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THE CIVIL WARS

Among the majority of those who gathered at Westminster in November 1640 for the beginning of the new Parliament a common purpose was evident: Charles I's reign had been dominated for too long by a faction committed to courses of action that were a severe threat to the fundamental laws of the kingdom, the liberties of the subject, and the doctrine and worship of the English church.¹ Throughout the 1630s the Caroline administration had sought outlandish and innovative ways of raising finance, and thus of improving its own prospects of governing strongly and without domestic hindrance. Customarily, revenue would be raised through a Parliament, but Charles's ministers resorted instead to a series of strained and unfamiliar extra-Parliamentary measures to circumvent the need for one: during the later 1620s, Parliaments had not only failed to grant the supply the administration needed but had also served to gather and amplify a series of grievances that Charles had no intention of assuaging. Such royal policies, backed up by aggrandising and alarming assertions of prerogative powers, appeared to threaten the subject's secure hold on his property as well as permitting the permanent mothballing of the only national forum available to those without power at court. It didn't help that the administration had been seen to compromise the capacity of the law to check such assertions of executive authority, and that in granting monopolies from which it hoped to gain revenue it was fostering discontent in those whose economic prospects and interests it had checked or overridden. When the Long Parliament met, it demonstrated a widely-shared determination not only to assert but also to establish an

¹ Underlying this narrative are both canonical and more recent accounts of the high political aspects of the civil wars: Robert Ashton, *The English Civil War: Conservatism and Revolution 1603-1649* (2nd edn; London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637-1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire: A New History of the English Civil Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

ineffaceable role for Parliament in the counsels of the King, and to cut off the legal and administrative means through which Charles had looked to realise his elevated aspirations for monarchical power.

These, though, were not simply secular issues for either the King and his ministers or his newly gathered opponents. Charles's vision of his rule also involved the reformation of a national church that appeared to him and his leading churchmen to be worryingly lax, ill-ordered and prone in parts to unorthodox doctrine and worship. An attempt at comprehensive and thorough reinvigoration was led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, with an emphasis on ceremony and hierarchy that was perceived by the 'hotter' sort of English Protestant not as reform but as a frightening counter-reformation. Laud and his supporters were understood to be deviating from the dominant Calvinist doctrine of the church, and imposing liturgical practices that smelled suspiciously of unreformed Roman Catholicism.² That the King had an openly Catholic wife redoubled such suspicions, as did the fact that he was offering barely lukewarm support for the cause of international Protestantism in the Thirty Years War, an epic European conflict then raging across the continent. By November 1640 these anxieties had convinced many members of the assembling Parliament that only fundamental reform of the English church could safeguard, and thus irrevocably complete, the Protestant reformation begun a century before. As part of this process the system of church government that invested power in a hierarchy of bishops had to go, or at the very least be drastically qualified.

So for Charles's opponents this was an opportunity to displace, or to impose constitutional limits on, a leadership in both church and state whose intentions as well as policies they had come to distrust. Distaste for what the episcopate and Charles's government had already done was effective enough, but fear of what they might be

² See Neil Forsyth's chapter, 'The English Church', for a more detailed discussion of Laud and his opponents.

plotting was as powerful a driver of reform, and an inducement to pursue more radical measures. Yet there were also those, and not just supporters of Charles's personal rule, who were animated by fears of their own: for them, the constitutional changes that the leading activists among Charles's parliamentary and ecclesiastical opponents thought necessary to curb untrustworthy incumbents were as much of a threat to the kingdom's proper constitutional order. The heated debate over prelacy in which Milton intervened so pungently offers a good example of this: many who were happy to see the deposition of Laud did not wish to pull down episcopacy itself, and rejected not only the claim that it was necessarily contaminated with Popery and tyranny but also the vision of a more thoroughly reformed church set out by Milton and his allies. From such as these, as much as from committed theorists and proponents of royal absolutism, the King's party eventually came.³ One of this party's problems was that it amounted to a coalition of interests with potentially conflicting aims, but its military opponents were, however, no less divided. The opposition to episcopacy that bound staunch Parliamentarians together was not enough to sustain their unity once the bishops were out of the way. For one grouping and their Scots allies, an established Presbyterian church in England was the necessary heart of any viable settlement; for those of a more radical religious persuasion, including Milton, the English Presbyterians were to become almost as contemptible an enemy as the royalists proper in the threat they offered to the liberty of conscience that was the precondition of a free civic life. Profound religious differences were to lead to conflicting attitudes to state and government in general, to monarchy in particular, and to King Charles himself.

