

MILTON

Paradise Lost

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Chapter 1

Paradise Lost in Milton's career and age

1 "Long choosing, and beginning late"

The sublime prophetic poem which so impressed Andrew Marvell in the lines quoted in the preface to this volume was not the work of a youthful poet. By the time Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, he was a blind man in his fifties, disappointed with the failures of church and state reformation, and yet aspiring to write a new kind of epic poem – one focusing on sacred truths and attempting, after the collapse of the English Revolution, to “assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men” (1.25–6). Although he had published his youthful *Poems* (1645–6) and had achieved considerable prominence as a controversial pamphleteer, he had still not written anything in verse nearly as ambitious nor as comprehensive as *Paradise Lost*. Yet Milton's earlier career can be seen as essential preparation for this great visionary project whose sacred subject and ambitious form he considered over many years. We need to begin, then, by addressing the literary choices and vocational issues that led to the composition of Milton's sublime epic.

We know that Milton was indeed “long choosing, and beginning late” in the sacred subject of his “Heroic Song”: so he tells us in the invocation to Book 9 of his poem. *Paradise Lost* was probably written between 1658 and 1663, a transitional period when he was completing much of his long career as a political pamphleteer and passionately opposing the Stuart Restoration which occurred in 1660. Milton's early biographer and nephew, Edward Phillips, told John Aubrey (another biographer) that Milton “began about 2 years before the King came in, and finished about 3 years after the King's Restoration” (*Early Lives*, p. 13). Phillips noted, however, that several years before the poem was begun (Aubrey suggests fifteen or sixteen

years before), his uncle showed him lines from Satan's soliloquy on Mt. Niphates (4.32–41), then considered "the very beginning" of a tragedy (*Early Lives*, p. 72). Milton composed and dictated as many as forty lines of *Paradise Lost* during the winter nights and mornings – he refers to the Muse's "nightly visitation" in his poem (*PL* 9.22; cf. 7.28–30) – which he would then cut down to half that number; Phillips would come to visit on occasion to look over the manuscript and correct spelling and punctuation. Milton thus seems to have taken about "4 or 5 years" to write the poem (so Aubrey recorded from Phillips) which Thomas Ellwood, one of Milton's young Quaker friends and former students, claims to have seen completed in 1665. Delayed by the Great Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of 1666, the publication of *Paradise Lost* finally occurred in 1667. It was first published in ten books and reissued in 1668 and 1669 with the addition of the prose Arguments and a defensive note on verse explaining why the poem does not rhyme. It was then published in 1674 in twelve books, a modified design more closely following Virgil's epic.

Although in terms of structure Milton chose to follow Virgil, he had also chosen to write an eternal epic on a sacred theme – not an epic focusing on older imperialistic themes (like the *Aeneid*) or a nationalistic poem celebrating a prominent leader such as Oliver Cromwell, whose achievements in the English Revolution Milton had lavishly praised in his Latin pamphlet, *Defensio Secunda* (1654). Nor did he choose to celebrate an earthly monarch such as King Arthur from legendary British history, the subject matter of Spenser's "historicall fiction," *The Faerie Queene*. The sublime Protestant epic of its age, *Paradise Lost* fully rivals and supersedes its classical and European precursors – a poem written by a poet inwardly illuminated by the spirit of the Bible and the light of God. Yet why did the ambitious poet finally decide against writing a nationalistic epic in favor of composing a sacred one?

From early in his career, Milton, always highly self-conscious about his literary vocation and precocious in his poetic enterprises, had planned to write a great heroic poem on an exalted subject. His early poems register this ambition: in "At a Vacation Exercise in the College" (1628) Milton expresses his wish to devote himself to "some graver subject" in English and to sing (in the manner

of Homer) “of Kings and Queens and *Heroes* old, / Such as the wise *Demodocus* once told.” And in *Elegy VI* (1629) he envisioned writing a poem concerning “wars and heaven under Jupiter in his prime, and pious heroes, and chieftains half-divine”; in that early piece, moreover, Milton stresses the sacrifices which the sacerdotal poet, conducting a fastidious and unblemished life, must make in order to write serious heroic verse. In *Mansus* and *Epitaphium Damonis* (both of 1639), Milton clearly has in mind for his subject the heroic King Arthur and his Round Table, as well as legendary British history from the time of the Trojan settlement under Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas and (according to medieval British chroniclers) founder of Britain and New Troy (later London). Other possibilities for subjects from British and Scottish history are recorded in the Trinity College, Cambridge Manuscript (c. 1639–42); Milton’s notes and drafts from the early 1640s also mention numerous Biblical subjects, including four drafts of a projected tragic drama on the Fall of man, two of them entitled “Paradise Lost” and “Adam unparadiz’d.” Indeed, Edward Phillips himself observes that the subject of *Paradise Lost* was “first designed a Tragedy” (*Early Lives*, p. 72). The fact that Milton first thought of the Fall in dramatic and tragic terms is itself significant: though an epic, *Paradise Lost* contains important elements of tragedy, as the invocation to Book 9 makes clear, when Milton indicates that now – as he is about to begin the “Sad task” of relating the drama of mankind’s disobedience and fall – he “must change” his “Notes to Tragic” (13, 5–6).

