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Edited by John Broadbent
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Foreword

> To grammarians and critics, who are principally occupied in editing the works of others, or in correcting the errors of copyists, we willingly concede the palm of industry and erudition; but we never bestow on them the surname of great. He alone is worthy of that appellation who either does great things, or teaches how they may be done, or describes them with a suitable majesty when they have been done; but those only are great things which tend to render life more happy, which increase the innocent enjoyments and comforts of existence, or which pave the way to a state of future bliss more permanent and more pure.
>
> *Second defence of the English people*

This volume is part of the Cambridge Milton series. The series supersedes A. W. Verity's Pitt Press edition of Milton's poetry published from Cambridge 1891 *et seq.* It is designed for use by the individual student, and the class and the teacher in schools and colleges, from about the beginning of the sixth form to the end of the BA course in England. This volume can be used independently but we assume that you refer as appropriate to others in the series, especially:

Paradise lost: introduction J. B. Broadbent. General introduction to the poem as a whole with chapters on myth and ritual; epic; history of publication; ideology; structures; allusion; language; and other stylistic features. Also contains a list of resources (books, art, music, speech etc.) designed for the launching of projects; and a chronology of the Bible, biblical writings, epic, and other versions of Miltonic material.

Comus, pastorals, early religious poems An editorial team. This will print, with annotation and individual introductions, most of the poems that Lorna Sage deals with in her general introduction to the early poems in *John Milton: introductions*, as well as much of the material referred to in other chapters here, especially Winifred

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Maynard's on music, and Isabel Rivers's on Milton's life and development as a poet.

Those and the other volumes also contain a general preface on the aims of the series, and ways of reading Milton.

The best rivals to this book are:

LOIS POTTER *A preface to Milton* (Longmans preface books, an excellent series, 1971) with many illustrations; particularly good on geography and other concrete details; includes critical analyses of some poems and excerpts.

J. H. HANFORD and J. G. TAAFE *A Milton handbook* 5th revised ed 1969; largely concerned with backgrounds to, and contents of, the poems.

C. V. WEDGWOOD *Milton and his world* 1969 with many illustrations; concentrates on biography and history.

For other suggestions see the footnotes and reading lists provided with each chapter here and in other volumes of the series. In the reading lists in this volume, the place of publication is London or New York, unless otherwise stated.

Of course another volume could be put together introducing other aspects of Milton. I should like to see essays on him by a linguistician and a semiologist; his treatment of mythology needs to be reconsidered, by an anthropologist; I should like to have found someone to write a serious psychological analysis of his symbolism and obsessions. In this volume he appears very much as a poet of the 17th century but he needs placing against the renaissance – or what the renaissance means in England needs defining in terms of Milton; as with much literature and history, we need local reconstruction – what exactly was it like in Bread Street?

No doubt the reader will be starting to write that extra volume. For this reason I have included at the end of the chapters, following the double lines, some additional material. This is entirely my responsibility and is meant to be used as a springboard for private working. Sometimes it implies a view different from the adjacent contributor's and is intended to initiate discussion. I am also responsible for any textual errors or omissions in the chapters, which I edited for the press, and for the choice and titling of the illustrations. I am grateful to my colleagues for their contributions, and for their patience while the volume was put together.

July 1973 J. B. B.

Consider such a passage as this one from Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*:

> Redeem
> The unread vision in the higher dream
> While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.

