JOHN MILTON

Selected Longer Poems and Prose

Edited by Tony Davies

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Introduction

On Tuesday 29 May 1660, his thirtieth birthday, in the company of his brothers James and Henry, with six hundred gentlemen in doublets of velvet and cloth of silver, the aldermen and members of the City companies in scarlet and gold, a troop of lackeys in purple velvet and a guard of twenty thousand soldiers in uniforms trimmed with silver lace, to the continuous firing of guns and ringing of church bells, Charles Stuart rode across London Bridge and through the city to the Palace of Whitehall and, on the spot where, just over eleven years before and after seven years of bitter and bloody civil war, his father had been executed as a traitor and murderer, listened politely as the Speakers of both Houses of Parliament welcomed him home with effusive protestations of imperishable loyalty and gratitude. The crowds cheered; the streets were strewn with herbs and flowers; wine flowed from the public taps and conduits; and the writer John Evelyn, who in 1649 had refused to attend the execution of Charles I and who had ever since observed the anniversary of that 'execrable wickedness' as a fast, 'stood in the Strand and beheld it, and blessed God. And all this was done without one drop of blood shed, and by that very army which rebelled against him; but it was the Lord's doing, for such a restoration was never mentioned in any history ancient or modern, since the return of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity; nor so joyful a day and so bright ever seen in this nation, this happening when to expect or effect it was past all human policy' (Evelyn 1890: 265). So ended the 'great rebellion', the revolutionary

constitutional experiment of government without a monarch: ended, it must have seemed, to those who had supported it as well as to those, like Evelyn, who abominated it, in humiliating failure and defeat.

There was an element of stage management, to be sure; public demonstrations of joy are rarely as spontaneous as they seem to the casual or partisan spectator. Twenty thousand soldiers make a good show, but they also serve as a reminder of the realities of power behind the ritual and display of a royal occasion; and the militias that lined the route from Dover to Whitehall no doubt helped ensure that the enthusiasm of the crowds had a respectably royalist character. Charles himself asked with ironic mock-naivety where all his father's enemies had gone, since he had met no-one all day 'who does not protest that he had ever wished for my return'. But the celebrations that lasted for the rest of the week did undoubtedly express a genuine pleasure and relief, however temporary. For the revolution of 1649–60 had never managed to strike roots in popular sentiment, never made the vital transition from seizure of power to secure government, and so never escaped the grim logic of Marvell's warning to the triumphant Cromwell, returning from the conquest of Ireland in 1650: 'The same arts that did gain/A power must it maintain'.[1] As Evelyn observed, the New Model Army that defeated the first Charles Stuart restored the second one; and if the absolutist ambitions of Charles I represented one sort of tyranny, the desperate constitutional improvisations of an increasingly authoritarian Protector and the factional squabbles of a junta of army officers represented another, no less dependent in the last resort on the naked weapon of military force. For a few months, at least, the sense that a world which had been turned upside down was on its feet again, that the embittered, saturnine and sardonic king was a 'merry monarch', that the reappearance of bishops and maypoles really did mean the restoration of traditional Englishry, found expression in a holiday mood of festive ebullience.

Festive, but also vengeful. To Charles's question about his father's enemies, they might have replied: in hiding or on the run. And with good reason. Less than five months after his

entry into London, the crowds were out in Whitehall again, and once more Evelyn was there: 'Scot, Scroope, Cook and Jones suffered for reward of their iniquities at Charing Cross, in sight of the place where they put to death their natural Prince, and in the presence of the King his son, whom they also sought to kill. I saw not their execution, but met their quarters mangled and cut and reeking as they were brought from the gallows in baskets on the hurdle. Oh the miraculous providence of God!' (Evelyn 1890: 268). The four regicides so savagely and humiliatingly punished (their bodies, first hanged and the entrails drawn, then decapitated, quartered, and boiled to prevent putrefaction, were finally nailed to the city gates, with the severed heads impaled alongside on poles) had been members of the tribunal that had tried and sentenced Charles I. Six of their colleagues had been butchered in the same way a few days earlier. All had been specifically excluded from the Act of Oblivion that Charles II had offered as a condition of his restoration. Others, escaping overseas, were sentenced to death in their absence. And even those forever beyond the reach of judge and hangman did not escape the humiliation of a ritual revenge. On the morning of 30 January 1661, the twelfth anniversary of the death of the king, the remains of Cromwell and two of his closest associates were dug up from their graves in Westminster Abbey, displayed all day on the public gallows at Tyburn, then buried in a pit beneath the gibbet. 'Oh the stupendous and inscrutable judgments of God!', exclaimed the pious Evelyn, and drew the proper moral: 'Fear God and honour the King; but meddle not with them who are given to change!' (Evelyn 1890: 271)

Prominent among those 'given to change', someone whom many would have been happy to see alongside the regicides at Charing Cross and whose name was canvassed by the parliamentary committee compiling a list of people too active in promoting or supporting the revolution to enjoy immunity under the Act of Oblivion, was John Milton. Better known in 1660 as a pamphleteer than as a poet, Milton had consistently given public support to the radical cause and its adherents in Church, Parliament and army. In the early forties he had written passionately against ecclesiastical and, by implication, royal

prerogative. By the end of the decade, with Charles on trial, he was openly defending the people's right to execute a tyrannical monarch as 'the highest top of their civil glory and emulation'. In the fifties, as an employee of the revolutionary Council of State, he championed its actions in a fierce attack on the cult of the 'royal martyr' and in two massive *Defences of the English People* (written in Latin for European circulation). As late as April 1660, with Charles II making preparations for his return, he was still pleading with his compatriots not 'to put our necks again under kingship' (*SSPP* 146). And if anybody had bothered to glance again at the little book of poems he had brought out in 1645, they would have noticed the proud claim that one of them, first published in 1638, 'by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy, then in their height' – the same high-Anglican and royalist clergy, many of them, who were at that very moment easing themselves back into the beneficed livings, Oxford fellowships and remunerative sinecures from which they had been ejected in the 1640s (*SSPP* 200). Long after the appearance of *Paradise Lost* and the other late poems had established his reputation as a major poet, Evelyn remembered him only as 'that Milton who wrote for the regicides'; and a century later, with rebellion once again stirring at home and abroad, the tory Samuel Johnson reminded readers of his *Life of Milton* that the author of *Paradise Lost* had also been 'an acrimonious and surly republican' (Johnson 1906: I, 112).