Still, in the early 1640s Milton had not firmly made up his mind about the form or subject of his “Heroic Song.” In his antiprelatical pamphlet, *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642), he explored further his poetic and prophetic ambitions, envisioning himself as a national poet and political reformer, “an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Iland in the mother dialect” (YP 1:811–12). Milton considered three forms for his poetic project “doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation”: the long epic modeled on the poems of Homer, Virgil, and Tasso; the brief epic modeled on the Book of Job; and Greek tragedy, with Sophocles and Euripides as his chief models. (Milton would later write a brief epic in *Paradise Regained* and model his drama based on the Book of Judges, *Samson Agonistes*, on Greek tragedy.)

Church-Government contains much that is pertinent to understanding Milton's poetic development and sense of "inward prompting": besides expressing his national literary aspirations, it expresses his Renaissance ambition to "leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die" (YP 1:810); it highlights his sense of the Bible as poetic (with its "frequent songs"); and it articulates his sense of the visionary power of the gifted poet who, purified and inspired like the prophet of Isaiah 6:6, might use his God-given talents to sing "in glorious and lofty Hymns . . . Gods Almightynesse, and what he works" (YP 1:817) – as *Paradise Lost* itself does when, for example, the poet's voice joins the angelic song of Book 3 (410–15). Yet Milton's pamphlet of 1642, however revealing about his early ambitions and literary sensibility, does not settle on a subject for Milton's prophetic work, whatever form it might finally take.

Sometime after 1639 and before he began writing *Paradise Lost*, Milton rejected the idea of writing an Arthuriad. Indeed, by the time Milton is working on the *History of Britain* (begun before March 1649 and resumed after 1655), he expresses considerable skepticism about the story from legendary history: "who *Arthur* was, and whether ever any such reign'd in *Britain*, hath bin doubted heertofore, and may again with good reason" (YP 5:164). There were good reasons for Milton turning away from this national myth; for one thing, there was increasing skepticism in his age about the old fables of legendary British history and a preference instead for the truths and authority of sacred history. Furthermore, the story of King Arthur had been associated with royal propaganda from Tudor to Stuart times (whose monarchs claimed to be derived from him), and the revolutionary writer who zealously challenged Stuart power and authority during the 1640s and 1650s was unlikely to choose such a myth – especially one requiring him to celebrate an earthly king and court – for his great poem.

So Milton, increasingly disenchanted with national politics, settled instead on a more universal theme – the story of Adam and Eve and the fall of humankind. Milton's Biblical subject was not only historically sound, but international in its interest. The Bible, after all, was the key text in the lives of Protestants, and Milton chose to base his poem about origins and beginnings on the first chapters of its first book, whose terse details *Paradise Lost* so brilliantly elaborates.

Moreover, rather than choosing a real or legendary national hero or an earthly monarch to place at the center of his epic, Milton chose instead Adam and Eve, mythic figures not bound to any one national history or heritage. And in choosing to relate the original story of the Fall in the form of the long epic, Milton chose what was by far the most ambitious and comprehensive of all literary genres in the Renaissance, a form whose name, we shall see (section 7), he would dare to raise to new and exciting heights.

In order to ready himself for his major poetic achievement, Milton prepared himself through many years of “labour and intent study” (YP 1:810). He received a humanist education, with its emphasis on classical culture and texts, at St. Paul’s School, which he entered in 1620; and from 1625 to 1632 he continued his education at Christ’s College, Cambridge, whose scholastic and narrow curriculum he found unsatisfactory. At Cambridge, where according to Phillips Milton was admired for his “extraordinary Wit and Reading” (*Early Lives*, p. 54), he engaged in academic disputations or Prolusions. He argued, for example, whether learning makes men happier than does ignorance, and this rhetorical training would later contribute to his versatile polemical skills as a prose writer and to the impressive rhetorical speeches and debates of *Paradise Lost*. Following Cambridge, he began a period of studious retirement and additional preparation (thanks to his father’s continuing financial support), which enabled him to read widely in Greek, Latin, and Italian authors, and to deepen his knowledge of history, politics, and ecclesiastical matters. A subsequent continental tour (1638–39) enabled Milton to meet Hugo Grotius and the blind and imprisoned Galileo, the only contemporary, besides Milton himself, mentioned in *Paradise Lost*. Milton’s warm reception by poets, patrons and intellectuals in private Florentine humanist academies reinforced his commitment to humanist values, as well as his keen sense of literary vocation. Upon returning to England until the time he began to serve the state as Secretary for Foreign Tongues in 1649, he worked as a private tutor, providing his nephews and other students with the sort of demanding education he believed the serious poet himself must possess – “a thorough knowledge of all the arts and sciences” (*Prolusion VII*, YP 1:288–9). Milton’s pamphlet, *Of Education* (1644), records the rigorous scheme of education he advocated, including

his interest in educational reform and the new empiricism, encouraged in his age by such figures as Francis Bacon and Samuel Hartlib (the notable Protestant reformer to whom the tract is addressed). It should not surprise us, then, to find that *Paradise Lost* itself explores a number of important pedagogical relationships – between the poet and his muse (“Instruct me, for Thou know’st,” 1.19), between Adam and the angel Raphael in Books 5–8, and, after the Fall, between Adam and Michael, who instructs his pupil in the trying lessons of history.

