

TOLERANCE OR A WAR ON SHADOWS: JOHN MILTON'S PARADISE LOST, THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR, AND THE KALEIDOSCOPIIC EARLY MODERN FRONTIER

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Abstract

This article comprises two sections. The first analyses John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in terms of the frontier dividing Providence and Chaos. Chaos is represented in violent images of the colonial world, the English Civil War, and Scientific Revolution cosmology. Providence intends to justify the ways of God in history. Milton's retelling of the traditional Biblical Fall allegorises the 17th century Scientific Revolution, English society overwhelmed by market forces, and early modern nation-building wars. The second section analyses the English Civil War, focusing on Providence and Natural Rights. The Natural Rights defence of pluralism was the work of political refugees, attempting to curtail atrocities done in the name of Providence. Providence, meanwhile, was a political weapon, amidst new forces of capitalism, dynastic rivalry, and nationalism. This article examines Milton's poetic visions, and the institutions and actions that characterized his political life in the English Revolution, and their interconnection.

Key words: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, English Civil War, Scientific Revolution, colonialism, religious wars, state building, Natural Rights, Providence, secularism, revolution.

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Providence and Chaos

John Milton (1608-1674) was chief propagandist during the English Civil War. He rode from triumph to defeat, with the heroic perseverance that characterized his lifelong belief in liberty (“he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself”), and struggle to know God’s ways in dealing with men, i.e. Providence (Milton, 2017, p. 6). *Paradise Lost* (1667) concerned “Eternal Providence”, intended to “justify the ways of God to men”, or the problem of theodicy (Milton, 2003, p. 3). By 1652, a tragic year, Milton went entirely blind. His wife died giving birth to his daughter, and his son died one month later. His wartime enemies declared this Divine Judgment, the work of Providence. The English Civil War (1642-1651), raging for nearly one decade, had recently ended. Charles I had been decapitated in 1649, a regicide that horrified Europe, but which Milton applauded as Providence. In the year of Oliver Cromwell’s (1599-1658) death, 1658, the fifty-year-old Milton started to write *Paradise Lost* completely blind. He completed it in 1663, writing it in hiding, after the 1660 royal Restoration, and in prison, threatened with being hung, drawn, and quartered, as the hangman publicly burned his seditious books. *Paradise Lost* was published, in 1667, one year after the Great Fire of London gutted the medieval City inside the old Roman city wall. Its deeply conflicted visions provide a unique window into those decades of monumental trial and error, of theocratic tyranny, parliamentary government, and military dictatorship (Jenkins, p. 151). A kaleidoscopic and polyvocal text, it problematizes the troubled 17th century reality-fiction boundary through the Providence-Chaos optic.

Born a scrivener’s son in Cheapside, London, in 1608, and educated at Cambridge, Milton committed mid-life to revolutionary Commonwealth politics, and was arrested during the Restoration. His experience of chaos, conflict, and revolution certainly informed *Paradise Lost*, whose central thematic is the decaying frontier dividing Providence and Chaos, or the inside/outside dynamic of invasion. The materialist universe of disorder and time invades the monotheist universe of eternity, which is lost. Thus, “exile has emptied heaven” (Milton, 2003, p. 19). His image of the “frame of Heaven falling” depicts the double collision of 17th century materialism, with interrelated epistemic and ethical aspects (Milton, 2003, p. 48). Despite Eve’s “gentle dreams”, in Book XII, with exile from Paradise eased by the Angel’s salvation prophecy, the historical-temporal promise of Providence is not sustained. The doubtful shadow

thrown by Chaos reveals Greek Atomist and Lucretian impact: "By convention coloured, by convention sweet, by convention bitter", but "only atoms and the void" (Bakewell, p.33). Milton's violent and alienated life fostered speculation, however reluctant, that Providence might be only convention, like colour or sweetness, and reality something quite other. In the secret imaginative background of *Paradise Lost*, this disturbs the fiction-reality boundary.

This scepticism is exposed, for instance, in moments of dialogue about God: "Whatever his wrath, which he calls justice." (Milton, 2003, p. 43). Is justice, then, merely a word, disguising a biased perspective? In this way, *Paradise Lost* is Kafkaesque. It depicts a trial, in which one lives for the struggle in everyday time, but larger metaphysical stakes are enslaved by perspective. Such scepticism is attributed to villains. They likely embody Milton's subverted feelings. As the author, Milton aspired passionately to believe in the transcendental unity of universal justice, "this universal frame" (Milton, 2003, p. 105).