By late 1641, the committed pursuit of a still common purpose by the dominant groupings in both Houses of Parliament had done much to clip the wings of bishops and King, and establish Parliamentary involvement in, and control over, the royal

³ David Smith, *Constitutional Royalism and the Search for Settlement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 62-106.

government. This, though, was not enough for the keenest supporters of Parliamentary efforts. To the frustration of many, episcopacy had not yet been abolished. Then alarming news of a rising in Ireland reached Westminster. Charles's dynastic rule over three kingdoms ensured that English politics was affected by the affairs of both Scotland and Ireland in many and unpredictable ways; indeed, it was the failure of his attempts to suppress the resistance to his imposition of ecclesiastical uniformity on Scotland, and his need to finance a further military effort to do so, that had brought him to the dangerous expediency of calling an English Parliament in 1640, and had thus given his opponents there the chance they had so eagerly seized. In the light of the threat the Irish rising was deemed to represent to English security, control over military resources became one of the main issues in renewed efforts to implement even more radical reform of church and state. By the spring of 1642, the King and his opponents were deadlocked over the militia, with Charles refusing point blank to assent to a bill allowing Parliament to control it. Parliament passed a Militia Ordinance instead, declaring in doing so its right to act as an executive authority against the King's will and without his approval. Charles then issued Commissions of Array authorising the raising of troops for his defence, and local leaders found themselves facing two incompatible demands on their allegiance. The workings of constitutional government had been replaced by a condition in which competing claims to a monopoly of legitimate force inhabited one polity, and both groupings felt that their success and survival alike had come to depend on the forceful overcoming of their opponents. England was now in a state of civil war, even if neither party had yet managed to mobilise the army it needed.

In fact, though, force and the threat of force had long been an important factor in the thinking of many of the actors in these constitutional dramas. Both the King and his opponents used force in ways that deeply alarmed their antagonists, and managed to make it more likely that the other party would resort to similar or equivalent means. The

Parliamentary leadership resorted to legally dubious proceedings to press home a charge of treason against one of Charles's chief ministers, the Earl of Strafford; the bill authorising his execution was reluctantly approved by the King, but was taken to be judicial murder even by many who deplored Strafford's policies. A Scottish army that had faced and beaten its own King in the First and Second Bishops Wars (January to June, 1639, August to October, 1640) occupied part of northern England and collaborated with its English allies at Westminster, while the proceedings of government in London were buffeted by both the spontaneous and the managed interventions of city crowds. On the other side, 1641 saw plots and threatened risings by royalist partisans, some from within the army that Charles had assembled to suppress his Scottish opponents, and in January 1642 Charles notoriously violated Parliament with a crowd of armed supporters in an attempt to arrest five prominent members of the House of Commons. Both sides manoeuvred to secure stores of armaments for themselves, leading to a celebrated and much-debated stand-off at the city of Hull. The sanguinary tendencies of partisans were thus an important factor in political calculations long before the King raised his standard at Nottingham in August 1642. The wars that followed left perhaps 180,000 people dead in England alone, and helped to confirm armed conflict as a customary aspect of domestic politics in England and Scotland for the following century.⁴ Yet military struggle was not some unanticipated bolt from the cloudless blue: it happened, and it continued to happen, because there were participants enough in the religious and political disputes of the period willing to engage in a war effort. John Milton, 'imbued with the fervor of what he considered to be a just war undertaken in a righteous cause', was one of them.⁵

⁴ For estimates of casualties in all three kingdoms, see Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: the Experience of the British Civil Wars, 1638-1651* (London: Routledge, 1992), 201-29.

⁵ Michael Lieb, *Poetics of the Holy: A Reading of Paradise Lost* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 265. See also Robert Fallon, *Captain or Colonel: The Soldier in Milton's Life and Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 30-71.

