

MILTON AND THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

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To get a proper sense of Milton in the English revolution we need to look not only at his work during the revolutionary period, but also at his early writings in the pre-revolutionary years, and at the mature works produced after the restoration.

For years now the blandly disseminated view of the pre-revolutionary decades of the early seventeenth century has held that the works of English literature of those years belong to a non-political world. It was a depoliticization made possible by an unawareness of the extent and effects of censorship, and a consequent refusal to decode political meanings from the literary texts. But the revolution did not suddenly appear from nowhere. And if we look at Milton's poetry of the 1630s we can see evidence of the social tensions, and unmistakable assertions of revolutionary sentiments.

In his *Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*, Milton has Comus, the tempter who tries to seduce the Lady, declare,

We that are of purer fire
 Imitate the starry quire,
 Who in their nightly watchful spheres,
 Lead in swift round the months and years.
 The sounds and seas with all their finny drove
 Now to the moon in wavering morris move,
 And on the tawny sands and shelves,
 Trip the pert fairies and the dapper elves;
 By dimpled book, and fountain-brim,
 The wood-nymphs decked with daisies trim,
 Their merry wakes and pastimes keep:
 What hath night to do with sleep?
 Night hath better sweets to prove,
 Venus now wakes, and wakens Love.
 Come let us our rites begin... (111-25)

A.N. Wilson remarks on this passage in his *Life of Milton* (1983):

The gaiety, and above all the supreme tastefulness of this is what lends the verse such charm. Lovers of Milton have always regarded his *Masque* as his prettiest work¹

Charm there certainly is, and Comus as a magician was a specialist in charms. But what the celebration of the 'wavering morris', the morris dance, and 'merry wakes and pastimes' (a 'wake' was originally the vigil or feast of a patron saint) achieve is to identify Comus with the central Stuart court policy of promoting traditional sports and pastimes. James I in his Declaration of Sports of 1618, reasserted by Charles I in his Declaration of 1633, the year before Milton's *Maske* was performed, had promoted the traditional sports and pastimes as a mechanism of social control. As Christopher Hill writes in *The Century of Revolution* (1961):

When James justified his Declaration of Sports, his reasons were: (i) men would associate the traditional sports with Popery, and become dissatisfied with the established Church if deprived of them; (ii) 'the common and meaner sort' would become unfit for military service; (iii) they would go in disgust to ale-houses, and there indulge in 'a number of idle and discontented speeches'. The Laudian Bishop Pierce a few years later added a fourth objection: if men had no sports to occupy them on Sundays, they might meet for illegal religious discussion.²

The traditional sports were denounced by the puritans as pagan and papist survivals. Christopher Hill notes that 'Fuller tells us that many moderate men thought the Declaration of Sports was a principal cause of the civil war' and that 'responsibility for the Declaration of Sports furnished one of the charges on the basis of which Laud was accused of high treason'.³

In one of his first prose polemics of the revolution, *Of Reformation in England* (May, 1641), Milton makes his attitude to the sports clear. The Bishops, he asserted,

hamstrung the valour of the Subject by seeking to effeminate us all at home. Well knows every wise Nation that their Liberty consists in manly and honest labours, in sobriety and rigorous honour to the Marriage Bed, which in both Sexes should be bred up from chaste hopes to loyal Enjoyments; and when the people slacken, and fall to looseness, and riot, then doe they as much as if they laid down their necks for some wily Tyrant to get up and ride. Thus learnt *Cyrus* to tame the *Lydians*, whom by Armes could not, whils they kept themselves from Luxury; with one easy Proclamation to set up *Stews*, dancing, feasting, & dicing he made them soone his slaves. I know not what drift the Prelats had, whose Brokers they were to prepare, and supple us for a Foreign Invasion or Domestick oppression; but this I am sure they took the ready way to despoile us both of *manhood* and *grace* at once, and that in the shamefullest and ungodliest manner upon that day which Gods Law, and even our own reason hath consecrated, that we might have one day at least of seven set apart wherein to examin and encrease our knowledge of God, to meditate, and commune of our Faith, our Hope, our eternal City in Heaven, and to quick'n, withall, the study and exercise of Charity; at such a time that men should bee pluck't from their soberest and saddest thoughts, and by *Bishops* the pretended *Fathers of the Church* instigated by publique Edict, and with earnest endeavour push't forward to gaming, jigging, wassailing and mixt dancing is a horror to think. Thus did the Reprobate hireling Priest *Balaam* seeke to subdue the Israelites to Moab, if not by force, then by this divellish *Pollicy*, to draw them from the Sanctuary of God to the luxurious, and ribald feasts of *Baal-peor*. (CPW I. 589).

