Introduction: "Those thoughts that wander through eternity"

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John Milton's intellectual and imaginative engagement with eschatological ideas is evident in his work from the beginning to the close of his career. Speculation about the end of time and the arrival of the great moment of the apocalypse was fueled by the momentous political and religious upheavals of his day and reached an extraordinary pitch of intensity in mid seventeenth-century England. In the Puritan parliament of 1654, Oliver Cromwell, having reminded his listeners of St. Paul's warning that "*In the last days perilous times should come*," went on to say, "and surely it may be well feared these are our times."[1] Cromwell's words reflected a widespread view that the world was in decline, and that human history was in its "perilous" closing phases. Dating of biblical events and prophesies suggested to many that the Second Coming would occur in the 1650s or 1660s. Milton was at one with many others of his age in being intensely interested in the last things. Eschatological themes appear throughout his poetry and prose, from his youthful anticipation in the 1620s of "at last" when "our bliss / Full and perfect is" (Nativity Ode, ll. 165–66) to his assertion that Christ's "Kingdome is now at hand" in the 1640s (*Animadversions, CP* 1: 707) and his politically charged allusion in the early 1670s to that kingdom which "shall to pieces dash / All Monarchies besides throughout the world" (*PR* 4.149–50). The essays in this book provide new insights into Milton's lifelong preoccupation with the ends of time – with the Second Coming, the millennium, Judgment Day, the new heaven and earth, and the eternity which follows.

Milton's eschatology has received little attention in recent years, despite its importance in his work.[2] The Sixth International Milton Symposium, held in York in July 1999, took "Milton and the Millennium" as one of its themes, renewing interest in Milton's apocalypticism. This collection of essays emerges from the vigorous discussion at that Symposium about the significance of the millennium and the apocalypse in Milton's poetry and prose, and forms part of the recent reassessment

of his political and religious radicalism.[3] Just over half the essays in this collection began as papers at the Symposium and have since been expanded and revised. Others represent responses to debate generated at the time. The international forum which provided the impetus for this book has stimulated interaction in the volume between scholars of different theoretical persuasions from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, India, and Australia. The contributors combine their various interests in theology, history, philosophy, authorship, science, politics, and aesthetics with a shared commitment to Milton studies to produce diverse perspectives upon the poet's vision of the ends of time.

The theme of Milton and the millennium prompts comparison between our own millennial moment at the turn of the twenty-first century and seventeenth-century speculation about a millennium which could begin at any time. The wild celebrations with fireworks and rejoicing around the globe which occurred on New Year's Eve 1999 were a far cry from the anxious expectations of religiously minded people in the seventeenth century. These contrasting approaches to the concept of a millennium convey much about the cultures of the respective eras. Our celebration of the dawn of a new millennium (inaccurate though the timing was), was an international, ostentatious, and technological occasion. Festivities for New Year's Eve in Sydney, Tokyo, Paris, London, New York, and other cities were beamed one by one on to television and computer screens across the world. Each city celebrated the moment differently, but each joined in a common recognition of a particular way of conceiving of and measuring time. The main anxieties surrounding the event concerned computer-systems failure, with surprisingly few predictions of the world's end. Despite the Christian significance of the date, its celebration appeared to be primarily secular. Globalization, multimedia, digitally governed systems, and secularization are defining elements of the contemporary world.

The disparity between our recent experience of the passing of a millennium and the seventeenth century's expectation of *the* millennium reveals the rapidity with which society has changed in the past few centuries. Three to four hundred years ago, the word "millennium" referred almost exclusively to John's vision of saints who "lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4). The orthodox, Augustinian interpretation of this verse is that the "thousand years" refers to the spiritual reign of Christ and his saints from the time of Christ's resurrection until the rising of Antichrist.[4] In the seventeenth century, however, there was a resurgence of the millenarian view that the verse was to be taken

literally. Christ would either reign on earth with his saints for a thousand years, or would reign through them. Millenarianism was often generally associated with radical Puritanism, but beliefs about the imminence of the millennium, the people's role in bringing it about, and the nature of the kingdom which Christ might establish have political implications which provide an index of their precise historical moment. Many Parliamentarians during the Civil War identified themselves with the "saints" who would establish the conditions for Christ's kingdom on earth, Fifth Monarchists in the 1650s used Christ's imminent political utopia to justify revolutionary action against the Protectorate, and after the Restoration millenarianism could imply adherence to the Good Old Cause.[5] For this reason Milton's developing millenarian views over the course of these decades give some indication of his shifting positions in contemporary political contests.