Moreover, the poet who was “long choosing, and beginning late” in his sacred subject always possessed a strong sense of his future-oriented literary vocation and a fascination with his own evolving genius, or what Wordsworth would call the “growth of a poet’s mind.” Highly ambitious, Milton was self-conscious about his precociousness and virtuosity as a poet from an early age. At the age of twenty-one he composed his ode *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* (1629), a prophetic poem whose complicated time scheme and cosmic vision range from the Creation to the Apocalypse (as does *Paradise Lost*), and a work which envisions the banishing of pagan oracles and idols with the advent of Christ, a particularly Protestant theme. It is at the beginning of this poem of vocational anticipation that Milton self-consciously announces his calling as a sacred poet, as he imagines himself arriving at the nativity scene before the wise men in order to present his “humble ode”:

Have thou the honor first, thy Lord to greet,
 And join thy voice unto the Angel Choir,
 From out his secret Altar toucht with hallow’d fire.

The allusion to Isaiah 6:6, the same Biblical passage Milton later refers to in *Church-Government*, underscores the aspiring Milton’s sense of prophetic authority, a characteristic of his literary vocation that would distinguish his poetry and prose from this point on. Furthermore, Milton would continue to insert himself dramatically into his literary creations – as he does, for example, in *Lycidas*, throughout his prose, and in the proems to Books 1, 3, 7, and 9 of *Paradise Lost* – so that the drama of vocation itself would become a central focus of his works.

When he published his 1645 *Poems* – the volume of English and Latin verses displaying his diverse and precocious literary development in the 1620s and 1630s – Milton included on the title page a telling motto from Virgil’s seventh Eclogue: “Crown my brow with foxglove lest an evil tongue harm the destined poet [*Baccare frontem / Cingite, ne vati noceat mala lingua futuro*].” The passage underscores yet once more his sense of the prophetic poet as sacred and chosen, a gifted writer whose work and self were already worthy of protection from rude ears and hostile tongues. And in *Ad Patrem*, the Latin poem in which he justified his poetic vocation to his father (who hoped his gifted son would pursue more gainful employment), Milton insists that cruel calumny cannot harm the ambitious and fame-oriented youthful poet (“I shall no longer mingle unknown with the dull rabble”) who walks “far from the sight of profane eyes” and produces divine poetry, with its mark of Promethean fire (Hughes, pp. 82–6). Throughout his career, Milton not only presented himself as leading a “pure and honorable life” (*Second Defense*, YP 4:611), but defined his role as a poet and prophet in distinctly aesthetic terms, envisioning a self transformed into a work of art: he who would hope “to write well hereafter in laudable things,” Milton observed in one of his early pamphlets, must himself be “a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things” (*An Apology for Smectymnuus*, YP 1:890). And so from early in his career, the ambitious and self-conscious poet not only believed that he must make himself into “a true Poem”, but that as a poet-prophet “separate to God” (*Samson*, 31) he was destined to accomplish extraordinary things.

2 *Lycidas*

The most profound and moving of Milton’s early explorations of his vocation as poet-prophet occurs in his pastoral elegy *Lycidas* (1637), a poem whose remarkable achievements look forward, in a number of ways, to *Paradise Lost*; consequently some of its important features deserve a brief account here. Milton laments the untimely death of Edward King, one of Milton’s promising contemporaries at Christ’s College, Cambridge, who had drowned in the Irish Seas “ere his prime” (8). The poem, however, becomes primarily an

occasion to explore Milton's own keen sense of vocational ambitions and uncertainties, especially as he mourns a youthful scholar-poet and model pastor suddenly and arbitrarily cut down, as was King or the "Young *Lycidas*" (9) in the poem's fiction. While Milton responds with pain, horror, and anger to this premature death and incomplete life, and while he laments the vulnerability of the aspiring poet who scorns delights and labors "with uncessant care" in his "homely slighted Shepherd's trade" (64–5), he nevertheless hopes that "some gentle Muse" might "favor [his] destin'd Urn" (19–20). Placing himself in a long line of ancient and Renaissance pastoralists (including Theocritus, Virgil, Spenser, among others), Milton creates an idyllic pastoral world, the rustic innocence of which is now shattered by the death of *Lycidas* (whose name recalls the shepherd poet in Virgil's ninth Eclogue):

We drove afield, and both together heard
 What time the Gray-fly winds her sultry horn,
 Batt'ning our flocks with the fresh dews of night . . . (27–9)