In the end Milton escaped serious punishment, though after some months lying low with friends the blind fifty-one-year-old poet was arrested, spent some time in gaol and had to pay the expenses of the sergeant-at-arms who arrested him. Influential friends, including the poet Marvell, now an MP, spoke up for him, and his name never appeared on the committee's list. But punishment he endured nonetheless; not so much the loss of his savings, put by for his three daughters and his own old age, which disappeared when the bank crashed at the restoration; not even his blindness, total for getting on for ten years now, though his enemies liked to vaunt it as evidence of divine displeasure; but the defeat of what he and other radicals called the 'Good Old Cause': the cause of republican

government, of uncensored freedom of opinion and expression and of unconstrained liberty of conscience and practice, in religion and in secular life alike. And behind that defeat, which after all could always be explained away as the fruit of human weakness, cowardice or stupidity, loomed a harder question still: if the Good Old Cause was also, as Milton had always believed, God's cause, then how was it possible for it to fail? 'God is decreeing', he had written in 1644, 'to begin some new and great period in his Church, even to the reforming of reformation itself. What does he then but reveal himself to his servants, and as his manner is, first to his Englishmen?' (*SSPP* 100). But what of God's Englishmen now, fawning on the tyrant's son; within sight of the Canaan of liberty, and enthusiastically 'choosing them a captain back for Egypt' (*SSPP* 147)? And what of the God who had turned to them in the 1640s, only to avert his face now when his help was needed most?

These are the questions that animate all Milton's writings from the restoration of Charles II until his own death fourteen years later. Of course they are not new. Milton is hardly the first writer to record the painful experience of disillusion with a world 'to good malignant, to bad men benign' (*PL* XII, 538), and the search for rationality and moral consistency in a universe that seems both capricious and unjust is the deep theme of *Lycidas* in 1638 as it is of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* thirty years later. But 1660 gave them a special urgency and focus precisely because for a few years in between it really had seemed that English history was being guided by a more than human hand towards some great providential denouement, perhaps even (and this was widely believed) towards that ultimate apocalyptic confrontation of light and darkness that Milton himself had looked forward to in 1641 'when thou, the eternal and shortly-expected King, shalt open the clouds to judge the several kingdoms of the world, and distributing national honours and rewards to religious and just commonwealths, shalt put an end to all earthly tyrannies, proclaiming thy universal and mild monarchy through Heaven and Earth' (*SSPP* 84). They are questions about psychology, about people's fear of freedom, their resistance to change, their deep hunger for the familiar. They are certainly questions about

politics, about the exercise of power, the collective organisation of human means and energies, the possibility of a just and rational society. Above all they are questions about history, about its hidden logic and structure, its meaning for present and future.

Of course they are also, as so many of Milton's later critics have insisted, questions about theology; or, as I'd rather put it, theology is the mother-discourse from which in the seventeenth century psychological, political and historical questions still draw most of their key terms and central references. 'Religious and theological debate', remarks Fredric Jameson, paraphrasing Marx, 'is the form, in pre-capitalist societies, in which groups become aware of their political differences and fight them out' (Barker 1986: 38–9). Late-renaissance England is moving rapidly towards a more sceptical and secularised – a more 'modern' – culture, one in which the ideological authority of the Church will be greatly weakened, in which the prestige of experimental science, and perhaps a certain weariness with the embattled doctrinal confrontations of the mid-century, will accommodate the uncompromising pronouncements of a bloodthirsty near-eastern deity and the irresistible urgings of sovereign conscience to the pragmatic priorities of lawyers, businessmen and civil servants. Religious belief, suggested the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, is nothing but 'fear of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales publicly allowed' (*Leviathan*, ch.6); but although he was denounced by some as an atheist and shared with Milton the distinction of having his books burned by the hangman, he was otherwise unmolested. Milton too is a modern, sympathetic to the enquiring and sceptical temper of the period; but he remained to the end a theist and a Christian, of his own singular kind. Radical in so many respects, he continued to the end to probe 'the unsearchable dispose/Of highest wisdom' (*SA* 1746–7), to insist that poetry was the divinely-inspired sister and mouthpiece of that wisdom and that the poet's ultimate task was to 'justify the ways of God to men' (*PL* I, 26).

But Milton's theology is no mere conventional pietism. On the contrary, it is as argumentative and anti-traditional as the politics from which it is inextricable. To 'justify the ways of

God to men' is to assume not only that the ways of God to men can be justified but that they need to be justified – that is, that their apparently gross injustice and incoherence can be shown to be rationally and morally tolerable. Some traditions of salvationist Christianity, foregrounding the loving or suffering Jesus at the expense of the fulminating Jehovah, emphasise the individual experience of guilt and reconciliation (the quietist Anglicanism of George Herbert would be an example). Others (Fifth Monarchists and similar millenarian sects, for instance) cancel the injustice and brutality of experience at a stroke by appealing to the expectation, vengeful or triumphant, of judgement and ultimate victory. For others, the ways of God will always be mysterious, a matter of faith rather than understanding; for some, indeed, the mystery may be the reason for belief: Sir Thomas Browne quotes approvingly Tertullian's 'certum quia impossibile' – I believe *because* it is impossible.[2] Milton belongs with none of these. Largely bypassing the traditional icons of Christian piety, the infant Jesus and the crucified Christ (the poem on the Nativity completely ignores the domestic and sentimental associations of the scene, and for a Christian poet he is curiously uninterested in the crucifixion), his writings are drawn compulsively to the bitter heart of the dilemma, searching out those narratives and figures (the Fall, Samson) in which the contradictions are most starkly and unmitigatedly represented, those parts of scripture (the brutal folktales of *Genesis*, the sanguinary tribal warfare of *Judges*) most troubling to the decent liberal Christian conscience. In the rich tissue of scriptural allusion that runs through his later writings, the part of the Bible that features least is the gospels; and when he does at last deal directly, in *Paradise Regained*, with the founder of Christianity, his Jesus is neither charismatic miracle-worker nor afflicted saviour but a severe, ascetic, argumentative young man, his mind since childhood 'set/Serious to learn and know' (*PR* I, 202–3), struggling in solitude to understand his own terrible sense of responsibility for the world around him. For Milton the way to regeneration lies pre-eminently neither through faith nor works (the orthodox dyad), but through knowledge; and knowledge, like virtue, comes 'by what is contrary' (*SSPP* 88): by debate, argument

and incessant questioning in the hard school of experience and failure.