The essays in the first part of the collection, "Millennium," provide a major revision of the traditional assessment of Milton's millenarianism. It has long been recognized that Milton held millenarian ideas in the 1640s and 1650s, but it has generally been thought that these diminished with the failure of the Puritan cause. Michael Fixler thought that Milton "progressively experienced" a reaction "to the millenarian claims of the saints," Austin C. Dobbins maintained that in *Paradise Lost* "Milton rejected the millennial position" and C. A. Patrides agreed.[6] These views are challenged in diverse ways in Part I of the collection.

In the first chapter in this book, Barbara Lewalski demonstrates that Milton appealed to the idea of the millennium throughout his career in order to urge personal, ecclesiastical, social, and political reformation. Examining Milton's prose and major poetry, she shows that Milton used his expectation of the millennium to draw support for "eradicating bishops, idolatry and kingship, disestablishing the church, and promoting religious and intellectual liberty." She argues that even in Milton's last poems, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, he emphasizes the need to prepare for the millennium, while at the same time accepting that it may not be imminent.

Sarah Hutton's chapter places Milton's millenarian ideas within the context of those of his contemporaries at Christ's College, Joseph Mede and Henry More. Hutton contends that Milton follows Mede in the unusual identification of the Last Judgment with the millennium. She shows that this position is expressed in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and argues that Milton uses it in *Paradise Lost* implicitly to affirm a belief in the millennium.

Stella Revard's chapter offers the first comprehensive examination of Milton's millenarianism in the context of contemporary political, religious, and millenarian thought. Revard argues that Milton's writings express millenarian views throughout his career, and focuses particularly upon his epics *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, which have previously been characterized as relatively quietist in this respect. By showing that the epics covertly express millenarian sentiments she demonstrates the poet's continuing engagement with radical politics and religion at the time of his major poems.

The following chapter, by Malabika Sarkar, considers Milton's post-Restoration responses to the defeat of his early expectation that the republican government would usher in the millennium. Sarkar argues that, while Milton may have retained faith in the millennium after the Restoration, astronomical images in *Paradise Lost* reveal him to be questioning and analyzing the reasons for its failure to materialize in the immediate present. She contends that Milton's Satan identifies himself with stars and comets which had been regarded as signs of Christ's imminent return earlier in the seventeenth century. Milton's association of these signs with Satan rather than the Second Coming "is a fierce indictment of the false hopes raised in the century of the immediate advent of the promised millennium and the misreadings of celestial signs that fueled such hopes."

The essays of William Hunter and John Shawcross provide divergent views of the significance of the millennium in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and the implications this has for the authorship of the treatise. Hunter advances his argument that Milton is not the author of *De Doctrina* by contrasting its scant treatment of the millennium with Milton's discussion of it in his political pamphlets. The treatise appears to Hunter to be inconsistent with Milton's authorship because it largely ignores the millennium and collapses it into the Last Judgment in accordance with a Continental tradition. Hunter also challenges the view, advanced by others in Part I, that Milton expressed millenarian views before writing *Lycidas* (1637) or in his epic poetry after *The Readie and Easie Way* (1660).

John Shawcross responds by arguing that there is nothing about the treatment of the millennium in *De Doctrina Christiana* which suggests it is not written by John Milton. He points out that the millennium plays only a small role in the scriptural account of the apocalypse and is inconsistent with other aspects of Revelation, a good reason why it is not a focus of a treatise concerned with Christian doctrine. The treatise, like many of Milton's other works, expresses a belief that Christ will reign for a thousand years. While Hunter sees *De Doctrina*'s lack of overt concern

with the political aspects of millenarianism as an indication that it was not written by Milton, Shawcross argues that this lack of concern is a feature of the treatise's genre.

Part II of the collection, "Apocalypse," is concerned generally with the apocalypse and with Milton's conception of the relationship between time and eternity in the later poems. While the two are traditionally conceived of as distinct, Milton's Raphael instructs Adam that time is "in Eternitie" (*PL* 5.581). Milton also conflates different historical periods with each other in his epic, as if time has a unity which is not superficially apparent. In Milton's complex depictions of history, beginnings anticipate endings and endings infiltrate middles: significantly, Eden, the "paradise lost," is a shadow of the last paradise which will obtain when earth becomes heaven and heaven earth.[7] The essays in this part examine Milton's poetic portrayal of time and the apocalypse in the contexts of aesthetics, comparative poetics, philosophy, politics, theology, and science.

