John Milton – heretic, defender of the Cromwellian regicides, epic poet – holds a crucial strategic position on the intellectual and ideological map of literary studies. In this provocative and liberating study, John P. Rumrich contends that contemporary critics, despite differences in methodology, have contributed to the invention of a monolithic or institutional Milton, as censorious preacher, aggressive misogynist, and champion of the emerging bourgeoisie. Rumrich reveals the pressures that have shaped this current critical orthodoxy, and exposes the historical inaccuracies and logical inconsistencies that sustain it. Through analysis of Milton's poetry and prose, and consideration of the historical forces that informed Milton's writing, Rumrich argues instead for a more complex Milton who was able to accommodate uncertainty and doubt.

MILTON UNBOUND

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Controversy and Reinterpretation

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This book is dedicated to my sisters and brother

Kathleen Mary
Patricia Eileen
Sheila Jolan
and
Joseph Bartholomew

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Preface and acknowledgments

This book began in Beijing, China in 1987. My students there lent human substance to what had been previously only a hypothetical proposition: that many of us in the United States were teaching or being taught a badly skewed version of Milton. The Milton to whom the students at Peking University responded was, as Joan Bennett has described him, a radical humanist, who not only hated tyranny and superstition but who, unlike more quiescent intellectuals and artists, put himself on the line fighting against them. That last is important, since Milton's ethics, social agenda, and, I shall argue, artistic and aesthetic expressions imply each other and express an open-ended tolerance, in the societal and structural senses of that term.

My students in China, then struggling with rigorous state censorship, deeply admired *Areopagitica*. It has been argued recently that every grant of liberty rests on an implicit exclusion or limitation of that liberty. Freedom of expression is always already censorship. Yet these students understood, and brought me to understand, that while social policy may always set limits to freedom, differences in degree are of much greater practical moment than some theoretically minded Western Milton scholars seem willing to recognize. Milton, for all his idealism, was a practical man, and a practical champion of liberty. The students at Peking University revered him for that. Living under a totalitarian regime is in some ways an excellent preparation for Milton studies, especially when the government is willing to end one's life for advocating too stubbornly a larger degree of individual liberty or for challenging the absolutist ideology by which it governs. Those were of course the conditions under which Milton lived much of his life, early and late.

I therefore found myself drawn to William Empson's *Milton's God*, which also begins, though to different effect, with the culture shock of teaching *Paradise Lost* in the East. I had long been taught to view

Empson's work as occasionally brilliant, but perverse and wrong-headed – because no one could seriously think that Milton would *really* question the ways of God to men. I do not endorse Empson's ultimate position – that Milton struggled sublimely to justify the inexcusably evil Christian God but failed because the Christian God is evil from his foundations. I am not morally certain enough to feel confident in such a claim, whereas Empson came to write his book already convinced that the Christian deity was a relic of Neolithic cruelty. For Empson, Milton's heresies could blunt only the harsher edges of Christianity, a gloomy opinion that, as I argue in the last chapter, in part reflects a mistaken understanding of the poetic implications of Milton's heretical materialism.

Like Empson, however, I do believe that the struggle of Milton's theodicy is genuine and that the poet presumes no certainty as to cosmic justice. The victory of *Paradise Lost*, to the extent Milton manages it, lies instead in helping us to accept the ambiguity, doubt, and indeterminacy constitutional of our lives, without succumbing to the fear that our existence is meaningless, or worse, malignant. The epic theodicy persuades us to make use of reasonable doubt to establish a place for benevolence and grace in our lives, and it does so most significantly by virtue of the very heresy that Empson was unwilling, perhaps stubbornly so, to admit into the epic narrative. Material indeterminacy and inconclusiveness, in the formlessness of chaos, are for Milton constitutional of the cosmos, of morality, and indeed are essential to the deity himself.

This investigation is largely concerned with internal or structural logic. Hence, in assessing Milton's humanism within a seventeenth-century context, I contend that the ramifications of his philosophy of matter are salient for comprehension of his political vision and poetic practice. In the case of Milton scholarship, on the other hand, the internal logic of what I call the paradigmatic Milton may be described as a closed dialectical circuit. The dialectical structure has helped a very misleading vision of the poet to prosper – the representation of Milton as a carping didact, aggressive misogynist, and poet of the emerging bourgeoisie.

Given my intention to lay out internal logic rather than to survey exhaustively Milton's works in their historical context or contemporary criticism of them, my argument inevitably neglects exceptions and inconsistencies to its twin theses. I have tried to acknowledge such exceptions as much as possible, however. Those exceptions that are

also my precursors cause even greater anxiety. Anyone who has worked in Milton studies for a few years will realize how easily others' perceptions and insights can become incorporated into one's own arguments. And like most of us, I write in dread of failing to acknowledge my debts. This dread is especially acute in the case of a book like this one, which not only has developed over a long time, but tends to be sharply critical of other work in the field and so should be correspondingly thorough and generous in acknowledgment. For the inevitable errors of omission, I apologize in advance, though I imagine that I will, quite properly, be called to account for them anyway.