The terms in which Milton phrases his indictment of these traditional sports - 'when the people slacken, and fall to looseness, and riot' and 'gaming, jigging, wassailing, and mixt dancing' are the terms in which the Lady denounces Comus's 'rites' when she first hears them:

methought it was the sound
 Of riot and ill-managed merriment,
 Such as the jocund flute or gamesome pipe
 Stirs up among the *loose* unlettered hinds,
 When for their teeming flocks and granges full,
 In wanton *dance* they praise the bounteous Pan,
 And thank the gods amiss. I should be loath
 To meet the rudeness and swilled insolence
 Of such late *wassailers*. (171-89).

And Milton's particular outrage that such pagan sports should have been encouraged by the bishops explains why Comus is also presented as a priest. He invokes Cotytto ('befriend/Us thy vowed priests' 135-6), he performs 'rites' to Cotytto and to Hecate (125, 534), and when the Lady delivers her speech for the just distribution of wealth he dismisses it with the words 'Come, no more, / This is mere moral babble, and direct/Against the canon laws of our foundation' (805-7);⁴

This specific reference to the morris dancing, the wakes and so on promoted by the Declaration of Sports is only one of the recurrent specific references to politically explosive topics that we can find in Milton's early work. It is buried, but not hidden irrecoverably, and once noticed it encourages us to look for other such specifics. But there are also general revolutionary sentiments, not located in historic specificities but applicable to most social periods. That speech of the Lady's advocating the just distribution of wealth retains its moral and political urgency no less today than it did 350 years ago:

If every just man that now pines with want
 Had but a moderate and beseeming share
 Of that which lewdly-pampered Luxury
 Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,
 Nature's full blessings would be well-dispens'd
 In unsuperfluous even proportion,
 And she no whit encumbered with her store,
 And then the giver would be better thanked,
 His praise due paid... (767-75)

By the time we reach 'Lycidas' in 1637, Milton's work is beginning to contain passages of heavy menace. 'Yet once more', he opens *Lycidas*, and for years critics accepted the reading of Cleanth Brooks and John E. Hardy: 'Evidently this is not the first time he has come forward with an immature performance.' (*Poems of Mr John Milton: The 1645 Edition with Essays in Analysis*, 1951, p. 170). But as a number of commentators have now pointed out, the phrase 'yet once more' is a Biblical allusion with very specific revolutionary implications. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 12; 25-7 reads:

See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

This was the opening clue on how to read Milton's indictment of the corrupt clergy and academy of the 1630s. The Pilot of the Galilean lake, lamenting Lycidas's death, declares:

How well could I have spared for thee, young swain
Enow of such as for their bellies' sake,
Creep and intrude and climb into the fold?

The hungry sheep look up and are not fed

But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more. (113-31)

There has been a lot of inconclusive academic speculation about what the 'two-handed engine' might be, a morbid preoccupation with the instrument of justice that deflects attention away from Milton's primary point that justice would be done, and soon, on the corrupt clergy and teachers. When he collected 'Lycidas' in his volume of *Poems* of 1645, he spelled out his prophetic insight in a headnote to the poem, pointing out how the author

by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy then in their height.

If the reader of 1637 had missed decoding the political pastoral, the reader of 1645 could not avoid the revolutionary denunciation, could not avoid seeing the poet as placed unambiguously with the forces of reform. The denunciation and promise of retribution was written when the clergy were 'then in their height.' It was not a convenient piece of hindsight, but a committed exercise of radical foresight, an indication of the true poet's gift of political prophecy.