Illustrations become a significant component of the study in the first essay in Part II, where Beverley Sherry examines the imagery associated with time and eternity in *Paradise Lost*, and the nineteenth-century artist John Martin's apocalyptic portrayal of such images. Sherry sees light and darkness as, paradoxically, at once temporal and eternal in Milton's epic and maintains that Martin's mezzotints capture this paradox. They show light and darkness operating in time, but the "images of ever receding light and ever deepening darkness" also evoke "dimensions of timelessness which correspond to the apocalyptic perspectives of *Paradise Lost*."

Catherine Gimelli Martin also explores the poetic figuration of time, comparing the enclosed gardens of Milton and Marvell in order to explore their divergent spatial, temporal, and spiritual orientations. Marvell's enclosed gardens tend to be static, remote retreats where "an active God" supplies the wants of "his passive people," while Milton's Eden is active, mutable and profoundly temporal, just as his eternity comprehends time and change. Martin shows that the dualist sense of time which shapes the enclosed gardens in Marvell's poetry gives rise to a rupture between human history and the apocalypse. On the other hand, the monism underlying Milton's portrayal of Eden supports a conception of divine providence as immanent and progressive, and history and the apocalypse as belonging to a continuum.

My chapter then extends Martin's focus on Milton's monistic portrayal of the relationship between time and eternity in *Paradise Lost* by examining

apocalyptic transformations in the poem. I argue that Milton indicates that the conversion of this world to the "New Heav'ns, new Earth" (12.549) will occur alchemically, existing matter being transmuted to a more refined state. There are also indications in the poem that human beings will be materially transformed at the apocalypse, intensifying metamorphosis experienced in this world. Challenging the predominant critical view that the damned are either annihilated or reduced to the materials of chaos, I claim that Milton insists on their eternal existence and ongoing material and spiritual degradation.

Claude Stulting contests the view that *Paradise Lost* is consistently monistic, maintaining that there is a radical discontinuity between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian states of humankind. Before the Fall God is immanent in nature and nature is the means by which Adam and Eve achieve communion with God. However, according to Stulting, in the postlapsarian sections of *Paradise Lost* Adam's and Eve's relationship with God is no longer grounded in the materiality of the created order, but becomes interiorized and situated in history. Milton's new heaven and earth are for Stulting "discontinuous with the original," and the material world of nature remains outside the realms of redemption.

The next chapter turns from *Paradise Lost* to *Paradise Regained* and its engagement with contemporary politics and theology. Ken Simpson argues that Milton provides a critique of the English Reformation in the short epic through scriptural and astrological references to Revelation. He refers to a long line of commentary associating Satan's temptations of Jesus with the trials of the church, and maintains that Milton represents the Anglican church's persecution of dissenters (who belong to the "true," spiritual church) in Satan's persecution of Jesus. Complementing Sarkar's discussion of the association between Satan, comets and false prophesies in *Paradise Lost*, Simpson contends that in *Paradise Regained* Milton has Jesus reject "false portents" (4.491) such as comets because they are sent from Satan. He suggests that the description of Satan as a falling "Autumnal Star" (4.619) or comet in *Paradise Regained* anticipates at once his apocalyptic doom and the fall of the Stuart regime.

The final chapter in this part turns to *Samson Agonistes* and its dramatization of the believer's experience of waiting for revelation and release from worldly hardships. Whereas Samson has traditionally been seen as a type of Christ, Karen Edwards shows that he is "the type of those born afterward who wait, in darkness, for judgment, for apocalypse, for the coming of the Lamb." This reading intensifies Samson's moral and spiritual ambivalence because he ultimately eschews the attitude of patient

waiting which Milton extols elsewhere as a means of serving God. The powerful, apocalyptic ending of the poem is thus one of "perfect ambiguity." The play leaves unresolved the question of whether the "rouzing motions" which motivate Samson to bring down the "two massie Pillars" (ll. 1382, 1648) stem from despair or have their source in divine inspiration. Interpretive ambiguity is not only critical to Milton's portrayal of Samson; it is also a condition of all those who wait for revelation, for the ends of time.

The wide range of responses to Milton's eschatology in this book reflects the variety of perspectives which the contributors bring to bear on Milton's work, but it also registers the contradictions and indeterminacies in Milton's representations of the last things. David Loewenstein's Afterword concludes the collection by noting connections between a number of the key essays while also making an argument of its own about the "multiple, divergent and indeed sometimes conflicting visions of the apocalypse and the millennium" in Milton's great poems. Loewenstein contrasts the terrifying apocalyptic destruction of *Samson Agonistes* with Milton's endorsement in *Paradise Regained* of a patient stance of waiting for the millennium. These alternative visionary responses, he argues, are not necessarily incompatible: they both provide a means of imagining the destruction of the Restoration church and state, and the substitution of Christ's kingdom in which God's saints will reign.