Milton nostalgically imagines their ideal life in Cambridge in terms of a pastoral day, with the young poets themselves as shepherds, but then punctures the illusion, as he registers the pain of losing this paradise: "But O the heavy change, now thou art gone, / Now thou art gone, and never must return!" (37–8). Indeed, much of the poem vacillates between the poet's attempts to find comfort in the pastoral fiction and his hard realization that the pastoral is nothing more than fiction that can barely console his feelings of anxiety and anguish at the unexplained death of young *Lycidas*: "Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise" (153), he observes after the beautiful flower passage, only to go on to express his shock – "Ay me!" (154) – at the thought that *Lycidas*'s bones, wherever they may be, have no "Laureate Hearse" (151) on which to strew the flowers. Nor is there a grave – only a "wat'ry bier" (12). *Lycidas* is an emotionally jagged poem, a poem of weltering moods: feelings of pain, loss, anger, and consolation coexist in this powerful meditation on the vulnerability of the poet and his vocation. Even the mythic poet Orpheus found no protection when he was torn apart by the Thracian women: his mother Calliope – "The Muse herself" (58) – Milton painfully observes could not save her son, a poignant vision of dismemberment that the solitary poet would later

recall in *Paradise Lost* (7.32–7). And, indeed, if the mythic Orpheus found no protection, why should the young and unknown Milton expect it?

Like the invocations to *Paradise Lost*, where Milton self-consciously explores his poetic authority and ambitions, *Lycidas* is concerned with the self-projection of the ambitious poet and the drama of his composition:

Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
 Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never sere,
 I come to pluck your Berries harsh and crude . . . (1–3)

Milton begins by announcing his unreadiness, his unripeness as a poet, despite his need to participate in the emotional ritual of mourning a fellow poet's death: both the poet and *Lycidas*, in their own ways, are untimely. In fact, Milton had written no poetry since *Comus* (1634), his occasional and highly personal entertainment dramatizing the trials and glamor of chaste youthfulness while honoring the earl of Bridgewater's family. Now, reluctantly and with a sense of uncertainty, he takes up his pen again: indeed, one of the tensions of Milton's early career is the conflict between his sense of unripeness (see also the sonnet, "How soon hath time," for his anxious sense of belatedness) and his sense of precociousness as a poet; concerned about his literary tardiness (he refers to his "slow-endavoring art" in his epitaph on Shakespeare), Milton also feared beginning prematurely. In *Lycidas*, Milton makes that anxiety about his poetic readiness one of the principal themes of his poem. By the end – after the painful, emotionally wrenching process of mourning and consolation has finished – the more mature, future-oriented pastoralist now warbles his lay "With eager thought" (189), no longer uncertain as he was at the outset.

Milton's unsettling meditation on vocational themes generates one of the most distinctive features of *Lycidas*: its passionate and angry prophetic voice. We have noted that his Nativity Ode inaugurated the young Milton's prophetic stance and career; but here, nearly eight years later, Milton's prophetic voice takes on a much more vehement, politically engaged dimension that anticipates his prose polemics and great poems. Even the poem's opening, "Yet once more," alludes to the promise of apocalyptic judgement in Hebrews 12:26–7. The death of one of the nation's young model pastors

struck a deep chord in Milton (even though Milton seems not to have been King's close friend), prompting, through his use of the pastoral code, the poem's impassioned religious and political criticism. As if to make the political dimension of the poem more explicit, Milton added a telling headnote to *Lycidas* when he published his 1645 *Poems*: "by occasion" his prophetic poem "foretells the ruin of our corrupted Clergy then in their height." Milton, who had himself considered an ecclesiastical career, felt "Church-outed by the Prelats," as he later noted in *Church-Government* (YP 1:823), and *Lycidas*, especially through the fiery apocalyptic voice of St. Peter, registers his profound disillusionment with the corrupt Anglican clergy. The inexplicable death of Lycidas seems even more unjust when the present clergy – with their "Blind mouths" (suggesting their rapacity and gluttony) – are such bad shepherds, their sermons merely fashionable and superficial exercises ("lean and flashy songs"), the work of bad artists (they grate on "scannel Pipes of wretched straw") that cannot feed or satisfy their Christian flock (119, 123, 124). Milton's criticisms recall a Biblical text such as Ezekiel 34:2 ("Woe *be* to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?"), giving Biblical pastoral a radical Protestant inflection as he builds up to the climactic vision of judgement in which "that two-handed engine at the door / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more" (130–1). This ominous passage of promised retribution, a famous crux in Milton criticism (it seems to refer to, among other things, the "Two massy Keys" [110] of St. Peter earlier in the poem, and to the sharp two-edged sword issuing out of the apocalyptic Christ's mouth in Rev. 1:16 and 19:15), looks forward to the fierce "two-handed" sword of the warrior angel Michael which "smites" Satan and his rebel forces in *Paradise Lost's* apocalyptic battle in heaven for the territory of God (see 6.251ff.).

