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1

The Poet

THIS IS the biography of a poem, not a poet; but, as the rest of this book will amply demonstrate, the fate of this poem came to be intricately (and in many instances unfortunately) intertwined with ideas about its author. Often we shall see that when readers respond to *Paradise Lost*—with admiration or disgust—they are responding less to the poem itself than to the mind they discern behind it. So it is with the curious and controversial career of that author that we must begin.

The ninth book of *Paradise Lost*, the one that describes the Fall of Adam and Eve from the perfect bliss for which they had been created, commences with a plea for divine assistance. This is the poet's third such plea. Milton had begun his poem with an invocation, a double one seeking aid first from the "Heavenly Muse" and then from the Holy Spirit. He had sought aid again at the outset of Book III, calling, as his story made the dramatic transition from the "darkness visible" of Hell to the bright courts of Heaven, for the illumination of "holy light." This plea is followed by a moving description of his blindness:



FIGURE 1. John Milton, by William Faithorne (1670).
National Portrait Gallery, London.

Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
Cut off, and for the Book of knowledge fair
Presented with a Universal blank
Of Nature's works to me expung'd and ras'd,
And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
(III.40–49)

The invocation at the outset of the ninth book grows more personal still, and expresses an uncharacteristic diffidence. After all, Milton says, his topic is one “Not less but more Heroic than the wrath / Of stern Achilles on his Foe pursu'd / Thrice Fugitive about Troy Wall” (IX.14–16); more heroic also than the tales told in the *Odyssey* and even the *Aeneid*. Can he really claim to be adequate to the challenge? Only if he can secure the aid of his “Celestial Patroness,” who, he tells us twice within a few lines, comes to him at night and whispers to him in his sleep, or merely “inspires” his “unpremeditated verse”—which is to say, he does not struggle to draft his lines: they come to him “easy,” in the night. (And then, we know from other sources, he would next morning dictate them to his amanuenses.)

Still, he's worried. Has he come “an age too late”?—Is the era of true epic poetry gone forever? Or, perhaps, is the “cold / Climate” of England hostile to the Mediterranean muses of his poetic predecessors? Or might his efforts be compromised by the simple yet inevitable effects of old age? (Milton was in his

late fifties when he composed these lines, but given the life expectancies in his time and place, and his own history of indifferent health, he had reason to consider himself elderly.)

One thing he is sure of: that his theme is the proper one. Though war had long been “the only Argument”—that is, subject—thought to be truly heroic, he hotly dissents from that judgment, and especially disdains the medieval and early modern poems that describe “Races and Games . . . emblazon’d Shields . . . Caparisons and Steeds . . . gorgeous Knights / At Joust and Tournament” (IX.33–41)—the whole business being, to Milton, a “long and tedious havoc.” About all such stuff he says he is “Nor skilled nor studious”: he knows little and doesn’t care to know more.¹ That said, he admits that he did not quickly come to the choice he now claims to be “higher”: His course was one of “long choosing, and beginning late.”

But why? Why did he take so long to choose his epic theme, his “great Argument,” and still longer to begin listening for the whispered nocturnal words of his Celestial Patroness?

Milton was born in London in December of 1608.² His father, also John Milton, was a scrivener—a scribe or notary, one paid

1. However, he remained always reverent towards Edmund Spenser, author of the *Faerie Queene* and his chief predecessor as an English poet working on an epic scale. See Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 80, for multiple examples.

2. My knowledge of Milton’s life comes primarily from three excellent biographies, those by Barbara K. Lewalski, Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, and Nicholas McDowell.

to write documents of many sorts—and his office in Bread Street, at the sign of the Spread Eagle, was also the family home. (The Spread Eagle was the traditional sign of a scrivener, so the illiterate—all too often in need of scribes—could find the person they needed.) But the elder John was by avocation a composer and musician, and from an early age his son was engaged in the family's musical endeavors. About the poet's mother, Sara, we know almost nothing, not even the date of her marriage, though some years after her death her son would write of her, "my mother [was] a woman of purest reputation, celebrated throughout the neighborhood for her acts of charity" (PR 346). The Worshipful Company of Scribes was (and is) one of the famous livery companies of London, along with the Mercers, the Merchant Taylors, the Vintners, and many others—organized and well-respected professions all.³ The Miltons were rather well off; not rich, but substantial.