Happily, there are many debts of which I am quite conscious. As I already indicated, the book began as an article, entitled "Uninventing Milton," eight years ago in Beijing, China, and I feel deep gratitude to my colleagues and former students there. I started to write "Uninventing Milton" as I was struggling to complete the introduction to my first book, which was then about to go into production. That introduction and the article make some of the same points, as indeed does this book. In general, the opinions presented in *Matter of Glory* concerning the workings of Milton's cosmos have not changed, and this study assumes and builds on that work. I hope that this overlap will be seen as continuity and development rather than as repetition.

"Uninventing Milton" was published in 1990, and I am indebted to Janel Mueller of the University of Chicago, who was then just beginning her tenure as editor of *Modern Philology* and who made the decision to publish that rather unusual piece. She also accompanied her editorial decision with generous encouragement and wise advice. In 1990–91, an NEH fellowship, in combination with a grant from the Research Institute of the University of Texas, Austin, allowed me the time to build upon the article toward a book-length study, and let me find a way to make the argument pivot so that I might offer a positive, alternative vision of the poet rather than simply criticize the existing one. Christopher Hill and John Carey read parts of the study at this point and offered encouragement and direction. Most of the crucial fellowship year was spent at the Alexander Turnbull Library, the research arm of the National Library of New Zealand. The head librarian Margaret Caldwell, her associate Philip Ranier, and the rest of the staff at the Turnbull were unfailingly generous and helpful as I drew on their extraordinary Milton collection, and were, moreover, unquestioningly accepting of an egregiously American visitor during the Gulf War. I also feel a deep sense of gratitude to Lydia Wevers,

Alastair Bisley, Brian and Ann Opie – as well as to their children – for friendship, generosity, affection, and encouragement while I was living and working in Wellington.

My greatest debt as a student of Milton continues to be to William Kerrigan. I can on occasion dissent from his published views only because his teaching, and what is more important, his passion for the truth, have set an example that encouraged me to do so. More specifically, I want to thank Stephen M. Fallon, J. Martin Evans, Wayne A. Rebhorn, and Leah S. Marcus, who all read a large part of the manuscript at an early stage and offered useful, detailed advice that helped me improve what I had already written. They also gave me a renewed sense of direction as I was bringing the work to its conclusion. Mark Womack, Dolora Wojciehowski, Joseph Wittreich, Lydia Wevers, Beth Rothermel, Maurice Kelley, George Boulukos, and Michael Bauman all read chapters and improved them with their comments. Lance Bertelsen advised me on book design and cover art and I have gratefully followed his advice. The portrait of Milton is reproduced courtesy of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Research assistant Daniel Rose caught many errors at the final stage. Most telling was the abiding collaborative effort of Stephen B. Dobranski, who over several years read each chapter, made detailed comments, and suggested new sources for me to consult.

Although this book begins by citing William Empson and Christopher Hill, it also owes much to other Milton scholars. The archetype of historically reliable and industrious Milton scholarship is David Masson, whose massive biography often influences what follows. Only in comparison with Masson could William R. Parker's learned and detailed study seem somehow slight and idiosyncratic. I also am indebted to the work of James Holly Hanford, Denis Saurat, E. M. W. Tillyard, John Milton French, Don Wolfe, Helen Darbishire, Merritt Hughes, and Alastair Fowler. Finally, I want to go on record with the opinion that Maurice Kelley's work on *de doctrina Christiana* is the single most significant and underappreciated contribution to twentieth-century Milton studies. Over years of studying Milton's theological opinions, I have come to rely on Kelley as being almost unfailingly accurate and just in his conclusions. Sadly, the same cannot always be said of those who have over the years disputed them.

Abbreviations

CW	*The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank H. Patterson, 18 vols. (New York, 1931–38).
CP	*The Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven, 1953–82).
Masson	David Masson, *Life of John Milton*, 6 vols. (1874–81; reprint, Gloucester, MA, 1965).
Parker	William R. Parker, *Milton: A Life*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1968).

Citations of Milton's poetry employ standard abbreviations and are taken from *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1952). These citations, and citations of the works listed above, will appear parenthetically in the body of the text. Notes will be used for most other references, with each chapter's initial citation of any given work appearing in full detail.

Translations

Translations of Milton's Latin poetry are my own. Latin and Greek words or passages will appear only for emphasis or when the argument relies on them directly.