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0521785693 - Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660

David Norbrook

Excerpt

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## Introduction: acts of oblivion and republican speech-acts

When Samuel Pepys was a fifteen-year-old schoolboy, he was present at the execution of Charles I on 30 January 1649. Being ‘a great roundhead’, he applauded the act, exclaiming to a friend that if he had the chance of preaching a sermon, his text would be ‘The memory of the wicked shall rot’ (Proverbs x.7). Eleven years later, in November 1660, Pepys found himself placed at dinner close to another schoolfriend. ‘I was much afeared’, he confided to his diary, ‘he would have remembered the words that I said the day that the King was beheaded . . . but I found afterward that he did go away from schoole before that time.’<sup>1</sup> Pepys was desperate that his youthful desire to obliterate the king’s memory should itself be forgotten.

Fortunately, he had not only chance but the law on his side. Forgetting was officially sanctioned: the Act of Indemnity and Oblivion banned ‘any name or names, or other words of reproach tending to revive the memory of the late differences or the occasions thereof’.<sup>2</sup> This book is one attempt to counter that process of erasure, which has had long-term effects on English literary history and, arguably, on wider aspects of political identity. In the short term, the Act of Indemnity and Oblivion can be seen as an enlightened piece of legislation. Twenty years of bitter contention between and within families and social and religious groups needed oblivion to heal them. In the longer term, however, such forgetting has had its costs. Suppressing the republican element in English cultural history entails simplifying a complex but intellectually and artistically challenging past into a sanitized and impoverished Royal Heritage. The period from 1649 to 1660 has become a blank space, an ‘Interregnum’ standing wholly outside the nation’s temporal process. The derogatory label ‘the Rump’, attached to the republic’s Parliament by its enemies in 1660, has moved without any sense of strain from royalist propaganda into the notionally value-free technical terms of academia. The republic’s political

<sup>1</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (1970–83), I, 280.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Smith, *LR*, p. 1.

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institutions ‘continue to languish in a historiographical blind spot’; much the same applies to its artistic culture.<sup>3</sup>

At a simple documentary level, the process of oblivion creates problems for the literary history of the mid-century. Milton is and always has been at the centre of the spotlight: magnificent scholarship has helped to set his work in its political context. There is a singular exception, T. S. Eliot’s attempt to ‘dislodge’ him. Interestingly, Eliot regarded as the ‘most important fact’ about Milton the prime topic of seventeenth-century royalist propaganda: his blindness. While for republicans this might symbolize sublimity, for royalists it marked a divine punishment for his republicanism. As one who had urged the rehabilitation of the absolutist Sir Robert Filmer, Eliot may have slyly enjoyed this oblique restaging of old controversies. He did not push his assault far, however – perhaps in part because he realized that the strongly ideological nature of his own royalism was as likely to stir up as to bury radical memories.<sup>4</sup>

As soon as one leaves Milton for his republican contemporaries, however, the shadows start to descend. Several of the figures discussed in this book – Fisher, Hall, Marten, May, Wither – have received hardly any attention in print. Their memory has been kept at bay by a *cordon sanitaire* of defensive ridicule. Though none of them equals Milton as a writer, they deserve something better. What most readers of seventeenth-century literature remember about George Wither is that during the Civil War he was captured and condemned to be hanged. He was reprieved by Sir John Denham, who declared that ‘whilst G. W. lived, he [Denham] should not be the worst Poet in England.’<sup>5</sup> In fact, Wither was never captured and during the campaign in question it was Denham who surrendered. Another much-cited anecdote links Wither to the republican Henry Marten, whose image has never recovered from his presentation in royalist newsbooks as a buffoonish libertine. Marten allegedly raided the jewel-house at Westminster and dressed Wither clownishly in the royal robes. Though Marten and Wither were involved in the fate of the jewels at different periods, there is no evidence for this story.<sup>6</sup> Thomas May is best known from Marvell’s satire, which presents the debauched poet’s republicanism as a mask for frustrated ambition.

3 Sean Kelsey, *Inventing a Republic: The Political Culture of the English Commonwealth 1649–1653* (Manchester, 1997), p. 226.

