10 The Politics of *Paradise Lost*

MARY ANN RADZINOWICZ

In ‘The Politics of *Paradise Lost*’ I fly the colours of a school of Miltonists who share a common desire to locate the poet in the rich complexities of his own historical moment. Such a school might be said to have been founded by David Masson, variably exemplified by William Haller, Ernest Barker and Christopher Hill, and represented currently by Joan Bennett, Keith Staveley and Michael Wilding. My own attitudes towards the subject seem to me most like those of Haller crossed with Staveley and Wilding. A monument of the concerns of this school as well as an indispensable tool for individual scholars of its persuasion would be the Yale edition of Milton’s complete prose works. Indeed, I think that one of the most interesting developments in current literary theory as applied to John Milton has been the use of the poet’s prose works in the interpretation of his *oeuvre*. My book *Toward Samson Agonistes: The Growth of Milton’s Mind*, an attempt at tracing the trajectory made by the interrelationships of almost all the works of Milton’s brain read chronologically, would have been incomparably more difficult without the Yale prose.

It is Milton’s contribution to the political history of his age, in contradistinction, say, to the social or religious, however, that particularly concerns me in this essay, as often elsewhere. Milton’s work has never lacked for political readers. My work resembles that of those who comment on the history of Milton’s ideology, or on Milton’s changes of stance in the developing relationship between his times and his politics. Ernest Sirluck was an early inspiration. I agree with Steven Zwicker and Kevin Sharpe in finding it interesting that the moralizing politics of *Paradise Lost* was anachronistic when it appeared in 1667 in the Restoration and yet an inspiration to revolutionary change only eleven years later at the time of the Glorious Revolution. The strategies I’ve used in this essay to get at Milton’s paideutic politics are those I tend to favour, the biographical and intertextual.

One received opinion concerning *Paradise Lost* tells us that when Milton’s political hopes for his nation were dealt the fatal blow of the Restoration, he withdrew into regions of the mind where he could find other-worldly solace and mingled no more with politics. Of this view Coleridge gave the romantic account:

In [Milton’s] mind itself there were purity and piety absolute; an imagination to which neither the past nor the present were interesting, except as far as they called forth and enlivened the great ideal in which and for which he lived; a keen love of truth, which, after many weary pursuits, found a harbour in a sublime listening to the still voice in his own spirit, and as keen a love of his country, which, after a disappointment still more depressing, expanded and soared into a love of man as a probationer of immortality. . . . He was, as every truly great poet has ever been, a good man, but finding it impossible to realize his own aspirations, either in religion, or in politics, or society, he gave up his heart to the living spirit and light within him, and avenged himself on the world by enriching it with this record of his own transcendent ideal.¹

Offered with varying degrees of approbation depending on the critic, that picture of the epic poet abandoning politics for religion, to endow the world with a sublime rather than a politically or historically-critical vision, remains current. It is the view made official or marmorealized for this generation in *A Milton Encyclopedia*, for example, in which Michael Feider writes, ‘The Restoration guaranteed a political amnesty to all but the worst offenders against the Stuarts, and Milton was one of those who narrowly escaped proscription. Thereafter he was prudently silent, except for an allusion to tyrants in *Paradise Lost* that caused a small flutter.’²

A contrary position argues that *Paradise Lost* participates in Milton’s persistent concern with politics but reveals the unrepentant radical wrestling hard to bring his libertarian views into accord with his theology. This stand also received its standard formulation by a romantic, William Blake. Blake located the ideological content of the epic in the struggle between Satan and God, a struggle he said was

in Milton's epic purposes that a political program might play in another kind of work. Accordingly the essay will examine the problems of subject and language - taking up Milton's conception of biblical authority, his radicalization of the story of the Fall, and his ways of using fallen language - as these matters become the very themes in the poem's political education, the problems set by the poet-political teacher in the way a Socratic educator sets problems, the occasions for debate, and instances for correction.

Paradise Lost, then, is directed on the political level 'to make the people fittest to judge, and the chosen fittest to govern.' Consequently I will deal with Milton's political ideas as an overt subject in the poem. The overt political thought itself presents a sufficient challenge for interpretation without resort to remoter levels of signification, where dwells the politics of criticism rather than the politics of discourse. The political concepts addressed in Paradise Lost are the three dominant ideas of continuous concern to Milton: freedom, order, and degree; their interrelationship; their appropriate protection; and their development through changing institutions in the course of history. Milton's method is not that of the propagandist for this or that institution or program; his method is that of the teacher. The text he sets before his readers is a biblical text, and with the political implications of choosing such a text we may begin.

