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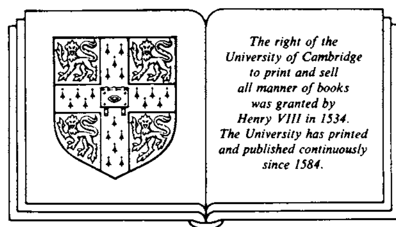
MILTON AND THE REVELATION OF HISTORY

MARSHALL GROSSMAN



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PREFACE

My topic is a certain textual inscription of the self in the second half of the seventeenth century. The experience of history as progress, proclaimed by Bacon and demonstrated by technological advances that were changing the economics of agriculture, marks the birth, in the seventeenth century, of the modern conception of the self as at once coherent and unified, yet developing, as capable of making and being made by history. In the third book of *Paradise Lost,* Milton has the Father describe Adam and Eve as "authors to themselves in all / Both what they judge and what they choose." This use of writing as a model for the structure of the self-information reflects a conception of history as a progress of second causes inscribed within a providential design. My book studies how the narrative form of *Paradise Lost* projects this new concept of the historical self through a dialectic that locates the narrated events at the intersection of prospective and retrospective points of view.

The notion that the modern conception of the individual was born in the Renaissance has long been a scholarly commonplace. Recent studies have described the textual traces of this birth in sixteenth-century English literature and have begun to outline in some detail the stages of its gestation. Stephen Greenblatt has described the appearance in sixteenth-century texts of the self as an object to be fashioned by an interior subject and submitted to a world of external forces, and Anne Ferry has charted the development of a vocabulary of "inwardness" with which this new self, composed of an authentic interior and an always inadequate outward expression, began to be explored in sixteenth-century sonnets. Greenblatt's

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notion of a self that can be fashioned, manipulated, and revised according to the tensions of a particular historical situation is in many ways the starting point of my study. I have sought to describe how this tension between the self as subject and as object is manifest in a narrative representation of inwardness that appears nearly a century after the sonnets in which Ferry traces the earliest poetics of the divided self.

The intervening century was a tumultuous one, and it is a certain assumption that English culture after the Glorious Revolution represents the transformation into a modern commercial state of the feudal world in which the Tudor monarchy began. The self-fashioned selves studied by Greenblatt reflect the tensions of a society whose explanations of power in relation to individual men lag behind the forces of historical change that such explanations must accommodate. The present study examines a textual constitution of the self in England in the second half of the seventeenth century, after the Commonwealth and the Protectorate have irreversibly broken the link with the feudal past.

The self-authored subject of *Paradise Lost* accumulates experiences through a series of judgments and choices that extend over the period of its life. As a fully historical conception of the self, it faces the problem of changing in response to temporally unfolding events while maintaining an essential continuity with its own past. Self-authorship, therefore, may be understood as the temporal recuperation of the tension between self-fashioning and self-cancellation – the alternating experience of oneself as mastering and mastered – described by Greenblatt. This modern subject substitutes for the continuity provided by a stable and repetitive network of power relations, the individual and internal integrity of the Cartesian cogito. The subject of self-authorship substitutes its internal coherence, its ability to understand itself as developing in continuity with a personal past, for the social continuity that is effaced by the technological dream of progress and its vision of "improvement by tract of time." Representing itself to itself as additive, as accumulating experiences through which it grows and changes, the self-authored subject imagines the recuperation over time of the instantaneous self-identification that had previously been afforded by a stable network of social, political, and familial roles. It offers, at the dawn of bourgeois

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social and political hegemony, the prototype of the self-made man, carefully modifying and retying the knot that binds this entrepreneurial self-purveyor to God and to history.

The method of this study reflects my belief that literary history errs when it constitutes the history of literature as an autonomous, self-generating system responsive only to intertextual processes like imitation or the exhaustion of generic possibilities or, conversely, when it treats literature as epiphenomenal to some extratextual "reality." The problem for the literary historian is to specify the relationship of text to history and to understand as far as possible how change in one affects change in the other, without reducing textual to literary events or reducing historical to textural processes. To navigate between this Scylla and Charybdis, I propose a dialectical analysis that uses the experiential and textual aspects of time to mediate material and literary history. Time, as Thomas Aquinas noted, is implicit in the verb. Literary texts, therefore, necessarily articulate a time of reading and a sense of duration interior to their discourse. Verbs have subjects as well as tense, and every narrative necessarily represents a series of choices in the linking of subjects to verbs. In his brilliant and comprehensive study of the redescriptive powers of rhetoric, *The Rule of Metaphor,* Paul Ricoeur has shown that the operation of rhetorical tropes depends upon predication. Following his argument, while resisting the ontological value he accords to metaphoric redescription, I have understood Milton's narrative as a sequence of tropes relating grammatical subjects and verbs in definite temporal sequences. The representation of time and the grammar of predication mediate between historical actions and the narrative episodes that recount them. Therefore, I have followed the episodes of *Paradise Lost* in sequence and charted the poem's representation of the self in relation to time as a method of exploring the boundary between world and literary events and of studying the dialectical interaction between experience and narrative. It is part of my argument that for Milton the temporal unfolding of human events is part of a signifying system in which the meaning of any human action is always provisionally anticipated in the act but ultimately deferred until the eschaton. The sequential reading of the poem respects and thematizes this representation of semantic deferral as narrative form.

