histories, among them the one glanced at in Milton's own allusion to the 'ancient liberty' with which he affiliated his poem. Milton's implied sense of his epic is not necessarily or obviously more correct than Dryden's; after all, coming in 1669, it may be a response to Dryden. And its appearance in a note solicited by the publisher of *Paradise Lost* is no guarantee that the choice of blank verse had been politically charged in the same way when Milton began to write the poem a quarter of a century earlier. As much as Dryden's rewriting of the epic, which occurred before the poem had even reached its definitive twelve-book form, Milton's note suggests the poet's revisionary relationship to his own text and career.

The Poet of the 1640s

Such relationships can be seen throughout Milton's life, and most explicitly when Milton's subject is his own career, as it is a number of times in his verse and prose. The prose passages in particular have often shaped later accounts of Milton's life and works; read critically, they allow one to examine the revisionary processes at work in Milton's writings. When, for example, Milton presents himself in his first signed publication, *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), it is as a poet who uses only his 'left hand' in writing prose. In the account he gives, his entire life appears to have been spent in training as a poet; the prose he writes in response to the present religious and political turmoil is represented as an interruption of a career that he intends to resume, even promising his reader 'a work not to be raised from the heat of youth'. These pages read resoundingly now, and the hope to write something 'to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die' sounds like a forecast of *Paradise Lost*; but in 1642, the name 'John Milton' had never appeared on any published poem. The fact is obscured, if not deliberately suppressed, in this prose declaration of an already existing corpus of works of his right hand soon to be crowned with immortal fame. If any of what was to become *Paradise Lost* had been written by 1642, it was as some lines of a drama entitled 'Adam Unparadised' that Milton showed to his nephews, John and Edward Phillips, at around this time—lines that, twenty-five years later, would form part of Satan's soliloquy at the beginning of book 4.

In 1645, a volume of *Poems of Mr John Milton, Both English and Latin* appeared. If it was meant to fulfil the promise made in 1642, it notably failed to do so. A citation from Virgil's seventh eclogue on the title-page said as much: 'Baccare frontem/Cingite, ne vati noceat mala lingua futuro' ('Wreath my brow with valerian, lest an evil tongue harm the poet yet to be'), imploring the safety of the poet who is still to come—'vati . . . futuro'. The fulfilment of the 1642 promise was thereby deferred. The 1645 volume included no epic or drama 'doctrinal and exemplary to a nation' such as Milton had envisioned in *The Reason of Church Government*; it was, in many respects, a perfectly familiar compilation of lyrics of the sort that had been published throughout the century. It exhibited skill in a number of the prevailing forms and modes: pastoral invitation in 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', elegies in English and Latin, metrical psalms, epigrams, sonnets. And if, in *Lycidas*, Milton drew on the traditional capacity of pastoral to comment on ecclesiastical corruption (something that can be seen in numerous

Renaissance precursors, among them Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*), the poem in 1645 no doubt also spoke powerfully to the present situation, the ousting of the bishops and the substitution of a Presbyterian Church government. None the less, the longest poem in the 1645 *Poems* was written in the most royalist of forms, the masque, and the title-page to the volume announced that it contained songs set by Henry Lawes, 'Gentleman of the King's Chapel, and one of his Majesty's Private Music'. Testimonials that preceded the section of Latin poems came from the hands of the Italian—and Catholic—literati who had acknowledged Milton's talent during his trip to Italy in 1638–9.

Milton's self-presentation in the prose of 1642 scarcely suggests the heterogeneity that can be seen in the 1645 collection of his poetry; the disparity between them makes clear that the career Milton was pursuing cannot entirely be understood through his own later designs. The volume in which Milton emerged as a self-acknowledged poet not only deferred the major work forecast in 1642. It also, inevitably, invoked another self: by 1645, Milton was well known, not as a poet but as the author of pamphlets on divorce. These were regarded as scandalous even by Milton's fellow Presbyterians—the publisher of *Poems of Mr John Milton* may, indeed, have been hoping to cash in precisely on the notoriety of Milton's name. As a collection of verse, the 1645 volume points backwards to the many directions Milton's career might have taken; it displays Milton trying on the mantle of many predecessors, and never in uncomplicated ways. But it also suggests that there is more to his biography than Milton allowed in *The Reason of Church Government*.