The politics of the biblical subject

Several times as a young writer of prose Milton set himself to prove that a political or legal arrangement - divorce, for example, or the Presbyterian form of church government - which he desired in the 1640s had been especially recommended or urged in Scripture centuries earlier. That is not the method of argument in political matters the heroic poet adopted in Paradise Lost. He does not search Scripture seeking precedents, freely interpreting the text in order to find them. He reads Scripture seeking its rational interpretation. Satisfied that he has rightly judged the significance of this or that occasion, his interpretation does not become the precedent to which current affairs are made conformable; rather, the free use of reason in an act of interpretation becomes the precedent, the mode by which current affairs are judged.

One paradigmatic example may illustrate Milton's political way with the Bible. His procedure is to offer a course in political education through biblical texts set to be interpreted. The persistently corrective effect of reading Scripture is the lesson he now provides, in contradistinction to that youthful practice of arguing that his own positions are supported by
decisive precedents. In the prose work closest in time to Paradise Lost, The Reade and Easie Way, written in the consciousness of the defeat of the Good Old Cause, Milton holds that 'to make the people fittest to chuse, and the chosen fittest to govern' is

to mend our corrupt and faulty education, to teach the people faith not without virtue, temperance, modesty, sobriety, parsimony, justice; not to admire wealth or honour; to hate turbulence and ambition; to place everyone his private welfare and happiness in the public peace, liberty and safety.

The first and last points enjoin his readers not to rest in the insight they already have and not to identify the public welfare with their own private moral well-being. It was not for that exclusive purity of conscience that Milton thought God covenanted with mankind. As teaching the triad of political ideas of freedom, order, and degree is half the point in Milton's Bible course, the other half is teaching the politics of historical covenant and progressive revelation.

The paradigm of Milton's Bible-based political education is Solomon's advice, 'Go to the ant.' In The Reade and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth (second edition) Milton writes,

And what madness is it, for them who might manage nobly their own affairs themselves, sluggishly and weakly to devote all on a single person; and more like boys under age than men, to commit all to his patronage and disposal, who neither can perform what he undertakes, and yet for undertaking it, though royally paid, will not be their servant, but their lord? How unmasten must it needs be, to count such a one the breath of our nostrils, to hang all our felicity on him, all our safety, our well-being, for which if we were aught else but sluggards or babies, we need depend on none but God and our own counsels, our own active virtue and industry; Go to the Ant, thou sluggard, saith Solomon; consider her ways, and be wise; which having no prince, ruler, or lord, provides her meat in the summer, and gathers her good in the harvest, which evidently shows us, that they who think the nation undone without a king, though they look grave or haughty, have not so much true spirit and understanding in them as a pismire; neither are these diligent creatures hence concluded to live in lawless anarchy, or that commended, but are set the examples to imprudent and ungoverned men, of frugal and self-governing democracy or commonwealth; safer and more thriving in the joint providence and counsel of many industrious equals, than under the single domination of one imperious lord.16

The Politics of Paradise Lost

The test from Proverbs is interpreted as supporting Milton's desired commonwealth by an argument from nature, not from scriptural law or revelation. Solomon becomes a good moral naturalist in Milton's hands, not one of God's secretaries.

When the same instance occurs in Paradise Lost, the ant enters unaccompanied by Solomon, having just been created with all its political evidence before Solomon's reign:

. . . First crept
The parsimonious emmet, provident
Of future, in small room large heart enclosed,
Pattern of just equality perhaps
Hereafter, joined in her popular tribes
Of commonalty.

(7:484–9)

Here the ant predicts both the natural argument and Solomon's way of making it. In both cases made through the 'Miniims of Nature,' the argument from Scripture (Solomon) is really an argument from nature (the ant); in the second case history (the 'Hereafter') shows men gaining illumination. God covenants with mankind to protract history so that such increases in understanding may take place.

So it is with all Milton's political instances involving scriptural scenarios in Paradise Lost. In them Scripture is history and not authority; no interpretation is coercive; no public policy comes with God's fiat behind it to overrule freedom. Furthermore, as in matters of faith the Bible provides progressive revelation, so in matters of civil policy, if rightly read, it records illuminating changes. Even the negative instances of Hell are rendered cautionary by their unreasoned quality and not merely as the vile precedents of evildoers. Sometimes, after all, the fallen angels do well in civil matters:

O shame to men! Devil with Devil damned
Firm concord holds, men only disagree
Of creatures rational, though under hope
Of heavenly Grace; and God proclaiming peace,
Yet live in hatred, enmity, and strife
Among themselves, and levy cruel wars,
Wasting the Earth, each other to destroy:
As if (which might induce us to accord)
Man had not hellish foes enow besides,
That day and night for his destruction wait.