The nature of Milton's theology has itself been the subject of much debate and argument. Blake's devil claimed him for 'the Devil's party without knowing it', suggesting a turbulently dissident imagination only partially restrained by theocratic orthodoxy (Blake 1959: 44). For C.S. Lewis or Douglas Bush the orthodoxy is the key, and A.N. Wilson will even have him a pious Anglican, despite his hatred for the established Church and the striking fact that though he married three times and fathered six children there is no evidence that he ever entered a church or observed any recognised form of worship after leaving university. For Denis Saurat he is deep in the mysteries of the Cabbala, his Christianity richly coloured by rabbinical and esoteric wisdom; while for Christopher Hill he is a radical heretic, mortalist and antinomian like the Ranters, Quakers and his communist contemporary Gerard Winstanley. None of this would have much bothered his seventeenth-century readers (worries about his anti-trinitarianism date from the doctrinally jittery eighteenth century). When the ecclesiastical censor Thomas Tomkins combed *Paradise Lost* for anything that would give him an excuse to ban it, it was the politics of the text he was interested in, not its theology, as we can see from what he found (see I, 597n); and when the same dutiful functionary insisted on the removal of some passages of the *History of Britain* that he found 'too sharp against the clergy', it was not the spiritual authority of his Saxon predecessors that he was defending but his own right to meddle in politics and to dictate the secular opinions of his parishioners. Fredric Jameson asks why after April 1660 Milton never again mentions the Good Old Cause, and finds the answer in the 'political unconscious' of the poem and its author, in a deep refusal of the possibility of collective struggle for change (Barker 1986: 54); but it is possible, without denying the validity of this reading, to point to another explanation, at once simpler and more material: that after 1660 Milton and every other writer had to learn to work under a system of state censorship as pervasive and narrow-minded as anything since the abolition of the Star Chamber in the early forties,

and a great deal more thorough and politically vindictive than that infamous institution had ever been. It is one of the ironies of the period that Milton, who wrote powerfully against censorship in *Areopagitica* (1644), had himself been a licenser of books in the fifties – a remarkably easy-going one, it must be said: there is no evidence that he ever banned or interfered with anything, and he was reported to have justified one particularly controversial decision on the grounds that 'men should refrain from forbidding books, and in approving of that book he had done no more than follow his conviction' (Parker 1968: II, 994). We can be sure that neither Tomkins nor his colleague, the furiously royalist civil licenser Roger L'Estrange, would have endorsed those libertarian principles; and it is likely that they took special pains to sniff out any hint of sedition in Milton's writings.

If they did, they must have been disappointed. The open appeal to republican ideals, the rallying activism of the *Ready and Easy Way* are not heard again in his work after the spring of 1660. But the 'fit audience . . . though few' that he seeks for *Paradise Lost* (VII, 31) need not be thought to be different from those 'men who set their minds on main matters' to whom he had addressed that earlier pamphlet, and of whom he had glumly said that 'in these most difficult times I find not many' (*SSPP* 147). The 'higher argument' of *Paradise Lost*, the 'better fortitude/Of patience and heroic martyrdom/Unsung' that the poem offers in place of the 'Wars, hitherto the only argument/Heroic deem'd' of renaissance epic (IX, 28–33) represents not an escapist withdrawal from action into defeated passivity but a renewal of resistance in circumstances in which success can no longer be taken for granted and the way ahead, once so clear, can no longer be made out, 'In darkness and with dangers compass'd round' (*PL VII*, 27): an 'optimism of the will', to quote another revolutionary all too familiar with the experience of defeat, no less affirmative for being grounded in 'pessimism of the intelligence'.[3] The politics of *Paradise Lost* will be found not so much in direct references to rebellion or regicide, of the kind Tomkins was looking for. Rather, it is secreted in the poem's metaphors, its syntactical ambiguities, its puns, its entirely modern way – not found in

any earlier epic – of commenting on its own structure and method, above all in the particular type and experience of reading that it incites, a reading watchful, self-conscious, increasingly alert as the text unfolds to the doubleness of language, the seductive treacheries of rhetoric, the deep perplexities of meaning. Such a reading might be called 'allegorical', if allegory had not acquired the diminished connotations of a simple cryptogram or *roman-à-clef*. Miltonic allegory (and I'm not thinking so much here of readings of the kind suggested, very interestingly, by Christopher Hill, who takes parts of the poem as a fairly close point-by-point allegory of the civil wars) is more like a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation, of comparison and revision, in which the boundaries between statement and metaphor, truth and fable, even the syntactical articulations of meaning itself are never fixed.

These features of the text can certainly be related to the conditions of censorship and political repression in which it was produced. Writers unable to express their convictions directly must either fall silent or find ways to express them indirectly. Ideas driven out of the public arena of the text may resurface strangely in its images, its syntax, its formal processes and marginal notations. Take the prefatory note on 'the Verse', added to later printings of the 1667 edition of *Paradise Lost*. Not even the most reactionary of Restoration hanging judges, I imagine, would have sent a poet to the gallows for preferring blank verse to rhyme; but who can doubt that just such an innocuously 'literary' issue carries for Milton a burden of political and moral conviction no less than, and no different from, that for which some of his contemporaries died at Tyburn and Charing Cross: 'this neglect then of rhyme so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar readers, that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming' (see p. 33). There is nothing fanciful about the language of this: it means exactly what it doesn't quite say. Rhyme, like monarchy, is unnecessary, artificial, *wasteful*. Blank verse restores the measured freedom enjoyed by the ancients, Greek and

Roman. And if that innovative and exemplary recovery, 'the first in English', of ancient liberty which Milton claims for his poem departs from the practice of renaissance epic (Spenser and the Italians wrote in rhyme), the poet might invoke the terms in which he had praised Charles Stuart's judges almost twenty years before: 'if the Parliament and military Council do what they do without precedent . . . it argues the more wisdom, virtue and magnanimity that they know themselves able to be a precedent to others' (*SSPP* 132). For a writer in a time of repression, questions of language, form and genre become crucial, carrying a significance that goes well beyond the narrowly linguistic, formal or generic. The politics of language assume paramount importance precisely at those times when the language of politics is no longer available.

