Introduction: Blank-verse freethinking and its opponents

In the "Note on the Verse" that he attached to *Paradise Lost*, Milton asks that his blank verse be "esteem'd [as] an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient Liberty recover'd to Heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern Bondage of Riming."[1] Milton derived his blank verse not only from English models but also from the *versi sciolti*, the "freed" hendecasyllabic verse of Italian poetry. His emphasis on liberty is focused on verse-form in the note, but liberty is never merely a formal matter for Milton: it always has a political or religious content of some kind. As John Creaser has recently observed, "Milton's rejection of rhyme lies at the heart of his masterpiece."[2] And as I shall argue in what follows, the freedom that Milton wanted his blank verse to exemplify is a freedom that would indeed be exemplary for the Romantic line of poets to come.

"True musical delight," asserts Milton, "consists only in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another." In contrast to the heroic couplet, Dryden's form, which offered an alternate route to the long poem by emphasizing, through the close-drawn symmetry of its rhymes and corresponding periods, the virtues of precision, clarity, and certainty, blank verse, as Milton suggests, seems to afford and heighten the possibilities of asymmetry: in *Paradise Lost*, the sense is variously drawn out through the use of enjambment, a shifting caesura, metrical variations of all kinds, the asymmetrical and syncopated positioning of syntax against line, and all manner of other techniques and contrivances it would be futile to attempt to enumerate. Milton commands them all. Blank verse, situated as it is between more

[1] John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1957), 210. References to the poem, unless otherwise indicated, will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically by book and line number in the text.

[2] John Creaser, "Verse and Rhyme," in *Milton in Context*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105–15 (109). For Creaser, *Paradise Lost* is "the epic of free will and liberty of conscience, and Milton creates the profoundly apt medium for it" (111).

formally rhymed verse and prose, and hence, as I shall be suggesting, between the "poetic" and the "prosaic" registers and realms of experience, gives him the freedom to wander where he will without losing his way; the freedom it affords is not purchased, as it is in the case of so many lesser poets, with the loss of poetic tension or resonance. In this it is reminiscent of the newly created earth in Milton's expansion on the Creation story, which "[s]eem'd like to Heav'n, a seat where Gods might dwell, / Or wander with delight" (7.29–30). Wandering, in its various figurative senses, will loom large in *Paradise Lost*, and will then carry over to the Romantics, among whom it seems to serve as a trope for Romanticism itself. To wander is the root meaning of *error*, and thus obviously has negative connotations in Milton's epic as well as positive ones; but (as I shall argue more pointedly in Chapter 2) Milton is himself Romantic in his willingness to risk error for the sake of a freedom that he regards as the truest index of our humanity.

The freedom of blank verse, first in Milton and then in the Romantic and modern poets who follow him in this mode, seems both to allow for and to promote what used to be called *freethinking*, a term that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines as "independence of thought; specifically, the free exercise of reason in matters of religious belief, unconstrained by deference to authority." Many of the entries under "freethinking" in the *OED* are disparaging, and this, of course, is not surprising; for if the term is equated with atheism, or even with agnosticism, as it frequently is, it will inevitably call up a host of anxieties.[3] The emphasis on independence of thought in the *OED* definition is precisely what I have in mind because the freethinking that occurs in blank-verse Romanticism can coincide with religious subject-positions of various kinds.[4] Like other opinions, these change over time, but the issue, in any event, is the thinking that is going on in a particular poem rather than what the poet thinks, or thinks he thinks, in general. Milton, of course, was a faithful, indeed a militant Christian, although not an orthodox one, and there probably was never a time when Wordsworth or Tennyson, though each experienced a series of upheavals in his religious outlook, would not have described himself as a believer in some sense of the word; but none of this militates against

[3] The first use of the term "free-thinking" given by the *OED* is from 1700, but an interesting entry of 1708 contained in the magazine *The British Apollo* suggests that the term may have been in currency prior to the eighteenth century: "Free Thinking (to use the Modish Phrase) … is no better than a Sword in a Child's hand."