Of the polemical works of the revolutionary years, *Areopagitica* (1644) has undoubtedly had the widest acceptance and dissemination in the English cultural tradition. But the liberal reputation of *Areopagitica* as 'the first work devoted primarily to freedom of the press' (*CPW* II. 163) has been at the expense of its historical context. It appeared amidst a revolution, confronting the attempt to control the press at a time when the press was pouring out increasingly radical materials. The abolition of the Court of Star Chamber in 1641 had removed the official institution that administered press censorship, but in 1643 parliament introduced a new licensing order to deal with the spate of radicalism that was taking the revolution into areas the presbyterians and bankers feared. Clarendon described the situation in his *History of the Rebellion* (1704):

The Common Soldiers, as well as the officers did not only Pray, and Preach among themselves, but went up into the Pulpits in all Churches, and Preached to the People; who quickly became inspired with the same Spirit; Women as well as Men taking upon them to Pray and Preach; which made as great a noise and confusion in all opinions concerning Religion, as there was in the Civil Government of the State; scarce any Man being suffer'd to be called in question for delivering any opinion in Religion, by speaking or writing, how Prophane, Heretical or Blasphemous soever it was; "which", they said, "was to restrain the spirit."

LIBERTY of Conscience was now the Common Argument and Quarrel, whilst the Presbyterian Party proceeded with equal bitterness against the several Sects as Enemies to all Godliness, as they had done, and still continued to do, against the Prelatical Party.' (III, 32).

It was just this Presbyterian attack on the sects, on the radical and progressive splinter groups, that Milton is concerned to confront in *Areopagitica*. Early in *Areopagitica* he remarked parenthetically and provocatively: 'The Christian faith, for that was once a schism...' (II, 529). Towards the end of the work he delivered his unforgettable defence of the sects in a passage often celebrated for its enthusiastic portrayal of London at the height of the revolution, vanguard of European reform:

Behold now this vast City of refuge, the mansion house of liberty, encompassed and surrounded with his protection; the shop of warre hath not there more anvils and hammers waking, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed Justice in defence of beleagur'd Truth, then there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas wherewith to present, as with their homage and their fealty the approaching Reformation; others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement. (II, 553-54).

From this image of harmony in variety, productive, progressive activity from the multiplicity of individual, differentiated concerns, he moves to stress the clashes, the confrontations so inevitable and necessary and no less productive:

Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. Under these fantastic terrors of sect and schism, we wrong the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge and understanding which God hath stirr'd up in this City. What some lament of, we rather should rejoyce at, should rather praise this pious forwardness among men, to reassume the ill deputed care of their Religion into their own hands again. (554)

And from this stress on the necessities of argument and opinion he moves on to the positive values of separation and division with images of cutting, quarrying, dissection:

Yet these are the men cry'd out against for schismatics and sectaries; as if, while the Temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrational men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber, ere the house of God can be built. (555).

What had been harsh and ugly terms of abuse and contempt from the new ruling class - schismatics, sectaries - are now resituated in this beautiful account of the building of the Temple of God. The class implications are unmistakable. A clue was given in 'we rather should rejoyce at' men reassuming the 'care of their Religion into their own hands again' (554); it is not aristocrats or bishops or businessmen who take things 'into their own hands'; there is a powerful respect here as always in Milton for manual labourers. This is made explicit in the unambiguously mechanical trades that are specified in the

building of the temple; people are shown cutting, squaring, hewing. These are all manual activities; there is 'spiritual architecture' (555) but no architect, only 'builders' (555). The appropriateness of such analogies from physical labour, from working with one's hands, from the employments of the common people, to defend the sects, composed in large part from the working classes, is yet another denial of that elitism so wrongly asserted of Milton. That the manual labour of the lower classes is presented as beautiful makes clear Milton's sympathies. It is not only the radical ideas of the sects that he defends but the social composition of the sects that he glorifies - in marked opposition to the corrupted clergy and university educated elite that he consistently condemns. Against university acquired learning he covertly insinuated the subversive alternative of divine inspiration. Discussing the injustice liable to be perpetrated on the work of an author now dead by posthumous licensing and censorship Milton remarks 'if there be found in his book one sentence of ventrous edge, utter'd in the height of zeal, and who knows whether it might not be the dictat of a divine Spirit' (534). Zeal and 'the dictat of a divine Spirit' are part of the rhetoric of the radical sects, like the phrase 'the people's birthright' that he also employs in *Areopagitica* (541). When he writes of a 'zealous thirst after knowledge which God had stirr'd up' (554) he is writing from the ideology of the radical sects and schisms. David Petergorsky defined the terms of the ideology in *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Revolution* (1940):