Paradise Lost was first conceived, it seems, as a play. A manuscript notebook in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge contains sketches, probably dating from soon after Milton's return from Italy in 1639, for a sort of oratorio-cum-classical-tragedy called variously 'Adam in Banishment', 'Adam Unparadiz'd' and 'Paradise Lost' (*CPW* VIII, 554–85). His nephew Edward Phillips remembered being shown part of Satan's soliloquy at the beginning of the fourth book sometime in the early forties, when it was the opening scene of a tragedy (Darbishire 1932: 72-3). There is no reason to suppose that Milton intended the play to be performed on the stage, any more than *Samson Agonistes* later. The public theatres were closed by parliamentary order in 1642, and did not reopen until after the Restoration. In any case, Milton's few references to the contemporary stage do not suggest a very high opinion; and there are other examples in the period of plays written to be read rather than performed, or at most to be declaimed in a sort of concert performance, like the plays of the Roman tragedian Seneca.[4] But the drafts suggest nonetheless that for the young Milton drama, and specifically tragedy, represented (in Aristotle's words) 'the most serious and philosophical kind of poetry'. From the Ludlow *Masque* at the beginning of his career to *Samson* near the end, he chooses dramatic form for some of his most searching explorations of strength and virtue under trial. *Lycidas* is described as a 'monody', itself a dramatic

genre. The biblical *Revelation* he compares to 'a high and stately tragedy'. *Paradise Lost* and its sequel *Paradise Regained* revolve, no less than the dramatic works, around confrontations too charged with vivid performative energies to be reduced to the staid 'debates' they are sometimes described as.

There is no way of knowing when the notion of a tragedy on the Fall was abandoned; but by 1658 ('about two years before the King came in', Phillips told the biographer John Aubrey) those earlier ideas and materials were being reworked into a heroic poem. Twenty years before, Milton had toyed with the notion of an epic based on the legendary pseudo-history of Geoffrey of Monmouth, perhaps tracing the descent of the ancient Britons from the Trojan Brutus and culminating in the exploits of Arthur against the Saxons. The project was soon abandoned; but both the choice of subject and Milton's inability to make anything of it say something important about the genre, as it was understood in the period. For if the tragic mode focuses on the struggles of the 'agonist', the embattled and lonely individual caught in a spotlit moment of triumph and disaster, the heroic (Milton prefers the term to 'epic') is historical, national, above all imperial: the explanatory myth of the nation-state on the threshold of a new *imperium*. For all the prestige of Homer, the *Aeneid* of Virgil was the real model here. Itself following close on a period of revolution, open class-conflict and civil war, it sets out to forge a new kind of national unity, at once ancient (Aeneas, like Homer's Odysseus, is a refugee from the destruction of Troy) and apocalyptically new (the poem gives visionary expression to the imperial destiny of Rome under Augustus). Plunging *in medias res*, into the heart of the story, with its great sweeps of retrospect and prospect, origin and destiny, the form has an intimate relationship with ideologies of nationhood; not a narrow, parochial chauvinism, but the broad consensual identification – Gramsci called it 'hegemony'[5] – that binds people, across differences of class and ethnicity, to a shared history and a common purpose.

Strong magic – if it works. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* had tried to do it, reworking Geoffrey's fanciful tales of Arthur and the ancient Britons to forge a sense of national unity around

Elizabeth; but the attempt had palpably failed long before he abandoned the poem half-finished. The social focus – the court and ruling elite of late Tudor England – is too narrow. The stories, organised around the frivolous pretence that the Tudors were descended from Arthur, and deployed with a scholarly antiquarianism that threatens constantly to degenerate into half-timbered tea-shoppe quaintness, simply cannot support the portentous allegorical and ideological load they are asked to carry. And the unity towards which the poem strains, a unity of crown and subjects, ancient and modern, feudal forms and capitalist energies, remains diagrammatic; it simply isn't there, in reality or imagination. Seeking to conjure a people out of the warring fractions of post-feudal England, the poem fails fatally to be popular.

Spenser had aspired, with a conscious sense of mission, to be the English Virgil. Milton, who admired him and shared his missionary ambitions, was never likely to repeat his mistakes, least of all the disastrous blunder of identifying the English people with the person of their monarch. (The supposed popularity of the Tudors and Stuarts was largely the work of professional propagandists, abetted by some later historians. As for our own sycophantic humbug about 'royalty', that is a Victorian invention). For a start, his intellectual formation and interests, expressed not only in his poetry and prose but in his work as 'Secretary for Foreign Tongues' under a Commonwealth notable for its expansionist foreign policy, were too European to waste much time on a narrowly ethnic idea of the 'British' epic. The polyglot poet who admired the Druids because (it was said) they wrote Greek outlined his plans for an Arthurian epic in a Latin poem addressed to an Italian acquaintance (*Mansus*, Carey 1971: 260–7). Second, his readings in early British history quickly persuaded him that the Brutus-to-Arthur story, a historical dead-end anyway after the collapse of the Tudor myth, wouldn't do, for the simple and devastating reason that it obviously wasn't true (see pp. 186–90). Third, the author of *Areopagitica*, increasingly caught up in the onrush of war and revolution, was coming to see the English people as the descendants (by analogy or symbol, at least) not of some shadowy Welsh chieftain but of the ancient

civilisations of Greece, Italy and Palestine. Evelyn's comparison of the Restoration to 'the return of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity', like Milton's view of the same event as the people 'choosing them a captain back for Egypt' (*SSPP* 147), illustrates the period's fondness for scriptural parallelism. Often this amounts to little more than idle analogy-mongering or the exchange of biblical insults; but in its strongest form – and Milton certainly falls into this category – it provides the substance of a powerful historical myth. 'God's Englishmen', busy with the pious reforming of reformation at home and the building of a protestant and mercantile empire overseas, stand in direct providential succession both to the Old Testament Israelites and to the imperial Romans, and the poem that will tell their story must seek to unite the two traditions in terms of their living immediacy for the present. *Paradise Lost* does this in a variety of ways. Homer and Ovid jostle constantly in the poem's myriad intertextuality with *Job* and *Revelation*. Syncretic perspectives multiply vertiginously: the Greeks are descended from Noah (I, 508), the Roman Vulcan is the architect of the Satanic Pandemonium, his fall from Heaven described in images from Homer (I, 739–46), and Eve merges with Pandora, Proserpine and a panoply of near-eastern vegetation goddesses (IV, 269–71, IX, 393–6). But it unites them at a more fundamental level still, casting an Old Testament tale into a Virgilian form. Out of an ancient genre and an even older story, something absolutely new is made, a thing 'unattempted yet in prose or rhyme' (I, 16).

