

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE BLANK-VERSE TRADITION FROM MILTON TO STEVENS

Blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter, has been central to English poetry since the Renaissance. It is the basic vehicle of Shakespeare's plays and the form in which Milton chose to write *Paradise Lost*. Milton associated it with freedom, and the Romantics, connecting it in turn with freethinking, used it to explore change and confront modernity, sometimes in unexpectedly radical ways. Henry Weinfield's detailed readings of the masterpieces of English blank verse focus on Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and Stevens. He traces the philosophical and psychological struggles underlying these poets' choice of form and genre, and the extent to which their work is marked, consciously or not, by the influence of other poets. Unusually attuned to echoes between poems, this study sheds new light on how important poetic texts, most of which are central to the literary canon, unfold as works of art.

HENRY WEINFELD is Professor of Liberal Studies and English at the University of Notre Dame.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the
Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE BLANK-VERSE TRADITION FROM MILTON TO STEVENS

Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity

HENRY WEINFELD

University of Notre Dame



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the
Crisis of Modernity
Henry Weinfield
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107025400

© Henry Weinfield 2012

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2012

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Weinfield, Henry.

The blank-verse tradition from Milton to Stevens : freethinking and the crisis of modernity /
Henry Weinfield, University of Notre Dame.

pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-02540-0
1. Blank verse, English—History and criticism. I. Title.
PR509.B53W45 2012
821.009—dc23
2012011697

ISBN 978-1-107-02540-0 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all *is* vanity.

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that *is* his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

Ecclesiastes 3:19–22

Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime,
Said then the lost Arch-Angel, this the Seat
That we must change for Heav'n ...?

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.242–44

... and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), 5,387–88

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the
Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page viii
Introduction: Blank-verse freethinking and its opponents	1
1 “In wand’ring mazes lost”: skepticism and poetry in Milton’s infernal conclave	22
2 “With Serpent error wand’ring found thir way”: Milton’s counter-plot revisited	44
3 “Man’s mortality”: Milton after Wordsworth	55
4 “These beauteous forms”: “Tintern Abbey” and the post-Enlightenment religious crisis	71
5 “Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power”: Wordsworth’s meditation on books and death in Book 5 of <i>The Prelude</i>	98
6 “Who shall save?”: Shelley’s quest for the absolute in <i>A Defence of Poetry</i> and <i>Alastor</i>	125
7 Keats and the dilemmas of modernity in the <i>Hyperion</i> poems	162
8 “Of happy men that have the power to die”: Tennyson’s “Tithonus”	193
9 Stevens’ anatomy	218
<i>Bibliography</i>	237
<i>Index</i>	248

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks to the many friends and colleagues who read portions of the manuscript, discussed the project with me, and offered encouragement and support along the way. My colleagues at Notre Dame have always been extremely generous in reading and responding to my work. Steve Fredman in the English Department and David O'Connor in Philosophy commented on each of the book's chapters as they emerged, offering detailed and insightful responses. Katy Schlegel of Notre Dame's Classics Department read the manuscript not once but several times, at various stages of its composition; her assistance was invaluable to me. I am deeply grateful as well to Steve Fallon, my friend and colleague in the Program of Liberal Studies, as much for his trenchant criticism as for his encouragement and support. The suggestions he gave, not only on the Milton chapters but on the book's structure and organization, were enormously helpful and I am very much in his debt. I am grateful also for the support and intellectual companionship of Christian Moevs and Vittorio Montemaggi of the Italian Department, Cyril O'Regan of Theology, Gretchen Reydam-Schils of Liberal Studies, Mark Roche of German, John Sitter and Chris Vanden Bossche of English, and Alain Toumayan of the French Department. All of these colleagues, along with the many wonderful students I have had over the years, have continually enriched my intellectual life at Notre Dame. I am grateful for the support I received for this book from Notre Dame's Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, and I would like to express my gratitude to Tom Merluzzi, Ken Garcia, and Pat Base of ISLA for their unfailing kindness, courtesy, and efficiency. Finally, I am grateful for the NEH summer stipend I received to work on the project in 2006.

Outside of Notre Dame, my gratitude extends to Louise Chawla, Norman Finkelstein, and Kevin Hart, old friends who read and responded to portions of the manuscript, and to Michael Heller, David Katz, Robert Murphy, and Dale Ramsey, who offered their encouragement. I would

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

ix

also like to thank Herbert Tucker, who made helpful suggestions on the Tennyson chapter. In addition, I want to express gratitude to two friends and mentors who, whether or not they are aware of it, have left their mark on this book: Paul Fry, whom I first came to know as a result of participating in the stimulating NEH summer seminar he taught in 1988 on the topic of “Lyric Poetry and History,” and whose thinking and writing have had a profound impact on me; and Geoffrey Hartman, with whom I was privileged to be able to study in the seminar on “Religious Hermeneutics and Secular Literature” that he gave in 2003.

Stuart Liebman has always been available to read and discuss my work – and has never minced words. I am grateful for his generosity, critical acumen, and intellectual integrity. I am also deeply grateful to my wife, Joyce Block, who has gone over the chapters that make up this book so many times that she probably understands it better than I do. I hope that the final product, so many years in the making, is in some way worthy of her and of our children, Paul, Saralena, and Vera.

Just before this book went into production, I received word of the deaths – in rapid succession – of two close friends: my old teacher, the extraordinary poet and translator Allen Mandelbaum, and Paul Bray, a remarkable poet who was also one of Allen’s students. Allen and Paul had both read portions of the manuscript, and it is sad to think that I will not be able to inscribe copies of the book for them. I can only hope that, whatever its failings, the book is in some sense worthy of the attention they gave it.

The two readers’ reports solicited by Cambridge University Press were tremendously helpful to me. The suggestions for revision that they contained lengthened my labors, but made this a stronger book than it would otherwise have been. I’m deeply grateful as well to Linda Bree, my marvelous editor at Cambridge, for her steadfast support of the project and for her patience and insight, and to my equally marvelous desk editor, Maartje Scheltens, and my copy-editor, Robert Whitelock.

Earlier versions of Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, and 9 have previously appeared as follows:

“Skepticism and Poetry in Milton’s Infernal Conclave,” *Studies in English Literature* 45:1 (Winter, 2005), 191–212.

“‘With Serpent Error Wand’ring Found Thir Way’: Milton’s Counter-Plot Revisited,” *Milton Quarterly* 37:1 (March, 2003), 11–20.

“‘These Beauteous Forms’: ‘Tintern Abbey’ and the Post-Enlightenment Religious Crisis,” *Religion and the Arts* 6:3 (2002), 257–90.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02540-0 - The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity

Henry Weinfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Acknowledgments

“‘Knowledge Not Purchased by the Loss of Power’: Wordsworth’s Meditation on Books and Death in Book 5 of *The Prelude*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43:3 (Fall, 2001), 334–63.

“‘Of Happy Men that Have the Power to Die’: Tennyson’s ‘Tithonus,’” *Victorian Poetry* 47:2 (Summer, 2009), 355–78.

“Stevens’ Anatomy,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 31:2 (Fall, 2007), 171–88.