4 T. S. Eliot, ‘Milton I’, in *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), pp. 138–45 (139). On Eliot’s anomalous monarchism see Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (1988), pp. 345–9, and David Bradshaw, ‘Lonely Royalists: T. S. Eliot and Sir Robert Filmer’, *Review of English Studies* 46 (1995), 375–9.

5 Bodleian MS Aubrey 6, fol. 105v, ABL, 1, 221.

6 On these anecdotes see David Norbrook, ‘Levelling Poetry: George Wither and the English Revolution, 1642–1649’, *English Literary Renaissance* 21 (1991), 217–56 (217–19).

As recycled uncritically by generations of literary historians, such anecdotes have succeeded in burying republican history in snobbish laughter. That was the purpose with which the antiquarian Anthony Wood put many of them in print, often citing selectively the more sympathetic account in one of his main sources for the republicans, the compilations of John Aubrey. To pursue the facts a little further is often to make the humour less evident. ‘Tom May’s Death’ declares that the poet’s body will be expelled from Westminster Abbey; this prophecy was fulfilled in a grisly way when in 1661 his body was disinterred in a mass exhumation that extended to many republicans and Cromwellians. The violence of such acts betrayed unease about the efficacy of the Act of Oblivion: forgetting would not happen of its own accord, the evidence must be actively erased. Wood was writing at a period of renewed Tory alarm over a renewal of the republican spirit, when some of Milton’s political works were publicly burned in Oxford.<sup>7</sup>

The more violent the erasure, however, the more it can be seen that there was something to hide. In 1662 Sir George Downing, the English Resident in the Netherlands, captured three of the men who had signed Charles I’s death warrant. The Dutch government had not been particularly enthusiastic about the extradition of men condemned to agonizing death, but Downing insisted, and the exiles were shipped home to be hanged, drawn and quartered. The king rewarded him with the strategic piece of land in Westminster that has now become Downing Street. That particular part of England’s royal heritage is now little remembered; but it may stand for many lesser episodes where anti-republican violence was used to compensate for a past which itself lacked monarchist purity. Only three years earlier, indeed, Downing had been a faithful servant of the Protectorate, a colleague of Andrew Marvell, and had been vigorously harassing not republican but royalist exiles in the Netherlands. A poem for his marriage had been written by Payne Fisher, who had been effectively Cromwell’s poet laureate. None of this, it is true, made Downing a republican: he was a fierce defender of Cromwell’s semi-monarchical regime against its republican critics. For some republicans, Cromwell’s coup of 1653 was at least as crucial a historical moment as the regicide. The blurring of any distinction between the Commonwealth and the Protectorate in the national memory is perhaps the most striking example of the elision of a republican perspective. Repellent as it may have been to some republicans, however, it is true that Cromwell’s regime, with its written constitution and attempts to separate executive from legislature, was itself an anomaly in English history.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas von Maltzahn, ‘Wood, Allam, and the Oxford Milton’, *Milton Studies* 31 (1994), 155–77.

<sup>8</sup> John Beresford, *The Godfather of Downing Street: Sir George Downing 1623–1684* (1925), pp. 83ff, 69, 60; Ralph C. H. Catterall, ‘Sir George Downing and the Regicides’, *American Historical Review* 17 (1911–12), 268–89.

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The ferocity of the anti-republican crackdown in 1660 was arguably out of all proportion to the political danger. It was fuelled by a minority of extreme reactionaries and often checked by more moderate counsels. But the fact that it was considered necessary at all is itself one kind of tribute to the republicans' achievement. If Charles's return was greeted by celebratory bonfires, we need to remember that some frantic burning of incriminating papers probably went on that year. Only recently have architectural historians begun to recognize that many interesting buildings conventionally given a post-1660 date in fact date from the 1650s.<sup>9</sup> Our knowledge of the portraiture of the republican period remains extremely shadowy in comparison with the attention that has been paid to court culture. One point this book tries to emphasize is that what has been referred to as the Augustan era of English poetry, initiated in 1660 and brought to perfection with Dryden's *Aeneid* (1697), was a reactive phenomenon. Strong anti-Augustanism preceded, and continued to engage with, courtly poetry. With the passing of time, however, the desperation with which England worked to eliminate compromising republican traces from its culture has been widely forgotten, and a bland monarchist surface has been substituted.