Puritanism had insisted that knowledge of God could come only through study and understanding of the Bible. By substituting the written word of the scriptures for the hierarchy as the final authority in religious life, it took the effective direction of religious affairs from the hands of the prelates only to make it the monopoly of a literate class. The reply of the poor - and hence, the illiterate and uneducated - was that not formal learning but an inner spiritual experience and inspiration were the true source of religious knowledge, that contact with God was not the exclusive privilege of a superior class, but could be attained by any man however humble his station. (p. 65).

Milton's ultimate defence of the sects (and hence of the radical, egalitarian and communistic values they espoused) was to turn the tables on the reactionary critics and accuse them, the critics, of being the troublemakers, the divisive influence in the new social experiment:

There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims. 'Tis their own pride and ignorance which causes the disturbing, who neither will hear with meekness, nor can convince, yet all must be suppress which is not found in their Syntagma. They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and permit not others to unite those disserver'd peeces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth. (550-1)

This classic dialectical strategy Milton was to use again in *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, it is structurally basic to the poem. Satan, the rebel against God is presented as the archetypal tyrant, the would-be absolutist monarch, with his 'throne of royal state' (II.1) and his 'Monarchal pride' (II. 428). The opprobrium attached to rebels, revolutionaries, radicals on earth is a projection by the tyrant and his party of the moral condemnation that properly and justly should attach to the tyrant. The Good Old Cause was not a rebellion but an attempt at restoring a just divine condition, a true Restoration. (See Fredric Jameson, 'Religion and Ideology', in Francis Barker, ed., *1642: Literature and Power in*

the Seventeenth Century, 1981, p. 329). Only five lines into the epic we read 'till one greater man / Restore us, and regain the blissful seat' (I. 5-6). To read the word 'restore' in this epic of 1667, part of the vocabulary of the Stuart return of 1660, is to read something profoundly shocking. It is an utterly unexpected word to find from a revolutionary regicide. It has to be faltered over, our political attention engaged. Emphatically placed at the poem's opening invocation, it is a provocative reassertion of true vocabulary, a refusal of the Stuart regime. And the political intentions of Milton were readily recognized in the seventeenth century. John Toland wrote in his *Life of John Milton* (1698): 'to display the different Effects of Liberty and Tyranny, is the chief design of his *Paradise Lost*'.⁵ Satan's tyranny is demonstrated in the parliament of Hell; the fallen angels all assemble in Pandemonium which, huge as it is, can only accommodate them if they reduce their giant size to 'less than smallest dwarfs,' that is the electorate, and their physical reduction is a mark of the way they are treated, unlike their parliamentary representatives:

But far within
And in their own dimensions like themselves
The great seraphic lords and cherubim
In close recess and secret conclave sat
A thousand demi-gods on golden seats,
Frequent and full. (I. 792-7)

Yet even these thousand unreduced great lords are treated with political contempt. Only four of them ever get to speak in the parliament Satan calls. And what those four say is irrelevant - splendid speech making as the literary critics have always noted, but nonetheless irrelevant; because Satan has already arranged what he wants through Beelzebub; 'Thus Beelzebub / Pleaded his devilish counsel, first devised / By Satan, and in part proposed.' (II. 378-80). And as soon as Satan has got agreement to his plan to invade earth, he ends the session: 'Thus saying rose / The monarch, and prevented all reply'. The whole episode splendidly enacts what Milton had analysed in *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), his last polemical tract of the revolution, published on the very eve of the restoration. Under a monarchy, he pointed out, it would always be the case that parliament

shall be call'd, by the kings good will and utmost endeavour, as seldome as may be; and then for his own ends: for it will soon return to that, let no man hope otherwise, whatever law or provision be made to the contrary. For it is only the kings right, he will say, to call a Parliament; and this he will do most commonly about his own affairs rather than the kingdom's, as will appear planely as soon as they are call'd (*CPW VII 375*).

