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Most twentieth-century accounts of Milton’s influence on the eighteenth century suggest that it was on the whole a baleful one. Harold Bloom’s dramatic and colorful hyperbole is but one recent rendering of the conventional wisdom: “Milton is the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles.” He is the “central problem in any theory and history of poetic influence in English.” Bloom’s theory of the influence of “strong” poets like Milton has provoked much controversy, though he was perhaps in part only elaborating what a few hostile critics had been saying of Milton for fifty years. As early as 1926, in a study of Keats, Middleton Murry asserted that

To be influenced beyond a certain point by Milton’s art... dammed the creative flow of the English genius in and through itself. To pass under the spell of Milton is to be condemned to imitate him. It is quite different with Shakespeare. Shakespeare baffles and liberates; Milton is perspicuous and constricts.2

And though T.S. Eliot took issue with the severity of Murry’s statement, he accepted the substance of it. Eliot himself had once deplored the “Chinese Wall of Milton’s blank verse” which allegedly descended on English poets of the eighteenth century, and in a 1936 essay darkly observed that “there is more of Milton’s influence in the badness of the verse of the eighteenth century than of anybody else’s.”3 By 1947 Eliot tempered his view, though he still declared that Milton had inhibited aspiring poets: “Milton made a great epic impossible for succeeding generations.”4 Comus, he had pronounced earlier, is “the death of the masque.”5 Great poets must remain silent because they do not wish to imitate; only the second-rate continue to produce faint echoes of Milton’s manner. Like Eliot, Leavis too dismisses “the conventional poetizing of the meditative – melancholic line of versifiers who drew their inspiration so largely from the minor poems of Milton.”6

The most comprehensive argument for Milton’s bad influence is found, ironically, in R.D. Havens’ The Influence of Milton on English Poetry (1922), the pioneering work that firmly established that eighteenth-century writers knew, admired, and imitated Milton almost continuously. Openly unsympathetic to what he calls the regularity and narrowness of “neo-classicism,” Havens finds Milton a force for liberation, especially in diction and prosody. Yet unhappily, in Havens’
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view, Milton’s diction proved to be “a dangerous model for mediocre bards who were dealing with prosaic themes.” The freedom offered by blank verse was likewise “fatal to mediocrity.” The influence of *Paradise Lost*, he laments, “was unquestionably away from simple directness and towards the high-sounding and the elaborate” (p. 67). For Havens, eighteenth-century writers show little of the “complexity and subtlety of influence” (p. 88) that characterize the Romantic poets, his own literary heroes.

Modern judgments about Milton’s bad influence then are in part the consequence of a generally low estimate of much eighteenth-century verse common in the first half of this century. In the light of the upward revaluation of eighteenth-century poetry during the last thirty years, we are in a position to see that Milton may in fact have contributed positively to the special character of eighteenth-century literature. We now need to re-examine freshly what eighteenth-century writers *said* about the challenge of past greatness and what they *did* with Milton’s work. My argument, most broadly, is that Milton offered to the eighteenth century a wide range of literary possibilities. While, admittedly, second-rate writers seized on superficial or merely technical features of Milton’s works, his blank verse prosody or octosyllabic measure, his Latinate diction or his inverted syntax, greater writers saw deeper and found inspiration in Milton’s great myth of a lost garden of innocence, in his recurrent and related themes of freedom, choice, and responsibility, his celebration of marriage, his defiant stance against his detractors. Without much exaggeration one might even say that Milton as it were set the poetic agenda for the century. Thus contrary to Havens, Eliot, and Bloom, we must conclude that ultimately Milton’s influence on the major English writers from Dryden to Johnson and Cowper was a creative one. Much of the best work in the period was in several senses a response to Milton. The eighteenth-century literary landscape would look very different — and, I would argue, a good deal poorer — without him.

Why should Milton have provoked such a powerful response? For any writer born after Pope (b. 1688) it was in fact not possible to ignore Milton, not possible to proceed as if he had not written. As a formidable presence in recent English history and in English culture, Milton no less than Newton *demanded* the muse. By 1700 he had become part of the English writer’s tradition, part of the very literary air he breathed, and the language in which he had to write. To use an old term recently given fresh currency, he possessed authority. The source of that authority, in the eyes of eighteenth-century writers, was not what Milton thought it was — scriptural grounding and the inspiration (quite literally) of a “heavenly muse.” It lay rather in Milton’s mastery of the
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highest literary forms, and in his comprehensive and compelling synthesis of disparate traditions, native and European, Christian and classical, Reformation Protestant and medieval Catholic. Though his materials were traditional — the ancient themes of temptation, of proud rebellion, the narrative pattern of innocence, fall, and recovery — it was Milton who gave them paradigmatic form. For the eighteenth century he became a modern classic, and England’s national poet.