Young John was first educated at home, then at St. Paul's School.⁴ Founded in 1509 by the great Renaissance humanist John Colet, it was located just on the north side of St. Paul's Cathedral, while Bread Street lay just south. This was Old St. Paul's, the magnificent Gothic church that would be destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666. At school he

3. The addition in recent years of the Worshipful Company of Management Consultants, the Worshipful Company of International Bankers, and the Worshipful Company of Security Professionals has rather altered the tone of the livery-company tradition.

4. In his Latin poem "*Ad Patrem*" ("To His Father") Milton praises the elder John Milton for providing him an excellent education—though there are some hints of paternal frustration at the son's delay in choosing and sticking with a career (CP 573ff).

learned to write English prose, to read and write Latin prose and verse, and then to read a little Greek and (eventually) Hebrew. Later Milton would say that as much as he admired Greek verse, he admired Hebrew verse more, and his earliest surviving poems are English versions of Psalms 114 and 136; Milton thought highly enough of them not just to keep them, but when he was in his thirties to publish them.⁵ He said then that he had written them at age fifteen, that is, in 1624.

The year after that he went up to Christ's College, Cambridge—sixteen was not then an unusual age to begin university; his closest friend, Charles Diodati, began Oxford at thirteen—where he had a mixed experience. He wrote many poems, most of them in English, most of them elegies for friends or teachers; but he also wrote in Latin some vigorous anti-Catholic polemics, and late in his time at Cambridge he began to devote serious time and energy to the writing of poems in Italian. To comply with certain requirements, he composed and delivered Latin addresses, known as “Prolusions.” He became widely known as “the Lady of Christ’s”—he refers jokingly to this in one of his Prolusions—probably

5. In *The Reason of Church Government* (1642) Milton notes “those magnificent odes and hymns wherein Pindarus and Callimachus are in most things worthy,” but then asserts that “those frequent songs throughout the law and prophets beyond all these, not in their divine argument alone, but in the very critical art of composition, may be easily made appear over all the kinds of lyric poesy to be incomparable” (PR 89). In *A Preface to “Paradise Lost”* C. S. Lewis comments: “I once had a pupil, innocent alike of the Greek and of the Hebrew tongue, who did not think himself thereby disqualified from pronouncing this judgement a proof of Milton’s bad taste; the rest of us, whose Greek is amateurish and who have no Hebrew, must leave Milton to discuss the question with his peers” (pp. 4–5).

because he was a slight and elegant youth with long silky hair;⁶ and he was certainly recognized for possessing great gifts.

But he was not happy at Cambridge. He wrote to a London friend in 1628 that he was “finding almost no intellectual companions here,” and for the rest of his life he would be contemptuous of what he believed to be the frivolity of university education in Britain. He struggled to get along with his tutor, and some would later say that he was rusticated—expelled for a season—though no surviving records say so. He does seem to have left Cambridge for a period, willingly or unwillingly, but eventually he took his bachelor’s degree and later returned for the brief period of residency necessary to gain the master’s. After that he spent several years in and near London, reading and studying—it was convenient for him to have a well-fixed father—nominally in preparation for a *sanctae theologiae baccalaureus* (later called the Bachelor of Divinity).

In any case he was glad to be done with Cambridge, and one suspects that he never would have left central London again if his father had not decided to seek a more rural life, first in Hammersmith—a mere hamlet in those days, seven miles from London proper—and later in the village of Horton, then in Buckinghamshire. Milton was a Londoner through and through, and everything that he did and wrote should be understood in that light. That city’s character and fortunes always shaped his own.