But what, in all this, of the supposedly national character of epic? The notion of the English as the new chosen people, successors to the biblical Israelites, provides part of the answer. That it is that gives the prophetic narrative of the twelfth book, ostensibly concerned with the early church, such powerful pertinence to Milton's own time: 'Who against faith and conscience can be heard/Infallible? Yet many will presume,/ Whence heavy persecution shall arise' (XII, 529–31). But the true 'Englishness' of *Paradise Lost* rests in something else, something so obvious that we are likely to overlook it altogether: the fact that it is written in English. The *Defences* of the 1650s, written in Latin, had given Milton a European reputation,

and Latin remained, even in the later seventeenth century, the medium for any serious piece of writing that aspired to a more than parochial circulation. The decision to write in the mother-tongue is above all a political decision, an act of solidarity with a particular national culture and history (as it still is today, for a Nigerian or a Welsh or a Quebecois writer). Not a difficult decision to make, perhaps, in 1644, with the image of 'a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep' still untarnished by later disillusion and compromise. But by the end of the fifties Milton's hopes of the English people, the 'misguided and abused multitude' even now thronging the roadsides to welcome home the restored tyrant, had been drastically revised, and the prospect of a congenial readership of enlightened European intellectuals might have seemed an attractive alternative to the disappointments nearer home. In these circumstances, the decision to persist with a vernacular epic amounts to an affirmation of confidence, however qualified and deferred, in the regenerative potential of the English people, and in the continuing validity and relevance of the epic mode itself.

Clearly, then, the question of *language* is central, and it is no accident that some of the fiercest controversies about the poem have revolved around its language. Noting the 'persistent mutual interference of what is stated and what is shown, the contradictory entanglements of 'epic' immediacy and hermeneutic discourse, the fixing of significations at one level that produces a sliding of them at another', Terry Eagleton ascribes the 'offensiveness' of *Paradise Lost*, in the eyes of those critics and readers who look to literature for the sensual immediacy of a Keats ode or the conversational transparency and moral assurance of a novel by Jane Austen, to the fact that its wrought and self-conscious idiom is 'a labour that works athwart the "natural" texture of the senses, failing or refusing . . . to repress its own artifice'.[6] Oddly, it is precisely those features of the poem, the obtrusive 'writtenness' of its language, the shifting perspectives and vertiginous uncertainties of meaning induced by its extraordinary syntax and sentence-structure, that most strikingly assure its remarkable modernity, fully justifying T.S. Eliot's comparison with Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*,

another linguistic and narrative *tour de force* that sets out to create not so much a story as a comprehensive and self-justifying *world*.[7] Such a claim for the poem's modernity may sound perversely improbable. What, after all, about Milton the great classicist, the scholarly revivalist of ancient forms like elegy, tragedy, epic? What about the notorious latinisms? The archaic convolutions of word-order? The schoolmasterly insistence on the etymological derivation of perfectly ordinary words? How can any of this be called modern? "tis Latin, 'tis Greek English', enthused his eighteenth-century biographer Jonathan Richardson; 'not only the words, the phraseology, the transpositions, but the ancient idiom is seen in all he writes, so that a learned foreigner will think Milton the easiest to be understood of all the English writers'. The 'learned foreigner' criterion is unlikely to cut much ice nowadays as an argument for Milton's genius, and what Richardson intended as praise has served other critics as proof of a deadening antiquarianism 'such as a college easily supplies' (Johnson); 'a northern dialect', Keats, who had tried to imitate the Miltonic idiom, called it, 'accommodating itself to greek and roman inversions and intonations', and resolved 'to give myself up to other sensations', adding that 'life for him would be death for me' (Wittreich 1970: 561). Milton, declared F.R.Leavis with an air of settling the matter once and for all, 'invented a medium the distinction of which is to have denied itself the life of the living language' (Leavis 1952: 42).

It would be interesting to have Milton's response to the confusions, evasions and coercions lurking behind the deceptive simplicity of this last judgement. Earlier critics who remarked that he had invented a language of his own meant only that he had declined to employ the currently fashionable modes of literary language, such as the 'Horatian' style of conversational couplet-verse elaborated by Waller and Dryden or the flatulent 'heroic' bombast of restoration tragedy. When Richardson asserts that 'Milton's language is English, but 'tis Milton's English', he does not mean to set up some absolute standard of 'English' against which all writers can be judged. But Leavis's 'life of the living language', with its characteristic vagueness and tautology, seeks to impose and (in Leavisian idiom)

'enforce' just such a standard, one all the more insidious for being almost entirely meaningless. Is the 'living language' spoken or written? Does it mean the language of Milton's century or our own? The language of intellectuals, of merchants, of rural labourers? Of the church or the street? Of London or Glasgow, Norwich or Penzance? Of the kitchen, the nursery or the bedroom? The truth, of course, is that except in some uselessly general sense there is no such entity as 'the living language'. Language, any language, is historically, socially, culturally, functionally plural. The fundamental medium and material of identity and difference, inescapably woven into the variety, fluidity and conflict of the social world, language is, to use Voloshinov's word,[8] 'multiaccented', charged with the competing energies of dialogue, argument, struggle; and it is this multiaccentuality, the dimension of historical and social difference suppressed in Leavisian notions of organic unity, that Milton's writings put unavoidably on display. When Satan's arguments to Eve are countered by an admonitory comment, we observe not some deep disjunction between the moralist and the 'true poet' (Blake's view) or a revealing glimpse of authorial insecurity (as Waldock argues) but the collision and reciprocation of two languages, of impassioned persuasion and distanced commentary, the one immediate, the other retrospective, analytic, both functional. When a familiar English word is used in such a way that its etymological (Greek or Latin) sense is activated alongside the contemporary one (see pp.260–1), it is not Milton's pedantry that is summoned into view but the inescapable historicity of language and the provisional status of its meanings. And these features of the poem attest its modernity, indeed its precocious modernism, evoking not only Joyce but Pound and Eliot himself. The endlessly shifting points of view, the sexual panic and fascination with androgyny, the mingling of history and myth, past and present, the polyglot self-consciousness of the language, the search for logic and structure in a chaos of historical fragmentation and disorder: what do these evoke if not the *Cantos* and *The Waste Land* (Eliot's *Lycidas*, a meditation on 'death by water' coming midway between the ironic *Comus* of the *Prufrock* poems and the justification of the ways of

God attempted in the *Four Quartets*). 'Making strange', the formalists' term for the special property of poetic language, is nowhere more appropriate than with this strangest of poems, this odyssey of outer and inner space where nothing is as it seems and we encounter the most familiar words and things as if we were seeing them for the first time.