Yet the "fixed laws of Heaven" are porous (Milton, 2003, p. 25). Milton's forbidden fruit of Eden symbolizes, beyond a mere pledge of obedience, a forbidden gateway to unknown knowledge and experience. Epistemologically, one may "attain to speech and reason", "till then void of both" (Milton, 2003, p. 185). Ethically, with the "veil" of "innocence" removed, their "minds are darkened" with "knowing ill" (Milton, 2003, p. 212). Satan's "thirst for knowledge", entailing death, initiates the transgressive act at the centre of *Paradise Lost* (Milton, 2003, pp. 167/169). Following the war in Heaven, and Satan's exile, Hell's divinely sealed prison explodes from within, splattering, to invade the New World of Man. It uses a "highway or bridge" built across the wasteland of Chaos (Milton, 2003, p. 217). Chaos is the "womb of Nature and perhaps her grave", filled with "pregnant causes mixed confusedly", and ever creating "more worlds" randomly (Milton, 2003, p. 48). The forbidden gate is "made of massy iron" or "solid rock", it can be opened – like Pandora's box - but not shut (Milton, 2003, p. 47). A small act of discovery has irreversibly world altering consequences, as when "the glass of Galileo" observes "regions in the moon" (Milton, 2003, p. 108).

This strange retelling of the traditional Biblical Fall – almost a prequel – evokes an allegory of the 17th century Scientific Revolution. It makes Chaos a border, or liminal

state, with this-worldly significance, and a recurrent “surging maze” (Milton, 2003, pp. 117/198/239/). Chaos is represented in violent images of the colonial world (“Europe with Asia joined”) and the English Civil War (“mangled and ghastly wounds”), and the cosmology of the Scientific Revolution (Milton, 2003, pp. 135/226). The border is fluid, a “watery labyrinth”, a “flood of deadly hate”, the “river of oblivion”, where “former state and being forgets”, and “armies whole have sunk” in “revolutions” that “feel by turns the bitter change” (Milton, 2003, p. 39). The social origin of the unsettled fiction-reality frontier is thus revealed.

We can recognize, in these images, the border of the early modern state-market matrix, rupturing the dynastic order of traditional cosmologies. From a localized horizon, where divinely ordained hierarchy was fixed, a global flux dynamic pervades experience, where the circle of moral consideration – and the very meaning of Man – must be radically re-evaluated. Milton therefore asks: “hath Man his fixed seat, or fixed seat hath none?” (Milton, 2003, p. 70). In the New World of market materialism, value is invested in commodities – “cedar, pine, and fir” – in a “nether empire”, which forgets that “God alone” can “value right the good before him” (Milton, 2003, pp. 77/79). It is a world “by centre, or eccentric, hard to tell” (Milton, 2003, pp. 67). Milton broaches the fundamental ontological question of value, anxiously crossing secular borders, which undermine the fiction-reality paradigm of post-Tudor England.

What are these fiery borders? Epistemically, unbridled medieval rationalism (the metaphysical “nature of things”) collides with the 17th century empirical revolt, favouring antecedents and consequences (history, causality, and time). Ethically, the swansong of Theodicy collides with the consequentialist ethics of the Scientific Revolution. For Milton – an amateur theologian, who called for revolution from below, against royal oppressors using the messianic fervour of Biblical prophecy – was deeply disappointed by the dark consequences of Cromwell’s failed divine mission. The disillusioning experience of “growing into a nation” plagued Milton with moral and existential questions about the “perverted world” (Milton, 2003, pp. 275/285). The English Revolution portended the levelling spirit of the modern age (organized underclass parties, demands for a constitution), despite the Cromwellian bid to restore a preordained order, i.e. “freedom by God’s blessing restored”, inscribed on the seal of 1651 (Arendt, p. 43). Milton unwittingly participated in the first modern revolution, the

template for centuries of upheaval, as in the 1640s English popular ballad, "A World Turned Upside Down" (Hill, 1991, p. 44).