Yet in fact the process of erasure has been a continuing and active one. When Queen Elizabeth II gave an address in Westminster Hall in 1988 to celebrate the tercentenary of the Glorious Revolution, a plaque marking the execution of Charles I was discreetly covered with a curtain.<sup>10</sup> The celebrations in France the following year for the bicentenary of the French Revolution called up a wave of self-congratulation in England over the contrast between foreign regicide and Britain's peaceful evolution.<sup>11</sup> This involved a strategic silence about the regicidal revolution of 1649, which had been taken as one point of reference by the French revolutionaries. Milton's *Defence of the English People* was published in translation in 1789 and again in 1792, as part of a campaign for the trial of Louis XVI, and works by Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington and Edward Sexby were involved in French debates.<sup>12</sup> Some English republicans had indeed taken as much pride in exporting their revolution as the French were to do a century and a half later, and encouraged the dissemination of the Levellers' ideal written constitution in rebellious areas of south-west France. In a remarkable

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *Architecture without Kings: The Rise of Puritan Classicism under Cromwell* (Manchester and New York, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *The Monarchy* (1990), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> A point noted by Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 108 n. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Davies, 'Borrowed Language: Milton, Jefferson, Mirabeau', *MR*, pp. 254–71 (269); Olivier Lutaud, *Des Révolutions d'Angleterre à la Révolution Française: le tyrannicide et 'Killing No Murder' (Cromwell, Athalie, Bonaparte)* (The Hague, 1973).

anticipation of French slogans, a title-page of 1652 carried the slogan ‘Vive la Re Publick’.<sup>13</sup> Title-pages, as in revolutionary France, were sometimes dated according to the year of liberty.<sup>14</sup> England produced a poetics of sublimity that has parallels in revolutionary France.<sup>15</sup> The American Revolution can more easily be seen as continuing aspects of English republicanism, but Americans can still find it hard to understand how little those links are acknowledged in the founding fathers’ Old World. At the basic level of imagining a political and literary culture divested of monarchy and its attendant trappings, however, the mid-seventeenth century can make modern Britain look archaic. The reform group Charter 88 is making demands that were voiced by the Levellers in the 1640s.

Where did this energetic republican culture come from? Did it spring from nowhere, only to disappear from sight within a few years? One might draw that conclusion from much recent historiography. A ‘revisionist’ movement has contested liberal and Marxist readings that traced the seventeenth-century revolution back to long-standing constitutional or social conflicts, reaffirming instead the profound social and intellectual conservatism of early Stuart England. On that analysis, republicanism was largely a response to, rather than the cause of, the execution of Charles I; before the 1640s republicanism was effectively unthinkable.<sup>16</sup> Some of the most exciting and innovative work on the history of political thought has accepted parts of the revisionist analysis. J. G. A. Pocock, Blair Worden and other scholars, in some important studies, have begun to explore a vigorous and energetic republican culture; but they have tended to side with the revisionists, insofar as they see that culture as a response to, rather than a significant influence on, the revolution of 1649. Before then, writes Pocock, English republicanism was ‘a language, not a programme’.<sup>17</sup> Certainly there was a lack before then of the kind of obsessively detailed

13 Walter Blith, *The English Improver Improved* (1652; E666.4); Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500–1660* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 227.

14 For example Payne Fisher’s volume of neo-Latin panegyrics to the republic’s leaders, *Irenodia Gratulatoria* (1652; E796.30), is dated in the ‘Aera’ both ‘Salutis Humanae MDCLII’ and ‘Libertatis Angliae IIII’.

15 Compare Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution 1789–1820* (New Haven and London, 1983), pp. 57ff, and Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer*, second edition (London, 1992), pp. 250–5.

16 For a strong statement of this view see Kevin Sharpe, ‘A Commonwealth of Meanings: Languages, Analogues, Ideas and Politics’, in *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England: Essays and Studies* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 3–71, and for a counter-view, David Norbrook, ‘Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Elizabethan World Picture’, in Peter Mack (ed.), *Renaissance Rhetoric* (1994), pp. 140–64.

