PART I

Life and works

CHAPTER 1

Biography

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John Milton lived a long and tumultuous life. He was born in 1608, just a few years after the death of Queen Elizabeth, and died about halfway through the reign of Charles II, in 1674. He was intended to be either a clergyman or some form of independent scholar/author – his father and he may have disagreed on the value of the latter, but the clerical option was soon dropped. Instead, his life was irrevocably shaped by what happened in the middle of the seventeenth century – the first English revolution against Charles I, father of Charles II, which produced first a civil war, then a republic, then a dictatorship under Oliver Cromwell, and finally came full circle with the recall of Charles II to the English throne. Milton was drawn deep into this conflict as it continued through the middle twenty years of the century. He became first what we today would call a public intellectual, second an apologist for the revolutionary government that had just executed their king, and eventually a figure in the international press of Europe, to which he contributed in Latin, earning himself both admirers and vociferous enemies.

In 1660, when Charles II returned to England, Milton was obviously in some danger for his attacks on the king's father. He was also completely blind, a condition that developed during, and was exacerbated by, his work for the revolutionary government. He survived the Restoration, after a brief spell in prison, by returning to a very restricted version of private life, writing poetry almost exclusively, and depending heavily on readers and secretaries, including his daughters. We are the beneficiaries of this downward turn in his fortunes, for what emerged in 1667 was *Paradise Lost*, and in 1673, the year before his death, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. These late poems made him a famous canonical author and justify his secure place in the international pantheon. But one cannot understand the man nor his great poems without also knowing his political views and arguments, as worked out in the heat of controversy, between 1640 and 1660.

There are at least two commonsense questions to consider before writing a life of John Milton: the first, obviously, what readers today want or need to know about the facts of Milton's life; the second, what would Milton himself have wished them to know. For one of the many things that made Milton remarkable was his determination to interpret his life along the evaluative lines he preferred, for his readers at the time, retrospective piece by piece. Without actually sitting down to write his life, Milton managed to insert large chunks of autobiography into other projects, to such a degree that John Diekhoff was able to publish these "digressions" under the title of *Milton on Himself* (New York, 1939). Their testimony needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. Most autobiographers shape their stories to make themselves seem more (or sometimes less) admirable than they really were. But Milton's desire to control the record is *itself* one of the more interesting biographical facts about him.[1]

At Cambridge, where his well-off scrivener father sent him to get a gentleman's education, Milton's sense of himself as designed for a great literary future was expressed in an important personal notebook, the "Trinity Manuscript," named after the college library that preserves it, as distinct from Milton's own college, which was Christ's. In this manuscript he recorded his early poems in the order in which they were composed, sometimes noting the dates of composition or the age at which he wrote them. But in his later autobiographical digressions Milton did not specify dates. This means that biographers and critics have for years struggled to create, or to agree on, an exact chronology of his life and works. Also, Milton's admirers tend to have a theory about his life, to which the undisputed facts are not so much bent as lent. Some of these theories are political, as in John Toland's late seventeenth-century Whig *Life*, or Barbara Lewalski's modern insistence that Milton was a coherent liberal thinker from beginning to end.[2] Some are sexual, as in William Kerrigan's Freudian account of Milton's relations with his parents, or Anna Beer's view that all three of Milton's marriages were inhibited by an early passionate commitment to a fellow undergraduate, Charles Diotati.[3] More recently, Blair Worden has argued for a long-standing collaboration between Milton and the Commonwealth journalist Marchamont Nedham, a side of Milton's career less high above the fray than he liked to suggest.[4] Some biographers believe that Milton was "unchanged," to use his own term from *Paradise Lost*, from college to the grave. Others see a story of drift, changes of intention, opportunism, and even an implicit retraction, in his great poems, of his most important contributions to English political life.

This, however, is a more or less uninterpreted summary of what we know, situating the man not only in a chronology but in relation to his works, his historical circumstances, his friends, his employers, his family – in last place because Milton almost never discussed his family members in his own writing. The most important exceptions are the early but undatable letter to his father (*Ad Patrem*) pleading, in Latin, to be allowed to pursue a literary vocation, and the late sonnet about the death of his wife – but which of his three wives he mourned, he left unclear!

