

Introduction: Spoken Only to Trees and Stones

John Milton wrote *The Ready and Easy Way*, as the full title maintains, to persuade the people of England “to establish a free commonwealth.” Its pages contain an impassioned plea for the continuation of a Republican government that, in the early months of 1660, was plainly deteriorating. Yet the peroration of the tract concludes with an echo of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah (22:29) that calls this stated purpose into question: “Thus much I should perhaps have said though I were sure I should have spoken only to trees and stones; and had none to cry to, but with the Prophet, *O earth, earth, earth!* to tell the very soil it self, what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to” (YP 7.462–63). The sentence envisions a dramatically arhetorical speech situation in which Milton addresses himself not to responsive agents in hopes that he might instruct or move them, but only to the deaf and inanimate objects of the natural world. He imagines his words not as practical instruments to be employed in argument, but rather as mere cries, minimally articulate sounds that give voice to inner sorrow. Each “*earth*” comes into being without use or application; it survives in the valley of its making, serving no purpose beyond bearing witness to the fraught soul whence it was born, a soul that does not seek to stand out from the landscape either by exercising its will or by speaking in its own voice. The lone utterance of this soul, cried out “with the Prophet,” aspires to be a mere echo, to avoid distinguishing itself, so that it may be at once spontaneous (without design or premeditation) and wholly unoriginal (a mere quotation). The echo of Jeremiah suggests that *The Ready and Easy Way* has no aims, no audience capable of being persuaded, no motive force, and only the shadow of an author to do the moving.

This book is a study of moments like these, in which Milton ostensibly renounces persuasive force, purpose, rhetoric, and instrumentality. From the early prose to the late poems, his writings disown the kinds of strength and self-assertion associated with classical oratory and offer themselves as models of how to do nothing with words. Milton routinely represents

himself as forced to write against his own will. Even his most contentious and vigorously argued polemics disclaim the very possibility of persuading an audience. His works invariably profess to escape from the practical network of means and ends that he and his contemporaries often refer to as “the world.” Passages like the close of *The Ready and Easy Way* prompt us to ask of Milton what Milton’s Satan asks of Christ: “What dost thou in this world?” (*PR* 4.372).

What he does or does not do has divided Milton studies into two schools of dramatically uneven size. The prevailing school has for some time been dedicated to establishing the poet of *Paradise Lost* as a figure rooted in and at work on every aspect of the seventeenth-century English world. Milton’s “worldly critics,” as they may justly be called, have argued that he was (among other things) an unflinching champion of civil, personal, and religious liberties; a courageous critic of monarchy; an early proponent of English Republicanism; and a key figure in the culture of dissent following the Restoration. I am thinking here of scholars like David Norbrook, Sharon Achinstein, David Loewenstein, Thomas Corns, and Laura Lunger Knoppers (the list could go on), but we may take Nigel Smith as representative when he asserts that Milton’s “literary practice” is “explicitly dedicated to positive transformation in all spheres of human activity.”¹

The worldly critics, among whom I number myself, are a heterogeneous group, but like a majority of contemporary literary scholars they are historicists, which means that they understand the meaning of Milton’s life and writings by situating them within the political, social, and religious controversies of his day. They assume an undogmatic and commonsense view of historical causality in which it matters not only what Milton read but also whom he knew and spoke with and in what projects, communities, and institutions he took part. Perhaps because of Milton’s own deep-seated beliefs about human freedom, his worldly critics are less likely than historicists of other stripes to adopt a deterministic view of causality. Even while weaving the poet ever more fully into the fabric of history, they do not look to dissolve his individuality or to render him a mere effect or epiphenomenon of the world in which he lived. He was rather, in their view, a vigorous and engaged agent, a “committed polemicist,” what we might now refer to simply as an activist.² This is why worldly critics usually describe Milton’s writings, poetry and prose alike, as works of deliberative rhetoric, composed to intervene in local questions of public importance by winning the assent of listeners and moving them to action.

The “otherworldly” school, as I will call it, could nearly be described as a sect of one, except that its chief sectarian, Stanley Fish, has proven

immensely influential. As a recent collection of essays suggests, we read Milton in the “Age of Fish.”³ In his 2001 book, *How Milton Works*, Fish argues that all of Milton’s writings are instances of “testimony.”⁴ Unlike rhetoric, which is designed to persuade, testimony “comes unbidden” into the mouths and pens of the faithful as “the verbal and visible sign of an ‘inward Sanctity’” (127). Whereas practical speech is necessarily constrained by a multitude of local circumstances, testimony is responsible only to its source in “a spirit filled with saving faith” (127). Writing testimony rather than rhetoric leaves Milton “free of the concerns that animate other writers – the concern that he be persuasive, that he be timely, that he be decorous” (128). While conceding that he “is continually performing political actions, and he certainly hopes that they will have the effects he desires,” Fish would have us believe that “those effects are not what he aims at.” By writing testimony, Milton aspires to be “a self whose exertions only *appear* to be aimed at measurable effects in the world” (4). His real aims lie elsewhere, in another world altogether.