In his Dante essay Eliot says of the pageantry of the *Paradiso* that it 'belongs to the world of what I call the *high dream*, and the modern world seems capable only of the *low dream*'. We dream whether we like it or not, and all knowledge, whether in poetry or out of it, involves suspension of disbelief. In our low dreams, our everyday states of consciousness, such suspension takes the form of simple credulity...In the low dream we wear a mask without realising it, in the high dream we put on a mask with stylised grace. The virtue of a poem consists in expressing, promoting, and communicating some phase of the high dream...A poetic utterance invites our imaginative assent...Even though a certain statement in a poem would be false if taken out of context (as is surely the case with Eliot's 'jewelled unicorns'), the relevant question is, How true is it within that context? And let us not delude ourselves with the hope that there are truths independent of any context whatever. When we think that, and act on it, we become blind to the contextual limitations that condition every judgement and every insight; we fall, so to speak, into a dream within a dream. The poet stakes out his context, the 'world' of his poem, with his imagination audaciously alive and responsive; that is the route, if any, toward the regaining of Terrestial Paradise. Most of us most of the time, with imaginations either stale or running riot, slip into some form of the lower dream, thereby constantly reënacting Adam's fall. The ground-bass of poetic truth is the truth, contextual but real, of man's possible redemption through the fullest imaginative response.

PHILIP WHEELWRIGHT from *The burning fountain: a study in the language of symbolism* rev ed 1968

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ELIZABETH SEWELL SIRIGNANO

To be a true poem

> And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem... *Apology for Smectymnuus*

A poet writes for people. He does not write for professors, English classes, textbooks, examination papers. If any of these lead to a better understanding and friendship between poet and ourselves, they may serve their turn. Mostly, something else happens: they come between the living man who writes poems and the living beings he writes for, with an icy, sterilizing, or just plain wearisome apparatus of technicality and 'scholarship'. The whole approach of the formal education we receive at school and college tends that way. It is a method; *a* method, no more. There is, also, another method. It has its importance because it is the one which the poets pursue, and people can and will agree to it if anyone gives them encouragement. It is another way of learning. As people, we do want to learn, and delight and instruction are what older poets have said poetry is for. This way of learning involves living; living poet and living people; live and learn.

John Milton, that towering phenomenon in English literature in general and the 17th century in particular, may seem an unlikely companion for living with and learning from. Is there not too much learning about him already? He is, in my experience, always presented within the academic method mentioned above as a learned, difficult poet, needing comment and elucidation by experts if the modern reader is even to understand, let alone respond to, what he wrote. In some sense this is what this present Cambridge Milton is all about. Milton *is* learned, no doubt about it, and we are not. Just the same, we in this other method are living people, those for whom, as much as for any others, this poet wrote; or rather, those to whom this poet spoke. One does not write if one is blind, as he was for his three last and greatest works. It takes some of the bookishness out of

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it too. There is, none the less, work to be done. Milton himself was not unduly sanguine about the people who would want to listen, asking only that he might 'fit audience find, though few' for *Paradise lost*. So let us get to work, in that other, poetic, method, and deal if we can with this formidable learning of his. (We shall have to do the same thing shortly for another major barrier, also much brought to the fore by criticism – his theology.)

A good way to come at this will be to gather up the scattered autobiographical passages in his prose and poetry where he speaks of his studies. Languages and philosophy were the beginning, he tells us in *The second defence of the people of England*, letting us glimpse there also the schoolboy of twelve so avid to read that he sat up every night till midnight, struggling with the headaches which were already the shadow of that darkening to come upon him in his middle years. He records, in his Latin poem to his father, the languages he studied: Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Hebrew – all this before he went to Cambridge. Other facts can be gathered from the account he gives of himself in his pamphlet, *An apology for Smectymnuus*,[1] from which I have taken the title, epigraph and theme of this chapter. He speaks again of his passion for reading, mentioning orators, historians, poets, no doubt in all the languages at his command; we hear of Dante and Petrarch, of the fables and romances of knighthood, then Plato and Xenophon; and training in the precepts of the Christian religion. Back now to the *Second defence*, where he describes his post-university years as entirely devoted to the Greek and Latin classics; in 1698 one of his biographers, John Toland, said that Milton could almost repeat Homer's two poems 'without book', and again one thinks of a blind man, and a prodigious memory. Then came his travels, and the meetings with distinguished men of learning in Europe, Grotius the jurist, Diodati the theologian, Galileo; then the beginnings of the civil war in England and his return home, marking effectively the end of his formal studies and the start of his active years in politics and controversy. And as a last self-statement on learning one could perhaps look at his treatise *On education* and see what he prescribes for young and more standard minds.

