Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose

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Essays Edited by
David Loewenstein &
James Grantham Turner

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and

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And now the time in speciall is, by priviledge
to write and speak what may help to the furder
discussing of matters in agitation. The
Temple of *Janus* with his two *controversal*
faces might now not unsignificantly be set
open.   (*Areopagitica*)

In words which admitt of various sense, the
libertie is ours to choose that interpretation
which may best minde us of what our restless
enemies endeavor, and what wee are timely to
prevent.   (*Eikonoklastes*, Preface)

Contributors

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A note on citations and abbreviations

Milton's English prose will be cited from the Yale edition, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe *et al.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), abbreviated where necessary as *CPW*. References (volume and page) will normally be added to the text in parentheses without further attribution.

Milton's Latin prose will be cited from the Columbia edition, *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson *et al.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–38), but an English translation and a *CPW* reference will always be provided. For ease of location, parenthetical references will always give the Yale first, followed after a semicolon by the Columbia.

"Prose concordance" refers to Laurence Sterne and Harold H. Kollmeier, eds., *A Concordance to the English Prose of John Milton* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985).

Other abbreviations are as follows:

Left Hand Michael Lieb and John T. Shawcross, eds., *Achievements of the Left Hand: Essays on the Prose of John Milton* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974)

MCH I John T. Shawcross, ed., *John Milton: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970)

MCH II John T. Shawcross, ed., *John Milton, 1732–1801: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1972)

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Introduction: "Labouring in the Word"

DAVID LOEWENSTEIN AND JAMES GRANTHAM TURNER

Milton's prose works have always meant trouble. Are they essential achieve-
ments in their own right, or are they a pernicious diversion from his creative
goal, violently partisan and tediously occasional? Bishop Warburton
denounced their "abominable" virulence and "unnatural" forced grandeur,
but extolled their "poetical enthusiasm" and sublimity, which at times
excelled even that of the poetry (*MCH* II.90–2). Macaulay discovers in
Milton's prose "the full power of the English language" –

> not even in the earlier books of the Paradise Lost has the great poet
> ever risen higher than in those parts of his controversial works in
> which his feelings, excited by conflict, find a vent in bursts of
> devotional and lyric rapture

– but he still represents Milton as a divided figure, struggling to reconcile the
needs of "the statesman" and "the poet."[1] When critics try to isolate the
sublime canonical bard from the vehement polemicist, the separated halves
cling together again. When they try to abandon this critical separatism and to
see Milton's work as a whole, conversely, the language of separation returns:
the prose is assumed to be "left-handed," subliterary, a mere repository of
ideas and gloss for the poems. In the unpremeditated language of Paradise,
"Prose or numerous Verse" were interchangeable or indistinguishable (*PL*
v.150). But for generations of interpreters, Milton's double career – as poet
and as prose controversialist – has come to resemble the difficult marriage
imagined in the divorce tracts and *Samson Agonistes*: a "cleaving mischief."

The separatist doctrine is often sustained more by faith than by evidence.
One traditional scholar asserts the "*omnipresent* difference between Milton's
poetry and Milton's prose," even though he himself demonstrates a number
of similarities between the two. The same scholar claims that the poet
described *all* his prose works as "labors of his left hand"; as Turner shows
below, however, Milton's passing reference to having the use "but of my left
hand" (1.807–8) is cancelled by its larger context, and should not be used as a
universal principle to describe the achievements of the prose.[2] One progress-
ive historian, who has made vast contributions to our understanding of
Milton's prose and to the integration of his poetic and political career, still

refers to the "left-handed prose propaganda" that interrupted his true vocation.[3] One psychoanalytic critic explores the deep connection between creativity and radical polemic, singling out the aggressive "Chariot of Zeale" passage in the *Apology* to show that Milton could indeed "hold the pen . . . in the right hand" in the prose, and yet maintains that Milton's "art could not survive amid these divisive passions," that he "severed himself" in the period of political activism.[4] Indeed, a major collection of essays on the prose, our only predecessor in the field, appeared under the title *Achievements of the Left Hand*, even though its best pieces, such as those by Joseph Wittreich and Michael Lieb, effectively abolish the dichotomy of poetry and rhetoric, performance and prophesy.