It used to be the fashion for biographers to dwell on Milton's earliest years, his excellent schooling, his time at Cambridge, his period of private study at his father's estate at Horton, and his extended tour of Italy, the social and conventional culmination of his education. This was the period of "intellectual development," as Harris Fletcher called it, thought to explain the poet he became.[5] What Milton himself felt, however, was that he suffered from writer's block. In 1632 he complained: "my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th. / . . . And inward ripeness doth much less appear, / That some more timely-happy spirit endu'th" (Sonnet 7). In bulk, at least half of his output was in Latin, and the so-called "prolusions" were required university essays. The form of block that he suffered was, perhaps, unrealistic ambition. In 1628, at the age of nineteen, performing a public exercise on the topic of Aristotelian logic, he outlined the grand metaphysical or heroic subjects he hoped in future to address. But by 1642 he had still not decided what kind of great poem to write, as he admits in a long autobiographical aside in *The Reason of Church-Government,* one of the earliest of the pamphlets by which his original goal had been derailed.

Nevertheless, Milton did write some successful poems before his continental tour. In the first of these, dated 1629, he established a claim to become a major new religious poet. This was "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," which goes far beyond the stable in Bethlehem, however beautifully rendered, to consider the eventual redemption of the world by Christ, all folded into a brilliant prolepsis that is withdrawn as soon as it is offered: "But wisest Fate says no, / This must not yet be so" (lines 149–50). The next religious poem he tried, "The Passion," collapsed after eight stanzas. It would take thirty-five years to prove his claim good.

At Cambridge Milton had also started to write sonnets, in Italian and English, a genre to which he would remain committed for the next twenty years. In 1630 he wrote, or at least dated, a sonnet-like poem in praise of Shakespeare, which had the honor of being included in the second folio of Shakespeare's plays when it appeared in 1632. Possibly as a result, in 1634 he received a rather important dramatic and social commission – to write a

masque for the installation of John, Earl of Bridgewater, as Lord President of Wales. The intermediary was Milton's friend Henry Lawes, a musician with court connections. Generically, the *Mask* sits uncertainly between the court masques of the day and something more intellectually and morally demanding. It was published by Henry Lawes, but still anonymously, in late 1637 or early 1638, and its anonymity led, ironically, to its being appropriated to the canon of his greatest college rival, Thomas Randolph.[6] Finally, in 1638, not long before he left for Italy, one of his most ambitious poems was published with his name attached: *Lycidas*, an elegy for a young man he had known at Cambridge and who had drowned in a shipwreck in the Irish Channel, was included with other elegies in a university memorial volume.[7] Thus by the time he left on his own sea-voyage Milton had, in real terms as adjudged by publication, accomplished very little, not nearly as much as other aspiring young writers such as Randolph or Abraham Cowley, two of the "more timely happy spirits" to whom he had compared himself in Sonnet 7.[8]

Most of what we know about Milton's continental tour is thanks to a very retrospective account he himself provided in 1654, in the Latin tract, *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio Secundo,* written to explain and defend the English revolution and regicide, and his own role therein. It is devoid of dates but packed with assertions of Milton's respectability and acceptability to European literati, including Giovanni Battista Manso, the famous patron of Torquato Tasso. Milton had gone with a letter of introduction, he tells us proudly, from Sir Henry Wotton, "who had long served King James' ambassador to the Venetians," and in Paris Lord Scudamore, the present ambassador to France, had introduced him to Hugo Grotius "then ambassador from the Queen of Sweden to the King of France" (*CPW* IV:614–15). Impeccable credentials; but whether he really gained from this trip *at the time* "a great boost of self-confidence in the rightness of his chosen vocation as poet"[9] is an inference from an autobiographical passage in *The Reason of Church-Government,* written three years later. Then Milton, asserting his qualifications as an author, described having recited some of his poems to the Italian academicians, their praise reinforcing an "inward prompting . . . that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life)" he might indeed become a great poet (*CPW* I:810). He did write a Latin letter of compliment and gratitude to Manso, and a pastoral elegy in Latin for Charles Diodati, who had died in August 1638. The second was certainly written after Milton's return to London, and the first very probably so. Both, in a sense, were required. Both poems, to the delight of Milton scholars, contain statements of a great literary ambition,

to write a British epic based on Arthurian materials. The statements are all we have. After that there were no signs of poetic activity for several years.