This is the case even at a personal level. To the 'ceaseless diligence and care' of his father, acknowledged there, might be juxtaposed the tense eloquence of the poem *Ad Patrem*, which suggests that the poetic career Milton chose in the mid-1630s was not his father's choice; the smooth progression toward the profession of poetry described in *The Reason of Church Government* ignores the conflicts that were occasioned by Milton's decision. This is by no means to suggest that the elder Milton was a philistine. He was an accomplished musician and composer, and (on the evidence of *Ad Patrem*) fostered his son's interests, even when they seemed opposed to his own. He was above all socially ambitious for all his children, and generous to them: he had settled a considerable dowry on his daughter Anne when she married Edward Phillips in 1623; Milton's younger brother Christopher was being trained as a lawyer; Milton himself, the elder son, had been from child-

hood 'destined', as he puts it in *The Reason of Church Government*, to a Church career. The ecclesiastical destiny also reflects what little we know about his mother, Sara, whose piety Milton praises elsewhere. The education that John Milton accorded his namesake bespeaks those plans: private tutoring; grammar school education at the prestigious St Paul's School; university education at Cambridge, culminating with an MA in 1632. His studies subsequently extended beyond the university, and were pursued at his father's expense.

The elder John Milton was a professional scrivener, lucrative work in the seventeenth century. Scriveners were employed to draw up legal documents, and were thereby made privy to financial transactions. Milton's father, in fact, made his money by lending money. He amassed enough not only to provide his son with the education of a gentleman and scholar, but to permit him the leisure of several years of independent study, first at the family estate at Hammersmith, to which the elder Milton had retired in 1632, and then at Horton, in Buckinghamshire, where he took up residence in 1635. In 1638-9 Milton capped his education with a trip to the continent, although the motives behind this Grand Tour were clearly complicated, both by his decision not to fulfil his parents' plans for him to enter the Church and by the death of his mother in April 1637. *Lycidas*, an elegy for a drowned schoolmate who had entered the priesthood, was completed by November 1637. In its situation, and from its initial declaration of poetic unripeness to its final lines heading towards 'pastures new', it echoes against the cross purposes of Milton's life in the 1630s.

There is no reason to doubt that Milton's decision not to enter the Church was made on the basis of religious principles; but one must also recognize that he was able to arrive at it because he was under no pressure to earn a living throughout this period. Nevertheless, when he came back from the continent he did not return to his father's estate but set up on his own in London; and in his first move towards independence he took on pupils, among them his sister's children, John and Edward Phillips. His financial circumstances remained relatively comfortable, though it would not be until almost a decade later, in 1649, when he became Cromwell's Latin Secretary, that the 41-year-old Milton would receive a regular salary.

The letter to a friend written about the same time as *Ad Patrem* expresses Milton's doubts about his vocation, and we can see from the 1645 *Poems* that in the 1630s Milton had pursued the kind of employment that a young man of means and leisure who wished to be a poet might have sought. He found a patron in the Dowager Countess of

Derby, for whom he composed the courtly entertainment *Arcades*; Henry Lawes, the king's musician and an acquaintance of Milton's father, had very likely provided the music on that occasion, and it was probably at his suggestion that the Countess's son-in-law, the Earl of Bridgewater, commissioned a masque from Milton to commemorate his installation as Lord Lieutenant of Wales. Between these two events, Milton's first published poem, 'On Shakespeare', had appeared, anonymously, in the second Shakespeare Folio (1632). There is no evidence of how the 24-year-old Milton found his way into that volume, but the fact suggests that he had ambitions quite separate from those for a career as a Churchman—or as a courtly poet. For this sort of professional aspiration, Ben Jonson offered almost the only living example, though by this time he was reduced to poverty and was sadly neglected. His example, nevertheless, was a powerful one: it would have demonstrated first of all the need for aristocratic or courtly patronage. But more important, through the publication of his *Workes* in folio in 1616, Jonson had presented himself as an English classic, and thereby had laid the ground both for the literary claims of Shakespeare's plays as they too appeared in authoritative folio editions, and for those of all future English writers who, like Milton, sought for their work the status of classics.

In the sixth of his Latin elegies, addressed to Charles Diodati, the close friend he made at Cambridge, Milton had described *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* as his own poetic coming of age; the poem stands first in the 1645 volume, followed by psalm translations and poems on Christian themes. These are, however, precisely the sorts of poems a future Churchman might have written and may be compared to the religious verse of Donne or Herbert. They are not the poems of a would-be laureate. In the letter written to an unknown friend some years later, Milton included a copy of his seventh sonnet, a declaration of poetic immaturity, but also, in that context, a defence of his belatedness. The contradiction between the announced arrival in the poem to Diodati and the subsequent deferral in the letter to the friend registers a critical change of direction, as Milton abandoned the Church career for which he had been trained and moved towards a poetic career whose terms and possibilities were necessarily transformed by the events of the 1640s.

