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The
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PREFACE

IN my previous book on Milton, published in 1930, I had little space for his seventeenth-century setting and not much more for his present poetic status. These are now my two main themes; and they are as important to-day as in 1930. It is still necessary to fight the old heresy that Milton was utterly isolated and to insist that he belonged to his age and cannot be understood outside it. Since 1930 a good deal has been written against Milton; but a good deal too in his defence. For instance, Miss Helen Darbishire's introduction to the *Early Lives of Milton* makes out a strong case for the decency of Milton's character (though it did not prevent Mr Belloc from calling Milton a cad and a coward). Miss Rose Macaulay's *Milton*, because it is a fresh study of the poet's life issuing in a sincere appreciation of his poetry, amounts to a serious defence of his high position. Professor Grierson's *Milton and Wordsworth* explicitly defends Milton against recent attack. Mr Desmond MacCarthy has given his testimony; and Mr Charles Williams, in a recent article on the *New Milton*, would relieve him of a number of crimes which even Milton's admirers had hitherto been content to put up with. But there is room for more defences yet. So long as Milton's detractors are vocal, those who value him highly should speak out in his favour, even at the risk of tautology.

I have tried, then, in this book to attach Milton more firmly to his age and to defend him against modern defamation. But my method of defence has been mainly positive. If I have denied what some have said about him, I have tried not to leave a vacuum but to put something in the place of what I repudiate. And in so doing I hope I have contributed something to a new notion of Milton which has been replacing, gradually and even painfully, a no longer wholesome piece of idolatry.

Though both themes are usually present, one or other tends to be more prominent in each section. In my study of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, for instance, I am mainly concerned with fixing these poems in their proper setting and with destroying their mythical connection with Horton. In writing of Milton's visual imagination, I am mainly concerned with defending him against a recent attack. In my note on Milton's style I blend the two themes. Anyhow, I hope that both themes are sufficiently sustained to give the unity of a book to a series of chapters which can also be read as separate studies.

In part of my last section I have appeared to stray a long way both from the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. Study of Milton has led me to that of the epic in general; and I have given, as a necessary prelude to Milton's treatment of the epic tradition, my own interpretation of the course of the epic in England.

One thing I regret. Aiming at brevity, I have had no room to refer to more than a fraction of the recent

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work on Milton that has interested me. And I should like to apologize for any seeming discourtesy, if I have repeated without comment personal opinions which competent critics of Milton have objected to. I have, for instance, in speaking of *Lycidas*, ignored Professor F. A. Patterson's questioning of the way I read that poem. But my silence in the text of this book must not be taken to mean that I ignore the danger of disagreeing with one so steeped in Miltonic lore as an editor of the *Columbia Milton*. Among pieces of Milton criticism I should have liked to comment on at length is Mr Empson's *Milton and Bentley* in his *Some Versions of Pastoral*. Knowing that if I once began I should run to a commentary far larger than the provocative original, I have kept myself to a couple of incidental references. But I wish to acknowledge the stimulus I got from Mr Empson. I read with the utmost interest the leading article in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 30 March 1933, entitled *Ormuz and Amurath*. The author, whose name is not known to me, proves Milton's close concern, exceptional among poets of his day, with contemporary exploration in Asia. This concern, which appears first in *Paradise Lost*, shows how in his mature period Milton was absorbed in the particular and in the local even though he merged them in a larger scope. This article reinforces strongly what is one of my main themes in the present volume.

If, now and again, I contradict opinions stated in my previous book, I mean that I have changed these opinions. But I hold with most of what I said in 1930.

My thanks are due for permission to reprint certain studies already published: to the English Association for '*L'Allegro*' and '*Il Penseroso*'; to the *Cambridge Review* for *Milton and Prophetic Poetry*, which was a review of a recent book; to the British Academy for the *English Epic Tradition*, which was the Warton Lecture on English Poetry for 1936; to the editors of the volume in honour of Professor Grierson for the *Growth of Milton's Epic Plans*, which appeared under the title of *Milton and the English Epic Tradition*. In all these I have made a few changes, but I have not recast them; and I would ask the reader to bear in mind that I have not tried to disguise the special conditions which influenced the form of the last three. In particular, although the *Growth of Milton's Epic Plans* was written as a sequel to the *English Epic Tradition*, I have preserved the autonomous form into which each study was cast; at the risk (may I warn the reader?) of retaining a few redundancies.

As in my earlier book on Milton, I have tried to combine a certain amount of scholarship with an appeal to the general literary public. It happens that the scholarship is more concentrated in the first and in the two last sections than elsewhere.

For quotations from Milton's verse I have used (with the kind permission of the Oxford University Press) the Oxford edition. If I am blamed for not using the Columbia edition, I would plead that its present high price puts it beyond the reach of most readers. It is more difficult to defend my continuing to refer to the Bohn edition of Milton's prose, when that admirably

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compact, comprehensive, and serviceable volume, Professor Patterson's *Student's Milton*, is readily available. But, since in England the Bohn edition is still the most widely diffused and the most accessible, I decided to quote from it on grounds of general utility. For quotations from Milton's letters and prolusions I have used my wife's (P. B. Tillyard's) translation.

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January 1938

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