From the perspective of the literary historian, one of the most significant elements in the rising conflict was the resort to print and to the public by many partisans of the coalescing sides. With the collapse of the system of pre-publication licensing through which Charles's administration had governed the presses, an extended and much denser chorus of voices found itself with a more easily accessible outlet. Crucially, it also found a public interested and large enough to support the publishers who furnished it with its medium. Some literary historians have described this as a crucial moment in the establishment of a 'public sphere' in English culture, with varying degrees of fealty to the model set out by Jürgen Habermas, and varying senses too of the extent to which this flowering instantiated a republican promise at this stage only fitfully animating the Parliamentary cause.⁶ Milton found one of his voices here, and once this liberty was under threat from the Parliamentary leadership he urgently and publicly asserted its benefits. His conjuration of London as 'a City of refuge, the mansion house of liberty' in *Areopagitica*, gives rise to a vision of a new 'Temple of the Lord' as a free space or forum accommodating many 'moderat varieties', 'brotherly dissimilitudes' and 'neighboring differences' of opinion and expression (CPW 2: 553-4, 555, 565), a tolerated diversity that is helping to restore a nation to its health and vigour.

Yet this pacific vision is not the only way he imagines the exchange made possible by the abolition of pre-publication censorship: elsewhere in the text, he repeatedly invokes not the architecturally ordered spaces of political or religious institutions, nor the proximities of family and locality, but the field of battle. Truth is in conflict with falsehood, and the 'true warfaring Christian' must fight with evil in order to

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (London: Polity, 1989); David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 93-139; Joad Raymond, 'The Newspaper, Public Opinion, and the Public Sphere in the Seventeenth Century,' in Raymond, ed., *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 109-40.

become fully virtuous: 'that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary' (CPW 2: 515; see also 517, 547, 556, 561, 562, 567). What's more, the force exerted in this conflict is not necessarily metaphorical, or otherwise confined in a separate sphere of letters. If books 'contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are' (CPW 2: 492), that does not simply invest them with a human dignity deserving of respect; it also ensures that they participate in the kind of danger presented by armies, the threatening physicality of a not always benign life, and that they are liable too to the same kinds of punishment. In opposing pre-publication censorship Milton is keen not to be accused of 'introducing licence', and is certainly not advocating a space of reasons untouched by physical force:

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Bookes demeane themselves, as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors. (CPW 2: 492)

And as he states at the tract's end, for 'mischievous' and 'libellous' books ('libel' here has a much broader application than its modern, purely legal usage, and includes royalist publications such as newsbooks (CPW 2: 528)) 'the fire and the executioner will be the timeliest and the most effectual remedy' (CPW 3: 569). So in *Areopagitica* the free space of the city merges with the rather different space of contingency that is the battlefield, just as a Truth that is only strengthened by its encounter with its enemy, and cannot be worsted (CPW 2: 561), must somehow be accommodated to a Truth violently dismembered by 'a wicked race of deceivers' and only to be restored by Christ's agency at his second coming (CPW 2: 549). The time and trial of war is therefore the period of the nation's greatest vigour, of its greatest liberty; but it is also the condition of its crisis, its

exposure to the threat of its enemies. Liberty is risk, and civility is continuous with hostility.

Other participants in the polemical exchanges of the 1640s found many ways to characterise their engagements, but were often as fond of the language of military force as Milton is here, and capable of demonstrating equivalent ambivalences. And for many of those participants poetry was a weapon or ‘Engine’, as the Parliamentary soldier and writer George Wither put it, with which to fight.⁷ Abraham Cowley – eminent poet, secretary to the exiled Queen, royalist intelligencer – set out a particularly resonant formulation in the preface to his *Poems* of 1656:

Now though in all *Civill Dissentions*, when they break into open hostilities, the *War* of the *Pen* is allowed to accompany that of the *Sword*, and every one is in a maner obliged with his *Tongue*, as well as *Hand*, to serve and assist the side which he engages in.⁸

In context, Cowley’s comments seek to excuse his participation in the royalist war effort to a Protectorate audience;⁹ nonetheless, his assertion that the conflicts of tongues and hands are continuous with each other, is the articulation of a civil war commonplace.