A minor and perhaps intentional irony lurks in Fish’s title, *How Milton Works*, since the book describes an author who, in his indifference to “measurable effects in the world,” does not intend to do anything like what we usually refer to as “work”: He moves nothing around, overcomes no obstacles, wins neither hearts nor minds. It is this lack of directed, purposeful activity that on a few occasions leads Fish to approve the complaint of K. G. Hamilton that Milton is “given to jumping up and down in one place.”⁵ This image of motion without purpose should not be confused with the idea that great works of literature are purposeless, autonomous, or autotelic: This is not Fish’s claim.⁶ Rather, Milton’s motivations and aims lie in “an *interior* country . . . an abstract landscape” (568). Instead of reconfiguring the practices of the world around him, his writings are “really aimed at getting back in tune with heaven” (4). And since the fruits of Milton’s actions “grow not in the soil of human history” (568), he speaks “not primarily to either his friends or foes” – to Republicans or Royalists, Parliamentarians or Presbyterians, Puritans or Independents, Englishmen or Europeans, learned or ignorant, fit or unfit – but only “to an audience of one,” the one God who will be his final and only judge (128). A founder of reader-response criticism, Fish claims that Milton has no proper readers and aims to elicit no response; a prominent neopragmatist, he proposes a thoroughly unpragmatic Milton.⁷

Throughout *How Milton Works* we find lists of the things Milton supposedly renounces: “time, plot, history, politics, projects, objects, discourses” (572) in one instance, and “the complexities of domestic, social,

political, military, aesthetic, and intellectual life” (10) in another. If these lists cover most of the topics worldly critics have devoted countless books and scholarly careers to exploring, then Fish delights all the more in asserting that a spirit engaged in testimony – the kind of spirit, in his view, that Milton aspires to be – regards them as “finally (and always) unreal” (10) and consequently “uses” them “rather than enjoys them for their own sake” (572). Worldly critics, he argues, have mistaken the various items on these lists for real goals, valuable in themselves.

Fish does not simply propose an alternative version of Milton’s worldly projects and commitments; he removes those projects and commitments from the world altogether. He does not suppose that an alternative set of historical conditions (Civil War versus Restoration culture, for example) motivates and constrains Milton’s writings; he replaces that set of conditions with a single condition – submission to the will of God – that lies outside history. He does not accept that context can serve as a “superior interpretive key” to the meaning of the works; he regards the attempt to contextualize Milton as a restrictive and indeed misguided endeavor – misguided because it seeks to fix even those meanings that lie outside time and causality. “The great moments in life and in Milton’s poetry,” he sums up, “simply do not yield their meaning to historical analysis” (569).

When Fish published *Surprised by Sin* in 1967 he healed an old divide in Milton studies; with the publication of *How Milton Works* in 2001 he opened a new one. This time the divide is not between the party of Satan and the party of God, but between Milton’s worldly and otherworldly critics. The first task of this book will be to show that this new divide is not simply a present-day critical artifact, the product of prevailing critical practices, or even (as some of his detractors have protested) of Fish’s idiosyncratic and selective interpretive approach.⁸ It exists rather at the core of Milton’s writings, which express, at various moments, both the drive to transform “the world” and the desire to withdraw from it altogether. The second task is to bridge this divide, rejoining the otherworldly ascetic to the committed polemicist by folding testimony back into rhetoric – reincorporating it, that is, into the practical world that it purports to exceed and escape. Arguing that Fish’s reading mistakenly inverts means and ends (what is to be “used” and what “enjoyed”), this study reinterprets the moments of “testimony” in Milton’s writings as rhetorical instruments wielded in precisely the local, historical projects they explicitly renounce.