6. Some Milton scholars have thought it significant that Aelius Donatus, a fourth-century biographer of Virgil, says that when Virgil lived in Naples he was commonly known as the Virgin (*parthenias vulgo appellatus sit*). But “virgin” and “lady” are scarcely synonyms.

In 1609, when Milton was just a few months old, the plague had swept through London. We do not know whether his family left the city at that time, though it was common for those who could afford it to seek refuge in the plague-free countryside. (That year's outbreak may have been the event that led William Shakespeare to end his long residency in the city and return to his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon.) Waves of the plague would recur in London through Milton's life, and when they did he and his family—first his parents, later his wife and children—would typically make a brief rural retreat. But he would not live outside the city for an extended period until the massive outbreak in 1665 that sent him for some months to Chalfont St. Giles, Buckinghamshire. This season of Milton's life gets more attention than it deserves because he completed *Paradise Lost* there, and because the cottage he occupied still exists and has been turned into a museum, whereas none of his London residences remain—most places associated with Milton, including the house in Bread Street, were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666. But make no mistake: *Paradise Lost* is a poem conceived by a Londoner, composed largely in London, and published in London. It is one of the definitive documents of that city's spiritual and intellectual life, rivaled in that respect primarily by the visionary poems and prints of William Blake.

And London is the very center of the political turmoil that would dominate the second half of Milton's life—turmoil that would result in the toppling and execution of a king, an event which led to Milton's becoming a government official; that appointment led in turn to his imprisonment as a traitor

and the imminent danger of execution. As Roy Porter wrote of this period,

[T]he coming of the new Stuart dynasty, fresh from Scotland and green in English politics, created friction between King and Commons, often over money matters dear to City hearts, such as excise and taxation. It would, recent historians have insisted, be rank hindsight to imply that early Stuart rule was rushing unstoppably down the rapids towards the Niagara of the Civil War, a disaster in which London was destined to be ranged against the King, representing, as vulgar Marxists might put it, bourgeois revolution against feudal monarchy. Nevertheless the metropolis was becoming so populous and powerful, so indispensable to royal solvency and the nation's prosperity, that the days had long passed when the White Tower terrorized the citizenry, or rebel leaders would meekly be led off to Mile End by a Richard II: things soon turned out quite the reverse, with a King being led to the scaffold, ironically in front of Inigo Jones's Banqueting House.⁷

7. Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 89. Inigo Jones had been commissioned to design and build Banqueting House by Charles's father, King James I. As Porter goes on to show, the financiers of the City did not immediately abandon Charles, and some of them were always ready to lend money to him, but "the turning point came on January 1642, when Charles tried to arrest five House of Commons opponents and they fled into the City, thereby sealing a Parliament/London bond. The king pursued. At the Guildhall his reception was mixed, but in the streets a howling mob of tradesmen, apprentices and mariners cried 'privilege of parliament, privilege of parliament' . . . In July 1642 the royalist Lord Mayor was impeached in Parliament, dismissed, and clapped in the Tower. A radical was appointed in his place, and London armed for war" (p. 72).

This was Milton's London. He lived and worked there through this period of escalating tension, and would have felt that tension in his bones.

But *his* concerns were not economic, or even, at first, strictly political. He was a learned man, one inclined first to the service of poetry and second to the service of the church; he was neither merchant nor politician. And yet he was gradually drawn into a world of revolution and regicide: of both he became the most famous and eloquent defender. Perhaps the single greatest puzzle about Milton's life is this: When and how was he radicalized? If, like his intimate friend Charles Diodati, he had died at age twenty-eight, he would have been seen as a relatively typical product of his time and social class: an erudite and sophisticated young poet who had shown no interest in politics and had never openly questioned the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England. But in his thirties he became a revolutionary and a defender of regicide. What happened?