Unlike earlier classics and national poets, Milton for the eighteenth century was a giant of the recent past. He was not so separated by time and by cultural change as were the ancients in the eyes of Dante and Petrarch, or even as was Chaucer, two hundred years after his death, in the eyes of Spenser and the Renaissance. A little more than three-quarters of a century separated the births of Milton and Pope. Milton was to Pope, as Spenser was to Milton, and Ariosto to Spenser, a past master in a living tradition. This status created special pressures as well as opportunities: as a near-contemporary, Milton presented a sharper challenge to emulators and rivals than, say, Homer did to Pope. But Milton’s nearness also meant that a poet need not laboriously recover and reconstruct the Miltonic heritage, as Dante had to recover Virgil. Though accessible, Milton was also sufficiently remote to a writer born after 1700 that he was seen as a representative of an earlier “age,” born “before the Flood” of the English Civil War and its attendant cultural change. He was sufficiently alien in his republican political principles, his almost unworldly moral character, and his links to a lost literary world of Renaissance fabling, that he in some ways had to be “translated” in order to be used in the eighteenth century. Indeed, the best literary uses of Milton in the period were those that acknowledged both his greatness and his difference, his pastness.

Acknowledging Milton’s greatness, however, seems not to have induced in eighteenth-century writers any distress or anxiety. Nor do their acknowledgements — indeed, their assertions — of his difference spring from an Oedipal need to define themselves as distinct from a father. Viewed historically, as a writer of an earlier age, Milton inhabited a world that was unlike the social and political world they inhabited, and that they by and large chose to describe. Viewed ahistorically, as a fellow writer, Milton’s rich literary harvest hardly prevented other poets from laboring in another part of the same vineyard. His achievement did not lessen their opportunities. Indeed, in some ways it increased them, for his work was now available, through imitation and allusion, for their use.

Imitation and allusion are two of the main means by which a poet records, and a reader registers, Milton’s presence. It is worthwhile to be clear, at the outset, about what these terms mean, and to note that
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their use need not be the mark of a derivative poetry. As we are recently more aware, allusion and imitation, familiar concepts in modern literary history and criticism, are complex terms covering a range of different literary responses. It has long been commonplace to say that Renaissance and neo-classical writers set out to imitate their classical predecessors, in part because they represented the best models, in part because Homer and nature were the same. But recent scholars have distinguished several imitative strategies in Renaissance writers, from the merely "reproductive" or reiterative to those which advertise both their derivation and their distance from a subtext, or even offer criticism or rivalry. In the eighteenth century it is only the third-rate writers who are content to reproduce Milton by imitating the superficial features of his style or by working in the same genres without rethinking generic conventions. The greater writers typically recognize their differences from Milton, and turn those differences to advantage.

"Allusion," likewise, has been widely used, at least since Reuben Brower’s Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion, to designate a mode of invoking a classical past or a wider European context. But allusion needs to be defined carefully, as a conscious and deliberate process of reference or memory, intended to be recognized by the literate reader. It should be distinguished from at least two related phenomena, what has been called echo, and what might plainly be called theft. The eighteenth-century poet who makes seemingly unconscious use of Milton’s language, meter, or materials, may be said to echo Milton. For my purposes, this phenomenon is perhaps an interesting aspect of psycho-aesthetics. It says something about the ways in which Milton has pervaded the literary culture and the generative imagination of a given writer. Such echoes, however, will have little critical significance, and do not register as more than unacknowledged responses to Milton. Theft, by contrast, implies that the poet is aware of his Miltonic source, but that he conceals it from his reader, and seeks to prevent Milton from entering the reader’s mind. Only in allusion proper, with which I am most concerned, does the poet acknowledge both to himself and to his reader his use of Miltonic materials. For it is only if imitation is acknowledged that the poet can be said to respond deliberately and publicly to his predecessor.

Miltonic allusion, in its proper sense, can furthermore have different purposes. As critics and editors have long noted, allusions to an Edenic past can provide a standard by which to measure a fallen present, just as allusions to Horace’s Sabine villa can suggest a kind of civilization toward which a poet aspires. Allusions to Satan can endow a villain with mythical resonance. Allusion may be systematic, invoking substantial parts of a predecessor text (though I think it rarely is, apart from poems
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like Pope’s *Imitations of Horace* or local, suggesting a single analogy, or merely providing a sophisticated kind of literary pleasure for well-read readers. More recently we have focused attention on the way in which allusion may enact a poet’s tribute to a predecessor, or may acknowledge kinship, or claim a place in a tradition.13

For my purposes the most interesting allusions to Milton are those in which a poet appropriates a Miltonic text in order at once to declare affinity and distance. The most obvious examples are the well-known eighteenth-century mock-epics and other Miltonic parodies. Though I will comment on *Absalom and Achitophel*, *The Splendid Shilling*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *The Dunciad*, I am more concerned to direct attention to the ways in which this allusive or imitative strategy operates widely in various eighteenth-century poetic genres, enabling writers to acknowledge Milton as a master and to make creative use of his work.