This is one of the contexts in which Milton’s own first published collection needs to be seen. Critics have often been puzzled by features of the 1645 *Poems* that appear to present its author as ‘a gentleman poet, possibly a member of the landed gentry with close ties to Caroline peerage’ and even to the courtly aesthetics of Charles’s personal rule: this is someone who writes masques for the aristocracy, collaborates with a composer, Henry Lawes, identified by his courtly role in the King’s Music, and even pens

⁷ George Wither, *Campo-Musae: or the field-musings of Captain George Wither* (London, 1643), sig. A3r.

⁸ Abraham Cowley, *Poems* (London, 1656), sig. [A4r].

⁹ James Loxley, *Royalism and Poetry in the English Civil Wars* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 97-8; Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England 1640-1660* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 216; Martin Dzlezainis, ‘Literature, war, and politics, 1642-1668’, in *A Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake*, ed. David Womersley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 15-16.

respectful elegies for bishops.¹⁰ The fact that the book was published by Humphrey Moseley, whose list came to feature volumes by poets strongly identified with Stuart court culture, has enhanced the sense of strangeness. In 1645 Moseley also published the poems of Edmund Waller, a quondam court poet and moderate Member of Parliament who had been disgraced for his involvement in a plot to surrender London to the royalist army, so this certainly would appear to be Milton placing himself – or being placed – in patently royalist company.¹¹ Yet Moseley’s brand of apparently nostalgic, recuperative or memorial royalism was not the only mode of poetical engagement of which royalists were capable, and the compromised Waller actually makes a rather poor exemplar of the wartime royalist writer. A far more illuminating comparison can be made with John Cleveland, also a graduate of Christ’s College, Cambridge, acknowledged for his rhetorical mastery, a fellow contributor to the volume of elegies in which *Lycidas* first appeared and possibly the ‘late court-Poet’ whose image of monarchy Milton turns to his own purposes in *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (CPW 7: 361, 426). Cleveland wrote royalist satires in prose and verse excoriating the full range of the King’s enemies; his energetic and demanding poetry was first collected and published in 1647 and went through eight editions and reissues that same year. A new collection of his poems appeared in 1651 and went through 14 editions and reissues before the Restoration, making him one of the more popular poets of the civil war period.¹² Significantly, his royalism was not an untimely attempt to preserve pre-war court culture: it adapted and reworked the satirical modes of war-time opponents and radicals, and was of a piece with the innovative inhabitation of the new public spaces demonstrated by

¹⁰ Richard Johnson, ‘The Politics of Publication: Misrepresentation in Milton’s 1645 Poems’, *Criticism* 36 (1994), 45; Peter Lindenbaum, ‘John Milton and the Republican Mode of Literary Production’, *Yearbook of English Studies* 21 (1991), 121-36. Stephen Dobranski, *Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 91-3.

¹¹ Warren Chernaik, ‘Waller, Edmund (1606–1687)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28556>, accessed 23 June 2008].

¹² See Brian Morris and Eleanor Withington, eds, *The Poems of John Cleveland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), xli-xlix.

other royalists.¹³ Unsurprisingly, he was strongly identified as a vigorous prosecutor of the royalist cause, ‘the grand Malignant of Cambridge’.¹⁴

The peculiarities of Milton’s 1645 *Poems* look rather different in this light. It is not that the volume appears to be quasi-royalist, necessarily; instead, the most striking feature is its disengagement of poetic endeavour from the exigencies of the war of the pen, positing poetry as a form of social engagement irreducible to the forceful exchanges of polemic or war. This might even open up the possibility of a rapprochement between enemies through the medium of poetry, a possibility enhanced by his 1646 sonnet praising Henry Lawes.¹⁵ Sonnet 8 does actually imagine an encounter between poetry and armed royalism: the poem is purportedly addressed to a ‘Captain or colonel, or knight in arms’ (1) who might have entered London as part of the King’s army when Charles seemed able and about to do so in the autumn of 1642. Yet far from being a polemical address, the poem attempts to deflect violence by recalling instances in which poetry or a poet’s fame had pacified an enemy, and in so doing refuses the subsumption of verse under the demands of hostility articulated by Wither, Cowley, Cleveland and other contemporaries. In his *Second Defence of the English People* Milton could happily boast of how he had met Salmasius ‘in single combat and plunged into his reviling throat this pen, the weapon of his own choice’ (CPW 4: 556), but this violent attack was committed in prose. As James Turner suggests, though, it would be a mistake to think that prose for Milton is the medium of public engagement, and poetry a social register that evades public demands and concerns.¹⁶ He had a rather different conception of poetry’s role in the world, and acknowledging this difference is important to understanding how the

¹³ Smith, *Literature and Revolution*, 306. Jason McElligott, *Royalism, Print and Censorship in Revolutionary England* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007).

