John Milton's major poems have long provoked wide-ranging judgments about the purposes of his biblical engagement. In this elegant and insightful study, Phillip Donnelly transforms our common perceptions about Milton's writing. He challenges the traditional assumption that the poet shared our modern view that reason is a capacity whose purpose is to control nature. Instead, Milton's conception of reason – both human and divine – is bound up with a poetic sense of difference, a capacity for being faithful to a goodness and beauty that survives the effects of human frailty in the Fall. Providing fresh new readings of Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes, Donnelly gives us important new perspectives on Milton's aesthetics, theology, and politics.

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MILTON’S SCRIPTURAL REASONING

Narrative and Protestant Toleration

PHILLIP J. DONNELLY
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Preface and acknowledgments

This study began as an attempt to correct an error in my previous treatment of Milton in *Rhetorical Faith: The Literary Hermeneutics of Stanley Fish*. In order to investigate Fish’s general theoretical claims, my analysis had, for the sake of argument, granted his interpretation of Milton as a matter of course. As a result, however, *Rhetorical Faith* ended up characterizing Milton as a modern rationalist who tended toward a quasi-Cartesian view of reason as a form of mastery. My argument had also, consequently, misconstrued Milton’s biblical hermeneutics. Only through a careful study of the hermeneutics implied by the biblicism in Milton’s major poetry did I begin to appreciate why my previous characterization of Miltonic reason had been more misleading than helpful.

As my new investigation unfolded, however, I realized that many Milton critics, most notably those who had set themselves in direct opposition to Fish, also shared the assumption that “reason” is necessarily a form of mastery, rather than a capacity for peaceful participation in a reality whose goodness is a gift. As a result, many critics, in arguing against Fish and contending that Milton does not share in the modern view of reason, end up imputing to Milton a contrasting insistence upon the primacy of chaos or indeterminacy. In both cases, however, there is a tendency to assume that sheer necessity and arbitrary randomness exhaust the available alternatives in Milton’s view of reality. In effect, Milton’s biblicist appeal to the polysemic unfolding of *ratio*, whether in his prose or poetry, often gets reduced to a modern instrumental rationality. This instrumental reason, in turn, is alternately interpreted either as a capacity for coercive certainty (understood as prediction whose purpose is to control matter and overcome chance) or as a capacity for arbitrary randomness (understood as a causeless “freedom” of “conscience”). Against both such alternatives, I contend that Milton views reason as the poetic gift of peaceful difference and that he does not share in the modern assumption that reason is intrinsically coercive.
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Part I considers a selection of Milton’s prose and explains how his view of divine and human reason relates to his account of what is real (ontology) and his view of ethics and Protestant toleration. Part II explains how the biblicist unfolding of reason in *Paradise Lost* is an attempt to reveal that the origin, or arché, of created being is a peaceful gift for the good of others – what I call “ontic charity.” In effect, the biblicism of the first ten books of *Paradise Lost* emphasizes the way that Divine Reason gives rise to the “ontic charity” of created being in which human reason may, or may not, fittingly participate. Part III focuses on the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, showing how their contrasting respective modes of biblicism each disclose various ways that the “ontic charity” revealed by the Son can inform “ethical charity,” or action guided by the restoration of “right reason” in humans.

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Abbreviations and editions


Quotations from Milton’s English prose or from English translations of his Latin prose are from the Yale edition. Latin quotations are from the Columbia *Works*. In cases where I cite an introduction or annotation to the Yale edition, I name the editor, followed by *CPW*, volume number and page. Biblical quotations are from the Authorized Version (1611) with lightly modernized spelling.