In the *Defensio Secunda* Milton tells us that his plans to visit Sicily and Greece were interrupted by the "sad tidings of civil war from England" (*CPW* IV:619). This could only have been have been the First Bishops' War against the Scots, declared late in January 1639. Seeing himself in the light of 1654, Milton wrote, "I thought it base that I should travel abroad at my ease for the cultivation of my mind, while my fellow-citizens at home were fighting for liberty" (*CPW* IV:619). This was an odd description of the war to put down the Scottish rebellion over the imposition of the English prayer-book, and in fact Milton did not immediately return home, but spent several more months in Florence, and visited Venice, where he spent a month sightseeing and buying books. He returned home in late July or early August 1639, by which time the war was in abeyance; but the Scots had, significantly, changed the structure of their church government, replacing the hierarchical and ritual structure of episcopacy (bishops at the top) with the somewhat more egalitarian organization of presbytery. Would this model spread to England?

Milton's behavior on his return was consistent with the program of "labour and intent study" he saw as his future, and had nothing to do with "the fight for liberty" he later claimed brought him home. Significantly, he left his family home at Horton for the more professional venue of London, and in the autumn of 1639 or early in 1640 rented lodgings near Fleet Street. He had agreed with Thomas Agar, the second husband of his sister Anne, to take on the education of his two young nephews, John and Edward Phillips, and both the little boys and their uncle began a rigorous program of study. Milton re-opened a notebook he had used at Horton as a record of his reading, and now rapidly filled it with references to, and citations from, new research. This "Commonplace Book" was already divided into four sections: ethical, economic, political, and a theological one which has not survived. Although Elizabeth Sauer has a detailed account of the Commonplace Book in chapter 38 of this volume, it is worth stating here that the new entries show a new interest in British history or political thought, especially Holinshed's *Chronicles* (the most frequently quoted work). By 1644 Milton had turned to European history, such as Paolo Sarpi's *Historia del Concilio Tridentino*, to which he makes thirteen references. Milton's Political Index, much the longest index in his Commonplace Book, has an overflowing section under the heading "King" and another under "Tyrant." While this might be a broad program of humanist reading,

such as Sauer and others posit, it will turn out to have political applications. It was not a seedbed for poetry.

For it must have become increasingly difficult to ignore what was happening outside the walls of the study and private schoolroom. In 1640 Bishop Joseph Hall responded to the threat of spreading Presbyterianism by publishing *Episcopacie by Divine Right*, a provocative title if ever there were one. In March 1641 five Presbyterian ministers, one of whom, Thomas Young, had been Milton's private tutor, wrote jointly *An Answer* to a second pamphlet by Hall. The *Answer* was followed by an anonymous "Postscript" attacking episcopacy on historical grounds, with references to the English historical sources, Holinshed, Speed, and Stow, that Milton had just been reading – including several of the same page references! Don Wolfe therefore infers that the anonymous author was John Milton (*CPW* 1:79–80), and the inference is supported by the appearance, in May 1641, of another anonymous tract in the conflict about the bishops: *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline in England*, which was largely an expansion, with some splendid metaphors, of the "Postscript". This was Milton's entrée into the world of political polemic – for political it was, despite the focus on church affairs. By the early spring of 1642 Milton had written four more tracts against the bishops, to the third of which, *The Reason of Church-Government Urg'd against Prelaty,* he put his name. And into it he inserted the first of his famous autobiographical passages, telling his audience not only about his education and Italian trip but about his literary ambitions, and how painful he found it to put them aside "to imbark in a troubl'd sea of noises and hoars disputes" (*CPW* 1:821).

But embarked he was, and getting better at polemic by the moment. On February 7, 1642, the House of Lords assented to the bill excluding all the bishops from their House, and Milton might reasonably have returned to his "calme and pleasing solitarynes" (*CPW* 1:821) in the belief that he had marginally contributed to this reform. But what happened next surprised everybody, including, perhaps, Milton himself. In the summer of 1642, just after his fifth antiprelatical tract appeared, Milton suddenly decided to get married. His choice was at first sight unfortunate (though perhaps it was love at first sight that was to blame). At thirty-three, after a very short courtship, he married Mary Powell, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Richard Powell, a royalist gentleman in Oxfordshire, who owed Milton a substantial sum of money. For this episode, we have the colorful testimony of Edward Phillips, his nephew and pupil, himself twelve at the time.[10] The young bride, brought back to London, soon became miserable in this rigorously scholarly household, and asked permission