(2:496–505)
As the paradigm of the ants predicted, all the biblical kingdoms of Heaven, Hell, and earth are shown in Paradise Lost as scenes in a historical or realistic fiction: They permit lessons to be taught about liberty, order, and degree. They are not given as scriptural precedents, offering a divine model, cautioning against a diabolical model, or correcting a human model. When God is shown as King of Heaven in the epic, Milton’s principal biblical sources are Ezekiel and Daniel, but his most prominent source is Arthurian romance—Spenser, not Scripture. What Milton utterly repudiated as unfit for ‘higher argument’ (‘tinsel trappings,’ ‘gorgeous knights’) he briefly uses to suggest God’s glory; but God’s heavenly enthronement offers no model for a human state. One scene may stand for all Milton’s depictions of kingship in Heaven, that in book 5, in which Raphael opens the education of Adam by describing God’s appointment of the Son. On a flaming ‘holy hill’ sit God and the Son: The ‘empyreal host / Of angels’ are ‘by imperial summons called’ together. They arrive in ‘orders bright’ organized under ensigns, standards, and gonfalons that ‘stream in the air, and for distinction serve / Of hierarchies, of orders, and degrees’ (5:588–91), and they wheel in concentric circles around God’s throne. He addresses them proclaiming His Son His heir— or, rather, His kingly vicegerent, since inheritance cannot be at issue where monarch and subject are all immortal. The words of institution Milton writes for God stress the initiation of a peculiar political state:

This day I have begot whom I declare  
My only Son, and on this holy hill  
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold  
At my right hand; your Head I him appoint;  
And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow  
All knees in Heaven, and shall confess him Lord:  
Under his great Vicegerent reign abide  
United as one individual soul  
For ever happy

(5:603–11)

Here on the heels of a feudal picture of Heaven, Milton installs a vicegerent Son. He rejects the Son’s hereditary right for a much more political reason than the theological question of the Father’s unique unbegottenness, however. He rejects it in order to instate the Son as Son on the grounds of merit; and, as we shall see, he insists on vicegerency rather than kingly inheritance in order to wash out the political inference that kingship on earth mysteriously resembles or is sanctioned by kingship in Heaven. The Son’s merit was the grounds God recognized in book 3 when the offer to die for mankind was made:

[Thou] hast been found  
By merit more than birthright Son of God,  
Found worthiest to be so by being good,  
Far more than great or high.

(3:308–11)

The appointment in terms of merit creates a fraternity or a united community that God’s imperial decree publishes. The angels are ‘for ever happy’ to be led and united by the best created being, whom the angel Abdiel calls ‘one of our numbers.’ It is impossible to argue that this concept of merited ‘sonship’ is a necessary part of the subordinationism so familiar to theology, or that its grounds in God’s desire to augment the quantum of freedom and fraternity in the universe is a necessary aspect of that perfectly unheretical doctrine, let alone that either proposition is particularly biblical. Milton enthrones God in a scene from a medieval romance made quasi-biblical. He enthrones the Son in a meritocracy of which the natural political result is a loosening of God’s empire and a strengthening of ties among creatures. And finally, although he attributes this arrangement to God’s calculated relinquishment of power, not to His tightening of it, the arrangement is held to be valuable for its reasonableness (it promotes unity and happiness), not for its divine binding.

Milton’s meritocracy endorses hierarchy or degree. That has given it a bad name with those who have not noticed the class structure in their own political arrangements and have gone on to ask questions about the roots of the class structure. What is distinctive about Milton’s hierarchy, however—its individualistic, voluntaristic, and meritocratic basis—is equally what makes his concept of covenant distinctively nonbiblical or, as Milton would prefer no doubt, Gospel rather than Old Testament. Covenant in the Old Testament is entirely an external arrangement made by God according to His will, unmerited by human beings, unproposed by the human will, and tribal as often as individual. Milton’s sense of gospel covenant or Christian liberty is a different matter. With respect to religious institutions, it produces a fraternity of voluntary Protestants, all equally priests: ‘Obviously,’ he writes, ‘if religious matters were not under our control, or to some extent within our power and choice, God could not enter into a covenant with us, and we could not keep it, let alone swear to keep it.’ Christian liberty also produces the possibility of sustained political evolution throughout history, the element in which progressive, independent, and free civil contracts are made. Of human covenants, or social and political contracts, Milton is sure that they must be entered into voluntarily, that they bind only as they reasonably fulfil the conditions for which they were made, and that they tend to failures.
related to man's fall, although the protraction of human history was intended in the divine covenant for their perfecting.