The submissive Milton who abandons persuasion to reside content in faith and the activist Milton who relentlessly champions political causes are joined in a single vision through the conceptual reversal latent in the

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Greek root of asceticism, *askesis*. The word denotes, on the one hand, rigorous austerity and self-purgation, and, on the other, the discipline, exercise, and training of one's will. The two meanings are not divergent: Out of austerity arises discipline, out of self-purgation a reasserted self. In offering a worldly interpretation of Milton's ascetic gestures I take my cue from three thinkers. Nietzsche devoted much of his later career to arguing that asceticism is a manifestation of the will to power. A trained classicist, he draws on the double meaning of the Greek root when he defines asceticism as "a gymnastics of the will." Foucault looks back to his predecessor when he speaks of *askesis* as a technology of the self, a way of "constituting oneself" that "does not take away: it equips, it gives."⁹

Most influential on my own thinking, however, has been Max Weber's notion of "worldly asceticism," which he uses to describe the counter-intuitive reversal in which the Protestant desire to save expense resulted not in a withdrawal from economic activity but rather in the accumulation of wealth necessary for the development of early capitalism. In Weber's account, asceticism generated an augmented and instrumentally rationalized "activity within the world."¹⁰ Renunciations of the sort practiced by seventeenth-century English Protestants did not transcend the world, but made it, in effect, still worldlier. Milton's writings manifest Weber's reversal in the discursive rather than the economic sphere. His renunciations result not in quietism or withdrawal but a renewed investment in public dialogue and debate. The asceticism of his writings gives rise to a disciplined and reasserted self, an ethos newly equipped for polemical struggle. Far from being opposed to his various persuasive aims, his renunciations play a central role in pursuing them. He employs the otherworldly utterances that Fish calls "testimony" as his most potent rhetorical and political instruments.

So why then speak only to trees and stones? *How Milton Works* quotes the sentence from *The Ready and Easy Way* with which we began no fewer than four times (128, 487, 518, 569) as evidence that Milton's writings are instances of testimony. "On the eve of the Restoration," Fish writes, he "is still giving forth with unimpos'd and unbidden expressions independently of whether or not anyone, except God, is listening" (128). Milton probably had few illusions about his tract's ability to stave off the Restoration of Charles II or prevent the demise of English Republicanism. But Fish overlooks a few telling details. The modality of the sentence, for a start: "thus much I should perhaps have said" is not the same as simply saying, while "though I were sure I should have spoken only to trees and stones" suggests, if anything, that Milton is *not* speaking to unresponsive objects, but

rather to receptive readers who may still be stirred to a better course of action. He raises the possibility of addressing himself only to “the very soil,” but he does not endorse it.

More crucially, it is here in these final sentences, when Milton seems to have cast away any hope of persuasion, that his voice rises to the height of its “prophetic strain.” Quintilian writes that the purpose of a peroration is to excite listeners’ emotions, particularly pity, through “eloquence pitched higher in this portion of our speech than in any other,”¹¹ and Milton, crackling with prophetic energy, does not disappoint. We should not be surprised when, only a sentence later, he suggests that his words might find the ear of a receptive audience after all: “I trust I shall have spoken persuasion to an abundance of sensible and ingenuous men.” Holding out hope of shaping the character and course of the nation, he foresees that his readers may “bethink themselves a little” and “stay these ruinous proceedings.” This rhetorical hope does not stand at odds with the rhetorical despair of “*O earth, earth, earth.*” To the contrary, despair functions as the means of realizing hope. Milton has been leading us from the Old Testament dejection of Jeremiah to the New Testament optimism of Matthew 3:9: “God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.” By speaking only to trees and stones he seeks to prepare his readers to become “children of reviving liberty” (YP 7.462–3). The impossibility of the task is, in his rhetoric, always the precursor and condition of its success. As Hamlet says of his father’s ghost – alluding, as Milton does, to Matthew 3:9 – his “preaching to stones / Would make them capable.”¹²

The two preceding paragraphs trace a pattern that I will retrace frequently in the three chapters that follow. I first identify a moment of “testimony” in which Milton professes to speak to no one (Chapter 1), to write from external compulsion and against his own will (Chapter 2), or to give voice only to a self-sufficient Truth without regard for further consequences (Chapter 3). Drawing on the precepts of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and their humanist successors, I then show how these moments are used to establish authority, project an ethos, allay doubts and objections, meet the demands of various constituencies, conceal logical and interpretive shortcomings – how, in short, they are used to persuade.

My argument puts me in the somewhat awkward position of maintaining that a critic as shrewd as Fish reads Milton with excessive, even hyperbolic credulity. By this I mean that he is perpetually and indeed systematically willing to accept Milton’s claims to speak only to trees and stones: to have no designs on his readers, no practical purposes, no “measurable effects in the world.” It is one thing to observe, as I do, that

Milton claims either to have escaped from the world or to desire that escape. But it is another thing altogether to accept, as Fish evidently does, that this claim is true, that this desire has been realized, or, still more, that the desire itself arises from and returns to an order outside history, rhetoric, and practice. Fish's unusual credulity may stem from his tendency, first noted by Stephen Mailloux, to underestimate the rhetorical power of universalizing vocabularies.¹³ Milton, by contrast, deeply understood that power.