Lycidas is a poem that essentially uses a classical form and gives it, through the language of religious prophecy and anticipation, a radical Christian meaning – one that is "of a higher mood" (87) than its classical tradition. (Its penultimate section of consolation, beginning "Weep no more" [165], is explicitly Christian in emphasis as it alludes to such scriptural passages as Rev. 7:17 and 21:4, where the heavenly voice says that "God shall wipe away all tears," as well as to the marriage song of the Lamb in Rev. 19.) In that sense, too, *Lycidas*

anticipates *Paradise Lost*, a poem that takes the highest classical form – the epic – and fundamentally transforms it, so that it suits Milton’s ambitious prophetic Protestant aim to “justify the ways of God to men.” Milton’s relation to his classical contexts and genres is never simple: in his earlier prophetic Nativity Ode, where he envisions the silencing of the pagan oracles, he nevertheless includes three elegiac stanzas (19–21) in which he imagines the nymphs mourning for the departing Greek and Roman gods. Rather than involving a full-scale rejection of classical forms and themes – after all, classical culture and literature were central to Milton’s intellectual upbringing – his poems tend to involve revisionary transformations of them, infusing these earlier forms with new prophetic Christian meaning.

For all its virtuosity and emotional power, *Lycidas* is a poem which concludes by anticipating still greater, more ambitious projects. Virgil himself had established the progression in his career by beginning with pastoral (the *Eclogues*), and then moving from georgic to epic poetry. Like Virgil and Spenser before him (the latter poet moving from *The Shepherdes Calender* to *The Faerie Queene*), the new, yet obscure poet or “uncouth Swain” (186) of this poem has distinguished himself in his early career by writing in pastoral, regarded as the lowest of literary forms in the Renaissance; and like them, Milton, already self-consciously fashioning his career in the early prophetic poems, will go on to write the most ambitious of all forms, the epic. “Sunk low” (172), like *Lycidas*, this young, learned poet hopes, in his own way, to mount high. “Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new” (193): using the language of pastoral, the ending of Milton’s *Lycidas* looks forward to a new beginning, new genres, and future actions. (And yet rather than simply abandoning pastoral, *Paradise Lost*, we shall see, incorporates it in its vision of Eden.) But not until some twenty years later would Milton fully invest his great literary talents in his most ambitious poem.

3 Writing in the English Revolution and the Restoration

Until the late 1650s, Milton postponed the composition of his great poem and instead invested his literary talents in the tireless composition of revolutionary tracts and polemics, while also working

(beginning in March 1649) as Oliver Cromwell's Latin Secretary. In order to understand *Paradise Lost* in relation to Milton's age and career, we need to remember that Milton spent almost twenty years (between 1641 and 1660) writing controversial prose works passionately defending ecclesiastical, domestic, and civil liberty, and attacking forms of ecclesiastical and political tyranny and idolatry. The Civil War and Interregnum years were a period of great religious and political upheaval in England – "tumultuous times" Milton called them (YP 1:807) – in which his contemporaries witnessed the abolition of episcopacy, kingship, and the House of Lords, as well as the execution of King Charles I and the establishment of the Commonwealth. In his antiprelatical tracts of the early 1640s, Milton himself vigorously opposed forms of episcopal power and church hierarchy; and in his antimonarchical, pro-republican tracts of 1649, as well as in his *Defenses of the English People* (1651, 1654), he attacked the symbolic representations of Stuart absolutism and power, along with the equivocal behavior of the Presbyterians who, by refusing to condemn Charles I, had betrayed the more radical Puritans committed to revolution. Milton's hatred of arbitrary rule in his polemical writings partly accounts for his condemnation of all earthly tyrannies in the prophetic books concluding *Paradise Lost*. Throughout his career, Milton continued to believe what he so bluntly stated in his *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649): "No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free" (YP 3:198). Always the iconoclast, he energetically smashed the lifeless idols of tradition and custom whenever they hindered the dynamic and ongoing process of ecclesiastical, domestic, and social reform. In his late pre-Restoration tracts (1659–60), he fearlessly urged his countrymen to resist the restoration of Stuart monarchy (which he compared to "chusing . . . a captain back for *Egypt*," YP 7:463), while defending Christian liberty and condemning the forcing of the individual conscience in spiritual matters by outward authority. Like other radicals of his age – for example the Leveller writer William Walwyn or the Quakers – Milton defended the liberty of conscience. As a polemicist during the Civil War years and Interregnum, then, Milton became increasingly suspicious of institutional and centralized forms of secular power and external authority, preferring instead, as he does at the end of *Paradise Lost*, the authority found in the Bible, "those written Records pure" (12.513).

Milton's long career as revolutionary prose writer was itself important in the evolution of his literary vocation and contributed to the shaping of *Paradise Lost* in its prophetic themes and art. Indeed, Milton often channelled his creative energies into his prose, and the occasions provided by his controversial works enabled him to define what were to become central epistemological and vocational concerns of his poem. His prophetic stance, for example, is no less pronounced in the prose than in his epic: thus in *The Reason of Church-Government*, Milton compares himself in his divine inspiration to "those ancient profets" Jeremiah, Isaiah, and John of Revelation; as a zealous prophet of his age urging social and ecclesiastical reform, he too may have to utter odious truths in "sharp, but saving words," for "when God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in mans will what he shall say, or what he shall conceal" (YP 1:802–4). This would become the stance of the just men in the final books of *Paradise Lost*. Moreover, even while attacking the Anglican clergy with apocalyptic vehemence, Milton could make his rich and flamboyant prose "soare a while as the Poets use," as when he colourfully imagines the warrior "Zeale" in his fiery chariot punishing "Scarlet Prelats" under his flaming wheels (*An Apology for Smectymnuus*, YP 1:900).