Satan, of course, as we shall see, is one of the sharpest critics of God's first devolution of power in appointing the Son vicegerent. Through the diabolical interpretation of Heaven's civility, Milton makes a number of points about the language of politics in his own day. But what of Satan's own political example? Whatever Satan has to say of God's tyranny and however beautifully Milton conducts that argument to secure political paideia, Satan's actual example is of a frozen meritorocracy or tyranny. Like an Alexander or a Tarmurlaine, a hero of power, Lucifer leads his own troops into battle. Once seated in Hell on his 'Throne of Royal State' made by Mammon more magnificient than 'Babilon, / . . . or great Alcairo,' he too is 'by merit raised / to [his] bad eminence.' His reign is condemned for its exploitive imperialism (as bad as anything the Turks can parallel) and its rapacity ( likened to that of the ubiquitous spice merchants in an irony condemning both). Milton's biblical authority for Satan's bad kingship is Revelation 2.13: 'I know where . . . Satan’s throne is,' but his sultanizing of Satan's tyrannic kingship as well as his echo of Spenser's presentation of Lucifer in the court scene indicates the contemporary associations with Romish pomp, illegal capital formation, and unconstitutional usurpation Milton wishes to promote.13 (With respect for fiscal morality, from the Lady's hopes in Comus for just distribution, through the advice to Fairfax on the subject of sequestration that 'public faith [be] cleared from the shameful brand / Of public fraud,' to Milton's scornful rejection of the economic argument for monarchy in The Readie and Easie Way - 'lest tradesmen should mutiny for want of trade' - the poet has shown himself to be uneasy about business amorality. He takes the same jaundiced view of exploitiveness in Paradise Lost and lodges a criticized commercialism in Mammon's procedures.) As we shall see, Milton entrusts to Abdiel the general political reasoning against Lucifer's claim to uphold freedom in heroic defiance of God's tyranny.

The first presentation of purely earthly kingship in Paradise Lost is a sort of divine pleasantness involving Adam's suzerainty over the animal kingdom. When the animals pass before Adam to receive their names, Milton's model is a coronation ceremony:

... each bird and beast behold
After their kinds; I bring them to receive
From thee their names, and pay thee fealty
With low subjection;

(8:342–5)

God pretends to see in the animals' inferiority to Adam grounds for their subjection to man and man's pleasure in lording it over them: 'They . . . reason not contemptibly; with these / Find pastime, and beat rule; thy realm is large.' Milton uses the occasion, however, to demonstrate the incommensurability of God and man, not of beasts and man, and to do so in a way that once and for all negates any claim that man does well to imitate God's ways, political or other, for he cannot. Adam explains:

Thou in the secrecy although alone,
Best with thyself accompanied, seekest not
Social communication, yet so pleased
Canst raise thy Creature to what height thou wilt
Of union or communion, deified;
I by conversing cannot these erect.

(8:427–32)

What Adam can do to increase 'social communication' is to multiply his own kind through 'wedded love . . . / Founded in reason, loyal, just and pure, relations dear.' The scene ends with God's approval of Adam's wish for a mate: Even here the political emphasis is on the establishment of wise institutions after a session of educative reasoning.

Historical kingship, as recorded in the Bible, Milton treats in the last two books of Paradise Lost, commencing with Nimrod's tyranny that wickedly ends the pure, brotherly, simple historical commonwealth of Noah's stock 'dwelling / Long time in peace by families and tribes' in 'fair equality, fraternal state.' Adam is shocked by Nimrod's usurpation of authority. He expostulates,

O execrable son so to aspire
Above his brethren, to himself assuming
Authority usurped, from God not given;
He gave us only over beast, fish, fowl
Dominion absolute; that right we hold
By his donation; but man over men
He made not lord; such title to himself
Reserving, human left from human free.

(12:64–71)

Milton's interpretation of Nimrod as a figure of the tyrant follows traditional Christian exegesis. Hughes cites Josephus, St Gregory, Dante, and Sir John Fortescue, who treat Nimrod as 'foiled empire builder'; Fowler adds St Jerome and St Basil.14 But to detest tyranny and to argue republicanism are not the same. And Adam's republicanism is Milton's
addition. Clearly human beings left free from other human beings acquire monarch or lord only unwisely.

Michael specifically bend an scriptural material toward the presentation of historical lessons of a significantly meritorious and republican cast. When he praises Adam’s condemnation of Nimrod, he makes the point that the burden of upholding liberty falls on man and that political liberty is a matter of individual responsibility. Then he adds,

Yet sometimes nations will decline so low
From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong,
But Justice, and some fatal curse annexed
Deprives them of their outward liberty
Their inward lost . . .

(12:97–101)

Those words commence another stage of God’s covenant. Although they fall on the ear with bleakness, sharply critical of Milton’s own day and predictive of other eras of mindless polity, they do not result in a disengagement from politics or a flight into simple private paradises.