Thus, while the 1645 *Poems* may look like the kind of collection produced by any number of poets in the 1630s, in that revolutionary time there could no longer be the hope that any of the sorts of poetic careers promised in that volume might be realized. The urgent work, Milton

came quickly to recognize, was the work of his left hand: the defence of embattled friends, the call for the reformation that seemed within reach. The declaration of immaturity and the anxieties expressed in the 1630s, in the letter to the friend, or in 'How soon hath time', or in *Lycidas*, none the less recur throughout the 1640s, and later, continually recontextualized by events Milton could not have anticipated. The poetic career, as Milton writes it, is always being postponed, is always in preparation. In 'How soon hath time', to enhance that claim, and to take charge of circumstances that were not always in his control, Milton described himself as both feeling and appearing younger than he really was; there, as in *The Reason of Church Government*, recalling the biblical parable that haunted the imagination of the scrivener's son, he presents himself as not yet ready to deliver on the talent with which he had been invested.

The Prose Career

Such strategies can still be seen as late as the *Second Defence* (1654). Although totally blind, his eyes, he insists, appear 'as clear and bright, without a cloud, as the eyes of men who see most keenly'; and although he is well on towards middle age, 'past forty', 'there is', he continues, 'scarcely anyone to whom I do not seem younger by about ten years'. It would be mistaken to read these remarks merely as signs of vanity; Milton's defensive self-construction occurs here, after all, more than a dozen years after he had promised his readers the poem 'doctrinal and exemplary to a nation'. These self-protective gestures are means to ensure the possibility that the promise might yet be kept. But they are also in the service of the self forged during his years as Latin Secretary, as his earlier notions of immediate revolutionary reform were challenged, and his blindness could be taken as a reason for, and a sign of abandonment. In the *Second Defence*, what had become a long digression from the poetic career is reread and reinterpreted.

This can be clearly seen in the tract when Milton reviews his career as a prose writer. No allowance is made for historical contingency or multiplicity; history, rather, is treated as a kind of logical problem and his prose takes place within what is represented as an entirely straightforward and rationalized exploration of various kinds of liberty:

Since, then, I observed that there were, in all, three varieties of liberty without which civilized life is scarcely possible, namely ecclesiastical liberty, domestic or personal liberty, and civil liberty, and since I had already written about the first, while I saw that the magistrates were vigorously attending to the third, I took as my province the remaining one, the second or domestic kind. This too seemed

to be concerned with three problems: the nature of marriage, the education of the children, and finally the existence of freedom to express oneself.

Milton had written his first prose tract, *Of Reformation*, in response to religious issues; yet there is an insistent politicization as one proceeds from *Of Reformation* to the *Apology* and *The Reason of Church Government* that is virtually effaced in his later account. His defences in the 1640s of Presbyterianism as the only true form of Protestantism entangled him in political debate and strife, moving him ever further from hopes of reform within the Church and with the support of the king. The 'reason' of Church government, like the logic of liberty in the *Second Defence*, is not so self-contained as Milton would have it. There is none the less the most intimate relationship between Milton's self-presentation and the kinds of claims he makes for such intrinsic logics. Similarly, the decision to treat domestic liberty, with its focus on the issue of divorce, can hardly have been the entirely rational choice that Milton represents; indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the moment of thought represented in the *Second Defence* ever took place except in that retrospective recounting. The point here is not to impugn Milton's veracity, but to see throughout his career, and as perhaps the single constant in it, Milton's overwhelming attempt to give a coherent shape to his life. The terms change, and different constraints are denied for the sake of the controlling design. If we pause over the acts of suppression involved in these acts of forecasting and retrospective recasting, it is only because such attention makes Milton's career and the texts he wrote legible beyond those Miltonic designs.

The tracts Milton wrote on domestic liberty from 1642 to 1645 are far more complex than the single progression through a tripartite structure that he describes. They represent particular responses to a range of situations, both political and personal. Behind the divorce tracts lies not only the anomaly that England was the sole Protestant nation that forbade divorce; there also lies the fact that Milton was separated from his wife throughout those years. He had married Mary Powell suddenly, or so the story goes: 'home he returns a married man, that went out a bachelor' is the memorable sentence in the first biography of Milton, written by his nephew Edward Phillips,² a description almost as startling as Milton's own endorsement of marriage in the *Apology*, after

² Merritt Y. Hughes (ed.), *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), 1031. Phillips's biography was almost certainly written at Milton's dictation; it shows signs, too, of having been influenced by Milton's accounts in his position.