to go back to Oxfordshire until the end of September. Meanwhile, the looming civil war between king and parliament had actually broken out. Oxford became a royalist stronghold (with Milton's brother Christopher among the king's supporters). Mary did not return at the appointed time, and her family refused communications with the deserted husband. By January 1643 the House of Commons forbade traffic with Oxford. By August 1, Milton had written the first of four pamphlets advocating a change in England's divorce laws, which were still regulated by canon law. Though he never mentions Mary Milton, we can easily read between the lines of the first divorce pamphlet, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce,* to recover his massive disappointment in his young wife and his consequent insistence that canon law, by allowing divorce only on the grounds of adultery or non-consummation, was entirely missing the point. Marriage was always, since Genesis, Milton now argued, intended to be less for sex or procreation than for emotional solace or intellectual support, a meeting of minds.

Between May 1641 and August 1644 Milton had published five pamphlets on church reform, four on reform of the divorce laws; and some of these tracts were long. Suddenly he had become a published author of some standing. That intensive study was still going on was advertised, if not proven, by his publication also of *Of Education* in June 1644, a fearsome account of the pedagogical regime that Milton was presumably attempting on behalf of his nephews. But meanwhile his divorce pamphlets were causing a scandal. The Presbyterians, whose cause Milton thought he had assisted in the church reform pamphlets, were now insisting on the need to control radical or "wicked" ideas in the marketplace of print. The House of Commons charged a committee to seek out and prosecute the authors, printers, and publishers of "the Pamphlet against the Immortality of the Soul, and concerning Divorce" (*CPW* II:142). Everybody knew that the latter referred to Milton, who had signed the preface to the second expanded edition of the *Doctrine*. William Prynne, whose own cruel treatment by Charles I for writing against the court had made him a revolutionary hero and martyr, now recommended that the Grand Council should suppress "Atheistical opinions, as of the soules mortality, divorce at pleasure, &c." (*CPW* II:142). And a very long, though anonymous, pamphlet "answering" the *Doctrine* appeared in November. Any thought that Milton might have had of retiring to "the quiet and still air of delightfull studies" (*CPW* I:821–22) was put aside by these challenges. The result was, in the eyes of literary scholars, Milton's most brilliant piece of prose, *Areopagitica*, a defense of the freedom of the press. Self-defense put Milton

in a flame which generated forward-looking principles he might not have previously thought through. Despite the occasional cavil (from those who object to Milton's exempting Catholic publications from such freedom), it still stands as one of the founding texts of early modern and modern liberalism. But in late November 1644, it utterly failed to achieve its specific goal of persuading the Long Parliament to repeal its new licensing act, which largely reinstated the censorship legislation and mechanisms of Charles I.

Milton now leased a larger house in Cripplegate, apparently with the intention of expanding his school and possibly of marrying again. He was having trouble with his eyesight, and needed domestic help. But in the summer of 1645, a reconciliation between Milton and his estranged wife was effected by friends. Mary returned to her husband's house, to help him run what was now a much larger establishment. At this point Milton collected and published almost all his early poems, both in English and Latin (although his publisher, Humphrey Moseley, stated that it was he who sought out the author on the basis of his reputation) and worked on several scholarly projects, including a history of Russia (Moscovia), a history of early Britain, and textbooks on grammar and logic. Was this a deliberate withdrawal from the political arena, or lack of other opportunities? In 1654 he complained that his polemical skills had received no recognition or reward, whereas "other men secured offices at no cost to themselves." "As for me, no man has ever seen me seeking office . . . clinging with suppliant expression to the doors of Parliament . . . I kept myself at home for the most part" (*CPW* IV:627). He wrote some politically inflected sonnets, including two that mocked the negative reception of his divorce pamphlets. Meanwhile, it had become clear that Charles I was losing the civil war, and that the new government would consist of some blend of the Long Parliament with the army leaders, of whom Oliver Cromwell was preeminent. On December 6, 1648 Colonel Pride and his forces arrested or excluded two-thirds of the Presbyterian MPs who had been negotiating with the king. Milton now knew that those in charge were the eighty-odd remaining parliamentarians, who became known as the Rump Parliament. On January 4, 1649, the Rump formally declared the kingdom a republic, and the army leaders determined to try Charles I on a charge of high treason against his subjects. The trial began on January 20, and on January 30 the king was executed.

These events brought to a close Milton's second retreat into pure scholarship. After nearly four years of silence in the public sphere, he suddenly reappeared as the author of a revolutionary pamphlet justifying the king's