In early modern Britain, you would have been hard-pressed to find anyone who believed that questions about the proper character of the state could be divorced from beliefs about the nature of the True Church. In the Elizabethan era a certain equilibrium between church and state had been laboriously achieved, though at the cost, to those who persevered in the Roman faith, of a profound loss of rights and privileges. Roman Catholic worship was legally forbidden throughout England; only those who affirmed the Church of England's Articles of Religion could receive degrees from Oxford or Cambridge; after the Popish Recusants Act of 1605 was passed—in response to the Gunpowder Plot to blow up the Houses of

Parliament—no Catholic could practice law or medicine, or serve as anyone's legal guardian or trustee. But with the succession of King Charles I in 1625, and the increasing power of his favored clergyman William Laud—named Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633—many Protestants came under legal scrutiny from Charles and his clerical servants. To be sure, king and prelates were not necessarily of one mind about all things. Laud's opponents always denigrated him as popish, but he was staunchly opposed to the Roman church; Charles, whose wife, Henrietta Maria, was Catholic and whose mother may have been as well, was less hostile. In any case, the crown and its church prelates became less concerned with any threat coming from Recusants (Catholics who *recused* themselves from Anglican worship services) and more concerned with Presbyterians and other Dissenters (those who *dissented* from some of the Articles of Religion) and Puritans (who remained obedient but sought to *purify* what they believed to be a corrupt Church of England).

This Laudian orthodoxy was much concerned to mandate certain forms of worship and liturgical practice—and to enforce its mandates. This project of administrative surveillance at one point touched the Milton family quite directly. In 1636 the elder Milton resigned from his role in the Company of Scriveners and he and his family moved to the village of Horton, then in Buckinghamshire, where, a year later, Sara Milton died and was buried under the aisle of the parish church. Soon thereafter a Laudian archdeacon, visiting the parish as a representative of the bishop of Lincoln, scrutinized the arrangements. He found some things to his liking and some things not. The rector's surplice was inappropriate, for instance; and

the family pew of the Miltons was too high. Moreover, Sara Milton's tombstone was improperly oriented—the inscription faced the wrong way—and the archdeacon ordered it to be reversed. In the event, it was not altered, but we know nothing about the Milton family's feelings on this matter. Did they treat it as the kind of minor annoyance that inevitably accompanies interactions with bureaucracy? Or were they more deeply offended? No evidence tells us.

We know that when Milton was at Cambridge he made all of the requisite affirmations of the principles that would ultimately be called Laudian; he also tells us that from an early age his family intended him for the church and that (as noted earlier) he studied towards a Bachelor of Divinity degree through much of the 1630s. But the greatest of his early poems, "Lycidas," written in 1637, departs briefly from its elegiac mood to utter a fierce denunciation of clerical corruption. ("Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold / A sheep-hook, or have learn'd aught else the least / That to the faithful herdman's art belongs!" [CP 44]) And very soon after he returned from his Italian journey in 1638 and 1639 he began to write antiprelatical pamphlets—pamphlets denouncing what he believed to be an excess of priestly authority over the Christian people of England. How he got from affirmation to denunciation is simply not known, though speculation has been endless among Miltonists.

He himself put the matter simply. In *The Reason of Church Government* (1642) he responds to the argument that, as a layman, he has no business arguing about how the church should be structured. He says that he had long felt the proper Christian impulse to aid "the church, to whose service by the intentions

of my parents and friends I was destined of a child, and in mine own resolutions”; but then, “coming to some maturity of years and perceiving what tyranny had invaded the church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slave, and take an oath withal, which unless he took with a conscience that would retch, he must either straight perjure or split his faith,” he decided to refrain from ordination. It is better to practice “a blameless silence” than to acquire “the sacred office of speaking bought and begun with servitude and forswearing.” Yet would such silence not be a lamentable refusal “to help ease and lighten the difficult labors of the church”? Thus, in the end, having been “church-outed by the prelates”—denied the possibility of honest ministry by arrogant and tyrannical Laudians—he decided that “God by his secretary conscience” required him to speak anyway (PR 91). He makes no mention, here or elsewhere, of being moved by any personal affront. No argument from silence can be definitive, but Milton was not one to ignore a slight.⁸

Writing more than a decade later, in 1654, when he was serving in Oliver Cromwell’s government, Milton responded to some of his many critics by saying that everything he wrote in the 1640s was done in service to a single overarching principle: the defense of liberty.