One of the most pertinent prose texts for approaching *Paradise Lost* is *Areopagitica* (November 1644), Milton's famous attack on censorship. A work in which Milton employs densely figurative prose to explore the ethical issues of confrontation, trial, and temptation, *Areopagitica* engages themes central to *Paradise Lost*, where Milton dramatizes issues of human choice and free will. Written in opposition to Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643, *Areopagitica* (itself addressed to Parliament, especially its more tolerant members) argues that certain forms of censorship will only hinder the ongoing process of reformation and social change. This process, Milton believes, is stimulated by the Revolution's ferment of new radical political and spiritual ideas, by the proliferation of religious sects, and by the outpouring of controversial writing itself which challenges and disrupts tyrannical custom, mindless conformity and old orthodoxies. Milton represents Truth as a dynamic force: she is like a "streaming fountain" flowing "in a perpetuall progression," so that her waters do not "sick'n into a muddy pool of conformity

and tradition" (YP 2:543). By the end *Areopagitica* envisions the rejuvenation of both the chosen nation Britannia ("a noble and puissant Nation") and her visionary writer – John Milton himself – while articulating passionately some of Milton's central social ideals, including the liberty of debate and combative discussion which creates an atmosphere of "knowledge in the making" (YP 2:554). Thus, virtue for Milton cannot simply be taken for granted, but must be continually tested and, in effect, given real meaning through a vigorous process of trial in which Truth grapples with Falsehood. Rejecting the notion of "a blank vertue" with "an excrementall [i.e. external] whitenesse," Milton asserts that "that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary" (YP 2:515–16), including trial which involves active engagement with evil and inner struggle with temptation. Milton's tract everywhere valorizes energetic conflict and confrontation, much as *Paradise Lost* will later do: like Eve, as she responds to Adam in their critical pre-temptation discussion in Book 9, Milton argues passionately against "a fugitive and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary" (YP 2:515).

In *Areopagitica*, Milton recognizes our constant need to engage heroically with a world of evil and moral ambiguity "in the midd'st whereof God hath plac't us unavoidably" (YP 2:526). Even Milton's prelapsarian Eden, we shall see later, is a dynamic place where Adam and Eve, confronted with numerous domestic and ethical challenges and trials, do not lead a languorous existence but continually and actively exercise their reason and freedom of choice. Some of *Paradise Lost's* central themes are already imbedded in this rich passage from Milton's pamphlet:

many there be that complain of divin Providence for suffering *Adam* to transgresse, foolish tongues! when God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had bin else a meer artificiall *Adam*, such an *Adam* as he is in the motions. We our selves esteem not of that obedience, or love, or gift, which is of force: God therefore left him free, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes; herein consisted his merit, herein the right of his reward, the praise of his abstinence. Wherefore did he creat passions within us, pleasures round about us, but that these rightly temper'd are the very ingredients of vertu?
(YP 2:527)

Milton places great emphasis here, as he does in his poem, on the freedom and responsibility of human agents to choose; in this sense, his epistemology of freedom differs greatly from the severe Calvinist position which stresses that human reason and will are completely inadequate and depraved. Without free will, Adam would have been nothing more than a puppet – “a meer artificiall *Adam*” – with no will or mind of his own; the theatrical metaphor underscores the hollowness of such an Adam, an Adam who is no more than a mask like the player-king Charles I whom Milton attacked five years later. Milton’s *Areopagitica* stresses the need to see and know “a provoking object” and yet abstain from it, as Spenser’s Guyon does in the Cave of Mammon and the sensuous Bower of Earthly Bliss in Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene* (see YP 2:516). For without temptation and trial, without being tested in “the wars of Truth” (YP 2:562), and without the struggle of contrarities, virtue itself would be as empty as an artificial Adam. Moreover, for all his emphasis on the importance of reason in the process of temptation and choice, Milton valorizes the passions within us, as well as the pleasures without – so long as they are tempered. And this, we shall see, is true in *Paradise Lost* where Milton presents, attractively and sympathetically, the complexities of human passion, while enabling his readers to enjoy – and almost taste – the pleasures of Eden.