The language of politics and the radical myth of the Fall

*Paradise Lost* depicts the course of political evolution, then, and not the values of the Puritan Revolution, as Milton argues in favour of the principles of liberty, order, and degree. To read the politics of the poem demands that we interpret a language common to religion and politics that in Milton’s day was appropriated by sectarian and secularist, by conservative and radical. In the controversial prose written nearest in time to *Paradise Lost* and when the collapse of the commonwealth was certain or nearly so, Milton drew on a single vocabulary for matters of both politics and religion to write ‘against two of the most prevailing usurpers over mankind, superstition and tyranny’ to effect ‘the liberation of all human life from slavery.’16 He made no linguistic distinction between the spheres of spirit and state. Thus in *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, he opens a phrase with the words ‘a free, elective and rational . . .’ to complete it with the word ‘worship’; in *The Readie and Easye Way* not worship but government attracts the same words, ‘free,’ ‘voluntary,’ and ‘rational.’17 In that tract he tells us he is speaking still ‘the language of which is not called amiss the good old Cause.’18 It is not the case that in writing prose in that language Milton used plain perspicuous terms that differentiated between civil and religious matters, whereas in writing poetry he did not. It is the case, however, that he was well aware that the same terms can signify opposed positions, whatever the medium used. In the end Milton took advantage of poetry’s linguistic self-consciousness in proffering his post-Restoration politics in that medium.

That the language of the ‘good old Cause’ can be common property of men of opposed persuasions Milton knew and often said. He referred to that linguistic ambiguity both when he wrote with a scholarly skepticism in *De doctrina Christiana* – ‘if there be anything like a universal meaning for language’ – and when he delivered in *Sonnet XI*, ‘I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs’, a punning, ironic rebuke to the ‘detractors of certain treatises’, the divorce tracts, and *Areopagitica*. There he turned against his Presbyterian opponents the very phrase they used to attack him, that his divorce proposal was a ‘mere authorizing of licence,’ by identifying their ‘bawl for freedom’ with their demand for the licensing of books: ‘Licence they mean when they cry liberty.’18 He made a like point about linguistic appropriation through Nimrod, the political tyrant in *Paradise Lost*,

[Who] from rebellion shall derive his name,
Though of rebellion others he accuse.

(12:36–7):

a like point about the sloganeering of language in *Samson Agonistes* when he referred to

... that sore battle when so many died
Without reprieve adjudged to death
For want of well pronouncing Shibboleth.

(287–9)

and a like point about ambiguity through the Devil’s advocacy when Satan claims in *Paradise Regained* that the title ‘The Son of God’ ‘bears no single sense’ (4:516). In *Paradise Lost*, partly because language is ambiguous and important normative words are so susceptible to appropriations, Milton invoked the heavenly Muse Urania, ‘by that name /If rightly thou art called,’ . . . ‘The meaning, not the name I call’ (7:1–2, 5).

To *Paradise Lost* conceived as political text, Milton brought two strategies to stabilize and dramatize his meaning. First he embodied in the poem a radicalization of the story of the Fall; whatever key terms might slip or suffer outright theft the tale itself would record to reinforce his meaning. As we shall see, he radicalized the scriptural story by rationally interpreting several features found in Genesis. He lodged freedom to choose not only in prelapsarian but also in fallen man as the
John Milton

law of his being; he defined Adam’s and our humanity as consisting of reason and choice; he identified trial and changed choices as the source of purification for the fallen. Second, he made his course of political education actually turn on the correction of false usages; increasing linguistic sophistication would protect his readers from the misinformation he thought made right choice so difficult. Milton had earlier offered a similarly political account of the fall of Adam and Eve in Areopagitica by arguing the hereditability of Adam’s freedom for Adam’s sons, to demonstrate that the Fall proves the law of liberty to be the very law of God’s universe, whatever, at this or that historical juncture, men may take to be their law. In Paradise Lost by making Satan’s rebellion an antecedent myth of the Fall, repeated in postlapsarian (fall specifically Nimrod’s), Milton further radicalizes the story. He extends the Fall into a sequence of falls that, far from necessitating man’s fate, reafirms religious and political liberty. Satan’s rebellion is political as well as spiritual, no mere subplot but part of a repeated pattern, a design in which failure itself enforces the doctrine of free choice. So too Nimrod’s fall instances the repeated pattern. Every fall involves the misuse of language, resolved only with its correction. And finally, as fall and renewed freedom in religion create the condition for progressive revelation, so by the interconnectedness of political and religious language that same pattern endorses continuous change and development in politics.