[4] Here my approach differs from that of a fine recent study by Martin Priestman, which tends to equate freethinking and atheism. See Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

the currents or undercurrents of freethinking in their poetry. Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing "The Necessity of Atheism" and Keats and Stevens might best be characterized as religious agnostics; but all three engage religious experience in profound ways, and, again, it is their poetry and not their subject-positions in the abstract that is at issue. Whatever their relationship to Christianity may be, all of these poets, at least in their finest work, are spiritual wanderers and freethinkers; they are all grappling with the religious crisis, or crisis of modernity, that overtakes Europe during the Renaissance and is deepened by the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. Blank verse gives them the license to wander and allows their freethinking tendencies to come to the fore. We can thus speak of a tradition of blank-verse Romanticism, stretching from Milton to Stevens, in which the poets are linked by a series of complex inter-textual relations anchored by a form.

Milton is the progenitor of this tradition, and, as such, is both outside it and enfolded within it. Gordon Teskey has recently emphasized the sense in which Milton is a poet "on the threshold of a post-theological world." Milton, Teskey argues, "is the last major poet in the European literary tradition for whom the act of creation is centered in God and the first in whom the act of creation begins to find its center in the human."[5] In *Paradise Lost*, freethinking repeatedly comes into conflict with Christian doctrine, and not only are the two in tension with each other but there is a sense in which this tension is enabling, or freeing, to the poet. It is not that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it," as Blake insisted, or that he "wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell";[6] but certainly Milton's devils have something important to say to us beyond the fact that they are devils: as I argue in Chapter 1, in undermining the doctrine to which the poet explicitly adheres they nonetheless express ideas that he must himself have harbored and entertained in some measure, at least to the extent that those ideas were "in the air" during the time in which Milton lived.

Freethinking, as I am using the term, cannot be equated with atheism, but neither is it exactly equivalent to agnosticism or Keats' Negative Capability. Keats praised Shakespeare for being able to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after

[5] Gordon Teskey, *Delirious Milton: The Fate of the Poet in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 5–6.
[6] William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1979), 88.

fact & reason,"[7] but whether or not this was true of Shakespeare, it is not true, at least not entirely true, of the poets in the blank-verse tradition I am examining, including Keats himself. To be sure, these poets do not defer to authority or rely on received wisdom or opinion, but they are not content to remain in uncertainties and mysteries; in their finest poems, they are questing for truth and, if not reaching for fact and reason, at least struggling to find some sort of solid ground. Blank verse can serve as the vehicle for their individual quests, both because of the example set by Milton and because of its formal qualities. Being metrical, blank verse is *measured* (the root meaning of "meter"); but, lacking the recursive tendency of rhyme – the fact that rhymed verse *returns* even as it moves forward – blank verse lends itself not only to the long poem but also to discursive, narrative, and meditative poetry.

There is, of course, no necessary correlation either between blank verse and freethinking or between blank verse and the sense of liberty or liberation to which Milton refers in his "Note." If such a thing as poetic freedom exists (and obviously it is a metaphysical abstraction), it is difficult to achieve and must be hard won; in poetry as in other things, it must coincide with a felt sense of necessity, for where this is lacking the line will seem flat or flaccid rather than free. Milton in the "Note" says of poets who make use of rhyme that they are "carried away by Custom, but much to thir own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than else they would have exprest them"; his rhetoric makes it seem as though the elimination of rhyme should be liberating in itself. This implies that the poetic act consists in putting into verse a pre-formed matter or argument, but such is never the case, not even in neoclassical verse, and certainly not in a poem so musical and intricately patterned as *Paradise Lost*. When one recognizes that poetry is not composed in this way and that rhyme can itself be liberating, it follows that from a certain point of view blank verse is actually more difficult than rhymed verse. Wordsworth, indeed, wrote that blank verse "is infinitely the most difficult metre to manage, as is clear from so few having succeeded in it."[8] In a similar vein, Hazlitt asserts that "Milton's blank verse is the only blank verse in the language (except

[7] John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 2 vols., Vol. I, 193.

[8] William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Later Years, Part II: 1829–1834*, 2nd edn., ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); cited by Brendan O'Donnell, *The Passion of Meter: A Study of Wordsworth's Metrical Art* (Kent, OH and London: Kent State University Press, 1995), 179.

Shakespeare's) which is readable."[9] Ironically, the reason that blank verse is so difficult (as the enormous quantities of bad writing in this form would attest) is that on a superficial level it seems so easy. Poetic composition always involves a dialectic of making and saying, and in the absence of rhyme the scales tilt so heavily in the direction of speech that the tendency is for the poet to become a mere declaimer or rhetorician. In bad blank verse, indeed, it is almost as if the meter takes revenge on itself, its heavy, unmusical recurrences tolling a more prosaic knell than prose itself could ever do.