An account of eighteenth-century literary responses to Milton appropriately begins with Milton the man. In his 1947 essay on Milton, Eliot wrote that “of no other poet is it so difficult to consider the poetry simply as poetry, without our theological and political dispositions, conscious and unconscious, inherited or acquired, making an unlawful entry.”14 Given his critical principles, Eliot clearly would find intrusions from a poet’s history and opinions “unlawful,” and would seek to keep man and poet separate. But readers in the eighteenth century thought otherwise. Milton influenced eighteenth-century literary culture as much through the force of his personality, his opinions and actions in public life, and the shape of his career, as through his published poems. To an extent that we have perhaps not properly recognized, eighteenth-century readers were accustomed to read poetry biographically. Johnson, who loved above all else “the biographical part of literature,” was representative of those many critics, editors, and literary biographers in his age who, in considering the “various merits” of the English poets, turned naturally to examine “the niceties of their characters, and the events of their progress through the world.”15 This seems to have been especially true of Milton, perhaps because so much more was known about his life (as opposed to Shakespeare, for example, or even Dryden), perhaps because his life was inwoven with the public life of the nation like that of no English poet before him. Nowadays we tend to follow Eliot’s lead in separating man and poet, and too often assume, without looking carefully, that the history of Milton criticism in the eighteenth century shows that Johnson and his contemporaries did the same. It is true that some eighteenth-century admirers of Milton’s poetry deplored his politics, morals, or theology, but they thought such matters were relevant. They tended to keep all of the man in view, and to notice links we now tend to dismiss between the historical figure and his works.
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Milton clearly thought such links worth remarking, and is perhaps himself in part responsible for the habit of reading his poems in the context of his personal and political life. He published forthright apologetic accounts of himself in the Defense of the English People and other tracts, works widely known and extensively quoted by Milton’s eighteenth-century biographers from Toland to Hayley. He published sonnets in which he dramatized his own struggles during the Civil War period, and commented proudly on the role he had played in the defense of freedom. And the blind poet expressed himself feelingly and personally in the famous proems to Books I, III, VII, and IX of Paradise Lost, lines that eighteenth-century commentators did not hesitate to read biographically.16 These proems were among the century’s favorite Miltonic lines. As Johnson wrote, “perhaps no passages are more frequently or more attentively read than those extrinsick paragraphs.”17

Other factors too would have contributed to a biographical reading. Eighteenth-century editions of Milton’s works regularly included a biography by the editor, from Edward Phillips in 1694 and Elijah Fenton in 1725 to Johnson in 1780. Popular “Lives” such as Toland’s (1698) and Newton’s (1749), which originally appeared with Milton’s works, were frequently reprinted in later editions by other editors. Throughout the century Milton’s editor-biographers quoted, corrected, and supplemented their predecessors, and kept a composite image of Milton before the reader’s eye. To construct that image editors referred indiscriminately to life and to art.

Milton’s poems were used to illustrate his life, but his life – more than has been noticed – was also used to gloss the poems. Editors throughout the century regularly found reflections of Milton’s life in the major poems. One common example is Eve’s apology to Adam in Book X of Paradise Lost:

\[
\text{[she] with tears that ceased not flowing,} \\
\text{And tresses all disordered, at his feet} \\
\text{Fell humble, and embracing them, besought} \\
\text{His peace.} \\
\text{(X. 910–13)}
\]

Jonathan Richardson is the first of several commentators to see in these lines a “copy” of the pathetic scene in which Milton’s first wife suddenly returned to beg his forgiveness.18 Thomas Newton prints Thyer’s note to the description of Adam and Eve’s spontaneous devotions (Paradise Lost, IV. 736): “Here Milton expresses his own favorite notions of devotion, which, it is well known, were very much against any thing ceremonial.”19 William Hayley suggests that the recollection of having been deluded by Cromwell “inspired the poet with his admirable apology for Uriel deceived by Satan.”20
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Not surprisingly, *Samson Agonistes* was often read as a thinly disguised reflection of Milton’s own life. Thyer notes that “it is suppos’d, with probability enough, that Milton chose Samson for his subject, because he was a fellow sufferer with him in the loss of his eyes.”21 When Samson laments his blindness, Newton remarks that “Here Milton in the person of Samson describes exactly his own case. He could not have written so well but from his own feelings and experience.”22 Hayley found that “the lot of Milton had a marvellous coincidence with that of his hero” with respect both to his marriage and his great change of fortune.23 Biographical readings of particular passages are increasingly common in the latter part of the eighteenth century in the notes of Hayley, Dunster, and Thomas Warton, but they begin with the earlier commentators, Richardson, Upton, Heylin, Warburton, and Newton.24