Perhaps the simplest way to indicate how the Genesis story was radicalized by the Puritans is general and by Milton in Areopagitica in particular is to contrast it with the myth of another garden state implying human choice and perfectibility: the myth of Utopia, a myth to which Milton was clearly attracted when he wrote The Reade and Easie Way. Both myths carry the emblem of cognate icons: Eden, a tree wrapped about by the serpent reaching for the apple; Utopia, Hermes’s winged or twig-tipped staff enwrapped by two serpents. Each icon—the symbol of man’s fall and the image of his scientific power—stands for a vision of man and of change. The Genesis story had its parallel in the Corpus Hermeticum translated by Ficino in 1471 and disseminated in sixteen editions before 1500. (That work taught that man was made in the image of God and given dominion over the creatures, had divine creativity within himself as brother to the creating Demiurge, took on mortal body by his own choice in an act involving no fall, in his bodily human form retained his creativity, and could therefore as man reacquire his knowledge of nature to use it for good. He could, that is, make scientific utopias.) Respecting change and permanence, the Paradise myth offers a narrative demonstration that things were not always the way they are now; they have been changed by the Fall from their first estate. If changed from what they were, they may be changed again. As Robert Burton put it, ‘Ye have been otherwise, you may and shall be again.’ The first change was a horror, a transgression or stepping over the boundary of Eden, of nature and its law. The narrative suggests, however, that change as transgression may become change as transcedence, a change back up and into the circle of God’s stability. That version of the Fall is a thoroughly conservative myth: ‘Turn back, o man, forsake thy foolish ways.’ To radicalize it is to argue that Adam’s freedom as well as his punishment are inherited by all his sons: man set on his feet once more by grace and led by his God has only to find in America or make in England a new sacred place and there reform what has been ill-done. If the utopian myth seems more radical in that it does not dub change ‘transgression,’ it was not so construed in Milton’s country and day. The impulse to make utopias was regularly construed in the English Renaissance as suggesting paternalistic and ritualized social arrangements for stability and permanency. Bacon’s New Atlantis is a typical case. It is not that utopias cannot render radical political states, for of course they often have. But in Milton’s day utopia seldom was, whereas the Genesis myth not only could be, but repeatedly was, made to argue social and political reform.

Clearly either myth can make change tolerable and impermanent temporary. The Readie and Easie Way, Milton’s version of utopia, clearly argues, notwithstanding its courageous republicanism, for a ‘perpetual Senate’ so that the nation ‘firmly constituted to perpetuity’ may live ‘forever in a firm and free commonwealth.’ While repeatedly drawing biblical analogies to the sinful servitude the people will choose if they restore the Stuart monarchy, Milton does not refer to the Fall at all. But The Readie and Easie Way is scarcely a revolutionary document; revolution once over, there will be no more revolution. Certainly Milton never repudiated a free commonwealth as a political ideal for his nation, but among all political corrections in Paradise Lost is one self-correction, a correction of the very concept of a permanent and changeless political utopia and an acknowledgement that political wisdom is founded through time and experience by stages of choice. Here is how Milton has Michael describe to Adam the lawgiver Moses leading the Chosen People out of bondage into the ‘wild Desert’:

Moses once more his potent rod extends
Over the sea; the sea his rod obeys:
On their embattled ranks the waves return,
And overwhelm their war: the race elect
Safe towards Canaan from the shore advance
Through the wild desert, not the readiest way,
Lest entering on the Canaanite alarmed
War terrify them inexpert, and fear
Return them back to Egypt, choosing rather
Inglorious life with servitude; for life
To noble and ignoble is more sweet
Untrained in arms, where rashness leads not on.
This also shall they gain by their delay
In the wide wilderness, there they shall found
Their government, and their great senate choose
Through the twelve tribes, to rule by laws ordained.

Here Milton directly recalls the attempt of his own ‘Readie . . . way’ to forestall the rush of the English people back to monarchy in the Restoration, a move he had there likened to the Chosen People’s ‘choosing them a captain back for Egypt.’ He concedes that the choice of something ‘not the readiest way’ led to the ‘gain’ of that very government he so wished for his own people, the ‘great senate . . . to rule by laws ordained,’ and by implication he suggests that the patience he regards as the highest kind of fortitude has great political value.

Milton does, however, refer in The Readie and Easiy Way to Nimrod and his analogue, the tower-builder in Luke, to speculate on how the restoration of monarchy will be received in the rest of the modern political world:

[What will they at best say of us and of the whole English name, but scoffingly as of that foolish builder, mentioned by our Saviour, who began to build a tower, and was not able to finish it. Where is this goodly tower of a commonwealth, which the English boasted they would build to overshadow kings, and be another Rome in the west? The foundation indeed they laid gallantly; but fell into a worse confusion, not of tongues but of factions, than those at the tower of Babel; and have left no memorial of their work behind them remaining, but the common laughter of Europe.

Through the reference to Nimrod Milton draws a double historical parallel between Scripture and his own times, not in proof that God requires the English to preserve their commonwealth but that any reasonable man can see how bad statecraft is like bad architecture and the foolish builders of either are worthy of being mocked.

Although The Readie and Easiy Way is unrevolutionary in conserving the commonwealth by planning for its frozen permanence, Milton nevertheless makes clear his conviction that kingship implies idolatry, that monarchy implies an apostasy from the rule of free reason, and that his detestations ‘tyranny and superstition’ are Siamese twins. The autocrat is shown there to pageant himself up and down in progress among the perpetual bowings and cringings of an abject people, on

either side deifying and adoring him for nothing done that can deserve it. Religion and politics face the same danger: idolatry. Idolatry is enslavement whether its agent be potentate or prelate. Idolatry of ruler is tyranny; of priest, superstition.