Samuel Johnson's remarks on blank verse in his "Life of Milton" diagnose the problem with a clarity and profundity that I suspect has been lost on many readers:

> "Rhyme," [Milton] says, and says truly, "is no necessary adjunct of true poetry." But perhaps of poetry as a mental operation meter or music is no necessary adjunct: it is however by the music of meter that poetry has been discriminated in all languages, and in languages melodiously constructed with a due proportion of long and short syllables, meter is sufficient. But one language cannot communicate its rules to another; where meter is scanty and imperfect some help is necessary. The music of the English heroic line strikes the ear so faintly that it is easily lost, unless all the syllables of every line cooperate together; this cooperation can be only obtained by the preservation of every verse unmingled with another as a distinct system of sounds, and this distinctness is obtained and preserved by the artifice of rhyme. The variety of pauses, so much boasted by the lovers of blank verse, changes the measures of an English poet to the periods of a declaimer; and there are only a few skillful and happy readers of Milton who enable their audience to perceive where the lines end or begin. "Blank verse," said an ingenious critic, "seems to be verse only to the eye."[10]

If, as Johnson says, the "artifice of rhyme" preserves every line of the poem as "a distinct system of sounds," which, in the larger system of the poem, is related by necessity to every other line, then in the absence of rhyme prosody has to find other ways of attaining to poetry – which is to say, poetry has to find other ways of attaining to itself. Johnson's perspective is a neoclassical one, but his strictures seem dated only to the extent that an ear so fully attuned to the end-stopped heroic couplet might have been insufficiently appreciative of the beauties of enjambment, which in the hands of a poet such as Milton could produce a sense of "flowing

[9] William Hazlitt, "On Milton's Versification," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1930), 21 vols., Vol. IV, 39.

[10] Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (New York: Octagon Books, 1967), 3 vols., Vol. I, 192–93.

over" without forfeiting the distinctness of the line. Johnson seems to have recognized this himself, however, because he adds: "But whatever be the advantage of rhyme I cannot prevail on myself to wish that Milton had been a rhymer, for I cannot wish his work to be other than it is."[11]

The point, then, is not that there is a necessary correlation between blank verse and freedom but rather that Milton himself makes this association, and that, in following him, the Romantics sometimes extend it to include freethinking. This tendency is typified by the lines, dating perhaps from 1798, that Wordsworth included in his Preface to *The Excursion* (1814) as a "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, the philosophical long poem that he projected but was unable to complete.[12] The "Prospectus" has long been recognized as a central text in Wordsworth's poetry, and it is no accident that Harold Bloom placed his discussion of it at the beginning of his Wordsworth section in *The Visionary Company* (1961) or that M. H. Abrams made it central to his examination of Wordsworth's "program for poetry" in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971).[13] If more needs to be said, this is not only because the "Prospectus" presents itself as a prototype of Romantic freethinking in a Miltonic mode but because it has to be understood in a larger literary-historical context than Bloom and Abrams provide.

The theme of the "Prospectus," as announced in its opening line, "On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life," seems perfectly straightforward and unproblematic, but there is a peculiar redundancy in Wordsworth's tricolon. This becomes evident when we turn to the work of an orthodox religious thinker, such as John Henry Newman. "There are three great subjects on which Human Reason employs itself," Newman writes in *The Idea of a University* (1852): "God, Nature, and Man."[14] The way in which "Human Life" replicates "Man" in Wordsworth's line indicates that God

[11] *Ibid*., 194.

[12] William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 5 vols., Vol. v, 1. Subsequent references to Wordsworth's poetry will be to this edition, unless otherwise indicated, and will be given parenthetically by volume and line number.

[13] Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, revised and enlarged edn. (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 124–28; M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1971), 21–32.

[14] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852), ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 166. It is interesting that Newman in the same text implicitly associates Milton with freethinking. "And then again," he writes, "the first time the mind comes across the arguments and speculation of unbelievers … and reflects that it may think and hold just what it will, that 'the world is all before it where to choose,' and what system to build up as its own private persuasion, who will deny that the fruit of the tree of knowledge, or what the mind takes for knowledge, has made it one of the gods?" (100).

has been omitted from the traditional triad of subjects and that the lacuna has been filled by giving additional emphasis to the human.