The *Second Defense of the English People* (1654), another major prose work, also signaled a potential direction for his epic ambitions. Addressed to the European community at large, this Latin pamphlet celebrated the heroic achievements of a number of virtuous revolutionary leaders and Parliamentarians, including Cromwell himself, leader of the Protectorate, the regime that assumed power at the end of 1653. The *Second Defense* became an occasion for revolutionary mythmaking; there, Milton explicitly compared himself to an epic poet celebrating the heroic deeds of his glorious compatriots:

just as the epic poet . . . undertakes to extol, not the whole life of the hero whom he proposes to celebrate in his verse, but usually one event of his life (the exploits of Achilles at Troy, let us say, or the return of Ulysses, or the arrival of Aeneas in Italy) and passes over the rest, so let it suffice me too . . . to have celebrated at least one heroic achievement of my countrymen.
(YP 4:685)

The *Second Defense* was a rhetorical performance which enabled Milton to channel his epic vision and literary talents directly into political prose writing. Indeed, the work reveals Milton's impulse to write an epic based not so much on legendary history as upon the major actors and exhilarating events of the Revolution, whose unfolding drama was so energetically engaging the writer's verbal and polemical skills during the 1640s and 1650s. Cromwell's deeds themselves, Milton claims, have outstripped "even the legends of our heroes" (YP 4:672). But in writing *Paradise Lost*, Milton, we have noted, chose not to restrict himself to immediate national concerns (however heroic), developing instead a more universal and international theme. By September 1658 Cromwell was dead and there would have been little to be gained, especially as the dark days of the Restoration approached, in composing a long poem honoring his epic-like deeds. As Milton the revolutionary writer observed in 1658, when he published a revised edition of his *First Defense*, "I am at this time hoping and planning still greater things" for the sake of "all Christian men" (YP 4:537) – quite possibly his large theological treatise, the *Christian Doctrine* (see section 5), or possibly *Paradise Lost* itself.

Our effort to situate *Paradise Lost* in relation to Milton's revolutionary writings, however, should not obscure the fact that his epic was written partly during the Restoration itself. That fact may prompt us to complicate our sometimes too neat sense of literary and historical periods. After all, the traditional way of approaching *Paradise Lost* as a landmark of world literature has been to see it as the most sublime product of Renaissance culture and especially as the last great epic of that age. But we need to remember as well its Restoration context: it was composed while Milton was still writing political tracts opposing the restoration of Stuart power and completed when the earthly monarchy had been restored and Milton's political ideals had been shattered. And with the Restoration came the return of the Church of England, the persecution of the Dissenting sects, and the resumption of strict censorship; the extraordinary outburst of millenarianism (the fervent belief in Christ's "shortly-expected" kingdom on earth, YP 1:616) that had made Milton's England a nation of prophets during the Civil War years and Interregnum was now largely checked. God's kingdom on earth had

failed to come: the promised new paradise in England now seemed lost forever.

After the Restoration Milton regarded himself as something of a political exile within his own country: “One’s *Patria* is wherever it is well with him” (YP 8:4), he observed to a correspondent in 1666. The famous English diarist, Samuel Pepys, concluded his account of that same year, the year before *Paradise Lost* was first published, with the following grim observation about the decadent Royalist court which Milton had defiantly opposed: “A sad, vicious, negligent Court, and all sober men there fearful of the ruin of the whole Kingdom this next year – from which, good God deliver us” (December 31). *Paradise Lost* at times keenly registers Milton’s political isolation and disappointment with the Restoration, as well as the sense of political danger to the former radical writer and Puritan activist. Like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, another major Puritan work of the Restoration years, *Paradise Lost* expresses its author’s sense of social and spiritual adversity towards a culture and age whose secular values he despises and feels alienated from. Imprisoned for some weeks towards the end of 1660, Milton was lucky indeed to escape a rebel’s execution: thus even while his poem’s sacred theme clearly gives it a more universal and international appeal, the poem’s immediate historical pressures can still poignantly be felt.

Paradise Lost, then, does not present the visionary writer in a land of prophets and among the Lord’s people engaged in energetic social reform (as does *Areopagitica*). Rather, the lonely prophet who published and partly wrote his poem in the politically “cold / Climate” (9.44–5) of the Restoration finds himself

fall’n on evil days,
On evil days though fall’n, and evil tongues;
In darkness, and with dangers compass’d round,
And solitude. (7.25–8)

Isolated in such a hostile world, like the defiant Abdiel among Satan’s legions in Book 5, the poet remains “unchang’d” (7.24) in his fundamental principles and beliefs. Nevertheless, he fears “the barbarous dissonance / Of *Bacchus* and his Revellers, the Race / Of that wild Rout that tore the *Thracian Bard*” (7.32–4), lines recalling the alarming dismemberment or *sparagmos* of the legendary poet Orpheus

(unprotected even by Calliope, his mother and muse of epic poetry) which Milton had lamented in *Lycidas*. The sacred poet of *Paradise Lost* is exposed to the dangers of a Satanic Restoration audience with their savagery and hostile tongues. Indeed, in 1660 he had referred to the “tigers of Bacchus” (YP 7:452–3) in the royalist court. Like the historical David, Milton himself hopes to be protected in his own time from the lying tongues of deadly enemies surrounding him (see Psalms 17:9 and 109:2). Such political references, moreover, underscore the precarious nature of the poet’s solitary and daring enterprise. After all, *Paradise Lost*, Milton suggests in the invocation to Book 9, may have been completed and published in “an age too late” (44), a Restoration milieu unsympathetic to the imaginative boldness and originality of Milton’s great Protestant epic.