The current volume stresses precisely those elements and issues that allow us to break down this partitioning of Milton's career. The essays all focus on the prose, but they open up avenues to the major poems and to contemporary ideologies, theologies and interpretative practices. Most of them bridge the gap between the history-of-ideas approach (typical of much previous work on the prose) and literary/textual analysis. Our concerns are obviously conceptual and historical as well as literary: martyrdom, iconoclasm, prophesy, apocalypticism, biblical exegesis, supplementarity, monism, natural law, authority, performance, citation, defense, polemic strategies, "elective poetics," reception, the genres of autobiography and jeremiad, the status of prose itself. But these themes are reinterpreted dynamically and as it were amphibiously, revealing their double operation – as substantial ideas in seventeenth-century history, and as linguistic and aesthetic effects. Our contributors show not simply what was thought, but how; they do not limit themselves to summaries of content, but reconstruct performance or probe for underlying (often contradictory) hermeneutic processes. They are in no way homogenous in their approaches, however. With *Areopagitica* as a model, we have encouraged "neighbouring differences" rather than "forc't and outward union"; the result is a "mangl'd body," but one that may strive towards Truth.

Though none of the following essays is primarily theoretical, they do raise theoretical issues. The multiplicity of pieces on *Eikonoklastes* and the divorce tracts suggests that they speak directly to a decade concerned with representation, deconstruction and the politics of gender. The contributions of the two editors, wielding their "two-handed engine," call for a rethinking of the relation between creativity and polemic violence. Many of these essays deal with what Cable calls the "idolatry of words," the self-referentiality of the image, the self-authentication of discourse, the tautologies that lurk beneath the appeal to biblical authority. As Knott and Cable demonstrate, the poet/iconoclast was faced with the problem of distinguishing false and true

martyrdom, false and true images – the false representation, embodied in Charles I, being that which bears witness only to itself. Many of us conclude, however, that all texts are false martyrs, and that all "assertions" usurp the authority they ostensibly obey.

These essays also propose a complex relationship between text and context, the aesthetic and the sociopolitical. David Norbrook has argued that Milton politicized the aesthetic in his early poetry; Keith Stavely, on the other hand, proposed that in his revolutionary prose Milton over-aestheticized the political, sacrificing *Realpolitik* to sonorous cadence and Utopian dreaming.[5] Stavely's polarity defines the political and the aesthetic too narrowly, we feel. The current volume highlights the aesthetic and literary dimensions of Milton's controversial writings, but its main concern is with the *interaction* between textual effects and the world of power – the ideologies of authority, the theological battles, or (less often) the political events that constitute "history." As our general epigraphs from *Areopagitica* and *Eikonoklastes* suggest, we are fascinated by those moments when significance is "set open" by war (like the temple of Janus), when revolutionary politics affect the act of interpretation itself. Our project implies, or moves towards, a dialectic and mutually constructive relation between text and context, rather than an inert background–foreground model. Thus, for example, placing *Eikonoklastes* against the background of radical Protestantism and revolutionary Puritanism may help explain the intellectual and social dimensions of Milton's iconoclasm; but treating the work as a literary text written by a poet–polemicist simultaneously fascinated by and deeply anxious about the power of an image explains even further Milton's ferocious attack on the spectacular representation of Charles I in *Eikon Basilike*. In Milton's demolition of the king's book and icon, the artistic and the political, the literary and the intellectual intersect: as a phenomenon, Milton's radical iconoclasm is simultaneously ideological and aesthetic.