Wordsworth's humanism in the "Prospectus," as has often been noted, expresses itself as a complex and ambivalent attempt to form an alliance with Milton and at the same time to seek to surpass him. Indeed, the entire first verse-paragraph is put into the mouth of a Miltonic "Bard," who asks, slightly misquoting *Paradise Lost* 7.31, "'fit audience let me find though few!'" (5.23). It is only at the beginning of the second verse-paragraph, however, that Wordsworth's framing device comes into perspective:

> "So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the Bard—
> In holiest mood. Urania, I shall need
> Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
> Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven!" (5.24–27)

That Wordsworth calls upon Urania "or a *greater* Muse" for guidance indicates that his narrative frame has the dual purpose of aligning him with and distancing him from Milton. And the remainder of the poem will bear this out. It is significant that Wordsworth placed the entire "Prospectus" in quotation marks, and the clause "fit audience let me find though few" in internal quotation marks. No doubt he did this partly because he was taking the poem out of its context in *The Recluse* (as he notes in the concluding sentence of his Preface to *The Excursion*), but the result is that there is no structural demarcation between Wordsworth and the Miltonic Bard he invokes: we know that the speaker of "So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the Bard – / In holiest mood" is Wordsworth, but it is not clear whether the rest of the poem, beginning with "Urania, I shall need / Thy guidance," is still Wordsworth or again his Miltonic Bard. And this conflation (or confusion) of voices and imagoes is further emphasized by the fact that, later on in the "Prospectus," in the passage in which Wordsworth seems most fully to be distancing himself from Milton, he again echoes him (whether consciously or not). Wordsworth (or his Miltonic Bard) complains:

> Paradise, and groves
> Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
> Sought in the Atlantic Main, why should they be
> A history only of departed things,
> Or a mere fiction of what never was?
> For the discerning intellect of Man,
> When wedded to this goodly universe
> In love and holy passion, shall find these
> A simple produce of the common day. (5.47–55)

Bloom rightly says of these powerful lines that "[t]he most defiant humanism in Wordsworth salutes the immediate possibility of [the] earthly paradise naturalizing itself in the here and now";[15] but it is interesting that the passage imitates the one from Book 3 of Milton's epic in which Satan, flying upward to the sun, sees

> happy Isles,
> Like those *Hesperian* Gardens fam'd of old,
> Fortunate Fields, and Groves and flow'ry Vales,
> Thrice happy Isles … (3.567–70)

If Wordsworth continues to echo Milton at the very point at which he most seeks to distance himself from him, this is partly because the tendency toward freethinking that emerges in his blank-verse poetry of the 1798 period is already latent in Milton's epic. Partly, however – as Ezra Pound will later express the matter in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" – it is because the modern poet wants "to maintain 'the sublime' / In the old sense," and the only way of doing this is literally to echo what has to be left behind.[16] This speaks to a dilemma in blank-verse Romanticism that will assert itself time and again. In the case of the "Prospectus," Wordsworth's vision of modernity leads him to want to distance himself from the "mere" (read *poetic*) fictions of a former age; at the same, however, in his desire to embrace a plainer reality figured as "the common day," he wants there to be no loss of poetic power. The problem with which the modern freethinking poet is grappling on the level of content is mirrored, on that of form, by a simultaneous struggle to create a new kind of poetry, one that is consonant with modernity and yet suffers no diminution as poetry. Blank verse is the terrain on which this struggle is played out, both because it entails an *agon* with Milton and because as a form blank verse implies the dialectical engagement of the "poetic" with the "prosaic."

If Romantic freethinking is already latent in *Paradise Lost*, then the question is why it took so long for this tendency – i.e., for Romanticism itself (for it is really this that defines it) – to emerge. In general, the answer has to do with the crisis of modernity and with the way in which secularizing tendencies both give rise to and for a long time are blocked by the inevitable reaction against them.[17] More specifically, however, with

[15] Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, 126.

[16] Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 185.

