REGAINING PARADISE
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Milton and the eighteenth century

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CONTENTS

Preface ........................................ page ix

Introduction .................................... 1

Part I
England’s Milton

1 Milton’s politics .......................... 11
2 Milton’s moral idealism ............... 22
3 Milton as literary hero ............... 33

Part II
After Milton: literary possibilities

4 The traditional genres ............. 45
   Epic
   Pastoral
   Classical tragedy
   Masque

5 Adaptations: re-making Milton
   Translations and corrections
   Milton on the stage .................. 62

6 New genres
   The evening poem
   Mock-epic
   Novel
   “Christian poetry” ................ 72

7 Regaining paradise
   “The world was all before them”
   Retirement poems
   Pleasures of imagination: Akenside and Young
   An English Eden: Philips and Dyer
   Miltonic marriage .................. 101
CONTENTS

Part III
The major writers

8 Dryden 137
  Dryden’s literary heritage
  Dryden’s criticism of Milton
  The State of Innocence
  Dryden’s heroic poems: Absalom and Achitophel,
    The Hind and the Panther, and the Aeneid

9 Pope 155
  “Constant remembrance”
  The early Pope: Pastorals, Windsor Forest,
    and The Rape of the Lock
  An Essay on Man
  The Dunciad

10 Thomson 179
  Thomson’s blank verse
  “Il Penseroso” and The Seasons
  Paradise Lost and The Seasons
  Paradise unlost
  Edenic evenings

11 Johnson 203
  Johnson and the biographical tradition
  Johnson Agonistes

12 Cowper 217
  Cowper the Miltonist
  Recovered paradise

Afterword: notes toward an eighteenth-century theory
  of literary influence 229

Notes 239

Index 293
A number of studies have been written since the early part of this century on Milton’s reception, reputation, and influence. Many readers will come to this book with some knowledge of R. D. Havens’ *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (1922), if not of the work by George Sherburn, J. W. Good, Ants Ora, W. R. Parker, and others. I should alert such readers at the outset that my aim in this book is not simply to update the work of my predecessors. First, I offer not an exhaustive survey of Milton’s influence on eighteenth-century English literature, but some selected perspectives on those points at which Milton’s influence is creative, or contributes to significant changes in outlook or sensibility. Second, my emphasis lies, properly speaking, not so much on Milton’s influence, or in cataloging imitations and debts, as it does on eighteenth-century responses to Milton as a resource to be drawn on, re-created, transformed. Third, I do not focus on Milton’s prosody and diction (Havens’ primary interest), but on some deeper features and above all his myth of a lost garden.

The older kind of “influence” study, now dated and even discredited, was naively empirical. In the last fifteen years, beginning with W. J. Bate and Harold Bloom, critics and literary historians have reconsidered the ideas of “influence” and a writer’s relationship to his predecessors. I am concerned to meet and oppose their arguments that Milton stilled or oppressed the writers that came after him. The record of the eighteenth century’s attitudes toward Milton and its own literary achievement suggests, on the contrary, that Milton helped to stimulate some of the best poetry of the century. The picture of the eighteenth century that I draw is one of literary opportunity and freedom to draw eclectically and idiosyncratically upon received tradition. Though it may seem attractive to us to imagine that every writer’s life is filled with literary anxiety, and that his relationships with his predecessors are intense, charged, and highly conflicted, I do not find this to be true of writers in the ages of Dryden, Pope, and Johnson. Indeed, I find instead a sense of detachment, friendly rivalry, and literary possibility. I attempt to re-create the shape of the literary world as it presented itself to poets during the century after Milton’s death. This requires some attention to literary issues—such as the epic—that seemed important in the eighteenth century. It also involves attention to some currently
PREFACE

underrated writers – Dennis, Watts, Akenside, John Philips, Dyer – who worked variously with Miltonic materials. The age, I suggest, was a consciously “post-Miltonic” one. But the term need not imply loss of potency or of amplitude. It may stand as a temporal marker, and as a sign of the differences between themselves and Milton that most writers in the age would have heartily insisted on.

Because I am finally concerned with major achievements, I concentrate (in Part III) on the major poets from Dryden to Cowper. Dryden, Pope, and Thomson were obvious choices. Johnson and Cowper illustrate the powerful responses, in critical biography and poetry, to Milton’s personality and his theology. Although I largely limit myself to poetry and biography, I briefly consider the novel in chapters six and seven. Some readers will be disappointed not to find a discussion of Blake. I exclude him on grounds that the response of Blake to Milton is itself a very large and complex subject; that it has recently received a good deal of helpful critical attention; and that it opens up a new era – Romantic responses to Milton – that lies outside my chosen subject.

Other readers may be surprised not to find a chapter on Satan. My reading suggests that Satan was after all not very interesting to the eighteenth century, except as a polemical image in political satire, and (as in Cowper) as a figure for the damned and lost soul. On the whole Satan is not problematic for the eighteenth century – and thus not attractive. Johnson, untroubled, says simply that Satan speaks and acts as you would expect the devil to act. Some critics such as Dryden claimed Satan to be the hero of the poem, but only in the technical sense that, in the short run, he triumphs. Mid-century critics found Satan sublime, but primarily arousing terror, not admiration.

It is a pleasure to record here my own debts (and hope they may be thought of as creative responses). Thanks go first to Thomas Edwards, Jean Hagstrum, J. Paul Hunter, Maynard Mack, and Earl Miner, who encouraged and supported my work at an early stage. I thank Robert Hume, William McClung, John Richetti, Gardner Stout, and especially Paula Backscheider for generously responding to inquiries. I thank Douglas Canfield, Stephen Fix, J. Paul Hunter, Anthony Low, Gordon Pradl, John Shawcross, John Sitter, and James Winn for their attentive readings of and comments on draft chapters. I am grateful to the staffs of the Bobst Library of New York University, the Butler Library at Columbia University, the New York Public Library, the Firestone Library at Princeton University, the British Library, and the Sterling and Beinecke Libraries at Yale University for their cooperation.

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x
PREFACE

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