My charge of credulity is doubly awkward because I also consider Fish the most faithful interpreter of Milton's asceticism. He captures something indispensable, for example, when he writes of Milton's early pamphlet *An Apology*, that it "comes unbidden into the outward gesture from a heart that is 'posses' by a fervent love to which it cannot help giving voice" (127). The virtue of this reading is that it expresses exactly what Milton wants us to believe: that all of his words are the pure outpourings of a soul that loves and serves God's truth, a truth that can be neither chosen nor resisted. But this is also the reading's deepest flaw. To accept *An Apology* – or, for that matter, any other document – as a conduit of divine truth unsullied by practical, worldly motives is to read it scripturally, to grant it the same degree of authority that Milton and his contemporaries granted to Scripture. To read the tract scripturally is also to submit, wittingly or not, to its most effective polemical appeal. In interpreting the intentions of *An Apology* with the utmost faithfulness, Fish also manages to swallow its key rhetorical stratagem, hook, line, and sinker.

The awkwardness of finding Fish simultaneously credulous and faithful falls away, however, when we realize that the two terms amount to one and the same thing. Properly interpreting a polemical work requires not only that we reconstruct its meanings as faithfully as Fish has done, but also that we eventually break faith by understanding it in terms other than the ones it presses upon us. Breaking faith allows us to see asceticism as one means of persuasion that the designing rhetorician places at his disposal, as one trope (from the Greek *tropein*, to turn) among others. Milton's turn away from the world conceals beneath it a second turn back, a return. Fish has most thoroughly traced the outlines of the ascetic's turn away, but by overlooking the return he has fundamentally misunderstood the persuasive function of Milton's otherworldliness.

One familiar complaint against *Surprised by Sin* is that it turns Milton into a stifling and manipulative figure, a "peremptory, knuckle-rapping prig," in the words of John Rumrich, who "requires conformity to his authoritative understanding."¹⁴ I object to Fish's more recent book on

opposite grounds: It does not make Milton authoritarian enough. That is, it overlooks some of the most powerful ways in which his prose tracts require or compel conformity. My objection also differs from the complaint of Rumrich and others in that I do not consider Milton's attempts to assert authority or require conformity to be particularly reprehensible. When you enlist in a pamphlet war, requiring conformity and asserting authority are simply the jobs you have signed up for. William Empson gets it right when he observes that by the time Milton began *Paradise Lost* he was "an experienced propagandist, very capable of deploying his whole case so as to convince his readers of what he had already decided they should believe."¹⁵

Even as we shed Fish's credulity we should not therefore lose sight of his faithfulness. It is by suspending skepticism, paradoxically enough, that he brings to light features of Milton's rhetoric that others have largely ignored or dismissed. Worldly critics have provided us, I think, with a more cogent account of Milton's aims, but they have largely failed to see testimony as an instrument placed at the service of those aims. In doing so, they miss one of the most distinctive features of his rhetoric. Smith's assertion, cited earlier, that Milton's "literary practice" is "explicitly dedicated to positive transformation in all spheres of human activity" (xvi) is correct, but it passes over the distinctly negative moments of that transformation – the pervasive and equally explicit claims to withdraw from all spheres of human activity – and thus misses a crucial feature of Milton's literary practice. Contextual scholarship has yet to grapple, in other words, with the passages in the works that purport to escape from any and every context. Surveying three decades of historicist criticism, Sharon Achinstein is no doubt right to assert that "Milton has always been 'in history,'" but this sort of assertion should not blind us to the passages in his writing that express the desire to get out.¹⁶

Milton's frequent gestures of renunciation and withdrawal can begin, as one reads through his works, to seem to be a prominent feature of his psychology. In establishing a rigorously psychohistorical portrait of Milton's personality, William Kerrigan suggests a renunciatory dialectic that is located in the author's psyche. He is fascinated by "Milton's translation of the anal character into ideas, systems of metaphor, a power of artistic design and economy, and, not least, into the psychological drama of his career."¹⁷ I find this to be an apt depiction of Milton's personality – one that, combined with biographical study, yields valuable insight into his actual withdrawals, the periods when he did not present himself to the public in speech or writing: his retreat to Horton, the "hiatus" following

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the 1645 poems, even his hiding after the Restoration.¹⁸ And yet, a purely psychological notion of reticence has little purchase on Milton's professed withdrawals. Kerrigan's suggestion of "drama" is dead on, but in the case of professed reticence the drama is not psychological but phenomenological: The dialectic of speaking or remaining silent is externally and observably dramatized. Nor should Milton's protestations of withdrawal be viewed as traces of psychic struggle that have escaped onto paper. While his actual withdrawals may be reconstructed through the interpretive processes that psychoanalysis provides, his written renunciations are already external, present, and, as such, available for description.

