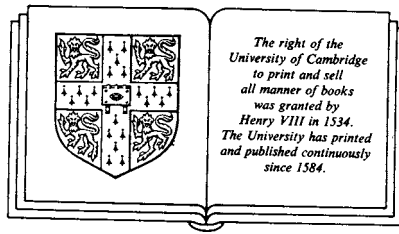


# Milton and the Drama of History

*Historical Vision, Iconoclasm,  
and the Literary Imagination*

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## Introduction

THIS BOOK is a study of the figuration of history in Milton's revolutionary prose and major poems. It focuses in particular on the relation between his literary imagination and his historical vision. Because I believe that Milton's imaginative achievement encompasses both his prose and poetry, I have chosen to discuss the prose in considerable detail rather than using it simply as a convenient or occasional gloss on the poems. Too often his revolutionary prose writings, except for more canonical texts like *Areopagitica* or *Of Education*, are treated as peripheral or secondary to the poems – as left-handed achievements with less aesthetic or literary value. Yet, as I argue in this study, the drama of history in the great poems is a profound and often troubled response to the sense of history and its complex figurations registered throughout the prose. The figurative and historiographical dimensions of Milton's revolutionary prose consequently deserve rigorous attention both in their own right and in relation to his poetic masterpieces. By stressing the imaginative continuity between these two stages of Milton's literary career, my study of his figurations of history enables us to see, from one significant perspective, how deeply his controversial prose works affected and shaped his major poetic achievements.

My book, then, is about Milton's imaginative responses to the historical process – his interpretations of the past, his visions of the future, his sense of active performance in the contemporary historical moment.<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase “the drama of history” to underscore the literary dimensions of Milton's historical vision, while also drawing attention to the performative side of Milton as a revolutionary writer whose controversial polemics themselves often operate as “Dramatick constitutions . . . doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation” (*The Reason of Church-Government*, 1, 814–15). My concern therefore is not with Milton's use of historical sources, but with his acute sense of the process of history – especially his sense of the urgencies and conflicts which both generate and thwart historical renovation in his age – and with the literary responses that historical consciousness provokes. While

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a study of Milton's creative use of historical materials might well yield valuable insights into his understanding of history and its relation to his literary achievements, I have chosen to undertake a different sort of project: one which highlights Milton as an imaginative writer who often saw himself, especially during the revolutionary years, as actively engaged in shaping and representing the drama of history. For Milton the literary imagination was not at all divorced from historiographical and polemical forms of discourse; rather it helped to shape them, just as it helped to transform social and cultural values.<sup>2</sup> My focus on the figurative dimensions of Milton's historiography and polemical writings enables me to address the ways in which tone, imagery, language, and revolutionary themes of both the polemical prose and major poems express Milton's historical imagination. My aim is to consider how the politics and figuration of history intersect throughout his revolutionary writings and major poems, including some of his less canonical texts – *Eikonoklastes* and the *History of Britain*, for example.

My study examines Milton's controversial writings in the context of important cultural developments in his age – radical millennial visions, revolutionary iconoclasm, seventeenth-century historiography – in order to highlight what is distinctive about his sense of historical renovation, especially in relation to his literary sensibility. My critical procedure is to alternate between exploring contemporary conceptions of history and their representations and offering detailed readings of individual texts and significant figurative passages from Milton's works. In this way I hope to highlight interconnections between Milton's historical consciousness and his literary creativity. My first chapter, for example, modulates between examining revolutionary millenarianism and treating in detail richly metaphorical and dramatic passages from Milton's turbulent apocalyptic tracts, including the rhetorically vehement conclusion to *Of Reformation* and the stunning hymn to Christ in *Animadversions*. This kind of "literary" reading of the polemical prose is often missing from history-of-ideas approaches, and enables me to consider the aesthetic dimensions of Milton's controversial writings in relation to his evolving historical vision and radicalism.<sup>3</sup> Because my study focuses primarily on the interplay between historical consciousness and literary expression, political vision and textual effects, it does not always attempt to reconstruct at length (as a number of recent historical studies have done) the social contexts of Milton's works.<sup>4</sup>