¹⁴ *The Kingdoms Weekly Intelligencer*, 101, 27 May 1645, 811.

¹⁵ See Nicholas McDowell, *Poetry and Allegiance in the English Civil Wars: Marvell and the Cause of Wit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69-90.

¹⁶ James Grantham Turner, ‘The Poetics of Engagement,’ in David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner, eds, *Politics, Poetics and Hermeneutics in Milton’s Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 257-75.

demands on different kinds of writing exerted by the civil wars find a distinctive response in Milton's major poetry.

In *The Reason of Church-Government* Milton establishes a clear polarity between his current endeavours 'sitting here below in the cool element of prose' and the work of 'a Poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him' (CPW 1: 808). Polemical pamphleteering is work of the left hand, and therefore lesser than the elevated productions of the right, poetic hand. He hopes he will eventually be able to speak as a national poet in the highest poetic forms, 'an interpreter and relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Iland in the mother dialect' (CPW 1: 811-12). Poetry in this proper sense is a divine gift, and concomitantly grand in capacity and aspiration; indeed, it is 'of power beside the office of a pulpit, to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu, and publick civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune', as well as an organ of worship and a means 'to deplore the general relapses of Kingdoms and States from justice and Gods true worship' (CPW 1: 816-17). But now is not the time for this kind of writing: it is not only that 'it were a folly to commit any thing elaborately compos'd to the carelesse and interrupted listening of these tumultuous times', but also that the conditions for the production and circulation of epic poetry are actually lacking: under the 'inquisitorious and tyrannical duncery' of episcopacy 'no free and splendid wit can flourish' (CPW 1: 807, 820). The suggestion that poetry is a means by which a free nation can be sustained in its strength and vigour is reinforced in *Of Education*, where poetry accompanies moral, political and rhetorical education to help produce the good citizens who will not 'in a dangerous fit of the commonwealth be such poor, shaken, uncertain reeds, of such tottering conscience, as many of our great counsellors have lately shewn themselves' (CPW 2: 398). Yet this pedagogy is still only an ideal, and the public

realm bedevilled by uncertain reeds; prose polemic is the mode more suited to combating the forces preventing the nation's restoration to its native strength.

Although Milton can often foresee the triumph of liberty, he is also acutely aware of the dangers that might prevent it. Royalist successes in the early years of the war were checked by decisive battles at Marston Moor, near York, in 1644, and then at Naseby, in Northamptonshire, in 1645. Recognising that his military cause was lost, the King gave himself up to Parliament's Scottish allies in 1646, before being transferred to English custody. But no settlement in church or state was forthcoming, and subsequent negotiations only served to widen divisions affecting the Parliamentary coalition. Milton's erstwhile Presbyterian allies had already emerged as inimical to the liberty he championed, as 'Old *Priest*' gave way to 'New *Presbyter*' ('On the New Forcers of Conscience', 20): book licensing had been maintained, the religious liberty of conscience was threatened, and Milton's reasoned and scholarly arguments for divorce had been the focus of vituperative Presbyterian attacks. During 1647 divisions among Parliamentarians, and the growing politicisation of the Parliamentary New Model Army, provoked new and dangerous instabilities in the uncertain English state. Emboldened by this factionalism, Charles's supporters reignited armed conflict the following year. Although these uprisings were conclusively defeated, Parliamentary Presbyterians continued to seek a deal with the King on terms that seemed to radicals to promise nothing more than the renewal of royal tyranny. By late 1648 the possibility of creating the right kind of nation appeared to be receding so starkly that in the 'Digression' to his *History of Britain*, probably written around this time, Milton is scathing about the English people's incapacity to embrace the liberty that the wars should have won for them.¹⁷ The military coup of December 1648, and the regicide that followed, were celebrated by

¹⁷ On the dating of the Digression, see Austin Woolrych, 'Dating Milton's *History of Britain*', *Historical Journal* 36 (1993), 929-43, von Maltzahn, 'Dating the Digression in Milton's *History of Britain*', *Historical Journal* 36 (1993), 945-56, and more recently Blair Worden, *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 410-26.