The eschatologies discussed in this book may seem largely foreign to twenty-first-century experiences – of historical rather than immediate significance. However, the human concern with endings – and so with structures of meaning – has not changed. The relationship between beginnings, middles, and endings affects our sense of time and our interpretation of meaning and remains fascinating, despite the recent philosophical interrogation of such concepts. While postmodernity has substituted "*Télos* [which] is totally open, is opening itself" for an expectation of closure,[8] it cannot entirely do away with the conception of structure which it deconstructs. Similarly, contemporary science retains some links with traditional eschatologies, in that it still entertains the possibility that the end will consist in a return to origins. A leading theory conceives of the end of the universe as a "big crunch" which "would be rather like the big bang that began the universe," a bleak and impersonal version of the Christian replacement of an original with an ultimate paradise.[9] In contemporary culture mystical and spiritual explanations of the end of time have greater credibility. It may no longer be common to expect the Word to appear in the clouds on a white horse, but

the promise of spiritual restoration lingers.[10] The collective ideas upon which culture is built, like Belial's thoughts, "wander through eternity" (*PL* 2.148). Shadows of early modern apocalypticism inform our thinking, just as our postmodern society emerges from the lost paradise of Milton's.

NOTES

The title of the introduction comes from Belial's speech in *Paradise Lost* 2.148. Citations of Milton's poetry are from *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston, 1998) and references appear in parentheses through the text.

1. Speech in the Painted Chamber to the Parliament, 4 September 1654, in Ivan Roots (ed.), *Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1989), p. 31, citing 2 Tim. 3:1 (original italics).
2. The main works on Milton and eschatological matters are several decades old and more confined in their focus than that of this book. See Michael Fixler, *Milton and the Kingdoms of God* (London and Evanston, 1964); Leland Ryken, *The Apocalyptic Vision in Paradise Lost* (Ithaca, 1970); and Austin C. Dobbins, *Milton and the Book of Revelation: The Heavenly Cycle* (University, Alabama, 1975). There have been various articles and book chapters in the 1980s and 1990s on Milton's eschatology, but no full-length studies have been published. The most important of these include Paul Rovang's "Milton's War in Heaven as Apocalyptic Drama: 'Thy Foes Justly Hast in Derision,'" *Milton Quarterly* 28 (1994), pp. 28–35; Samuel Smith's "'Christ's Victorie Over the Dragon': The Apocalypse in *Paradise Regained*," *Milton Studies* 29 (1993), pp. 59–82; the first chapter of David Loewenstein's *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, 1990), which examines the relation between "radical millennial thought" and Milton's "sense of history in the early polemics" (pp. 8–9); and Thomas Amorose's "Milton the Apocalyptic Historian: Competing Genres in *Paradise Lost*, Books XI–XII," *Milton Studies* 17 (1983), pp. 141–62. For seventeenth-century eschatology generally, see Richard H. Popkin (ed.), *Millenarianism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought: 1650–1800* (Leiden, 1988); Richard W. Cogley, "Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism," *Religion* (1987), pp. 379–96; Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions From the Reformation to the Eve of the Civil War* (Toronto, 1978); B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism* (London, 1972); and Bryan W. Ball, *A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden, 1975).
3. See, for example, Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich, *Milton and Heresy* (Cambridge, 1998), and David Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism* (Cambridge, 2001).
4. See Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men*, p. 23; Ball, *A Great Expectation*, pp. 161–62; and Stella Revard's chapter in this book, p. 42.

5. See Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men*, pp. 35–45, 59; Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London, 1984), pp. 50–62, 180–81; and Stella Revard's chapter in this book, pp. 56–57.
6. Fixler, *Milton and the Kingdoms of God*, p. 219; Dobbins, *Milton and the Book of Revelation*, p. 70; C. A. Patrides, " 'Something like Prophetick strain': apocalyptic configurations in Milton," in C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (eds.), *The Apocalypse in English Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents, and Repercussions* (Manchester, 1984), pp. 207–37, especially pp. 226–27.
7. See Helen Wilcox, " 'Is this the end of this new glorious world?': *Paradise Lost* and the beginning of the end," *Essays and Studies* 48 (1995), pp. 1–15.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978), p. 167.
9. Stephen Hawking, *Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays* (London, 1993), p. 146.
10. See Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). Boyer cites the findings of a 1983 Gallup poll that 62 percent of Americans believed that Jesus would come to earth again (p. 2) and argues that at the beginning of the 1990s a "new scenario, supplementing age-old themes with warnings of ecological catastrophe and visions of a globe restored to Edenic purity, appears capable of sustaining prophecy belief far into the twenty-first century" (p. 337).