17 *HPW*, p. 15. Pocock’s *magnum opus*, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), ch. 10, offers a superb conspectus of pre-Civil War political discourses.

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constitutional programme provided by James Harrington, who for Pocock is the paradigmatic republican; but the present study will try to show that republican language was a more powerful presence than has been recognized. Worden, who has written with great insight of such vigorously enthusiastic republicans as Marchamont Nedham, nonetheless emphasizes the fact that most of those who ‘cut off King Charles’ head’ then ‘wondered what to do next’. And what they did next, in his view, fell short of anything one can legitimately term a republic. After 1653, when Cromwell dissolved the Long Parliament, republicans ‘retreated into nostalgia’.<sup>18</sup> Republicanism did not exist before 1649, was not put into effect then, and quickly became an object of distant nostalgia: such a fleeting phenomenon hardly disturbs a general model of English culture as overwhelmingly monarchist.

This analysis of the dominance of conservative monarchism has united commentators with widely differing political views. In literary studies, the paradigm offered by Michel Foucault, who projects a massive shift in signifying systems precisely at the mid-seventeenth century, has been attractive to writers on English cultural history, where the execution of Charles I provides an obligingly neat watershed.<sup>19</sup> On Perry Anderson’s influential neo-Marxist analysis, the persistent strength of monarchism is a symptom of the nation’s backwardness, its retention of a culture of deference that has discouraged political modernization and thus contributed to economic decline. Over the last few years there has been a gradual thawing of the strict taboo on criticism of the royal family, but the new generation of British republicans seems often to have little sense of occupying a space in cultural history that is not wholly new. Tom Nairn, in the most powerful modern critique of monarchism, has reinforced that verdict, considering the term ‘bourgeois revolution’ to be ‘over-flattering’ to the deeply conservative republicans of the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>20</sup> The republican John Streater was saying something rather similar on the eve of the Restoration in a retort to those who claimed that kingship was natural to England:

the long Continuation of Kingly Government in this Nation . . . created so many corrupt Props and Pillars to support its Dignity, that were like so many

18 Blair Worden, ‘Milton’s Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven’, in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 225–45 (226); ‘Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution’, in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl and Blair Worden (1981), pp. 182–200 (199).

19 See David Norbrook, ‘Life and Death of Renaissance Man’, *Raritan* 8:4 (Spring 1989), 89–110, and James Holstun, ‘Ranting at the New Historicism’, *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989), 189–225.

20 Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass*, pp. 151ff. For a stimulating riposte, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: An Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States* (London and New York, 1991).

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Sores and Phistula's to the Nation: the taking away of which on a suddain, would be something against Nature; though it was a burden to Nature, and a Disease[.]<sup>21</sup>

It is true that even at the high tide of the 1650s the proportion of committed republicans in the population was a very small one, and the quasi-republican regime that was toppled by the monarchy was probably the most despised government in English history. This book is very far from offering a representative cross-section of political opinion. Yet neither republicanism nor monarchism was a single coherent entity. Under the Protectorate, England had experimented with a compromise form of government. The republican Parliament had the double misfortune of being hated both by high-flying monarchists and by republicans for whom it had not gone nearly far enough. The Restoration of 1660 did not exactly mark the return of an unquestioningly monarchist people to a natural order; it was to inaugurate further experiments and instabilities. The emotive cult of Charles the martyr-king was at least as much a post-regicide phenomenon as its opposing ideology; it was subscribed to by people who had not been exceptionally vigorous in preventing his demise. Though there was an eclipse for much of the eighteenth century, republicanism underwent another major revival between the 1790s and the 1840s.<sup>22</sup> The nineteenth-century reinvention of the English as a people particularly devoted to royal ceremony was as much a reaction to new forms of radicalism as a residual legacy of the nation's archaism.<sup>23</sup>