I observed that there are, in all, three varieties of liberty without which civilized life is scarcely possible, namely

8. In his *Second Defense* he bristles at personal insults flung at him by his opponents: “Ugly I have never been thought by anyone, to my knowledge, who has laid eyes on me. . . . I admit that I am not tall, but my stature is closer to the medium than to the small. . . . Although I am past forty, there is scarcely anyone to whom I do not seem younger by about ten years” (PR 334).

ecclesiastical liberty, domestic or personal liberty, and civil liberty, and since I had already written about the first, while I saw that the magistrates were vigorously attending to the third, I took as my province the remaining one, the second or domestic kind. This too seemed to be concerned with three problems: the nature of marriage itself, the education of the children, and finally the existence of freedom to express oneself. Hence I set forth my views of marriage, not only its proper contraction, but also, if need be, its dissolution. (PR 349)

In 1642 Milton, age thirty-three, married seventeen-year-old Mary Powell, but after just a few weeks of marriage she returned to her parents. Eventually she was convinced to rejoin her husband, but Milton had already begun a massive project of research into what he would call *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (the title of the first of four lengthy tracts he would publish between 1643 and 1645)—essentially looking for ways to evade the evident bluntness of Jesus’s declaration that a man cannot divorce his wife except on the grounds of her “fornication” (Matthew 19).

Milton’s description of these tracts is puzzling. He wrote, “Concerning this matter then I published several books, at the very time when man and wife were often bitter foes, he dwelling at home with their children, she, the mother of the family, in the camp of the enemy, threatening her husband with death and disaster” (PR 349). This reference to the English Civil War, then raging, is either allegorical—civil war figured as a divorce—or an example of a legitimate cause for seeking divorce, i.e., you may divorce your wife if she wants you

murdered. It's impossible to tell, and one cannot but suspect an evasiveness in his account of the divorce tracts. He does not in any event mention his own marital struggles.

And as he continues to describe his writing of those years he returns to an emphasis on themes of general relevance:

Next, in one small volume, I discussed the education of children, a brief treatment to be sure, but sufficient, as I thought, for those who devote to the subject the attention it deserves. For nothing can be more efficacious than education in moulding the minds of men to virtue (whence arises true and internal liberty), in governing the state effectively, and preserving it for the longest possible space of time. (PR 350)

This is a reference to his famous essay "Of Education" (1644); though for a time in the 1630s he has been a tutor to his sister's children and eventually to a few others, he ignores that experience here and reaffirms his concern for preserving and protecting liberty. And he continues along these lines:

Lastly I wrote, on the model of a genuine speech, the *Areopagitica*, concerning freedom of the press, that the judgment of truth and falsehood, what should be printed and what suppressed, ought not to be in the hands of a few men (and these mostly ignorant and of vulgar discernment) charged with the inspection of books, at whose will or whim virtually everyone is prevented from publishing aught that surpasses the understanding of the mob.⁹

9. It should be noted here that, though Milton has gone down in history as the great proponent of "freedom of the press," he explicitly says in *Areopagitica* that no Catholic writings should be licensed: "I mean not tolerated Popery, and open

Thus Milton denies that any of his varied prose works of the 1640s—whether on the power of prelates, or the circumstances under which a marriage may be ended, or the nature of education, or the licensing of printed documents—are responses to his own circumstances. They are, rather, disinterested (if not dispassionate) defenses of one great overarching principle.