paragraphs lauding chastity. What is not mentioned in Phillips's *Life* is the fact that the elder Milton had loaned money to the Powells; Milton's trip to the country, when he met Mary Powell, was undertaken to collect on the loan. Shortly after their marriage, Mary Powell Milton returned to her parents, supposedly for a visit; she was absent for the next three years. But what separated the Miltons was not merely personal: Powell was a royalist. In the four divorce pamphlets Milton wrote in these years, incompatibility is repeatedly presented as grounds for divorce. Milton argues as if he were articulating a universal, time-transcending principle of freedom, yet we cannot ignore personal and political dimensions to his motives. We must also come to terms with the fact that the right of divorce insisted upon is solely a male prerogative: no provision is imagined for women with marital grievances. Finally, while Milton associates this liberty with the principle of Christian liberty proclaimed by St Paul, it is hard won against the biblical texts upon which Milton attempted to rest his case.

So too with *Areopagitica*, written to defend the liberty of the press against the 1643 licensing act that asserted the government's right of pre-censorship. Milton's liberty, however, is explicitly only for Protestants and not for Catholics; and although he attacks pre-censorship, he does not question post-publication censorship. Moreover, rather than representing a seamless development from the pamphlets on religious freedom, *Areopagitica* registers Milton's move away from the Presbyterians who had assumed power; it is their policies that he calls into question. Glossed over, then, by Milton's category of domestic liberty are the personal and political motives in his writing—and those categories are not easily separated. Similarly, the tract *On Education* arises from experiences Milton chose not to acknowledge there nor to recount in the *Second Defence*: that he first earned a living in the 1640s by taking on pupils. Although Dr Johnson is hardly the most sympathetic biographer of Milton, he is perhaps worth listening to here: 'Let not our veneration for Milton forbid us to look with some degree of merriment on great promises and small performance, on the man who hastens home, because his countrymen are contending for their liberty, and, when he reaches the scene of action, vapours away his patriotism in a private boarding-school.'³ Johnson had no sympathy with Milton's politics; he none the less points accurately to the several years between Milton's return from the continent and his first prose writings, years

³ *The Lives of the Poets in The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 9 vols. (Oxford: Talboys and Wheeler, 1825), vii. 75.

suppressed in Milton's account. One could be more sympathetic to Milton at this point in his life; he was establishing a home of his own; dealing with the death of his best friend, Diodati, memorialized in the *Epitaphium Damonis*; casting about for a large poetic subject (as that poem indicates); facing, even at a personal level, the national schism—his brother Christopher chose to side with the king. None the less, the point holds: the *Second Defence* presents a far more single-minded Milton, and years disappear in it.

Of Education is a complex document, testifying to Milton's interest in educational reforms, but also marking his adherence to the humanist education he had received at St Paul's, and which he attempted to pass on to his nephews. When, in 1673, Milton republished the 1645 poems with some further additions of poems both early and late (another attempt to organize his poetic career), he included *Of Education* in the volume, treating it thereby as a kind of poetics. The tract can be seen in that way; but it also imagines education not merely as an intellectual pursuit but as a kind of military training. It points, as does *Areopagitica*, towards Milton's break with the Presbyterians and his alliance with the Independents who assumed power after the trial and execution of Charles I in January 1649. They were enabled to do so only because Colonel Pride with an armed troop had entered Parliament the month before and forcibly ejected the Presbyterians. When, a month later, Milton defended the inevitability of the removal of the unjust king in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, he did not address the question of the illegality of Pride's Purge: the king would not have been executed had the Presbyterians been allowed to vote.

The 'ancient liberty' with which Milton associated his versification in *Paradise Lost* has its connections with the principle of liberty announced in the *Second Defence*, and practised in Milton's strenuous engagements with the Bible in the divorce tracts (the principle behind such interpretive strategies is laid out in a chapter on the scriptures in *Christian Doctrine*). It allies the poem with the highly politicized version of individual male prerogative forged in Milton's prose, and perhaps most resolutely stated in the most desperate of situations: in *The Ready and Easy Way*, for example, written shortly before the Restoration, Milton virtually dictates solutions to the nation; the principle of liberty leads him to propose ignoring the will of the people. It is not difficult to find in the heroic self-portrait of the blind bard and prophet offered in the *Second Defence* the creation of the voice of the poet of *Paradise Lost*. The extraordinary strength of the self-presentation in the prose of the 1650s is part of the most literal act of revision, as the claims for sight and fore-

sight are made in the face of personal ruin or of impending political collapse. And it is worth noting, too, that in these tracts, Milton had stopped promising the poem 'doctrinal and exemplary to a nation'; the prose has come to stand in that place, explicitly so at the end of the *Second Defence*. Taking control of the career had come to be an abandonment of that career as it had been laid out in the early 1640s; what remained was to 'stand and wait'.