This book aims to trace the early development of English republicanism not through the texts of 'high' political theory but through literary culture, and more specifically through poetry. Contemporary republican poets like Tony Harrison and Tom Paulin have had to do a certain amount of excavating to establish their tradition, for literary history in the twentieth century has often had a strongly monarchist bias.<sup>24</sup> A modest hope for this study is to help to open up different traditions. Many of the writers here dealt with were much more current two centuries ago than they are today. In 1802 Wordsworth could still write, with an air of familiarity:

21 J. S[treater], *A Shield Against the Parthian Dart* (1659; E988.11), pp. 17–18.

22 Peter J. Kitson, "'Sages and patriots that being dead do yet speak to us': Readings of the English Revolution in the Late Eighteenth Century", in James Holstun (ed.), *Pamphlet Wars: Prose in the English Revolution* (1992), pp. 205–30.

23 D. A. Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c. 1820–1977', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 34–73.

24 T. W. Harrison, 'English Virgil: The *Aeneid* in the XVIII Century', *Philologica Pragensia* 10 (1967), 1–11, 80–91, shows an awareness unusual at the time of the Whiggish and republican cult of Lucan, Milton and Marvell (I owe this reference to Oliver Taplin); Tom Paulin, *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (London and Boston, 1986).



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Great men have been among us; hands that penned  
 And tongues that uttered wisdom – better none:  
 The later Sidney, Marvel, Harrington,  
 Young Vane, and others who called Milton friend.<sup>25</sup>

‘O that I might have such an action to remember on my Death-bed!’ wrote Coleridge of the regicide.<sup>26</sup> At this time Thomas May still retained a certain stature, his history of the Long Parliament vying with Clarendon’s royalist version down to the mid-nineteenth century, when the last ‘modern’ edition appeared. Southey and other poets contributed to a cult of Henry Marten; Coleridge and Lamb rehabilitated Wither; while Walter Savage Landor – who was delighted that his birthday coincided with the anniversary of the regicide – maintained a poetic cult of the republicans.<sup>27</sup> As for William Blake, the motto for his ‘Republican Art’ was:

The Strongest Poison ever known  
 Came From Caesar’s Laurel Crown[.]<sup>28</sup>

Wordsworth, it should be noted, includes in his canon a mixture of poets and prose writers. He himself, however, was also involved in a process that contributed greatly to the later eclipse of literary republicanism: the split between rhetoric and poetry, between the public world and a ‘literature’ defined in increasingly narrow terms as concerned with a private, intimate sphere. Writing of the Romantic reaction against rhetoric, Martin Thom observes: ‘After the Terror . . . a line would be drawn between the space of the heart and the space of the agora.’<sup>29</sup> If not exactly new, such a line certainly became much more emphatic. And it has to some extent become embodied in academic institutions. Of the writers mentioned in Wordsworth’s list, Milton and Marvell have become canonized as poets, and their prose, especially the latter’s, has until relatively recently been placed in a separate compartment. Harrington, on the other hand, has become a key figure in the study of republican thought, but the fact that he wrote poetry, and wrote prose with a keen eye to poetic allusion, has received hardly any attention. The history of political thought has made great strides in recent years, but its practitioners have paid more attention to generalized patterns of meaning than to the texture of

25 *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1940–9), III, 116.

26 *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 12: Marginalia*, part 2, ed. George Whalley (London and Princeton, 1984), p. 970.

27 One of Landor’s last works was ‘Andrew Marvel [sic] and Henry Marten’, in John Forster, *Walter Savage Landor: A Biography*, 2 vols. (1869), II, 584–6.

28 From ‘Auguries of Innocence’, in G. E. Bentley, Jr. (ed.), *William Blake’s Writings*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1978), II, 1314.

29 Martin Thom, *Republics, Nations and Tribes* (London and New York, 1995), p. 46.



the writings, so that readers might not recognize amidst the high seriousness just how witty many of these texts could be. The role of poetry like Lucan's in giving a powerful emotional colouring to the abstract categories of political theory has yet to be fully recognized. In any case, the mid-seventeenth century was a period when conventional boundaries between prose and verse were especially permeable, whether in Wither's versified tracts or Milton's image-dense prose. In approaching the period, we do well to set aside a narrow model of what counts as literary and to be open to experimentation that linked poetry with popular newsbooks and classical oratory.