Milton as a miraculous opportunity to reinvigorate the cause of freedom. But liberty remained fragile, and polemical labours were still necessary: the English people were all too enamoured of their dead king, as the popularity of his book, *Eikon Basilike*, suggested, and Milton took up the role of a breaker of images in *Eikonoklastes*, with its apparent contempt for the poetic, as well as writing in defence of the commonwealth and himself against their foreign enemies. The republic and the succeeding Protectorate found new ways to entwine hope and disappointment until the depressingly secure renewal of the Stuart yoke in 1660 postponed the day of true liberty once again.¹⁸

The conditions in which Milton might properly assume the mantle of the national poet, then, never became propitious. On occasion, he imagines that his prose celebrations of ‘at least one heroic achievement of my countrymen’ can be compared with the noble work of the epic writer (CPW 4: 685). Yet neither the moment or the achievement lasted. Unable in the end to speak from and for a ‘noble and puissant nation’ (CPW 3: 558), unable to reflect in verse the historical actualisation of a promise, Milton conjured an epic instead from the wrong conditions, as the narratorial self-presentation in the proem to Book 7 of *Paradise Lost* makes clear. There was a strong classical precedent for this kind of difficult epic in Lucan’s *De Bello Civili* (or *Pharsalia*), a work that not only chimed with Milton’s republican sympathies but was likewise written from a position at odds with the polity it first addressed.¹⁹ By the same token, the identity of Milton’s public here is not an easy matter to settle. Instead of the presumed national auditory of the early 1640s was he addressing only the marginalised remnant of the republic’s supporters, those few who would be equally perturbed by the way history had turned out? *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained*, published together in 1671, reflect particularly acutely on the question of right action in fraught circumstances through the choices faced by their central figures and might reasonably be read as addressing the

¹⁸ See ****’s chapter, ‘The Interregnum’.

¹⁹ See Anthony Welch’s chapter, ‘Poetic Tradition: Epic’.

predicament of Milton's fellow radicals, as a number of recent contextual studies have suggested.²⁰ It might also be thought that Milton had arrived at his full poetic powers too late, that the moment of true freedom had passed; but perhaps it was still too soon, and he had to speak proleptically for and to a nation that was yet to come?

Whatever his sense of his audience, the epic frame of *Paradise Lost* demanded the reflective placing of recent English history into theological and world-historical narratives that would serve to determine its meaning. The religious, domestic and civil liberty of which he had been such a strong champion in the 1640s is here elaborated in its full theological and historical significance, and the consequences of its long betrayal are set out both for the emblematic figures of Adam and Eve and for the line of their descendants down to the English of Milton's own day. Here, too, there is an explanation for those whom providence might on the face of it appear to have abandoned, and a recasting and reaffirmation of the messianic hopes that had animated the zealous reformers of 1641. The events and lessons of the civil war period are folded into an eschatological vision that promises an ultimate triumph for the cause of rational liberty and reformation. In granting himself such synoptic powers Milton offers a pointed riposte to those, such as John Dryden, who presumed to dictate the appropriate forms and modes of poetry from their now authorised and authoritative positions at the heart of the restored monarchical regime.²¹ The disengagement here, the turn away from the modes and genres of topicality that had dominated Milton's published writing until 1660, is in fact a renewed engagement with the grandest public concerns on different terrain: the poet proclaims his miraculous ability to soar, to address his public or his nation, even in the face of its historical absence. In doing so, he refuses the uniformity of a

²⁰ Albert Labriola and David Loewenstein, eds, *Milton Studies* 42 (2003), special issue: 'Paradise Regained in Context', David Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 242-95, Worden, *Literature and Politics*, 358-83.

²¹ Steven Zwicker, 'Milton, Dryden and the Politics of Literary Controversy,' in Gerald Maclean, ed., *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137-58.

Restoration settlement and revives the risky liberty of the early 1640s; now, though, poetry is the means by which this can happen. Though given up to the exigencies of the cause, and buffeted by its defeats and disappointments, the Miltonic poet will not in the end be a helpless or silenced victim.

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