The affinities between historical discourse and the literary imagination, an issue Milton himself was sensitive to, has become a focus of recent discussions of historiography. In particular, Hayden White has stressed the extent to which "the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other"; indeed, he has suggested that there is a "poetic element in all historical writing."<sup>5</sup> Subjecting historical

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discourse to the kinds of formal and rhetorical analyses applied to literary texts, White has emphasized the figurative dimensions of historiography, including the different ways historical sequences may be “emplotted” or configured – comically, tragically, epically, satirically, and so on – thus endowing events with interpretations implicit in these literary paradigms.<sup>6</sup> One need not adhere, of course, to all the formal and systematic implications of White’s categories to appreciate the way his work has prompted us to reconsider the literary dimensions of historical texts. The boundary between historical discourse and imaginative writing can prove more problematic and less fixed than modern historiographers and literary critics are often willing to acknowledge.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, historical representations may have specific ideological implications; as Roland Barthes observes, in an essay that questions the firm distinction between historical representation and fiction, “historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration, or to put it more precisely, an *imaginary* elaboration.”<sup>8</sup> Such theoretical reflections on the complex relations between historical discourse, rhetoric, and the figurative imagination can help us explore the political and aesthetic dimensions of Milton’s representations of history. In Milton we have a major literary artist who is simultaneously a historiographer, and who embeds much historical commentary and discourse in his revolutionary writings; there he often exploits polemical occasions in order “to soare a while as the Poets use” (*An Apology for Smectymnuus*, 1, 900). His literary sensibility deeply affects his dramatic sense of history and helps to shape the configurations he perceives in historical events.

Throughout this study I treat Milton’s prose discourses as the works of a poet responding in literary terms to the process of history: even his *History of Britain*, in which he appears to disavow inventive elements in historical narrative, contains a lengthy account of the mythic story of Brutus. Elsewhere Milton represents the historical process in highly figurative and mythopoetic ways: the dense metaphorical prose of *Areopagitica* emphasizes his dynamic view of historical renovation in which social conflict is essential; the theatrical tropes in *Eikonoklastes* and *Samson Agonistes* express his ambivalent sense of history as spectacle; the appropriation of epic vision to revolutionary polemic in the *Second Defense* underscores the conflation of his mythic and historical consciousness. Moreover, my study suggests that Milton’s representations of history reveal his sensitivity to the contradictions and conflicts involved in historical and social processes, not a naive and disengaged political sensibility, as is sometimes claimed.<sup>9</sup>

Responding imaginatively to history – treating it, in effect, as a literary construct – is at times for Milton deeply problematic. Indeed, my study explores the tension Milton as historical writer sometimes registers between committing himself to invention and committing himself to truth-telling. The

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*History of Britain*, one of the prose works discussed in chapter 4, is a particularly interesting text from the point of view of his literary representation of history and for the powerful tensions it reveals in his claims for historical discourse. Milton is clearly aware of recent developments in seventeenth-century history writing whose authors, seeking a more direct and impartial account of historical truth, often express their skepticism towards historical invention and rhetorical embellishment. Yet Milton remains divided in his *History* between representing his nation's troubled past mythopoetically and representing its truth impartially – “as lean as a plain Journal” (v, 230), to use his words, without any imaginative material or adornment at all. As I shall argue, this is the distinctive dilemma of the poetic historiographer who frequently represents imaginatively the historical process in his writings and who cannot easily abandon the figurative dimensions of his discourse.