As I have suggested, Milton renders the Fall useful for political education (1) by lodging freedom in both prelapsarian and fallen man as the law of his being, (2) by identifying choice through reason as constitutive of humanity, and (3) by converting trial, struggle, or change itself into the source of purification. Given the figure of Adam in rational choice as the model of the properly human, both religious and political implications for individual free choice naturally follow. Only uncoerced faith is true religion, so that ‘if [a man] believe things only because his pastor says so, or the assembly so determines . . . though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy.’ Autocracy in church or state idolatrously diverts to a human being, honour rightly God’s alone.

Milton further radicalizes that mythed story of the Fall in Paradise Lost by charting a sequence of falls, commencing with the rebellion of Satan and his angelic peers. In the course of that fall Lucifer, debating with Milton’s spokesman Abel, shows clearly that he has read Milton’s prose tract. He opens his oration, which will urge rebellion against God’s tyranny:

Thrones, Dominations, Princehoods, Virtues, Powers
If these magnific titles yet remain
Not merely titular, since by decree
Another now hath to himself ingressed
All power, and us eclipsed under the name
Of king anointed . . .

His contempt for decree seems only a slight misapplication of The Reason of Church Government: ‘In the publishing of human laws . . . to set them barely forth to the people without reason or preface like a physical precept, or only with threatening, as it were a lordly command, in the judgement of Plato was thought to be done neither generously nor wisely.’ His contempt for the name of kingship is no misreading at all of Εἰκόνοκλασται: ‘the gaudy name of Majesty . . . a name than which there needs no more among the blockish vulgar, to make it wise, admired, and excellent, nay to set it next the Bible, though otherwise containing little else but the common grounds of tyranny and popery.’

His scorn of the authority merely of ‘old repute . . . or custom’ usurps Milton’s very language in the antiprelatical tracts. In the conclave in Hell the language of Mammon, who calls Heaven a ‘state of splendid
mean what he wills them to mean: if he stands on a high tower, he is
high; if men call him great, he is great. The kind of rebuke he gets from
God exactly answers his assault on ‘rational liberty’; God ‘sets upon their
tongues a various spirit to rase / Quite out their native language.’ The
Hobbesian linguistic takeover where terms have meaning only relative to
their users results in plurality of tongues. The plurality of tongues thus
marks the rupture of coherent truth as it emerges from the Creator and
the fracturing of every man’s fraternal access to it. (It might be noted in
passing that both the tower and Hobbes’s Leviathan display the marks not
only of absolutism and linguistic relativity but also of utopianism, by
their claims to fixedness and perpetuity.)

Adam’s judgment is Milton’s; Nimrod committed both tyranny and
aspostasy:

... Man over men
He made not Lord; such title to himself
Reserving, human left from human free.
But the usurper his encroachment proud
Stays not on man; to God his tower intends
Seige and defiance.

(12:69–74)

Yet as usual Michael extends Adam’s reaction in his comment, and
Milton converts one more fall into a pattern of radical political paideia.
The fall of language into confusion affects men’s ability to live in political
fraternity. Inner liberty, the reasonable capacity to learn and
communicate truth, is the essential precondition for political liberty. Only
free men can be brothers; self-enslaved men either struggle for dominion
or slackly yield to it:

... Yet know withall,
Since thy original lapse, true liberty
Is lost, which always with right reason dwells
Twinned, and from her hath no dividual being:

(12:82–5)

Michael then draws for Adam an internal model of the external political
model he has shown him:

Reason in man obscured, or not obeyed,
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart passions catch the government
From reason, and to servitude reduce
Man till then free.

(12:86–90)

The deprivation of outer freedom is the inevitable result of the surrender
of inner freedom: ‘Tyranny must be / Though to the tyrant thereby no
crime. ’Justice ‘deprives men of their outward liberty, Their inward lost’, and
Michael concludes in tragic vein, ‘Thus will the latter, as the former
world / Still tend from bad to worse.’

As the fall of Satan is used to imply a collective ideal of organic change
in opposition to his claim that liberty is nothing but the space in which
the self competes for self-aggrandizement, so the fall of Nimrod and its
consequences in linguistic relativity are used to imply a contrary ideal to
his political vision of the imperial tribe of powerful conquerors led by the
mightiest of all. What succeeds is a man capable of self-sacrifice and a
nation of his lineage ‘in whom all nations shall be blessed.’ Hence
Michael’s narrative concludes not with the heroic struggle Adam expects
between the usurper tyrant Satan and the greater man but with a ‘cure’
of men to be achieved ‘Not by destroying Satan, but his works / In
[Adam] and in [his] seed.’ The final lesson of the Fall pattern or sequence
is a Christian revolutionary lesson, not a fixed program for political or
religious action.