Paradise Lost was published in 1667. At its first appearance it was in ten books (for the second edition in 1674 Milton divided books seven and ten in two, to give twelve overall, the same number as the *Aeneid*), bare text without any explanatory material. Early readers evidently had some difficulties, because later copies of the first edition have an 'argument' (a summary of the action of the poem) and a note on the verse, which suggests that they found the story hard to follow without a map, and that they expected it to rhyme (blank verse being very unusual outside the theatre). Milton had published nothing for over seven years, and the poem must have looked a very odd fish indeed – a stranded leviathan, perhaps – in a year which also saw Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis*, an enthusiastically royalist poem in rhyming stanzas on the naval wars against the Dutch and the great fire of London, described by the poet as 'the most heroic subject which any poet could desire'. Despite all this, *Paradise Lost* sold rather well, the edition of 1300 copies selling out in less than two years and earning its author, now for the first time in his life in something like poverty, the impressive sum of ten pounds. In 1670 he published the *History of Britain* on which he had been working since the mid-forties, and the following year saw the publication, in a single volume, of the short epic *Paradise Regained* and the neoclassical tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, which may also have been started some time earlier. In 1673 appeared the brief treatise *Of True Religion* and a second edition of his shorter poems, adding the little pamphlet *Of Education* written thirty years earlier; and educational as well as financial considerations perhaps persuaded him to publish two other earlier works, a Latin *Grammar* (1669) and a *Logic* (1672). 1674 saw a collection of Latin letters, together with some writings from his university days, and the second (twelve-book) edition of *Paradise*

Lost, the last of his works to be published in his lifetime. He died in November, a month before his sixty-sixth birthday.

The history of Milton's reputation is unusually complex. Early readers, struggling to reconcile the 'heavenly muse' of the later poetry with the seditious impieties of the regicide pamphlets, betray a painful ambivalence. In most cases, the poetry wins, just (see *SSPP* 14–15); and by the middle of the eighteenth century *Paradise Lost*, at least, is well on the way, with a little discreet 'improvement',[9] to becoming a national monument. But the ambivalence lingers, resurfacing against a background of renewed social disorder and political agitation in Samuel Johnson's *Life* (1779), with its unconcealed hostility towards the 'surly and acrimonious republican' (Johnson had earlier collaborated with William Lauder in a fraudulent attempt to discredit Milton as a plagiarist). Tory disapproval finds its counterpart in a Whig mythology of Milton the incorruptible statesman-poet, with Milton posthumously conscripted as patron of the bourgeois 'glorious revolution' of 1688-9; a tradition, more vigorous overseas than at home, that played some part in formulating the political agenda of the American and French revolutions (Thomas Jefferson's commonplace-books are full of quotations from Milton, and Mirabeau's translation of *Areopagitica* went into four editions between 1788 and 1792), and that received its definitive expression in Macaulay's 1825 *Essay on Milton*. But there were always other Miltons, less assertive but perhaps more significant than the high-cultural consecration of the Christian Virgil or the noble patriot. Christopher Hill argues that Milton was closer to the plebeian radicalism of the Ranters, Muggletonians, Fifth Monarchists and early Quakers than his critics have allowed for (Hill 1977: 93-116); and through the eighteenth century his writings helped, in dissenting academies and corresponding societies, to nourish a dissident protestant counterculture that was to be the yeast of the popular radicalism of the revolutionary years and a vital constituent in what E.P. Thompson calls the 'making of the English working class'. William Godwin wrote warmly of the 'great talents and great energies' of the archetypal revolutionary, Satan, adding that such energies 'cannot flow but from a powerful sense of fitness

and justice' (Shawcross 1972); and Joseph Wittreich has shown that women readers, including early feminists like Mary Astell and Mary Chudleigh, undeterred by the passages of patriarchalism and misogyny, read *Paradise Lost* and the pamphlets of the forties as the visionary manifestos of a still scarcely conceivable emancipation (Wittreich 1987). Godwin's daughter Mary read the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* shortly before starting to write *Frankenstein*, and while she worked on the novel, in which the unfortunate monster, abandoned by its creator, first comes to a full awareness of its predicament through overhearing *Paradise Lost* read aloud, her husband, the poet Shelley, was reading the poem to her in the evenings.

The importance of Milton to Shelley and the other romantic poets, whether as Blake's genial 'Awakener' or as the oppressive 'covering Cherub' of Harold Bloom's account (Bloom 1973), would be hard to overestimate. Joseph Wittreich's collection of romantic writings on Milton, by novelists and critics as well as poets (Wittreich 1970), is impressive testimony of a presence too actively disturbing to be called 'influence'. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare were influences, admired and imitated. Milton entered the unconscious of the romantic imagination, surfacing not only in its waking language and imagery (Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for example, a conscious continuation of *Paradise Lost* with its initial determination to explore 'some British theme . . . by Milton left unsung', contains hundreds, perhaps thousands of quotations, allusions and verbal echoes of the earlier poet) but in its deepest desires and fears. Edmund Burke, for whom Milton was the outstanding example in English of literary 'sublimity', had described him as 'entirely possessed with the power of a well-managed darkness', and for Gothic novelists like Ann Radcliffe, Charles Maturin and Mary Shelley, Milton opened the way to a psychic underworld of crepuscular terrors, unacknowledged wishes and dark illuminations. Shelley's Monster, abandoned in fear and disgust by his creator Frankenstein, struggles to understand his own turbulent emotions through books. First he reads Plutarch's *Lives* and Goethe's *Werther*, but then, happening on *Paradise Lost*, he suddenly discovers 'different and far deeper emotions . . . It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that

the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting'.[10] Blake, who told a friend that 'Milton loved me in childhood and shewed me his face', longed 'to have a continued dream, representing visually and audibly all Milton's Paradise Lost' (Wittreich 1970: 162). Coleridge, who wrote of 'my idol, Milton', described him in terms that seem more appropriate to the creator of the world than the author of *Paradise Lost*: 'Milton attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal. All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of Milton'.[11] Even Keats, who abandoned his Miltonic epic *Hyperion* and emerged from his shadow with the remark that 'life for him would be death for me', acknowledged a Promethean power and daring in the later writings: 'The evil days had come to him – he hit the new system of things a mighty mental blow – the exertion must have had or is yet to have some sequences' (Wittreich 1970: 556).

