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John P. Rumrich

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: the invented Milton

If you realize that Milton was really worried about the official subject of his poem, you find the poetry very genuine.

William Empson¹

In 1961, William Empson in the controversial *Milton's God* challenged what he called the growing “neo-Christian” bias of scholars, blaming it for overstatement of Milton’s orthodoxy and understatement of the sincerity of his epic theodicy. Empson claimed that the epic’s “struggling” and “searching” outside the limits of the “traditional Christian” faith is the “chief source of its fascination and poignancy.”² In making this claim, he was responding rather pointedly to works like C. S. Lewis’s *Preface to Paradise Lost*, which placed the epic firmly within Christianity’s “great central tradition.”³ Despite Empson’s challenge, Lewis’s basic reading has increasingly dominated, though with certain crucial refinements, and Empson’s views have been dismissed and even derided. There have been striking exceptions to this general trend, however, most substantially Christopher Hill’s historically detailed presentation of Milton as a “radical Protestant heretic.”⁴

Professor Hill introduced his study by endorsing Empson’s complaint that neo-Christian critics have attempted to “annex Milton” on behalf of orthodoxy. He then went on to condemn the reflexive pedantry of much recent scholarship:

There is the immensely productive Milton industry, largely in the United States of America, a great part of whose vast output appears to be concerned less with what Milton wrote (still less with enjoyment of what Milton wrote) than with the views of Professor Blank on the views of Professor Schrank on the views of Professor Rank.⁵

Empson’s and Hill’s complaints are in combination the basis of the first half of this book, which, while it does not pretend to be an exhaustive

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survey of recent Milton scholarship, nevertheless offers a critique of the logic of contemporary critical practice. The arid debate to which Hill refers – and chapter 3 argues that deflation of literary delight particularly distinguishes contemporary criticism – diverts attention from the fact that we Blanks, Schrank, and Ranks, despite very real differences, have managed to agree on a basis for disagreement. The subject of that underlying agreement I call the invented Milton, a rhetorical artifact or paradigm foundational to contemporary Milton scholarship.

I use the term “paradigm” with the work of historian of science Thomas Kuhn in mind. In Kuhn’s analysis, a paradigm is “an accepted model or pattern,” one that serves as “an object for further articulation and specification.”⁶ Such a paradigm enjoys its status because it successfully solves problems or a problem that “the group of practitioners has come to recognize as acute.”⁷ By the 1960s, the “acute” problem for “practitioners” of Milton criticism was that of Satan’s appeal in *Paradise Lost*. The old controversy over Satan’s heroism had become a worn, dead-end debate, yet it continued to consume enormous amounts of critical energy and attention, generating a certain amount of heat but very little light. During a period when intense impatience with the status quo pervaded American culture, especially in the academy, Milton scholarship was obviously going nowhere.

The invention that ameliorated this acute problem was set forth in Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin*.⁸ By deploying reader-response theory to acknowledge and then defuse the problem of Satan’s appeal, Fish inaugurated a period in Milton criticism analogous to what Kuhn describes as “normal science,” a condition in which practitioners expend their labors to extend and deepen a working paradigm rather than rehash fundamental issues that it resolved.⁹ Over the last quarter-century, many practitioners of Milton criticism have attempted, as the title of a recent collection suggests, to “re-member” Milton according to the form and pressure of contemporary intellectual preoccupations.¹⁰ The great post-Romantic impasse had been overcome, and the practice of Milton criticism became progressive, ironically enough, at the very moment when postmodern skeptics were calling the idea of progress into question.

Contemporary Milton scholarship cannot be described as uniform, of course, except in a rough way and at the most basic level. We currently enjoy unprecedented diversity of a sort, and in conforming to Fish’s paradigm, we have, as Kuhn says, “solved problems that [practitioners] could scarcely have imagined and would never have undertaken without

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commitment to the paradigm.”¹¹ Furthermore, as the early citation of Professor Hill indicates, the invented Milton has not monopolized critical discourse. Useful studies, oblivious to or selectively critical of the paradigm, have recently appeared and been recognized for their substantial contributions to our understanding of Milton.¹²