The reader is free to decide whether or not to believe him. But there is no question that Milton did have an unusually high regard for liberty; and there seems to have been a very particular reason for that. I have already referred to the passage from his *Reason of Church Government* in which Milton defends his participation, as a layman, in ecclesiastical debates; but it is a passage worth returning to, because it is revelatory in several ways. His status as a layman is not the only factor that might disqualify Milton from engagement in the debate, he acknowledges; his youth also, his “green years,” count against him. Anticipating this criticism, Milton embarks on a sinuous train of reasoning. First, “the elegant and learned reader” will, surely, understand that Milton does not seek praise for his polemics, because if *that* was what he wanted, “I should not write thus out of mine own season, when I have [not] yet completed to my mind the full circle of my private studies.” His chief point here is that one of “green years” who leaps into such a fray must be in earnest (though it’s noteworthy

superstition, which as it extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate, provided first that all charitable and compassionate means be used to win and regain the weak and the misled: that also which is impious or evil absolutely either against faith or manners no law can possibly permit, that intends not to unlaw itself” (PR 211). Of course, every text banned by every government is deemed “evil absolutely.”

that more than a decade after taking his Master of Arts, Milton still feels his education inadequate to his ambitions). However, this admission should not be taken to indicate that he's not up to the current challenge: "I complain not of any insufficiency to the matter in hand." Indeed, the task is so easy that if Milton had *chosen* it, that would have led to "knowing my self inferior to my self," a kind of self-betrayal. In refuting the prelates and their supporters, "I have the use, as I may account it, but of my left hand"—the task is so easily accomplished that he has no need of the stronger right one (PR 88).

But this only raises a question: What are the ambitions to which his education has been inadequate? What kind of task *would* require the use of both hands? Why, the writing of *great poetry*, of course. He finds himself "sitting here below in the cool element of prose," when he would, given his choice, be "a Poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him." The learned scholars and poets he met on his recent voyage to Italy told him that he was capable of becoming such a poet; and

I began this far to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home, and not less to an inward prompting which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to after times, as they should not willingly let it die. (PR 88)

(That is beautifully said.) So why not take up that poetic work, if indeed it is his calling, rather than engage in these one-armed polemics?

This question takes us to the nub of the matter. Milton considers what a government is for, and affirms that “it were happy for the Commonwealth, if our Magistrates, as in those famous governments of old, would take into their care, not only the deciding of our contentious law cases and brawls,” but also the education of the people in virtue—and for Milton that means the promotion of proper entertainments and arts, leisure activities that

may civilize, adorn and make discreet our minds by the learned and affable meeting of frequent Academies, and the procurement of wise and artful recitations sweetened with eloquent and graceful enticements to the love and practice of justice, temperance and fortitude, instructing and bettering the Nation at all opportunities, that the call of wisdom and virtue may be heard everywhere. (PR 90)

(Remember also his belief, articulated in his essay “Of Education,” that virtue is the guarantor of liberty.) It is to this cause that Milton believes himself as a poet to be called: “to be an interpreter and relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this island in the mother dialect”—“those intentions . . . have liv’d within me ever since I could conceive myself any thing worth to my Country” (PR 91). His only *true* ambition, then, had been to become the English Virgil, the author of the English *Aeneid*.

But the current Magistrates are too occupied by “contentious law cases and brawls”; by inferior schemes of education; by intrusive overpolicing of printing and of church ceremonies and of the placement of tombstones in churches, to take up the noble cause of “instructing and bettering the Nation.” They not only fail to encourage and support the arts, they,

through their constraints upon liberty, actively impede the ability of artists like Milton to fulfill their vocations. Such vocations can be fulfilled only when England has “enfranchised herself from this impertinent yoke of prelacy”; because “under [such] inquisitorial and tyrannical duncery no free and splendid wit can flourish” (PR 91). So, until that yoke is lifted, that duncery banished, true liberty restored, Milton must set aside his garland and singing robes, and must write cold prose with his left hand.¹⁰