[17] Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2007), is only the most recent of a long line of scholars who have studied the process of secularization. Taylor

respect to the blank-verse tradition, it has to do with the way in which, prior to the Romantics, blank verse can sometimes serve as the vehicle of a holding action *against* freethinking. The shadow of Milton looms over the blank-verse poetry of the entire subsequent tradition; there is no escaping it. But just as a conflict plays out in *Paradise Lost* itself between Christian belief and freethinking, so, in what follows, these opposing tendencies, now largely split off between different poets and poems, or sometimes within the same poet at different times and in different poems, will continue to make themselves felt. In the ensuing chapters, I shall focus on great poems in the Romantic tradition in which blank-verse freethinking is exemplified. To put this into perspective, however, we need to take some account of the opposing tendency, both as it precedes the Romantics and within the Romantic period itself. By "opposing tendency," I hope it is clear, I do not mean poetry that espouses Christian ideas or attitudes but rather poetry that insists on certainty and situates itself in opposition to freethinking.[18]

To illustrate the point, at the furthest possible remove from Wordsworth's "Prospectus" and Romantic freethinking generally is Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–46), a blank-verse poem in nine books.[19] Immensely popular in its own time, the poem rapidly fell out of fashion after the middle of the nineteenth century, and is now read, one assumes, mainly, if not solely, by specialists. It is clear that the poem owed its popularity to its defense of orthodox Christianity at a time when religious skepticism was not only on the rise but increasingly coming into the open. (Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, with its argument against miracles, would appear in 1748, and his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in 1751.) "For the modern reader," Stephen Cornford concedes, Young's arguments for the truth of Christianity

makes the obvious point that 500 years ago "non-belief in God was close to unthinkable for the vast majority; whereas today this is not at all the case" (556). As I suggest below, and then argue more decisively in my chapter on "Tintern Abbey" with respect to Wordsworth's engagement with Gray, the poetry produced in the middle of the eighteenth century shows it to be a particularly fraught moment in this historical process.

[18] The poet who evades these categories most significantly is William Cowper, whose poem *The Task* (1783–84) is in my view the finest long poem in blank verse between Milton and Wordsworth. A fervent Evangelical Christian, Cowper does not exactly qualify as a freethinker; yet his verse is alive to the movement of his own mind, and though sometimes didactic it is never rigid or closed-minded.

[19] The full title of the poem, as given in the 1742 edition comprising Books 1 to 3, is *The Complaint; or Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*. See Edward Young, *Night Thoughts*, ed. Stephen Cornford (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 33. References to the poem will be to this edition and will be given by book and line number in the text; references to Cornford's introduction will be given by page number.

"can make for uninspired reading"; but Cornford adds that "for the vast majority of Young's readers … [these arguments] were matters of life and death" (16). For those desperate to hold onto the traditional belief in the immortality of the soul and the Christian afterlife, they were literally matters of life and death, but, presumably, by the middle of the nineteenth century, for a poetry-reading public that was now very different from what it had been when the *Night Thoughts* were published, Young's arguments would no longer have been intellectually persuasive and his rhetoric and versification would have seemed inflated and bombastic. To George Eliot, at least, whose essay on Young was written in 1857, there was no mistaking his "radical insincerity as a poetic artist."[20]

Something of the quality of Young's mind can be gleaned from his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), where he remarks that "what we mean by blank verse is verse unfallen, uncurst; verse reclaimed, reinthroned in the true language of the gods; who never thundered, nor suffered their Homer to thunder, in rhyme."[21] Milton's comment about the "ancient liberty recover'd to Heroic Poem" is here inflated to a suggestion that blank verse frees poetry from Original Sin (and never mind that the reference is to Homer and the pagan gods). This kind of insincerity and sheer bad taste permeates the *Night Thoughts* as a whole and can be found in virtually every passage. In "Night the Third," for example, in lines that welcome Death (always capitalized, of course) as a "Victory" over the "Ills of Life," Young says of Death that "'Tis our great Pay-day; 'Tis our Harvest, rich / And ripe: what tho' the Sickle, sometimes keen, / Just scars us, as we reap the Golden Grain?" (3.495, 496, 502–04). Young turns the old cliché about the Grim Reaper (which at least expresses what everyone has always felt about death) into a bizarre trope in which it is we ourselves who are doing the reaping; he then literalizes the metaphor, so that the "Golden Grain" of a "rich" harvest becomes equivalent to coins that might be pocketed on "Pay-day." And yet, as the pretentious and ludicrously inept enjambment on "rich / And ripe" indicates, Young is implicitly laying claim to Miltonic freedom in the passage.

Young's insincerity stems partly from the fact that though he is terrified by death and by the possibility that the soul is mortal and the Christian

[20] George Eliot, "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young," in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 335–85 (366). Eliot's essay on Young, though largely negative, is curiously ambivalent. "To a clay compounded chiefly of the worldling and the rhetorician," she writes, "there is added a real spark of Promethean fire" (338).

[21] Cited by Martin Priestman, *Cowper's Task: Structure and Influence* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 17.