For Milton, responding creatively to the drama of history means responding actively in his writings to the social pressures and crises of his revolutionary age. Yet, given a God-centered view of history, to what degree *can* a human agent – in this case, Milton as controversial writer – both participate in and configure the drama of history? This is a question which Milton's revolutionary writings often implicitly raise and which this book often addresses.<sup>10</sup> The “new historicism” in Renaissance studies has indeed made us more sensitive to the complex interactions between literary texts and history: texts are deeply implicated in the historical process, with its social contradictions and conflicts, not set off or detached from it in an autonomous aesthetic realm.<sup>11</sup> History can no longer be simply relegated to the “background” of the texts which represent its conflicts. Admittedly, the cultural practices and displays of power in the English Renaissance – the subject of much new historical criticism – aroused the revolutionary Milton's deepest suspicion and incited his iconoclastic rage, as we shall see in chapter 3. Nevertheless, the new historicism's emphasis on literary texts participating in – rather than merely serving as a passive reflection of – historical and social processes can help us assess the relation between Milton's literary imagination and his historical consciousness. The view of the text as a creative force in history opens up possibilities for readings of Milton's controversial prose works which address in fresh ways both their figurative dimensions and their historical themes; and it enables us to appreciate better how Milton, through his polemical writings, seeks to mold revolutionary values and to represent social reality in his age. The revolutionary writer, I suspect, would have endorsed Edward Said's notion of the “worldly” and “historical” text “as a dynamic field, rather than . . . a static block” of words taking part in the historical moment in which it is located and produced.<sup>12</sup> For Milton the controversialist, engaging in the historical moment involved an energetic



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assertion of his literary powers and intensified his sense of performance in polemical prose.<sup>13</sup>

In the prose works the controversial writer assumes an active and dynamic role in the historical process, which he attempts to shape and direct through his polemical discourses. At times – especially at impassioned moments in the antiprelatical tracts – we see Milton completely intoxicated with his power as polemicist to perform actively and imaginatively in the eschatological drama. Moreover, this drama of political activism in history often underscores essential connections between the controversial prose and major poems.<sup>14</sup> The spectacular iconoclasm of *Samson* closely resembles, in ways that critics have not always adequately recognized, the aggressive and vehement iconoclasm of *Eikonoklastes*. Iconoclasm becomes in Milton's writings an essential means of effecting historical change, and the literary text – in this case, Milton's virulent regicide polemic – operates as an active, renovating force in the turbulent drama of history.<sup>15</sup> In both *Eikonoklastes* and *Samson* iconoclasm is simultaneously literary and historical: historical transformation involves “casting down imaginations,” a powerful and destructive act that for Milton is nevertheless poetic and theatrical.

From the early revolutionary polemics to the major poems, Milton often envisions history as a particularly dynamic, iconoclastic process, sometimes involving dramatic and violent transformations. In this respect, my argument about Milton's historical imagination suggests that he should be treated less as an orthodox figure and more as a radical thinker of unusual power.<sup>16</sup> Among recent commentators, Christopher Hill has surely done more than anyone else to place Milton in the context of the radical culture and thought of his age.<sup>17</sup> Yet Hill's important revisionary work on Milton and his revolutionary milieu, though it has encouraged us to reconsider the relations between history and literature, does not always examine the imaginative and mythopoetic dimensions of Milton's writings. We need an approach, I believe, that attempts to merge the radical and intellectual dimensions of Milton's poetry and prose with his aesthetic achievements. My study of Milton's sense of history aims to do precisely this: to integrate – rather than to separate from each other – these major facets of Milton's texts. Despite its emphasis on the social dimensions of Milton's historical representations, my project is concerned less with Milton's dialogue with his contemporaries – already explored so richly by Hill – and more with the imaginative responses to history articulated in the works themselves. Such an approach attempts to illuminate the literary expressions of Milton's radicalism.

Furthermore, my study suggests that however iconoclastic and radical their vision may be, Milton's revolutionary tracts never offer a fully or consistently developed philosophy of history. Rather, they are occasional works in which Milton responds creatively to an immediate sense of historical drama –

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though that aspect of his controversial texts itself deserves much wider recognition and critical attention. Even the ambitious historical narrative of the *History of Britain*, a work whose aesthetic and social dimensions deserve more study, does not present a thoroughly developed philosophy of history. Only in the great poems, and especially in Michael's prophecy concluding *Paradise Lost*, do we encounter a more sustained meditation on the uneven, turbulent course of postlapsarian history, with all its tribulations, tragic conflicts, and uncertainties.