Also, certain works that overtly submit to the paradigm – William Kerrigan’s *The Sacred Complex*, for example – have deepened our understanding of John Milton in ways that actually tend to subvert it.¹³ Hence, in an otherwise laudatory review of Kerrigan’s book, the late Philip Gallagher objects to the “undercurrent of profound eccentricity in [*The Sacred Complex*’s] subtext . . . that would seek by pathways at once subterranean and recondite to recapture Milton for the Saurats and Hills and – though Kerrigan would deny it – the Waldocks and Empsons of this world.”¹⁴ The sensitivity to an “undercurrent of profound eccentricity” is noteworthy if oddly phrased. One anticipates misgivings over the validity of Kerrigan’s controversial, psychohistorical methodology. But the reference to Milton as if he were a trophy in an intellectual contest, combined with the denigration of critics like Empson and Hill (merely naming them is enough) suggests that, for some, disputes over critical methodology do not signify in comparison with what might be regarded as the cultural stakes – Milton’s allegiance to an unproblematic, centrist orthodoxy.

If indeed the invented Milton has of late been ignored or implicitly challenged by some, and subverted from within by others, no one has successfully refuted Fish’s main argument, not on its own terms. Nor have we found a fresh way to regard the poet, one that might displace the paradigm or at least provide an alternative to it. Though I do not deny the value of much recent Milton scholarship, or of the insights that over the last three decades the paradigm has made possible, I feel convinced that it is seriously mistaken and, what is worse, a pedagogical disaster. The purpose of the first half of this book, therefore, is to challenge the invented Milton. The second half is more constructive in its aims and attempts to demonstrate the benefit of uninventing Milton for our understanding of his works. Ultimately, I argue that Milton’s poetry, though overtly patriarchal, reflects maternal influences to a greater extent than we have previously recognized, especially in its presentation of generative processes, including those of poetry and divine creation.

I thus begin with the premise that the consolidation and general

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acceptance of what Empson called the “neo-Christian” position derive from the crystallizing impact of Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin*. First published in 1967, Fish’s work appealed to the more restless among its contemporary audience in part because it followed an innovative interpretive strategy – associated with reader-response theory – that placed the reader in the center of the epic action or, rather, placed the center of the epic action in the reader. The consequence was a methodologically radical update of Lewis’s reading of *Paradise Lost* as a literary monument to mainstream Christianity. With the advantage of hindsight, we can appreciate the tactical brilliance of *Surprised by Sin*. Along with its appeal to freethinkers appreciative of fresh critical methods, it also pleased their customary opponents, those more traditional scholars who saw Milton as a champion of Christian essentials. In an early instance of what has since become a familiar irony, *Surprised by Sin* initiated a confederation of factions in Milton studies by putting an apparently destabilizing hermeneutics to work for traditionalist interests.

Ultimately, this book concerns itself not with the reading of *Paradise Lost* presented in *Surprised by Sin*, but rather with a corporate, almost institutionalized, view of Milton and his works. For neither reader-response theory nor the generalship of a single critic has sustained expansion of the invented Milton. This growth owes instead to a remarkable agglomeration of diverse disciplinary interests. I am nonetheless committed to a refutation of Fish’s seminal study, because its dexterous reading of the epic is still basic to our contemporary understanding of Milton’s works and, sadly, of the man himself.

The success of the invented Milton owes partly to epistemological skepticism over the validity of historical interpretation. Concern with scholarly accuracy and consistent use of historical evidence has come to seem uninformed and irrelevant compared with dense discussion of apparently more urgent theoretical issues.¹⁵ Many of us have come to think that there is no such thing as an author’s meaning, or indeed an author, except perhaps as negotiated within a particular community of readers.¹⁶ Whatever interpretation best calculates and accommodates the interests of the most influential groups, and avoids positively alienating most others, becomes dominant. Given this state of affairs, I intend the term “invented” to be descriptive, not pejorative. Fish himself suggests it and means by it a rhetorically adept, and therefore politically viable (for him these modifiers are synonymous) adaptation to the features of an “interpretive community.”¹⁷ Under such conditions,