So began his career as a polemicist and, later, a government official. From his early thirties to his early fifties, Milton rarely donned those robes. When, in 1646, in the midst of a barrage of pamphlets, he published *Poems of Mr. John Milton*, he must have felt that he was remembering another life. A year later his father died and he gave up teaching; in 1649, just weeks after Charles I was tried and executed by Parliament, he published *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, an argument that rulers only rule on behalf of and at the sufferance of the People. This led immediately to his appointment as Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Commonwealth Council of State, a position he held until the Commonwealth government ended with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.¹¹ Later in 1649 he

10. This is the great emphasis of Nicholas McDowell's biography, *Poet of Revolution: The Making of John Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020): “Milton's political development is shaped by his evolving understanding of the ways in which ‘tyranny’—defined initially in ecclesiastical and clerical terms but which grows to encompass political organization—retards the intellectual and cultural progress of a nation” (p. 13).

11. Essentially, Milton was responsible for communicating with other European governments, usually in Latin. Two of his colleagues were Andrew Marvell and

published *Eikonoklastes*, a passionate defense of the execution of Charles, whom some were already beginning to think of as King Charles the Martyr.

In the next decade Milton helped conduct foreign affairs for the government, and wrote more polemical treatises defending the execution of the king and celebrating the Commonwealth as a restorer of true liberty; he also began work on a history of England. His wife Mary died, and his young son John; he married again, but within a year and a half his wife and infant daughter, both named Katherine, also died. (His three daughters from his first marriage, Anne, Mary, and Deborah, survived.) Having long had poor eyesight, he became completely blind.¹² In early 1660, just before King Charles II came to assume his throne and therefore far too late, he wrote one last political treatise, this one explaining how a commonwealth might be established and sustained.

All of his political and most of his personal hopes had been dashed. If under the Commonwealth true liberty has

John Dryden: thus the three greatest English poets of the age worked together as bureaucrats, possibly even sharing an office, though because of his blindness Milton worked mainly at home. Surely this is a unique circumstance.

12. His enemies thought his blindness a sign of God's judgment against him. To this, in his *Second Defense*, he replied, "Your blindness, deeply implanted in the inmost faculties, obscures the mind, so that you may see nothing whole or real. Mine, which you make a reproach, merely deprives things of color and superficial appearance. What is true and essential in them is not lost to my intellectual vision. . . . Nor do I feel pain at being classed with the blind, the afflicted, the suffering, and the weak (although you hold this to be wretched), since there is hope that in this way I may approach more closely the mercy and protection of the Father Almighty. There is a certain road which leads through weakness, as the apostle teaches, to the greatest strength" (PR 335).

been gained, in the Restoration it was surely lost again. Two of his books were banned and burned, and he was arrested and imprisoned.¹³ As not merely a supporter of the Commonwealth but one of its leading officers, and the single most uncompromising advocate for the execution of the father of the new king, he had every reason to expect to be publicly and brutally executed. Instead, for reasons unknown, he was released.¹⁴

It was time, he decided, to place a garland upon his head, to don his robes, and to sing.

13. The burning of the books—*Eikonoklastes* and the *Second Defense*—was largely symbolic; no attempt was made to confiscate copies. Book burners had learned a lot in the century and a half since the Bishop of London bought up all the copies he could find of William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament and burned them in a great auto-da-fé. Tyndale took all the money he made from the transaction and used it to print a new edition, with corrections and revisions.

14. The standard form of execution of a traitor required him to be hanged, but not until dead: he was to be cut down while still living to have his sexual organs amputated, to have his entrails torn from his abdomen and burned before his eyes, and only then to be beheaded and bodily divided into four quarters. See Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 400. Speculation about why Milton was spared is infinite and infinitely inconclusive, but the most likely explanation is that the new government thought it adequate to destroy the man's books in place of the man himself. It may well be that this course of action was recommended by Andrew Marvell, who by this time was a Member of Parliament—though he had been Milton's colleague, he somehow managed to avoid condemnation by the new regime. And Milton had other friends among royalists. A final factor: It is quite possible, as Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns argue in *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 309, that the new government believed that Milton could be persuaded to use his powerful rhetorical and argumentative gifts on its behalf.

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