Superficially, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton accepted Saint Augustine's argument that ethics is systemic prohibition (Augustine, p. 402). If ethics is obedience to divine will, good means simply what God approves. Yet the undermining of Providence by Chaos makes divine approval manifestly arbitrary. Of the multiple interpretations of divine will, for which so many were suffering and dying, who was right? This question, of the sacred and violence, figured centrally in destabilizing the fiction-reality frontier for Milton's generation of Stuart Period upstarts.

Milton was an early Enlightenment figure, an English radical, in days of religious and political ferment, who publicly reasoned to defend divorce, progressive education, regicide, and the revolutionary Commonwealth. He exemplified early modern citizen activism. Milton's *Areopagitica* was a monument to the free speech ideal. But Milton did not uphold the autonomy of reason. This reflects his vacillation between two dominant 17th century ways of defining the troubling Providence-Chaos boundary, i.e. renegotiating the reality-fiction optic, between modern scientific epistemology and dogmatic religious backlash.

Examples from *Paradise Lost* illustrate this ambiguity. When Milton urged, "answer thy desire Of knowledge within bounds; beyond abstain to ask", this compares plausibly to the 17th century Lockean anti-metaphysical principle (Milton, 2003, 274/153). John Locke's (1632-1704) proto-Enlightenment call urged avoidance of intellectual plunges "into the vast Ocean of *Being*" (Locke, 1997, p. 6). This invested the Providence-Chaos boundary with secular significance. Nobody knows with certainty who God is, and, thus, we should tolerate one another's conflicting views. We cannot, as mortals, differentiate reality from fiction at that level. Breaking with the Platonic absolute in Western tradition, it denied the right to "punish" (Locke, 2005, p. 135). An epistemic argument, it sought to curtail the contagion of political violence spawned from religious difference.

However, Milton held that blasphemy incurs a "fatal curse" upon "nations" (Milton, 2003, p. 274). This ethical argument reconnects politics and the eternal reality-

fiction boundary. From this perspective, Milton's same injunction compares to Locke's arch-rival, Robert Filmer (1588-1653), a Civil War royalist propagandist. He articulated an absolutist model of authority based on the Great Chain of Being, opposing the pure religious truth to the scourge of modern ideas: "a natural freedom of mankind cannot be supposed without the denial of the creation of Adam" (Wooten, p. 98). Freedom of thought implies the risk of sacrilege, and therefore should be repressed. Milton reproduces this view, hostile to modern secular knowledge, in an argument for divine omnipotence: "be lowly wise: Think only what concerns thee and thy being; Dream not of other worlds, what creatures there live" (Milton, 2003, p. 171). Other worlds might include marine biology, or life in outer space. It simply means, do not seek the secrets of nature through scientific enquiry.

This ambiguous fault line, in the polyvocal and kaleidoscopic structure of *Paradise Lost*, indicates how deeply Milton exemplifies the cultural split personality that Paul Hazard has named the 17th century "crisis of European consciousness" (Hazard, pp. 225-237). In Milton's case, the antinomy concerns human freedom of action, including scientific discovery, and the rights of God, as two possible but incommensurable ideals of human freedom. The political agent, according to the rights of God, must act upon the assumption of having full knowledge of God's will, and impose it as reality. By contrast, in the Lockean view, that full knowledge is a fiction, and reality is bounded by the parochial limits of human experience. This view does not deny God or the angels, of which Locke was a believer. It merely holds that human wars of religion are propelled by presumptuous ignorance, and not knowledge. They are wars on shadows, where fictions are tragically taken for reality.

Here, the war on shadows is reflected in Milton's writings. It is exemplified in the "red right hand", "exhorting glorious war" (Milton, 2003, p. 29). The politically objective issue of representation – i.e. institutional forms, power distribution – is linked to a second, existentially deeper – and internally conflicting – "ontological" problem of authenticity, or the enduring substance of religious identity in changing Stuart society. This crisis of inner experience is transferred to the public realm, epitomized in William Prynne's (1600-1669) attack on the 'unreality' of the theatre. Its fictions, he held, undermine authentic religious identity, through multiple falsely constructed selves, and delegitimize political authority (Agnew, p. 102). Prynne depicted theatre much as

Milton depicts Chaos: pluralism as a destabilizing threat to unified social order. Although a problem of the soul, or the hidden world of inner conscience, these issues point to the “foundation” crisis in early modernity, or the search for a new principle of authority, to secure lasting institutions amidst disorder. A political struggle explodes over the “true” meaning of inherited tradition in the English Revolution.