Milton’s note on the verse of *Paradise Lost*, added in the 1668 issue of the poem (and kept in subsequent editions), underscores his defensiveness and defiance as he writes in an insensitive age that may not adequately appreciate his daring literary achievements and ambitions. Clearly, many readers expected the poem, when it first appeared in 1667, to rhyme. Rhyme, after all, was in fashion among royalist writers in the Restoration, especially for the heroic poem: Sir William Davenant had used rhyme in his uncompleted heroic poem *Gondibert* (1651), and other poets of the age, including Edmund Waller, John Dryden, and Abraham Cowley, used it as well. According to Aubrey, Dryden even asked Milton’s permission “to put his *Paradise Lost* into a Drama in Rhyme” and Milton, receiving him graciously, wittily told the poet “he would give him leave to tagge his Verses” (*Early Lives*, p. 7). But in *Paradise Lost*, where Milton chooses blank verse, he follows the examples of his great classical precursors and originals – “Homer in Greek . . . Virgil in Latin” – and consequently thinks rhyme is merely “the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meter” (Hughes, p. 210). (Homer and Virgil had used unrhymed hexameters in their epic poems.) Milton scorns those “vulgar Readers” in this frivolous age who expect his epic poem to conform to such trifling literary conventions. He prefers a more discriminating or “fit audience” (7.31), cultured readers sharing his vision of political and religious reformation (like Marvell for example) who will appreciate the boldness of his prophetic enterprise and “vast Design” (to recall Marvell’s phrase).

Choosing to resist the Restoration vogue for rhyme, Milton asserts that his practice "rather is to be esteem'd an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover'd to Heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of Riming." Indeed, the political language here – the recovery of ancient liberty, the bondage of rhyme – suggests that Milton's decision to defy Restoration aesthetics and taste is by no means a purely literary matter.

4 Milton's blindness

When Milton tells us in the invocation to Book 7 that he exists "In darkness, and with dangers compast round, / And solitude" (27–8), he not only highlights his sense of isolation in the dangerous Restoration years, but also his blindness, with its poignant sense of enclosure and solitariness explored in the great invocations to *Paradise Lost* (see section 8). Milton had gone completely blind by February 1652, his sight having begun to fail as early as 1644: how was the ambitious poet, who envisioned himself as sacred and destined in his vocation, to respond to this traumatic event in his life and career? And what indeed was the effect of Milton's physical affliction (possibly caused by a cystic tumour or by chronic glaucoma) on his literary creativity and powers? As the bitterness and restlessness expressed in the first part of his sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent" (1652?) suggests, a blind and anxious Milton feared that he might turn out to be like the unprofitable servant of the Parable of Talents (Matthew 25:14–30) who, failing to yield his talent lodged "useless" within, is cast into outer darkness. Milton was the son of a money-lender and his reference to the Parable of Talents here reveals, as it does in sonnet 7, "How soon hath time," and *Ad Patrem*, that Milton hoped that the investment made in his poetic talents would yield a handsome return. Yet Milton's blindness in some sense also made him resolute and decisive as a poet, even if that meant further postponing his great poem: "They also serve who only stand and wait," he concludes his famous sonnet on blindness. Standing and waiting for "due time" when God will call is in fact precisely the theme Milton would explore in *Paradise Regained* (1671), where Jesus, tempted by Satan to act now when his years are "ripe," instead chooses to wait and stand. In contrast

to the active angels who rush to serve “without rest” in “When I consider,” the blind poet himself will wait for God’s command, will reserve his enormous creative energy for the future, and will thereby make a strength out of his weakness.

Milton had long believed in “the mighty weaknes of the Gospel” to “throw down the weak mightiness of mans reasoning” (*Church-Government*, YP 1:827). Indeed, this notion of strength made perfect in weakness turned out to be crucial to his conception of the poet as *vates* – one who is a prophet and seer though blind – and contributed to the intense inwardness of his great poems. “My strength is made perfect in weakness,” based on 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, became nothing less than the blind Milton’s personal motto in the 1650s, one he would inscribe in autograph albums. The notion underlies Milton’s *Second Defense* where, even as he writes as a public defender of the state, he includes a great deal of autobiographical material in defense of himself and his character. There, too, Milton attempts to make sense of his blindness: had he, after all, been punished by God with blindness for his savage polemics against King Charles I, as royalist propagandists had claimed? Having lost his eyes, as he writes in one of his sonnets, “overplied / In liberty’s defense” (“To Mr. Cyriack Skinner”), Milton interprets his blindness in the *Second Defense* as no less than a divine gift, a distinctive mark of sacredness and artistic strength and an indication of spiritual, internal illumination:

I shall be at once the weakest and the strongest, at the same time blind and most keen in vision. By this infirmity may I be perfected, by this completed . . . Divine law and divine favor have rendered us not only safe from the injuries of men, but almost sacred, nor do these shadows around us seem to have been created so much by the dullness of our eyes as by the shade of angels’ wings. And divine favor not infrequently is wont to lighten these shadows again, once made, by an inner and far more enduring light. (YP 4:590)

And so the righteous and unapproachable poet-polemicist may well be blind to the external world, but he is illuminated within and resembles David who is protected by the shadow of heavenly wings (see e.g. Psalms 17:8, 63:7). Milton wanted to believe, then, that