In his major poems, as I argue in the last two chapters, Milton continues to grapple with historical conflicts already registered in his revolutionary prose works – between millennial and cyclical history, national regeneration and decline, defeatism and radical iconoclasm, to mention some of the tensions I explore. I have chosen to develop this argument by focusing on the presentation of history at the end of *Paradise Lost* – an artistically controversial section of the poem in the eyes of many critics – and the iconoclastic spectacle of history in *Samson Agonistes*. The major poems, I believe, do not always attempt to transcend the tragedy of human history, though Milton expresses that impulse in the apocalyptic visions of *Paradise Lost*; rather the poems courageously attempt to confront the drama of history as it unfolded in the revolutionary years and found urgent expression in Milton's controversial writings.

I treat *Samson Agonistes* therefore as a troubled, unsettling dramatic poem re-engaging with, but by no means resolving, the conflicts Milton confronted as he wrote his revolutionary prose works. Although in the period of his antiprelatical tracts Milton thought of writing a drama “doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation,” his dramatic poem aims neither to re-educate nor to advise God's people; nor does it quite offer a vision of “a glorious future” and “a call of hope to the defeated,” as one major commentator on its political themes has suggested.<sup>18</sup> Rather *Samson* expresses, in a highly theatrical way, Milton's iconoclastic, turbulent sense of history: its power lies less in its didactic purpose than in its disturbing mixture of pessimism and iconoclasm, as it continues to respond to the drama of history represented throughout the revolutionary prose works, especially *Eikonoklastes*. Like the regicide polemic, whose radical vision it so vividly resembles, the tragedy presents the historical process as fiercely iconoclastic: Samson pulls down the theater and temple of Dagon much as the controversial polemicist had pulled down the “Stage-work” of *Eikon Basilike* (III, 530); Samson's terrifying destruction represents nothing less than the power of God's iconoclastic intervention in the drama of history. Iconoclasm, with all its vehemence and violence, becomes in Milton's polemics and poems a sociocultural activity with significant literary implications. Samson's spectacular act of iconoclasm is a distinctly theatrical gesture – despite its apparent antitheatricalism – which

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continues to express Milton's violent and dramatic sense of historical transformation. Among writers, Milton was one of the great iconoclasts of his revolutionary age, and this crucial dimension of his historical vision and literary imagination deserves further critical attention.

The major poems, however, are by no means uniform in their artistic and sociopolitical responses to the drama of history. Indeed, Milton continued to imagine complex and sometimes contradictory responses to the historical process, without always resolving these responses and interpretations in a consistent or unambiguous fashion. The apocalyptic visions of *Paradise Lost*, which alternate with the weary historical patterns of repetition and decline, vividly recall the renovating apocalypticism of the prose tracts, registering a tension between Milton's impulse to intervene dramatically in history and his impulse to retire from its tragic conflicts having been, like the mangled figure of Truth, "Bestuck with sland'rous darts" (xii.536). The epic's competing historical configurations – degenerative, cyclical, apocalyptic, typological – represent a series of contesting and unresolved imaginative responses which recapitulate conflicting historical visions in the revolutionary prose. Consequently, my study of the relation between Milton's historical consciousness and his figurative imagination often examines aesthetic tensions and literary expressions of social conflict; in this respect, its themes coincide with some of the recent emphases in new historical criticism.<sup>19</sup> As I consider the figuration of history in Milton's writings, I tend to explore their more contradictory, iconoclastic, and unsettling dimensions, unlike many commentators who have given us a less troubling, more orthodox account of Milton's works. In what follows, I argue that Milton's imaginative responses to history, with all the urgencies and contradictions they register, should be understood in relation to his revolutionary writings and his sense of polemical engagement, beginning with the earliest controversial works: there, as we shall see in chapter 1, his acute self-consciousness about the historical process and its conflicts finds powerful expression, while also looking forward to the drama of history envisioned in the great poems.