Each individual essay explores a different aspect of this conjunction of literary and political discourse. As Mueller demonstrates, the bold transformation of the apocalyptic tradition in *Of Reformation* operates at a metaphorical level; in Milton's polemical use of body tropes, the "apocalyptic strain" stimulates an imaginative vision in which concept and image fuse together. Smith suggests that Milton's engagement with context may be creative and interpretive, as he appropriates and reworks the language of Parliamentarian apology and natural law to promote a new theory of ethics – the free trade of Truth expressed in *Areopagitica*'s numerous socioeconomic metaphors. Even in a text like the *Observations upon the Articles of Peace* – one of Milton's least studied and most disturbing polemics – we see him fashioning his polemical art to meet the political occasion: Corns shows how Milton supports the ethically dubious military operation in Ireland by exploiting an austere polemical style and by manipulating his audience's fears and prejudices. Fallon analyzes Milton's figurative imagination to show how

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his early monism develops in the divorce pamphlets. Drawing upon genre theory, Patterson considers how fictional narratives operate within Milton's divorce polemic, while Loewenstein stresses the mythopoetic dimensions of Milton's defense of the Protectorate in 1654; the *Second Defense* channels his poetic energies into a heroic vision of the new social order, while also responding with acute sensitivity to the fragile social realities of the historical moment. Focusing on *The Readie and Easie Way*, Knoppers demonstrates how boldly and self-consciously the polemicist appropriates and transforms the conventions of the jeremiad in order to challenge the ideology behind that prophetic mode – the notion that England would indeed remain elect.

To take Milton's prose seriously is to plunge into the vexed question of timeliness or occasionality. Our second epigraph applies not just to the revolutionary polemicist, but also to the literary critic: "in words which admitt of various sense, the libertie is ours to choose that interpretation which may best minde us of what our restless enemies endeavor, and what wee are timely to prevent" (III.342). According to separatist aesthetics, poetic achievement depends on withdrawal from the immediate processes of history, and particularly from the troubling pressures of political crisis. This withdrawal may be literal (Milton could only compose great works in the retirement forced on him by political failure), conceptual (literature transforms and transcends the specificity of the moment and the passions of commitment) or psychological (Milton may respond superficially to the changes of the times, but his real essence, the real "truth" of his literary power, lies in some perennial condition of his "ego" – as Fish argues below.) One problem of this position is theoretical: the opposition of the timeless/ literary to the local/political rests on a tautology, since this definition of the literary is obtained in the first place by subtracting the occasional and the political (which have, of course, already been defined to suit the hostile dichotomy). The timeless, far from being the source of artistic value, is thus a diminished category, a name without a thing, as Hobbes might have called it. Another problem is practical: it is difficult to read the essays in this volume without being aware of the vital interaction between Milton's creativity and the thrilling catastrophes of the Revolution. The fundamental change between the hermeneutic passivity of *Of Prelatical Episcopacy* and the activism of the divorce tracts – strikingly elaborated by Fish – reveals a deepening political crisis and personal involvement. Even a venerable Christian concept like martyrdom, as Knott shows, changed from year to year as the accelerated drama of the Revolution, and the reactionary events in France and the Piedmont, stirred the poet to new vehemence. Even in *De Doctrina*, Schwartz argues, questions of textual authority are inextricable from political questions. Discursive genres, such as the autobiographical romance studied by Patterson or the jeremiad studied by Knoppers, cannot be seen as fixed entities, since they gain new depth and meaning in the crucible of national and domestic politics. Milton's concerns were activated, concretized and so

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transformed by the developing stages of the crisis. His epistemology, his style, his self-presentation, his grasp of the relation between poetry and prose – all these alter profoundly between 1642 and 1644, or between 1654 and 1659. Like Truth itself, Milton was made, not found.[6]

One consequence of this activist conception of Milton is a new integration of the stages of his career. Fallon shows how Milton's heretical monism – central to the materialism of *Paradise Lost* – begins to emerge in the divorce tracts, while Woods argues that the concern with reader choice (what she calls "elective poetics") is as important for Milton's prose as it is for his poems. Such essays encourage us to see interrelations between the prose and the poems, and to reexamine the common assumption – the foundation stone of separatism – that the prose writings constitute a major period of interruption or diversion in Milton's poetic development.