According to John Toland *Paradise Lost* was nearly banned by the censor because of an image of the sun 'in dim Eclipse' that 'with fear of change / Perplexes Monarchs' (I. 594-9).⁶ The poem is permeated with political asides, oblique insights. Milton tended to slip his revolutionary sentiments in under the cover of some other problematical matter and this way evaded the censor's attention. In the celebration of wedded love when we first encounter Adam and Eve in book IV, Milton moves from the idyllic, sensuous description of Adam and Eve to a combative argument about sexuality, opposing those who claimed there was no sexual relationship between Adam and Eve before the fall. The counterpoint between the lyrical descriptions - Eve 'in naked beauty more adorn'd / More lovely than Pandora' - and the strident polemic is characteristic of Milton:

Straight side by side were laid, nor turn'd I ween
 Adam from his fair Spouse, nor Eve the Rites
 Mysterious of connubial Love refus'd
 Whatever Hypocrites austerely talk
 Of purity and place and innocence
 Defaming as impure what God declares
 Pure. (IV 741-7)

And then into this already tonally complex passage with its alternation of the erotic and polemic, Milton adds the explosively political:

Haile wedded Love, mysterious law, true source
 Of human offspring, sole propriety
 In Paradise of all things common else. (IV 750-2)

Marriage is the 'sole propriety'; everything else is held in common. The assertion of the absence of private ownership in Paradise is unambiguous. Paradise was communist.

The assertions of equality and communal property and landholding were expressed most cogently in the revolutionary period by Gerrard Winstanley in the various Digger tracts. And their spirit is echoed elsewhere by Milton. After the execution of King Charles I in 1649, Milton wrote a pamphlet justifying the execution, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. Explaining the origin and development of the institution of monarchy, Milton wrote:

No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey... (CPW III 198-9).

The same sentiments are expressed in the same year in the Diggers' manifesto, *The True Levellers' Standard Advanced: or The State of Community opened and Presented to the Sons of Men*:

In the beginning of time, the great creator Reason made the earth to be a common treasury, to preserve the beasts, birds, fishes and man, the lord that was to govern this creation, for man had domination given to him, over the beasts, birds and fishes; but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another.⁷

This same stress, that man was given command over the animals, birds and fish but not over other men, is repeated in *Paradise Lost*. Having seen the career of the tyrant Nimrod and the building of the tower of Babel in his vision of the future, Adam declaims

O execrable son so to aspire
 Above his Brethren, to himself assuming
 Authority usurped, from God not given:
 He gave us only over Beast, Fish Fowl
 Dominion absolute; that right we hold
 By his donation, but Man over men
 He made not Lord, such title to himself
 Reserving, human left from human free. (XII 63-71)

The sentiments and their expression are clear and unambiguous. Milton is here at the conclusion of *Paradise Lost* reasserting the radical egalitarian sentiments of 1649. From the pre-revolutionary 1630s, through his employment by the Council of State to write official propaganda for the new republic, on into the dark years of the restoration reaction and repression, Milton remained firmly committed to a revolutionary position never ceasing to give expression to his egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, communistic progressive beliefs.

Notes

Milton's poetry is cited from *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler, London, 1968. The prose is cited from *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, et al., 8 volumes, New Haven, 1953-1982; (noted as CPW). *Areopagitica* is in volume 2, ed. Ernest Sirluck, 1959. The material of this paper draws on discussions developed at length in my *Dragons Teeth: Literature in the English Revolution*, Oxford, 1987, and in 'Milton's *Areopagitica*: Liberty for the Sects,' in Thomas N. Corns, ed., *The Literature of Controversy: Polemical Strategy from Milton to Junius*, London, 1987, pp. 7-38.

¹ A.N. Wilson, *Life of Milton*, London, 1983, p.51.

² Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, London, 1961, p.85.

³ Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in the Pre-Revolutionary England*, London, 1969, pp.195 and 198.

⁴ Andrew Milner, *John Milton and the English Revolution*, London, 1981, p.135.

⁵ Helen Darbishire (ed), *The Early Lives of Milton*, London, 1965, p. 182.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.180.

⁷ Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill, London, 1973, p. 77.