For the 17th century sceptic Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), a nation of atheists could live happily, and make morally right choices (Lilla, p. 125). Ethics are, by this account, social. Choice, for Milton, by contrast, concerned the reality of divine justice in the afterlife. He held that “what obeys reason is free”, and “reason is choice”, not chance (Milton, 2003, pp. 194/55). This was a pre-Hobbesian – and pre-modern - free will and rationality, centring the self-mastery of worldly and unbidden desires: hunger, lust, mood, illness, fear, impulses to conformity. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) – another English Civil War survivor, and author of the founding modern political text, *Leviathan* (1651) - believed that only quantifiable physical reality, i.e. matter, was at stake in political change, and mechanical solutions the only viable ones. Milton’s depiction of Chaos as the “illimitable ocean” of hyperactive atoms, where one might, nonetheless, undertake a “wandering quest” for “concurring signs”, suggests his inner struggle between prophetic imaginings, and Hobbesian free will as coincidentally colliding atoms (Milton, 2003, pp. 45-47). Milton wanders in the valley between Augustine and Hobbes, either the decaying earthly city, whose end-time is in eternity, and new secular belief in institutions, subject to birth, growth, and revolution, i.e. the natural law of reason, conscience, and history (Berman, p. 109).

At the Augustine-Hobbes crossroad, Providence and Chaos collide like a two-headed man strangling himself. Is ethics a social and imaginative creation, conditioned by spatio-temporal contingencies of physical environment? This question – in some form - could not but have crossed Milton’s mind, given the contemporary intellectual climate. He wrote: “Can hearts not free, be tried” (Milton, 2003, p. 115). This rings with doubt about the justice of Judgment Day. In Chaos, “chance, not choice, is the highest arbiter that governs all” (Milton, 2003, p. 47). Hell, the New World, and Man are “built” from “Chaos”, in an “eternal empire” (Milton, 2003, p. 152). It is “embryon atoms”, which “swarm populous”, “unnumbered as the sands”, in the “eternal anarchy” of “endless wars” and “confusion” (Milton, 2003, p. 47). Unlike the traditional view, where

Chaos was used up in Creation, for Milton, it continues to exist, ontologically challenging divine order (Milton, 2003, p. xviii).

This Chaos thematic is therefore a destabilizing force in Milton's universe. When Chaos permits Satan to invade the New World of Man, God's reflections upon this transgression, i.e. the Fall, render divine speech incoherent. God's most memorable passages in *Paradise Lost* betray an anxiety for self-acquittal. Accused of wicked ways, the speaker lapses into incoherence. This is the ultimate sense in which *Paradise Lost* is a Kafkaesque trial. In Milton's account, God allows Chaos to seep unseen into his discourse on "necessity", and thereby refutes both his own theodicy and omnipotence (Milton, 2003, pp. xxix/56). This was, of course, Milton's oversight. It comes dangerously close to suggesting that the traditional qualities attributed to God, as the "Author and end of all things", are untenable falsehoods (Milton, 2003, p. 165).

The dissociative fissure in *Paradise Lost* therefore widens. Milton harboured a vividly imagined millennial religious passion, in tension with his secularly conceived social reforms based on rational criticism. Despite boasting of a left hand which wrote prose, and a right hand for poetry, suggesting complementarity between reason and religious vision, the riveting tensions of *Paradise Lost* rest upon an absence of reconciliation. The "Eternal Providence", or endeavour to "justify the ways of God to men", the moral centre of *Paradise Lost*, was partly one Englishman's tortured confession (Milton, 2003, p. 3). This single road of Providence, the medieval ideal of a cosmically coherent opposite to chaos, in which "God's timeless perception and knowledge is made apparent to us as foreknowledge", is unknowable "from within time" (Pocock, p. 40). It is the modern experience of Machiavellian time - "citizenship and the risks of action in time", against "unchanging hierarchy" - that haunts *Paradise Lost* (Pocock, p. 66).