Several essays stress the performative aspect of signification and self-presentation in the controversial writings. Milton's performance varies with the occasion, revealing (as Fish suggests) his uneasiness with the contradictions of interpretative authority. On the one hand, the danger of becoming a supplement to the Word encourages Milton to perform as minimally as possible; on the other hand, the pressure to reinterpret biblical authority in a text like the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* provokes the bold supplementer to perform a series of dazzling hermeneutic maneuvers. Self-conscious of his performance in the divorce tracts, Milton negotiates, according to Fallon, between two audiences – the conventional dualists and the unconventional monists. In the *Second Defense*, as Loewenstein shows, Milton's self-dramatization reaches delirious heights, especially when he imagines himself receiving the applause of multitudes in Europe for his heroic deliverance of an exiled Liberty. Even in the *History of Britain*, Hamilton observes, Milton's self-presentation assumes heroic dimensions as he performs the difficult task of guiding his reader through the mazes of untrustworthy and contradictory historical authorities. Highly conscious of addressing a relapsing nation at the end of his revolutionary career, Milton transforms his jeremiad into a powerful "performative utterance" (as Knoppers shows) in which he dramatizes himself as the disregarded prophet facing personal danger from the misguided majority.

Concomitantly, he seeks to perform upon the audience. Turner shows how the imputed reader in *The Reason of Church-Government* changes to accommodate the sensuous as well as the rational response. Woods argues that, even in the relatively plain tracts of 1659, Milton employs such devices as repetition, litotes, and negative construction to promote active reader choice. Similarly, Hamilton stresses Milton's "art of indirection" in the *History*, which subtly prompts his reader – often through significant silences in the historical narrative – to scrutinize and question contemporary political issues. This is not the flamboyant, militant, and highly dramatic polemicist we encounter elsewhere in the prose writings; yet, as Hamilton's analysis

suggests, the understated prose of indirection is quietly subversive, especially for the fit reader of Milton's historical work.

Our challenge, then, is to rethink Milton from the point of view of an all-embracing activism, a "labouring in the Word" through which he sought to gain the power and fervency he praised in the Apostles (1.715). Even in his earliest polemic Mueller finds an astonishing capacity to modify a providential perspective by valorizing human agency. Knott's emphasis on Milton's active and defiant conception of martyrdom confirms Mueller's observation, as does Loewenstein's consideration of Milton's dramatic assertion of himself in his state discourse, where he employs the power of mythopoetic vision to alter the ideological pressures of his age. Turner gives central importance to the anti-rational impulse of "Zeale," which promotes a heroic rhetoric obliterating the difference between Miltonic prose and poetry. Woods adds another dimension to this theme by transferring activism to Milton's reader, who finds herself negotiating – in both the prose and poetry – a multiplicity of meanings. As Knoppers observes, however, the notion of activism may reflect a crucial tension: the need for human action – expressed in Milton's own performative discourse – struggles with a sense of "its impossibility without divine aid." This leads him to a paradoxical position: "deferring to Biblical authority, Milton establishes his own."

Indeed, a number of these essays explore tensions and contradictions in Milton, establishing him as a figure divided, not by the cleavage of prose and poetry, but in every work and at every level. Focusing on questions of citation and authorization in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Schwartz (like Knoppers) shows Milton grappling with rival claims to authority – his own versus biblical authority. His emphasis on the plainness and clearness of scripture conflicts with his strenuous efforts at interpretation; as Schwartz suggests, this interpretive engagement can be competitive and aggressive – a confrontation between Milton and scripture, an act of dismembering and rearranging the sacred text. Patterson discovers in the syntax of the *Doctrine and Discipline* a tension between a disinterested self and a self-interested author, between an impersonal zeal for reform and Milton's "owne by-ends"; his use of myth – for example, the union of Eros and Anteros to express reciprocal love – conveys "both a generic and a gendered discomfort." Likewise, Fallon stresses a tension between blamelessness and responsibility in the divorce tracts, where the voice of the patriarchal and injured male repeatedly undermines Milton's more humane plea for no-fault divorce based on incompatibility. In *Areopagitica*, Smith detects a "creative tension" between political obligation and liberty, noting that Milton's ethics of virtuous choosing are not fully reconciled with ideas of natural law and contract. Even Fish, though he laments the attention given by left-wing critics to fissures and contradictions, takes obvious pleasure in demonstrating that Milton's argument is "everywhere divided against itself." Milton's contrary assertions about his achievements in prose reveal, as Turner suggests in the final essay, a