If we read the Fall as a sequential pattern, the poem offers scope for
heroic virtue by disclaiming the triumph of one sufficient heroic virtue.
The pattern enacts a series of radical correctives, affirming each time a
movement to renewed choices in stages of enlightenment. Every fall is
accompanied by the proposal of one coercive fixed meaning and
concludes with the falsity of the claim made clear in the illumination of
alternative meaning. Satan poses as liberator, but a contrary vision of
organic change as liberation emerges in the free collective fulfilment
suggested by Abdiel. Adam’s fall, however, shows man inheriting liberty
as well as fallerness and so ‘once more on even ground against his
mortal foe.’ Nimrod’s fall is Michael’s chance to preach the radical
politics of self-conquest as the means to eliminate tyranny and show the
absurd falsity of the heroes of linguistic and political usurpation. The
expulsion scene goes so far as to correct the very word ‘fall’ into the
‘great deliverance . . . to come . . . on all mankind.’ The openness of the
epic’s conclusion, with the world all before Adam and Eve, offers to
Milton’s own time the resumption of the challenge to read correctly the
easily abused linguistic sign. Adam is not promised utopia, shown fixity,
or taught monocausality, for Milton has successfully resisted the
temptation himself to appropriate ‘the language of that which is not
called amiss the good old Cause’ for a utopian program.

Notes

1. SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, Lecture X, Literary Remains (London, 1836),
quoted from James Thorpe (ed.), Milton Criticism: Selections from Four Centuries


For perhaps the most extreme statement of this position, see Hugh M.
Richmond, The Christian Revolutionary: John Milton (Berkeley, Los Angeles and
London: University of California Press, 1974), passim. Richmond argues that
political defeat leading to Milton’s abandonment of idealist Platonist political
thought was the very precondition for the creation of the great poem.

Similarly, in Milton the Puritan (London: Macmillan, 1977), A.L. Rowse writes,
‘The Restoration was the best thing that could have happened to Milton. It
forced him to drop dealing with the ephemera of politics, back upon his own
true genius, the life of the imagination and its expression in poetry’. (p. 215).
Finally, one might note that although Charles R. Geist – in the most recent
study of The Political Thought of John Milton (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1984) – finds that Adam’s fall was a fall into political experience (p. 46),
he does not specify what in that fallen location Adam or Milton or the reader
would find political experience to be.

Jackie Disalvo notes that ‘in quest of [a] political Milton one has had to turn
mainly to historical studies focused primarily upon his prose, by Arthur
Barker, Edgell Rickwood, William Haller, Don Wolfe, Zera Fink, A.S.P.
Woodhouse, George Sensabaugh, and Florence Sandler. ‘ See War of Titans:
Blake’s Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion (Pittsburgh: University of

adds, “the young Wordsworth recalled Milton the libertarian, Shelley recalled
Milton the defender of regicide.” See ‘A Bourgeois Revolution?’ in Three British

4. Disalvo, War of Titans, pp. 15, 10, 12, 42. She points to support for her
analysis in Malcolm Ross, Milton’s Realism: A Study of the Conflict of Symbol and
Christopher Hill, Milton and the English Revolution (New York: Viking, 1978);
and Edgell Rickwood, Milton, the Revolutionary Intellectual’ in The English

5. HERMAN RAPAPORT, Milton and the Post Modern (Lincoln: University of
Nebraska Press, 1983). Rapaport conceives his task in examining ‘Milton and the
State’ to be ‘to counter the Anglo-American reception of Milton as a great
humanist in the democratic tradition’ (p. 171). He notes, ‘I stress, not Milton’s
resistance, but his complicity with the most repellant aspects of fascist, or
totalitarian action’ (p. 172). He speaks of Milton’s ‘mind harboring a darker
fascination with dictatorial takeover, with what amounts to another absolutism

138

139
John Milton

much bleaker and calculating than the folly of Charles I and the grand schemes of the Anglicans under Archbishop Laud’ (p. 176).

6. The Reason of Church Government, 1.816.

7. An Apology against a Pamphlet call’d A Modest Confutat of the Animadversions upon the Remonstrant against Smethynius, 1.890.

8. I am very far from proposing that one read the course of political education performed in Paradise Lost as a kind of ‘Surprized by ideology’, by analogy to the way in which Stanley Fish handles ethical and other ideas in Surprised by Sin: The Reader in ‘Paradise Lost’ (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1967). Milton did not, by my reading, calculate a magnificent plot to entrap his readers into such misinterpretations and corrections as would lead him to salvation. His political paideia is overt and historical; it results in progressive enlightenment as to the very slowness and difficulty involved in human arrangements within fallen history. Where Henry James is Fish’s tutelary genius, Socrates is Milton’s.


10. 7.427. The addition to the first edition of the material ‘neither . . . Lord’ interprets Proverbs 6:6–8 as supporting from nature Milton’s argument for a commonwealth.


16. A Treatise of Civil Power, 7.262. The corresponding words in The Readie and Easiest Way are used again and again severally.

17. 7.462.


20. 7.409, 421, 444.

21. 7.462.

22. 7.422–3