Acknowledging asceticism as Milton's characteristic means of persuasion allows us to reframe vexed questions about his political involvement following the Restoration. Blair Worden, among others, has argued that toward the end of his career Milton "withdraws from politics into faith," concerning himself in the post-Restoration poems with "eternal verities" rather than "temporal politics."¹⁹ Reacting against this view, David Norbrook and David Loewenstein find evidence of continued political activism in the late poetry. Norbrook argues that "Milton made every effort to intervene in the now-diminished public sphere as far as he possibly could," while Loewenstein asserts that *Paradise Lost* is "polemically alive in the adverse milieu of Restoration England."²⁰ Siding with Worden and using arguments pioneered by Fish, William Walker questions the resemblances Norbrook and Loewenstein – and, by extension, worldly critics more generally – find between Milton's poetry and the language of contemporary political debates. He argues that the "case for the polemical, topical dimension of *Paradise Lost*, for the view that the poem is to a great extent about seventeenth-century English politics" is "grounded in a simplistic understanding" of the parallels between Milton's poems and other texts.²¹ Instead of gearing his poetry to political aims, Walker suggests, Milton uses and exploits "the discourses, vocabularies, and texts which were available to him in the immediate political arena" for aesthetic and theological rather than rhetorical purposes (199). In this view, the late poems are not intended as interventions in the local concerns of the Civil War and the Restoration; they rather subordinate those concerns to an all-embracing vision of ahistorical truth. Milton is not "writing about eternal verities *instead* of temporal politics," asserts Walker, "but writing about eternal verities *through* temporal politics" (201).

As the following chapters will make clear, the professed desire to renounce "temporal politics" in order to reside content in "eternal verities" is hardly new to Milton's post-Restoration poems. Such gestures are already

present in his early, most fiercely argued prose tracts; indeed they are one of the most persistent features of his “committed” writings. Whatever retreat from polemical engagement we may find in the late poems is the continuation – we might even say the heightening – of a rhetorical strategy that Milton had employed throughout his polemical career. He dons his singing robes to take care of business.

At a more fundamental level this study attempts to move away from one of Milton criticism’s most pervasive assumptions. Worldly and other-worldly critics alike have generally assumed that Milton’s writings are expressions of deeply held beliefs that we must recover and make consistent with one another. His characteristic utterance, in this view, is the Christian “*credo...*,” and the proper scholarly response to this utterance is doxography, which asks, “What did he believe about *x*?”²² For *x* scholars have inserted topics like liberty, tyranny, Republicanism, church government, hierarchy, monism, cosmology, ecology, sin, death, salvation, chastity, marriage, Cromwell, scriptural interpretation, heresy, Arianism, Arminianism, Socinianism, mortalism, the Crucifixion, idolatry, toleration, Reformation, Restoration, nationalism – to offer a necessarily partial list.

Rather than revising or giving a new account of any of these beliefs, this book focuses instead on Milton’s peculiar deployment of what Aristotle calls “the available means of persuasion.”²³ I read his writings less as expressions of commitments rooted in his soul than as ways of coping with and influencing the contingencies of Interregnum and Restoration England. There is, for example, little attempt in the pages that follow to place Milton under the label of any orthodoxy or heresy. In an attempt to inject a new strain of pragmatism into Milton criticism, I consider his utterances less as propositions about how the world is or how he believes it ought be than as efforts to transform the world, as midwives between “is” and “ought.”²⁴ Drawing on humanist rhetoric as the traditional discipline of world transformation, my analysis proceeds primarily through instrumental understanding (discerning a sentence’s function in a larger project) rather than explication (figuring out the beliefs to which a sentence gives voice). This shift in approach still finds a kind of unity in Milton’s works, but it is a pragmatic rather than a doctrinal unity, a unity that exists in the final effect he aims to have on his readers rather than the reconciliation of apparently incompatible beliefs in his soul.

There are, however, a few reasons why the move away from doxography is not as disruptive as it may initially sound. The first is that any attempt to describe practices rather than *doxa* necessarily ends up generating a new set of implicit beliefs. Rhetorical habits, for example, can