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[1] 'bless us! what a word on
A title page is this!'

One cherishes Milton's rare flashes of humour. He speaks here of his own *Tetrachordon*, a mouthful no less. Smectymnuus is an acronym of the initials of the five Presbyterian divines who wrote the original pamphlet Milton is here defending.

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Where does all this leave us? At a gross disadvantage, we may feel, most of us not even having received what used to be called 'a good classical education', but a strange hybrid of no clear character. The only thing to do is to remember that a poet, learned as he may be, writes for people, not in the first place literati. He will impart his learning – after all, it is a part of his life, and if we take it that way we shall escape being daunted, estranged, or, curiously, resentful of it. We too are looking for 'delight and instruction', and, as part of both, great men are generous with their learning; it is a part of magnanimity. Once we can take that learning as an archway, not a barrier, we can walk through and into it. Anyone can.

The other Milton largely focused upon by academic and critical studies, it seems to me, perhaps out of all proportion in so great a poet, is Milton the theologian, the Puritan, the dogmatic if idiosyncratic Christian. This may seem reasonable enough in regard to one who in his epic declares his intention of justifying the ways of God to man, chooses biblical subjects for his three major works, writes a great tractate on Christian doctrine, and so on. Yet in a poet speaking to people, within the poetic method, these concerns are really not important. For one thing, such an approach cannot touch people in our time, and it is to them that the poetic method is rightly directed. Arguments on dogma or on ecclesiastical institutions are dead, as far as Christianity is concerned, here and now. People's needs in religion, which is another thing, our needs of the spirit, are deep and desperate, and Milton the poet may begin to speak to them, but not Milton the Christian polemicist as presented in so many academic studies. Once he is out of the way as theologian or Puritan (puritan – this man who says poetry should be 'simple, sensuous and passionate', who married three times and wrestles with the erotic so long and painfully?), the poet may begin to speak to our real needs.

Let me quickly get out of the way too one other distortion we visit upon poets, before we start to listen, as people, to poet as poet, and what is more, to respond, for we need, in whatever sense you may take this, to talk to poets, living or dead. I mean the presentation of Milton, or any other comparable figure, whether tacitly or explicitly, as 'the great man', largely or wholly unapproachable. Instead of vital beings with whom we can converse, poets in our tradition seem to have become Great Masters of English Literature, set like statues on marble pedestals in some cold Pantheon, as unhelpful as unreal. (Is this due to our cult of 'success' – as if most poets, John Milton among them, had ever been successes in a worldly sense?[1] Is it our miscomprehension of the nature of genius, or the dead educational processing we undergo instead of a living poetic tradition?) Anyway, nothing could be more unpoetic or un-Miltonic. The more you read of this man, the more he emerges as a struggling, anguished human being, as we are, dealing with question after question with which we too are caught up, but also mysteriously endowed from time to time with a great voice which tells us things we desperately need to know.

He himself, in the *Second defence*, speaks of the underlying theme, or dynamic, of his prose writing as he saw it: 'three species of liberty which are essential to the happiness of social life – religious, domestic, and civil'. The first he characterizes as combat with 'slavery and superstition'. The second includes his work, *The doctrine and discipline of divorce*, and, he says, interestingly, his brief essay *On education*. Under the third, civil liberty, come the attacks on monarchy become tyranny, and the condemnation of censorship of printed matter, *Areopagitica*. Already this, with a little translation, should catch our minds: marriage and divorce, education, the nature of revolution, the life of the spirit released from dead forms, institutional or devotional – these are all matters which a late 20th-century mind must find itself thinking long and hard over, if it thinks at all. Yet beyond this it is possible and, I think, desirable, to tease them out a little further. Look at it this way: freedom – what is it? (Milton says, in this same place, that real and substantial freedom is to come from within ourselves and depends on integrity of life.) How are we to be governed and to govern ourselves? And slavery, what is it to be a slave or enslaved? And where is true authority?