In line with other recent studies, the present book removes canonical writers like Milton and Marvell from their timeless pantheon and looks at the poems as they were first composed or circulated, setting them in the political flux along with many much less well-known contemporaries. When Marvell placed May in a sordid, resentful republican Grub Street, he was uneasily aware that others might locate him in the same venue, and a reading of his poetry can only gain from a consciousness of such tensions. I have tried to allow other voices – from Puritan saints to deft opportunists – to speak at some length without reducing them to a mere background to the familiar literary history. The republican crisis generated a lot of powerful writing that is often difficult of access.

Broadening the scope of literary history in this way makes it evident how a narrower model of the literary has often served to obscure the origins of republican culture. An idealized and ultimately conservative literary Culture has been pitted against republican Anarchy, or at least philistinism. If political historians often see 1649 as a watershed that suddenly ushers in republicanism, for some literary scholars the execution of Charles I has been a key moment in a shift from a poetic monarchical order to a republican or Whiggish world of prose. The poetic imagination, on this reading, was stimulated by traditional rituals which established intricate analogies between the individual and the natural and social orders. T. S. Eliot's idea of a 'dissociation of sensibility' in the mid-seventeenth century was reinforced by E. M. W. Tillyard's claim that up to that point a universally held 'Elizabethan World Picture' made monarchy the natural centre of the cosmos, with any other form of government effectively unimaginable.

Recent 'new historicist' and 'cultural materialist' criticism has moved beyond these paradigms, offering a wider model of the text and of culture to cover a broad range of signs and representations.<sup>30</sup> The present study shares these critics' concern to view literary texts in the context of social rhetoric, and

30 H. Aram Veese (ed.), *The New Historicism* (New York and London, 1989); Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, second edition (New York and London, 1989).

to explore parallels between artistic and political representation: republican politics produced a republican poetics. Some developments in recent literary and cultural theory, however, have had the effect of overemphasizing the influence of monarchy from a different direction. 'Anti-humanist' theorists have presented language and ideology as all-pervasive and ultimately unconscious structuring influences on the individual 'subject'. Such theories produce a passive model of the relation between ideology and political culture: whether the form of government is republican or monarchical, the history produced is one of subjects, not citizens. A more dynamic view of the relations between language and political change needs to be found. In common with many historians of political thought, therefore, the present study draws on the 'speech-act theory' or 'pragmatics' derived from J. L. Austin. As the name implies, this approach is concerned with the links between language and action, with the kinds of public intervention that speech, and writing, can make. To understand a text by Sidney or Hobbes, Quentin Skinner argues, we need to analyse not only its cognitive content, considered as timeless truths, but the kinds of 'illocutionary act' the author was performing in publishing it: i.e. which positions he or she was attacking, how he or she was intervening in a contemporary context of debate.<sup>31</sup> The history of political thought is thus reconceived as one part of the history of political action. It is also part of the history of reading: the study of the recovery of classical republican texts is also the study of their deployment in contemporary debates.

This is not the place to explore the technicalities, and the possible limitations, of speech-act theory.<sup>32</sup> While it has spawned a large, and highly technical, theoretical literature, its value as a heuristic device in cultural history emerges best in practice – indeed it is in some ways a rationalization of the practice of good historians. No use will be made below of its panoply of technical terms beyond the simple, and yet easily overlooked, distinction between the overt content of a text and the illocutionary act or acts involved in composing or circulating it. The locutionary force of much of Milton's *Readie and Easie Way* is that the English people have turned irredeemably to monarchy and are beyond hope; the illocutionary force of publishing two editions in concert with other republicans is a significant shade less despairing. The same applies, I shall try to show, to the political connotations of *Paradise Lost*.

31 See the essays collected in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton, 1988), pp. 29–132.

32 While the use of 'speech' to cover written texts is a broad one, the present study's focus on rhetoric is a reminder that oral and written discourses were still being considered in closely similar terms. Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (New York and London, 1990), offers the best discussion of the theoretical issues as they are relevant to literature, and engages with the deconstructionist critique of the concept of 'speech' in a way that is not possible here.