The uncertainty in applying Providence in the organized Puritan movement for political change, rather than preserving a static dynastic hierarchy, was resolved hermeneutically, with reference to progressive revelation, by which "the pulling down of the Bishops", "change of government, whatever it was - any of those things hath a remarkable point of providence set upon it, that he that runs may read" (Cromwell, p. 10-11). The image of "running" affirms the moment of pure action, or experiential

immediacy, i.e. the citizen activist, as deciding a transcendental meaning. From this precept, a Divine Will was to produce law, based on the interpretation of “signs” among “the elect”, and the sheer process itself became law, in an ontologically conceived voluntarist idea of the historical dynamic. Milton argued, in 1644, that truth consists in the “all concurrence of signs”, by which “God is decreeing to begin some new and great period” (Milton, 2017, p. 177).

The submerged autobiographical, i.e. temporal, current in *Paradise Lost* threatens the clearly ordered borders of Milton’s very identity as an Idea (Christian, English, centred), dissolved by the hidden and irrational states of a chaotic material unconscious (social breakdown, the earth, centreless). The traditional ideal of perfect Knowledge, a Platonic legacy, was harnessed to Providence as a political weapon amidst “the new secular forces” of “capitalism, dynastic rivalry, nationalism, and state sovereignty” (Dunn, pp. 11-12). *Paradise Lost* is shot through with the self-destructive tensions which subvert justification of these Machiavellian experiences in the traditional religious terms of a transcendental moral meaning.

Milton’s inadvertent confession of inner doubt emerges through the figure of Chaos. The poem’s underworld characters embody collapsing inside/outside conventions: “Spirits” can “either sex assume, or both” (Milton, 2003, p. 13). Only God in Heaven is pure and unmixed, but the Justice of Divine Will fails to prevail in conflicting modern nation making. While “God is proclaiming peace”, men “live in hatred, enmity, and strife”, and “levy cruel wars”, while “wasting the earth, and each other to destroy” (Milton, 2003, p. 37). The same holds for nature: “Chance rules all”, in a “wild abyss”, “without dimension, where length, breadth, and height”, “and time and place are lost” (Milton, 2003, p. 47).

Like an infectious abscess, the Chaos thematic is introduced in book II as “the eldest of things”, “chance”, a “darksome desert” pervading God’s “spacious empire up to light”. At the centre of *Paradise Lost* is a cosmic inversion of light and dark. By the time of its publication, the invention of the telescope had destroyed the traditional belief in celestial light, and turned the luminous heavens into the darkness of outer space. Milton alternately depicts the universe as light and dark, never resolving the contradiction (Milton, 2003, p. xxi). Occasionally he depicts darkness – traditionally - as a local

phenomenon, the “shadow of the earth”. At other times, Milton follows the modern Scientific Revolutionary cosmology, and day is a local phenomenon, where “total darkness should by night reign” (Milton, 2003, p. 91). Milton yields to the night of modern cosmology, even envisioning the possibility of infinite instances of alien life on unlimited planets. Among “innumerable stars”, there are “other worlds” (Milton, 2003, p. 67). Milton remotely approaches the recognition that human meaning is local and temporary. Unwittingly, he places the traditional anthropic principle in doubt, that the universe was waiting for human life to appear. It might be incidental, within an infinity of universes which follow varying laws of nature. Each “star” might be “other suns perhaps”, “with their attendant moons” (Milton, 2003, p. 171).

The dynamic Chaos metaphor – at once person and place, good and evil, submissive and subversive, a “formless infinite” - unravels repressed conflicts and liberates imaginative powers (Milton, 2003, p. 53). Without synthesis, it pluralizes the intended unitary truth of Milton’s Theodicy. His truth concept is complicated and various, mired in disturbing relativity, where “Heaven resembles Hell” (Milton, 2003, p. 31). Opposites collapse into one another dialectically, as logical antinomies. *Paradise Lost* tacitly – perhaps unwillingly? - anticipates the modern 18th century Kantian “antinomies”, slayers of the medieval dialectic, notably, determinism and free will (Kant, p. 405). Yet for Milton it spelled desolation, a sense of worldlessness, like the unity of God and Man might be fracturing, against the ever-changing cosmic hypotheses of modern science, or, worse, the New Jerusalem of his hopes might border on a dream.