Then there is rebellion, some of which is right and some wrong, so that obedience has to be thought about too; and love, erotic love and sex and marriage and divorce, the central mystery of man and woman, and what religion and society do to regulate and perhaps prison it. And how much of life is to be action, with words and language and the mind's activity moving into deeds, and how much is to be quiet and strong patience? ('Silence and sufferance, and speaking deeds against faltering words', as Milton says of himself in the *Apology*.) How can despair be balanced by hope?

And so it could go on. But already we are moving into another dimension, through the prose and its preoccupations, to the poetry and the life, although I want also to emphasize at this point that some knowledge of his prose in its full range is essential if we are ever to get to know Milton as man and poet. This is not a matter of working doggedly through *Areopagitica* as a 'set book'. It has far more to do with poking about in secondhand bookshops for old copies of Milton's prose works, and discovering for oneself the man of argument and sudden surprising self-exposé, of nobility, insight and pig-headedness, in works like *Divorce* and the *Apology* and the two *Defences of the people of England.* With such acquaintance goes the right, of course, to disagree violently with him, time and again, as one does with a friend. This also is part of the conversation I spoke of earlier.

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[1] Not for nothing are the heroes of his two greatest works, *Paradise lost* and *Samson agonistes*, in a profound sense failures. One cannot read his pamphlet of 1660, *The ready and easy way to establish a free commonwealth*, without hearing in it the note of desperation at what might be about to happen, the ruin of all he had stood for in politics and religion. It did happen, too.

I have so far dwelt, rather insistently, on a conversation, two-way, which goes on between poet and hearers, Milton and ourselves, aware as I do so of an odd mixture of passion and hopelessness in myself, because I am sure that some such approach to great work is a matter of life and death for poet and people both, and because I am also sure that no-one in today's educational setting is likely to take so simple an approach seriously. There has been all the time, however, another conversation going on, which we listen in to rather than listen to, of a more hidden, subtle, perhaps essential nature. A poet, in his poetry, speaks to himself; or, rather, initiates and pursues a relationship where the living self and the work being done converse each with each. Not just conversation either, and perhaps I should shift my metaphor, for this is much more like a mutual constructing, a fusion, a marriage. Life = poem; poem = life. It is here that the quotation from the *Apology* belongs: Milton saying of himself that the man who desires 'to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem'. Not a true poet, you notice – a true poem.

We are not accustomed to thinking in this fashion, and perhaps I had better pause and comment a little on what is going on here. The life–poem equation does not mean that the works need be directly autobiographical, nor that they consist of introspection. It does mean, however, as Coleridge says (and he too as a poet works in this manner) that John Milton is in every line of *Paradise lost*; indeed, that in every one of Milton's poems it is Milton himself whom we see, that his Satan, his Adam, his Raphael, even – almost – his Eve, are all John Milton; and Coleridge adds at this point, 'The egotism of such a man is a revelation of spirit'. So there is self-study of a sort, but again Coleridge comments: 'In the *Paradise lost* the sublimest parts are the revelations of Milton's own mind, producing and evolving its own greatness.'[1]

A mind, a life, an organism producing and evolving itself – is this a way of looking at what a man is? And in this case doing it in and through a poem. Then what a poem is had better be asked about too.

Suppose we begin by thinking of life – and ourselves, our own life – as something we make; each one of us astonishing human organisms daily and hourly making, unmaking and remaking the self.[2] How thinly we think of ourselves ordinarily, it seems to me, the self an unclear form drudging along a line in time, both the form and the line more or less fixed and given! And when we look at it squarely, our idea of a poem is about as meagre, a blob of words affixed to a page. But a poem too is a process, endlessly constructed:

> With everything five wits contain,
> Poem is something that is made,

and this may let us see that poem = life is a feasible metaphor, for that of course is what it is. The metaphor is not simply between poet's life and poet's product. If it be true that 'the mind knows its constructive faculty in the act of constructing, and contemplates the act in the product',[3] this does not, in the case of poem and poet, affect poets alone. Otherwise this interchange would be of interest only to