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as in the case of presidential politics, vague banality and dull elaboration of the status quo are often the unfortunate consequences. Lance Bertelsen has wryly observed that those in our profession who manage to thrive under such conditions are generally those we call “smart”: “in other words,” says Bertelsen, “‘smart’ means today (with rhetorical adjustments) what ‘dunce’ meant to Pope – the aspiration to fulfill, through flexible and everchanging discursive practice, the will to literary power.”¹⁸

There is no going back. Though few perhaps would push to the extreme represented by Roland Barthes, fewer still would deny the role of readers in negotiating meaning.¹⁹ Communication is by definition a social phenomenon and literary interpretation is a special instance of human communication. But skepticism over the place of authors in determining meaning, and thus over the value of historical contextualization, derives not from a shift in focus away from authors and toward readers, who after all have no more authority than the author. Skepticism about the role played by authors (or readers) in determining meaning derives instead from assumptions about the role linguistic codes play in communication.

Philosophers from Aristotle to Derrida have studied language itself as if it were the basis of human communication. Under this assumption, communication boils down to the coding and decoding of messages between senders and receivers.²⁰ But, as exponents of deconstruction have argued, the upshot of post-Saussurean linguistics is that the interpretation of codes – understood as ever shifting semiotic systems of non-identity relationships – is logically without limits. And inasmuch as authors use codes, there is no way to establish what authors mean.

Human use of language, however, has developed into a conscious and sophisticated form of intentional behavior, something logically quite distinct from the codes that are typically its media. So far as we know, coding and decoding as a means of transferring information from sender to receiver does not belong particularly to humans – birds do it, bees do it, even educated machines do it. The significant difference between us and many of these other senders and receivers lies in our ability to communicate *without* the use of codes. Adam’s “glance or toy / Of amorous intent,” for example, can be communicative and “well understood” without any established precedent for the signs used or any conventionally agreed upon definitions (*PL* 9, 1034–35). In paradise as Milton presents it, intelligent animals, though they lack human language, still manage to communicate with humans.

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If rational beings communicated solely through instinctively patterned movements or autonomically controlled, stimulus-sensitive secretions, there would of course be much less interpretive problematizing about messages or, strictly speaking, no interpretation at all – just information processing. The codes would be fixed and establishing meaning would be a function of them.

In communicating, however, most people outside the academy go beyond the limits of language use observed by a drone dancing in his hive. History and common experience tell us that, regardless of how cleverly those who trade in secrets scramble the code, they find it difficult to communicate messages to a select audience and still keep the relevant meaning hidden from others.²¹ One look at the third base coach during a baseball game tells you that. Strangers utterly ignorant of each other's languages manage to make their intentions known and eventually to learn each other's codes, even without outside help. The attempt to account for human communication by obsessive resort to the code model is rather like an attempt to account for the elephant's ability to pick things up with its nose by invoking the sense of smell.²² Those olfactory philosophers among us who might conclude that elephants therefore *cannot* pick things up with their noses are welcome to argue that pachyderms feed themselves by interpreting the odor of hay.

Chapter 2 takes up the vexed question of authorial intention, relevance, and historical context in more detail. Yet I should say that the theoretical premises of this book, per the arguments of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, are that there is no “necessary link between language and communication,” and that therefore the looseness and indeterminacy of human codes do not render interpretation entirely an affair of politically or rhetorically adept invention. Intention and relevance – not the linguistic code – form the basis of human communication and interpretation.²³ A sentence like “the tank is half empty” can mean “stop and fill up before New York,” or “the fish will die if we do not add water soon” or “I’m a pessimist,” or “where have Corporal Smith and Gunner Jones gone?” and so on. As a matter of communication between people in particular situations, the relevant, intended meaning will generally be discernible. In line with the practice if not the theory of most Milton scholars, my argument assumes the principle that awareness of historical context allows us to attain a surprisingly strong sense of authorial intention and to discuss relevance with practical assurance. Given the relatively objective limits provided

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by cultural convention, we can reasonably judge particular interpretations so improbable as to be mistaken and others so probable as to be correct. And my claim is that the invented Milton is a mistake, a big one.