The Last Revision: the 1660s

In 1660, with his life in danger, Milton went into hiding, only to emerge after the Act of Oblivion, which pardoned those who had served under Cromwell. He was heavily fined, his works were burned, and he lived a far more straitened life than he had ever known. Instead of the steady supply of amanuenses to take down his words, or to read to him, he now had only his three daughters, whom he required, notoriously, to read texts to him in languages they could not understand. These were the surviving children of his marriage to Mary Powell, who had died in 1652 (there were no surviving children from his brief second marriage to Katherine Woodstock, and none from his third marriage to Elizabeth Minshull, whom he married in 1663). In the changed circumstances of the 1660s, *Paradise Lost* reached its final form, appearing first as a ten-book epic in 1667. The poem is striated by its years of composition. Doubtless it is not only Satan's soliloquy at the beginning of book 4 that dates from the 'Adam Unparadised' of the 1640s, or from other early drafts of epics and tragedies. Some passages seem to draw upon political experiences from the 1640s and 1650s—the war councils and battles, for all their Homeric and Virgilian overtones, must also have had their counterparts in the years of revolution. But the 'evil days' of the opening of book 7 seem to allude to the collapse of the Revolution and the restoration of the Stuarts; and, more intimately, references to Milton's blindness must postdate the 1640s, and are likely to be later than 1652, when he lost his sight completely.

If *Paradise Lost* at last fulfils the promise to write a poem 'doctrinal and exemplary', it does so in ways that could not have been anticipated in the early 1640s, when the poem, imagined as a national epic, would have served as an arm of the state and its religion. That the poem is heavily censored even in its theology can be seen by comparing it with the *Christian Doctrine*, a work that occupied Milton for the last twenty years of his life, and in which his religious beliefs are detailed. These include heresies, among them the rejection of the Trinity and a conviction that the soul dies with the body—Milton's religion was hardly one

that any Christian nation would have embraced as doctrinal. *Paradise Lost* barely allows its heretical views to be seen; it similarly suppresses its politics. If the poem managed to have an immediate afterlife it was as much due to what was being denied as to its recasting of the founding myth of Christian culture.

In his final years, Milton also completed *Samson Agonistes*, a poem whose roots lie in the 1640s and 1650s, and *Paradise Regained*, explicitly written as a sequel to the earlier epic. These are poems whose strengths, too, lie in powerful denials; the negativity of the Jesus of *Paradise Regained* baffles Satan almost as much as it has puzzled modern readers.⁴ Milton published these two poems together in 1671, followed them with a reissue of his shorter poems, with additions, in 1673, and with the revised twelve-book version of *Paradise Lost* in 1674, shortly before his death; he attempted thereby to give a final and definitive shape to his career. After years in which postponement had been the key to poetic production, and in which contingencies—whether political or personal—were constantly being made to serve as parts of a willed design, the poet finally delivered himself, complete. The opening lines of *Paradise Regained*, in a gesture reminiscent of the Virgil citation on the title-page of the 1645 *Poems*, refer back to *Paradise Lost* as if the earlier epic had been the pastoral prelude and this the epic fulfilment. Yet even *Paradise Regained* returns its hero home to await a deferred, if inevitable, destiny. Jesus and Samson are palpably versions of Milton, and it is through the latter that the poet at last delivered himself and his talent over to posterity, and to death—and to those subsequent revisions, of which Dryden's *State of Innocence* has served as a first example.

Early Critical Views: The Sublimity of Paradise Lost

Dryden's opera was never staged, however, and its appearance in print in 1677 seems to have made little impact. Unlike Restoration versions of Shakespeare plays, which claimed the stage for over a century, Dryden's operatic recasting of *Paradise Lost* did not replace the poem. But Dryden's engagement with Milton did have other consequences, most immediately for Dryden's style and his own epic ambitions, but perhaps more importantly for a long history of critical pronouncements, beginning with the preface to the *State of Innocence*, which praised Milton's epic as 'one of the greatest, most noble, and most sublime poems which

⁴ For a noteworthy exception, see Stanley Fish's 'Things and Actions Indifferent: the Temptation to Plot in *Paradise Regained*', *Milton Studies* 17 (1983).