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[1] The last remark is from *Coleridge's miscellaneous criticism* ed Raysor 1936, p. 164; the rest is from his *Table talk*. It is good to be reminded that in our pursuit of this other method the guides will be not professional literary critics, but other poets, and what they say about Milton. I would suggest a good look at Blake, who thought of himself, at times at least, as Milton's reincarnation, and who in his prophetic books, especially *Milton*, as well as in *The marriage of heaven and hell*, works hard at assimilating and interpreting Milton, as also in the illustrations he made for Milton's poetical works. Wordsworth provides crucial insight in his lines beginning 'On man, on nature and on human life', part of *The recluse* fragment, where he makes plain that he in *The prelude* is taking on where Milton left off, and that the task of both, in their differing ways, has been and is the exploration of the cosmic deeps and spaces of the human mind. Then there is Keats, in his letters and poems, especially the second of the two *Hyperions*. I have written something on the Milton–Keats connection, and their common task, in *The human metaphor* Notre Dame 1964.

[2] *Quisque sui faber* – each man the artificer of himself, as Coleridge says in his Notebook for 1804. He is full of information about what he calls the rudiments (in a letter of September 1817) and in *Biographia literaria* the process of self-construction. He speaks too of thought as self-observation, of self-intuition, of self-knowledge. I. A. Richards, in *Coleridge on the imagination*, says of him that he postulates an 'activity of the mind in which knowing and doing and making and being are least to be distinguished'.

[3] Coleridge, *Aids to reflection*, Moral and Religious Aphorisms, Aphorism XIV.

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that (rather unsatisfactory) piece of psychology which may deal with 'creativity'. But poems always have to be constructed, by reader or hearer, warmed into activity if they are not to be just blobs, and by that act we, the non-poets as it may seem to us, construct and reconstruct our own minds, lives, acts. This is not a literary technique nor a whimsy. It is a way of learning, a great system of education, almost wholly forgotten or ignored now, to our dire peril. One could call it imagination.

If it is not done through direct shifting-over of the life into the poem, how is it done? Part of the answer to that question is that it is done by *figures*. Images, myths, legends, historical personages, ordinary people, objects, stories – all these we can choose from if we are writing our own poem and trying in this way to understand our own story or life or poem. Equally, we can for the understanding process accept those which the poets offer to us, and make them our own. In either case we lend our lives to the figure we are contemplating, learning about ourselves by identifying with them, no matter how wildly different from our own usually rather dull circumstances the story or figure we are contemplating may be. Drama effects this in a particularly concentrated way, but all poetry works by it, except perhaps satire. The identification of self and figure is not total (this is important because total identification is called madness in our society); but it has to be deep and passionate if it is to be, as it is meant to be, an organ of learning. I think of it as 'I-am-and-am-not', hyphened like that and damn the contradiction which is a concept pertaining to logic but not imagination. I-am-and-am-not Dido and the Ancient Mariner and Raskolnikov. Milton is-and-is-not Comus and Samson and Adam, and we with him. In this way, mysterious, human, and – make no mistake – as yet very little understood or used in what we call our education, we produce and evolve ourselves. Produce and e-volve – Coleridge has given us a beautiful pair of prefixes and verbs, for thinking and feeling and forward-living creatures.

We may be ready now to turn to Milton and to look at some of the figures he lends his life to. Let it be clear that I am not cataloguing his use of particular myths. Indexes of this sort exist, and very useful they are. All we are doing is noticing some of the recurrent figures which we also may want to identify ourselves with.[1]

[1] The first time I worked in this way with Milton I was following the figure of Orpheus (in *The Orphic voice* 1960). I do not mean to repeat that here; but do not miss Orpheus in Milton, for that myth gave him a vision of the poet's task and fate, and runs all through his poems, from early to late. See *PL: introduction* in this series, p. 81, for a student view.