A final factor from the critical climate which may have encouraged eighteenth-century readers to conflate the man and the poet is the popularity of Longinus, and of the Longinian conception of the sublime poet as a “noble soul.” The first and most important source of the sublime, Longinus says in chapter nine of his treatise, is greatness of mind, and a capacity for “Elevation of Thought”: “The Sublime is an Image reflected from the inward Greatness of the Soul.”25 Milton was of course the great example to the century of the sublime poet, and as Hayley put it, “although sublimity is the predominant characteristic of Milton’s poem, his own personal character is still more sublime.” Milton’s poetry, he asserts, “may be regarded both as the offspring and the witness of his virtues.” Thus distinctions between the man and the poet are arbitrary: “there is a striking resemblance between the poetical and moral character of Milton.”26

Again, it is Milton himself who encouraged an integrative view. In the Second Defense, surveying his early career, in words often quoted by eighteenth-century editors and biographers,27 Milton wrote of his devotion to liberty and to its “three species” which are “essential to the happiness of social life” – religious, domestic, and civil freedom – and of the works he had written “to the promotion of real and substantial liberty.” Eighteenth-century commentators implicitly build on Milton’s own foundation when they describe him as the defender – and poet – of freedom in all its forms, religious, domestic, civil, and literary. For Toland, *Paradise Lost* is essentially a political statement: “to display the different Effects of Liberty and Tyranny” is the “chief design” of the poem.28 For Henry Felton and numerous others, Milton is “the Assertor of Poetic Liberty, and would have freed us from the Bondage of Rhyme.”29

To recover the eighteenth century’s picture of Milton, then, we will
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have to ignore Eliot’s implicit caution. We cannot otherwise understand the powerful responses in the period to Milton’s life and art. For some few, it is true, Milton was simply a great poet and a bad man. But for most, including the great writers of the century, Milton’s devotion to “liberty,” his public righteousness, and his profound Christian faith helped shape their responses to the great poems.
PART I

England’s Milton

Greece, sound thy Homer’s, Rome, thy Virgil’s name,
But England’s Milton equals both in fame.
Selvaggi’s 1645 distich, translated by William Cowper, Latin and Italian Poems of Milton,
1 · MILTON’S POLITICS

Because he played a highly visible role as apologist for the Puritan Revolution and for Cromwell’s government, because he was polemical and outspoken, and because he appealed to the highest principles, Milton’s politics, like his poetry, demanded an eighteenth-century response. Most modern readers have mistakenly assumed that the century’s response was essentially hostile, and that Johnson’s Life of Milton, the most influential eighteenth-century account of Milton’s politics, accurately represents the age’s suspicions and resentments. A few modern scholars have gone to the opposite extreme and claimed that Milton was an eighteenth-century Whig and “Commonwealthsman” hero. Misled by these minority and extremist reactions, modern readers have heard almost nothing about the broad middle range of eighteenth-century opinion; most eighteenth-century readers found it difficult simply to dismiss or to embrace Milton’s politics. Some called for toleration of an honest difference of opinion; some attempted to make Milton a founding father of modern constitutional government; some assigned him the special (and limited) role of visionary.

What is common to the whole range of responses, from hostility to idealization, is the sense that the political Milton is both near to and distant from their world. Near, because his political principles remained very much alive, provocative, challenging. Distant, not only because Milton lived in an earlier age, but also because he seemed to stand apart and judge the world of everyday politics. Distant and near, Milton helped the post-Miltonic world to define itself politically.

One prominent and enduring tradition defined itself by wholly rejecting Milton and denouncing him as “a notorious Traytory” who “most impiously and villainously bely’d that blessed Martyr King Charles the First.” This reaction, common before 1700, can be found throughout the eighteenth century. It focuses narrowly on the same themes: king-killer, servant to a usurper. Its characteristic notes are curtness, intemperance, and (up to about 1750) a sentimentalized royalism. One defender of absolute royal sovereignty still thought it necessary in 1703 to denounce the “Prodigious Subtlety” of this “Cursed ENEMY of KINGS” and to “Expose” Milton’s name “to the Scorn, and Abhorrence of all Honest Men.” In 1718 Milton appeared as one of 365 “Hellish Saints” in The History of King-Killers, a sensationalized