What are the chief characteristics of the widely accepted version of the author of *Paradise Lost*? According to Georgia Christopher's award-winning book (1982), one which Empson would have called "neo-Christian,"

Stanley Fish has shown how *Paradise Lost* is constructed for evangelical purposes so as to elicit a pattern of alternating identification with and rejection of the characters, in order to convict the reader of sin.²⁴

James Grantham Turner's New Historicist study of Milton's sexual attitudes (1987) offers the substantially identical observation that Milton effects the "deliberate entrapment of the audience in fallen responses, the better to guide them toward regeneration." If Turner sidesteps language like "convict" and "sin," his citation of "entrapment" in "fallen responses" as a major feature of Milton's art conforms to the customary reading.²⁵ He explicitly parts company with Fish only in his insistence that fallen readers' sexual experiences do allow them to understand Adam and Eve's erotic bliss. For this particular disagreement over readers' responses, however, it is difficult to see any basis other than self-gratulatory.²⁶

In the same year as Turner, Marshall Grossman steered his theoretically inventive argument, which contemplates early modern self-fashioning in *Paradise Lost*, into a similar alignment with orthodoxy. He remarks that Milton's awakening of readers' capacities for active self-awareness is especially notable in their responses to Milton's God: "the difficulty of accepting the Father is, as Stanley Fish points out, a measure of our 'crookedness'. . . . It is not so much the Father who is characterized in book III as the reader's relationship to the Godhead."²⁷

Judging by these three influential and ostensibly quite different works of the last decade, *Paradise Lost* instructs rather easily duped and forgetful readers by repeatedly convicting them of sin or by obtruding measures of their crookedness. True, these studies have also branched out from the standard position. Yet, each of them accepts Fish's basic position as a premise: Milton provokes an emotional response (as in the similes or the depiction of God) and then, having established fallen engagement, dominates it. That New Historicist readings like those of

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Turner and Grossman should fall in so readily behind the evangelical standard may seem surprising. Yet Fish's description of Christian didacticism anticipates the familiar New Historicist interpretive paradigm, in which subversion is a fantasy that can never be successfully realized. Authority, according to this model, clandestinely instigates rebellion, or at least the thought of it, as a pretext for the assertion and confirmation of power. Like evil and good in Augustinian theology and its Protestant derivatives, subversion and containment constitute only an appearance of dualism within a totalitarian system.²⁸

To elicit his audience's awareness of its peccant condition and so validate the divine perspective, Milton allegedly exploits the disjunction between readers' fallen attitudes and standard, Protestant, ethical doctrine – comprising what one critic calls “catechetical formulations.”²⁹ Christopher Kendrick's Marxian study (1986) describes such “didactic theology” as being in conflict with the epic's psychological effect:

Theological and psychological genres appear to conflict with one another, and . . . the dominant genre of the hexameron overrules affective drama, didactic theology retroactively canceling profane psychological motivations.³⁰

This mouthful does no more than “to put into generic terms Stanley Fish's argument about the presentation of God,” as Kendrick admits.³¹

When Fish comes to interpret *Areopagitica*, he returns Kendrick's favor, noting the congruity of their respective readings of that work too:

On one point we are in agreement, that *Areopagitica* displays a double structure of discursive argument and anti-discursive eruptions that “uncenter” the overt rhetorical movement of the oration The chief difference is that whereas I see Milton continually undermining the forms within which he necessarily moves in order to make his tract a (self-consuming) emblem of its message, Kendrick sees contradictions that Milton does not control because they mark his implication in the ideological structure of emerging capitalism.³²

For Kendrick, Milton's use of the vocabulary of commerce and monopoly in a tract claiming that truth is not a ware subject to such practices betrays his social contradiction, and thus his class stand.³³ Milton does not himself expose this implicit contradiction, says Kendrick, because of his alignment with the “revolutionary bourgeois class.” To disclose the lie of bourgeois ideology would be a betrayal. What for Kendrick exemplifies Marx's concept of contradiction – an economic interest profiting from ideological posturing to the contrary –

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for Fish illustrates the same strategy that he finds everywhere in Milton: “it would be no trick at all, just a standard move in the repertoire Kendrick and I share with other members of the profession, to outflank and assimilate his reading.”³⁴