Through all this, still, run deep tensions and ambivalences. A presence so dominating cannot fail to arouse competing responses of admiration and repugnance, love and fear. In any case, we are confronted here not with a single 'romantic Milton' but with many. Against Blake's liberator and Shelley's revolutionary iconoclast we must set Wordsworth's Milton, an embodiment of traditional Englishness as conservative as Wordsworth himself. The Milton who 'attracts all forms and things to himself' provokes in all these writers what Harold Bloom calls a 'strong misreading', a formulation in Miltonic terms of their own deep needs and preoccupations. Nor is it only Milton's writings that evoke these responses, but the strikingly divergent traditions of interpretation through which they have been delivered, traditions that offer variously a high-bourgeois Milton, neoclassical, orthodox and patriarchal, a Whig Milton, enlightened, rational and English as roast beef and a popular-radical Milton, prophetic and antinomian. When Wordsworth thunders, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that 'the invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse',[12] his

commitment to 'Shakespeare and Milton' as monuments of canonical high culture prevents him from seeing how deeply both writers, but especially Milton, have entered into the very novels, plays and poems he opposes them to. Blake's famous distinction between the conventional moralist writing 'in fetters' and the 'true poet' creating freely is a comment on Milton's eighteenth-century reputation as much as on the poet himself; and Shelley expressed the disjunction succinctly in his sardonic reminder that 'the sacred Milton' canonised by eighteenth-century literary culture had also been 'a republican, and a bold enquirer into morals and religion' (Shelley 1971: 206). Much more is at stake here, clearly, than a harmless difference of literary opinion. The attempt of some of Milton's early critics (and some of his more recent ones) to admire the poetry while suppressing their fear and hatred of the politics was inevitably doomed. His writings have always been, to a greater extent than with any other English writer, a battle-ground of competing ideologies.

Often this is explicit. The eighteen thirties and forties, the years of the People's Charter and the Communist Manifesto, saw a remarkable upsurge of Milton publishing for a popular readership. Biographies by Joseph Ivimey (1833) and William Carpenter (1836) set out to rescue the poet from the 'ultra-toryism and bigotry' of Johnson's *Life*, stressing his active republicanism and the visionary energies of his poetry. The chartist Thomas Cooper testified in his *Autobiography* to the influence of Milton on his political education, and G.J. Harney, friend of Marx and Engels, reviewing the prose works in 1850 for the chartist *Democratic Review*, thundered against 'the ban put upon them by the aristocracy, and the ill name given to them by royalist writers, and the literary toadies of monarchy and oligarchy'. Across the Atlantic, the American feminist Margaret Fuller praised Milton's 'primitive vitality', and his writings played their part in formulating the demands of the struggle for Black emancipation (Wittreich 1987: 4).

Against this celebration of a Milton embattled, partisan and popular, Matthew Arnold deplored the Hebraic 'narrowness and contentiousness' of the Puritan temper, and attempted to defuse the political impact and popular appeal of the writings

by shifting attention, in a familiar classicising turn, to the style. Arnold's Milton is 'our great artist in style', source of a classless and depoliticised 'refining and elevation'; qualities, he adds, with an anxious eye on the resurgent suffrage and labour agitation of the 1860s, which 'no race needs . . . more than ours'. In the same vein, Mark Pattison, claiming Milton as the prime exemplar of the 'English man of letters', dismissed the prose as 'a record of the prostitution of genius to political party' and reclaimed the poems as the special preserve of a privileged minority – not, to be sure, the poet's own 'fit audience . . . though few', but an even more exclusive fraternity of chaps with 'taste', classics and the right school tie: 'the lofty strain which requires more effort to accompany, than the average reader is able to make . . . and a wealth of allusion demanding more literature than is possessed by any but the few whose life is lived with the poets' (Pattison 1879: 67, 215).

Confronted with this stuffily reverential academicism (what Harry Blamires calls 'the Milton of organ music and versified telephone directory', *Milton Encyclopedia* 4,139), we may feel that the debunking efforts of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, which the latter was to claim in 1936 had 'dislodged' Milton 'with remarkably little fuss', have a refreshing candour. But they, no less than Arnold and Pattison, were concerned to depoliticise Milton, to thwart the radical historical energies of the writing and to belittle the issues that animate it. They failed, and in retrospect the once-celebrated 'Milton controversy' looks comically self-important, a parochial squabble among literary critics about the 'great tradition' of academic English, reminiscent of the 'surplice-brabbles and tippet-scuffles' of the Anglican prelates that Milton had satirised in the 1640s (*SSPP* 71). But as so often in Milton criticism, the real issues lie deeper, and the hidden agenda of the Eliot-Leavis onslaught, as of the defence mounted by C.S. Lewis and the 'neo-Christians', is much more interesting than anything they actually wrote.[13] For both sides, Milton serves as a symbol of something much wider: for Eliot and Leavis, of a 'dissociation of sensibility' evident everywhere in a society that has supposedly lost contact with its organic and traditional roots; for Lewis and Douglas Bush, of the immutable simplicities of Christian

orthodoxy, given lapidary expression by a poet 'to whom good and evil are distinct polarities . . . who sees in human life an eternal contest between irreligious pride and religious humility' (Bush, in Barker 1965: 174). There is little to choose here; for what both sides in the argument are concerned to reject or deny in Milton's writings is their disconcerting *modernity*.

Milton, Fredric Jameson writes, is 'the greatest English political poet', and the hero of his greatest poem is not Satan but Adam, 'the commoner, the first bourgeois', prototype of 'that extraordinary mutation which is middle-class man' (Barker 1986: 52). The son of a scrivener (that is, a money-lender and investment-broker), Milton defines liberty and virtue in competitive and individualistic terms. The arguments against censorship in *Areopagitica* advocate a free market in knowledge. The Lady in *Comus* defends her chastity as a kind of thrift and good husbandry, anticipating the open commercialisation of virginity in Restoration comedy and eighteenth-century fiction. Eve and Adam are not the aristocratic heroes of classical or renaissance epic but Everywoman and Everyman, and Paradise before the fall idealises the middle-class household. *Paradise Lost* and *Samson*, with their self-tormenting interiority, their preoccupation with self-knowledge and the labyrinthine perplexities of motive and action, their focal stress on family relationships and their unheroic protagonists struggling to grasp the elusive meaning and logic of history, are closer in most important respects to *Middlemarch* and *War and Peace*, *The Rainbow* and *The Golden Notebook*, than they are to the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid* or *The Faerie Queene*. To look at Milton's impact, not on literary critics but on novelists and poets, is to see his writings as one of the key vectors of modernity, shaping images and concepts for a society that was still, in his own lifetime, struggling into being.

Raymond Williams's term for cultural forms reaching out for new articulations of meaning and response – inevitably a difficult and contradictory process, since they must do so with the very same traditional languages and structures that they seek to transcend – is 'emergent'[14]; and the idea of emergence recalls the exuberantly imagined episode in *Paradise Lost* when, on the sixth and last day of creation, the earth is commanded

to bring forth 'cattle and creeping things, and beast of th'earth,/ Each in their kind'.