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Preface

It has not been my intention to provide a revisionary reading of Milton's epic or to reinterpret its major cruces or fix its historical meaning, although on occasion such interpretive efforts have been an inevitable outcome of my procedure. Rather, I have sought as much as possible to displace the question What does this mean? in favor of the question How does this mean?; further, I have situated the latter question in the sequence of the narration, paying special attention to how a specific textural feature may mean differently at different points in the poem. In practice the answer to this question has taken the form of a description of the rhetorical tropes that organize the narrative configuration of the epic and form the basis of the text's representation of judging and choosing subjects moving through time. Seeking a vocabulary with which to fashion this description of Milton's rhetoric and its historical and social context, I have referred to a broad spectrum of philosophical and narratological studies. Underlying this range of reference is my conviction that each of these apparently disparate discourses reinscribes, within its own context, logical and temporal relations implicit in a dialectic internal to the tropes themselves. I have thus used several frames of reference, not heterogenously, but relying on their homogeneity for the freedom to exploit each to its appropriate effect.

A special instance of this procedure is my juxtaposition of psychoanalytic and rhetorical analyses. In some ways my text may be taken as an inverting mirror image of William Kerrigan's *The Sacred Complex*, a work with which any study of the representation of the self in *Paradise Lost* ought come to terms. Kerrigan provides a sophisticated and sensitive study of the "psychogenesis of *Paradise Lost*" in the personal history of John Milton, and of the poet's particular use of Christian myth as a vehicle for the resolution of the tensions to which that history gives rise. Since the subject of psychoanalysis itself is the very configuration of the self or ego whose formation is exemplified in Milton's narrative, my study may be thought of as presenting the psychogenesis of John Milton in the text of *Paradise Lost*. Where Kerrigan seeks the origin of *Paradise Lost* in the life history of its author, I seek to trace in the text an early articulation of the form "life history" presupposed by psychoanalytic explanation. Psychoanalytic discourse presupposes the experience of a self in search of the continuity between its past and

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present, such as the one I have sought to locate in the developing response of men and women in the seventeenth century to the changing conditions of their lives. As I have suggested, this configuration of the self was already in the making by the second half of the sixteenth century. Psychoanalysis can thus be situated within a historical formation of the self of which Milton's narrative is exemplary. The unique form of Milton's narrative – and its realignment of theology, hermeneutics, and experience – makes *Paradise Lost* the epic of the origin of Freudian man, discovering at once the form and subject of psychoanalytic inquiry. It is a trope of psychoanalytic discourse to place the origin of the text in the ego and its history, but this temporal priority is an effect of the discourse, not an ontological necessity. Because our interests interrelate in this way, my text parallels Kerrigan's at some points, approaching the same issues and reading the same passages, but always with a strategic reversal of direction. In the notes, I have traced these points of contiguity with the psychoanalytic reading and allowed Milton's texts to comment on, in effect, to historicize, Freud's and Lacan's.

In the preparation of this study, I have incurred more debts than I can properly chronicle. C. A. Patrides and Anthony Low introduced me to the serious study of Milton's work, and conversations with Hayden White and Joel Fineman led me to study the vicissitudes of the subject in Renaissance poetry. Mary Ann Radzinowicz, Anthony Low, Bernard Gilligan, and Lee Erickson provided meticulous readings of the entire manuscript, saving me from many embarrassments. Ernest B. Gilman read this material in various stages of production, engaged in a discourse on the issues raised in it, functioned as a critically acute bibliographic resource, and, finally, offered a careful and generous reading of the whole. Patricia Clough, Lee Erickson, Bernard Gilligan, Lia Lerner, Robert O'Brien, and Herman Rapaport listened attentively to endless formulations and reformulations of my thoughts and commented perspicaciously. Andree Hayum advised me on parallel developments in the visual arts. I have a special debt to Richard Harrier for his long-standing encouragement of my efforts, for his generosity, and for the example of humane humanism he provides.

I should also like to express my appreciation to the staffs of the New York Public Library and of the Elmer Holmes Bobst Memorial

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Finally, I am indebted to my wife and son for tolerating my sporadic absence and my constant preoccupation over a long period of time.

Parts of Chapters 5, 6, and 8 of this study have appeared, in different forms, in *Milton Quarterly*, *Milton Studies*, and *Modern Philology*, respectively. I thank the editors for permission to reprint this material.

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