Fish’s characterization of critical debate as a strategic contest seems to me persuasive, at least given the practice of the Blanks, Schranks, and Ranks of contemporary Milton scholarship. Whether one employs neo-Christian terms or New Historicist ones, whether one follows Marx or Derrida, connection with the paradigm requires only a perceived contradiction within a supposed unity. Once the possibility of a contradiction is admitted, the unified appearance can be construed as excessive and therefore significant of correction or suppression. It is a classic example of dialectical reduction and synthesis (for deconstruction, simply reverse the order of these terms). And it represents a way of dealing with complexity to which Western theoreticians after Hegel seem especially prone. Though Fish and his interlocutors can presumably go on endlessly outflanking and assimilating each other’s readings, I will argue that as applied to Milton, such dialectical interpretive schemes are inadequate, and too often impositions in the service of professional or ideological agendas. What I propose is not so much a teaching as a disentangling.

As the interplay with Kendrick reveals, while Fish’s interpretive theory has evolved from affective stylistics toward deconstruction, his criticism of Milton has worked to extend the consensus that *Surprised by Sin* originated. Chapter 3 takes the dialectical structure of the paradigm as its subject and eventually addresses the pursuit of dominance among Milton scholars working within that paradigm. It does so by first examining the Oedipal psychology attributed to the poet and his readers.

Kerrigan locates the psychological allure of Fish’s reading of Milton not in its power to illuminate Milton’s works, but in its appeal to two opposed factions among *and within* scholars:

Paradise Lost combines mythopoeic narrative with rational theodicy ... In many readers the figure of Satan generates a tension between these two poles: his mythopoeic grandeur at the opening of the work opposes his discursive condemnation by the narrator and the heavenly characters ... In claiming that the tension was deliberate, Fish healed an old division in Milton studies ... The pious reader can entertain potentially rebellious attitudes knowing that, as signs of his fallenness, these attitudes already confirm the doctrinal content of the poem and therefore have a piety all their own.³⁵

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According to this analysis, Fish has played a role in Milton studies analogous to that of the Oedipal ego as it attempts to negotiate a satisfactory compromise between the id's drives and the superego's laws.

For Kerrigan, Milton can also be explained through the dialectic of law and forbidden desire at the heart of the Oedipal drama: "the Oedipus complex is the generative center of [Milton's] character and his art"; "temptation remained his myth . . . obedience his virtue"; "as time is a river, as God is the Father, Miltonic Christianity is the Oedipus complex."³⁶ Kerrigan's deployment of Oedipal analysis revitalized the paradigmatic version of the poet. The strong father of the Oedipal drama figures as the quasi-mythological figure supporting Marxian, Weberian, and New Historicist attempts to articulate seventeenth-century social and cultural history through the patriarchal particulars of Milton's life and art. Was not Milton, in Kermode's classic phrase, his father's "chief investment"?³⁷ Hence, while psychoanalytic criticism may seem eccentric or marginal to many, I find the Oedipal version of the poet to be central for recent developments in more purely theoretical Milton criticism. Chapter 3 reviews the Oedipal paradigm and the proliferation of dialectical interpretations it has helped to foster. Chapter 4 offers an alternative psychological model, one that is structurally integrative and indeterminate rather than dichotomous and closed. It focuses on Milton's *Comus*, which Kerrigan labels the "mask of the superego" and in which, allegedly, the severity of Milton's paralyzing Oedipal trauma is most evident. Rather than accept the portrait of Milton as a latent, Oedipally traumatized rebel, I ask in the second half of this book that we recognize the primacy of pre-Oedipal, maternally oriented aspects of his character. Uncertainties over boundaries and the extent of his powers, coupled with an overwhelming desire to achieve greatness, are definitive of the dilemma that I take to be fundamental to young Milton's developing personality.

Before indicating more about the direction that the second half of this book will take, I must first return to Fish's "thesis book."³⁸ I have described it as the basis of the predominant strain of Milton scholarship during the last quarter-century, but I have not yet offered compelling reasons for dissatisfaction with it, and presenting such reasons is the main business of *this* chapter. For Fish, Milton fits in perfectly with mainstream Reformation opinions on theodicy: "that thou may'st