> The earth obey'd, and straight
> Op'ning her fertile womb teem'd at a birth
> Innumerous living creatures, perfect forms,
> Limb'd and full-grown. Out of the ground up rose
> As from his lair the wild beast where he wons
> In forest wild, in thicket, brake or den;
> Among the trees in pairs they rose, they walk'd,
> The cattle in the fields and meadows green,
> Those rare and solitary, these in flocks
> Pasturing at once, and in broad herds upsprung.
> The grassy clods now calv'd; now half appear'd
> The tawny lion, pawing to get free
> His hinder parts, then springs as broke from bonds
> And rampant shakes his brinded mane; the ounce,
> The libbard and the tiger, as the mole
> Rising, the crumbled earth above them threw
> In hillocks; the swift stag from underground
> Bore up his branching head; scarce from his mould
> Behemoth, biggest born of earth, upheav'd
> His vastness;
>
> (VII, 453-72)

Behemoth, the biblical elephant, gave Hobbes the title of his study of the causes of the Civil Wars; but although the whole episode, in which the ant figures as a 'pattern of just equality perhaps/Hereafter', is open to an allegorical reading (what isn't, in this poem?), what impresses and moves above all is the playful, fantastic and wholly positive celebration of new and emergent life. In just such terms had Milton welcomed the bewildering proliferation of pamphlet literature in the London of the 1640s, satire, polemic, visionary prophecy, 'each in their kind': 'The shop of war hath not there more anvils and hammers waking, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed Justice in defence of beleaguered Truth, than there be pens and heads there sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas wherewith to present as with their homage and fealty the approaching

reformation . . . Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much argument, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making . . . Should ye suppress all this flowery crop of knowledge and new light sprung up and yet springing daily in this city?' (*SSPP* 101–4); and *Areopagitica*'s revolutionary England 'rising like a strong man from sleep and shaking her invincible locks' (103) is not a more compelling image of the 'rousing motions' of resurgent creative power than the lion who, 'half appear'd' and 'pawing to get free/His hinder parts, then springs as broke from bonds/And rampant shakes his brinded mane'.

Such passages give strong support to Frank Kermode's contention that Milton's 'radical topic' is 'the power of joy and its loss'; joy, he adds, cautioning against too theological a reading of the poems, which is 'very much a matter of the senses' (Kermode 1960: 101–3). The image of the joyless puritan patriarch, abusing his daughters and browbeating his readers, still persists in some quarters, and the suggestion that Milton's writings, for all their fierce moral and political argumentativeness, are committed at root to the pleasures of the senses may seem an improbable one. But it was the arch-intellectual Milton, not Keats or Lawrence, who defined poetry as 'simple, sensuous and passionate', and his own poetry explores and develops its meanings at least as much through the sensualities of sound and rhythm and the evocation of smell, taste, sight, and movement as through the logic and structure of its arguments. In any case, the distinction between sensation (physical) and argument (intellectual) is misleading. 'Poetry is written in the brain', Dannie Abse has said; 'but the brain is bathed in blood';[15] and Milton, who rejected the Platonic and Augustinian separation of soul and body, would undoubtedly have agreed. We think with our bodies, just as we feel with our minds, and in the baroque synaesthesia[16] of Milton's text an idea can be as luminous, as fragrant, as sensuously provocative as ripe fruit or warm flesh.

'Love Virtue, she alone is free'. Love, Virtue, Freedom: the triad of Miltonic Graces invoked at the end of the Ludlow masque rewrites the 'faith, hope and charity' of Pauline orthodoxy. Virtue (integrity, self-knowledge, justice) is politicised,

as the only route to freedom; but it is also sensualised, as the only goal of love, the ultimate object of desire. The bitter lessons of 1660 forced Milton to rethink the meaning of love, virtue and freedom, and the relations between them, in a world darkened by disappointment and defeat. The writings that result from that rethinking may indeed, as Jameson suggests, 'anticipate the social impoverishment of the modern world', its privatisation of hope, its collective internalisation of failure (Barker 1986: 54). But they offer too some of the most compelling accounts we have of the rousing motions of change, the sheer unpredictability of the emergent. Whether they also successfully 'assert eternal providence/And justify the ways of God to men' is a question for their modern readers to decide for ourselves, if we care to. Speaking for myself, I don't believe that they do; but then the question isn't one that interests me very much. What does strike me, writing these sentences and looking around at our world, at China or Latin America or Eastern Europe, is that history has lost none of its power to astonish and confound since Milton's day, that people caught up in it can still be moved by the love of virtue (though they might not call it that) and the hope of freedom to turn the world upside down, and that his own writings continue to testify with undiminished eloquence to that hope and that possibility.

NOTES

1 'An Horatian Ode On Cromwell's Return From Ireland', lines 119-20, in *Marvell: Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Robert Wilcher, London, Methuen (1986), 60.
2 Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, London, Dent (1965), 10-11.
3 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence & Wishart (1971), 175. Gramsci, Sardinian leader of the Italian Communist Party, was arrested on Mussolini's orders in November 1926, and spent the last ten years of his life in prison. The phrase is a quotation from the French socialist writer Romain Rolland.

4 On the other hand, one of the drafts begins with a prologue explaining that Adam and Eve are invisible to mortal eyes until after the fall, which looks like an ingenious way of getting round the problem of prelapsarian nudity and wouldn't be necessary unless some sort of performance was envisaged.
5 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 242ff. 'Hegemony', for Gramsci, means not just political leadership but the creation of common objectives and a common socio-national identity for different social classes and groups.
6 Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, London, Verso (1981), 12.
7 T.S. Eliot, 'Milton II', in *On Poetry and Poets*, London, Faber & Faber (1957), 157. See also p. 143.
8 V. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, New York, Seminar Press (1973).
9 For example, John Wesley's *Paradise Lost Improved* (1763) and James Buchanan's *Paradise Lost Rendered Into Grammatical Construction* (1773).
10 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, in *Three Gothic Novels*, Harmondsworth, Penguin (1968), 396.
11 Samuel Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ch. 15.
12 William Wordsworth, *Poems*, Harmondsworth, Penguin (1977), vol. 1, p. 873.
13 There is a review of the 'Milton controversy' by Bernard Bergonzi in Kermode (1960), 162-80.
14 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press (1977), 123: 'By "emergent" I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture . . . and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it.' On my reading, Satan would fall into the first category, Eve into the second; but Milton would have agreed that it is 'exceptionally difficult to distinguish' between them.
15 In an interview in *The Observer*, 3 June 1990, p. 61.
16 Margaret Bottrall defines baroque in terms of 'audacity',