Paradise Lost therefore belongs to the literature of exile. Thematically, it compares to Ovid’s (43 BC – 17 AD) poems of exile, which recount the spiritual pain of his exile from the Roman Empire. Ovid evokes exile in terms of the following horizon:

“a scatter of names in all but unknown waste: beyond that, nothing but frozen, uninhabitable tundra – alas, how close I stand to the world’s end! Remote from my homeland ... I can’t make physical contact with [loved ones], must imagine their presence.” (Ovid, p. 48)

Real people are reduced to mere names, in world of unintelligible disorder. One can neither live there biologically, nor feel at home spiritually. The loved one, retrievable only through the inner dream world, fragile like a soap bubble, is principally defined by painful absence. Each aspect applies to *Paradise Lost*. It evokes a similar

horizon: "Beyond this flood a frozen continent Lies dark and wild, beat with perpetual storms" (Milton, 2004, p. 39). Yet Milton depicts it through a double purview: man's religious exile from God, and Satan's quest for knowledge of the New World: "Let us bend all our thoughts, to learn what creatures there inhabit" (Milton, 2003, p. 33).

At this time "all the vital ideas, those of property, liberty, and justice, were brought newly into question by way of what was far away" (Hazard, p. 21). Geographically, we see the onset of population flows, goods, and money, not only between nations, but entire continents, with the emerging North Atlantic slave triangle, indentured labour, the Transatlantic and Puritan migrations, and the administration of the British East India Company in Surat (1608). Early globalisation aimed at commercial empires. Buttressed by state and military intervention, colonies represented one authoritarian face of modern violence, experienced by the world's majority. It received frequent theoretical justification, contradicting Natural Rights, by major Western Enlightenment figures as 'universal' systems (Serequeberhan, p. 30). These, too, contained elements of a secularized theodicy, notably in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). By the 16th century, guns, steel, and germs had conquered the "New World" (Diamond, p. 40). Voltaire (1694-1778) later used the discovery of India's profound past to belittle the exclusive claims of Christianity, and the contradictory limits of the Mosaic historical narrative (Sharma, p. 10). Although after Milton's time, the grains of these disruptive tensions were already subtly bursting in the antinomies of *Paradise Lost*.

Satan's bid to overcome infernal exile, through war on God, and man's exile from God, allegorise the disorder of 17th century English society, its traditional hierarchic order overwhelmed by new market forces. Jean-Christophe Agnew has written: "In the century preceding the English Civil War, ..., Britons could be described as feeling their way around a problematic of exchange; that is to say, they were putting forward a repeated pattern of problems or questions about the nature of social identity, intentionality, accountability, transparency, and reciprocity in commodity transactions" (Agnew, p. 9). This new experience of the global market interacted with older existing institutional tendencies, in "the struggle between the secular and the religious regarding the source of legitimacy" (Greif, p. 149).

Why does Satan so much resemble the scientific and democratic spirit of the Enlightenment? This question, for the historian of ideas and the imagination, implies a perspectival kaleidoscope. In Milton's *Hell*, there are "millions that stand in arms", against the "prison of tyranny" (Milton, 2003, p. 26). They prefer "hard liberty before the easy yoke" (Milton, 2003, p. 31). Satan declares to God, "inexplicable thy justice seems" (Milton, 2003, p. 237). *Paradise Lost* is a world of "revolted multitudes", and "conquest", where "universal reproach is worse to bear than violence" (Milton, 2003, p. 126). It is a vision of colonialism, where "Columbus found the American so girt", "naked and wild", and "India east or west", in a "wilderness of sweets" (Milton, 2003, pp. 214/110/109). It is "rich Mexico the seat of Motezume" (Milton, 2003, p. 257). It is a world of "mazes intricate", "most irregular they seem", but where "the secrets of another world" are "not lawful to reveal" (Milton, 2003, 117). Knowledge intersects with power and politics. There is "one first matter, all" (Milton, 2003, 113). It is a world where "military obedience" rises against "Heavens awful monarch" (Milton, 2003, 98). The "earth" is merely "a spot, a grain, An atom, with the firmament compared And all her numbered stars, that seem to roll spaces incomprehensible" (Milton, 2003, 167).

In these ways, 17th century violence, instability, and social upheaval – but also newly discovered scientific, cosmic, and geographic horizons - seep through the porous boundaries of *Paradise Lost* as a text. It is a unique revolutionary document, testament to the deep anxieties of uncontrollable and violent social change, and imaginative masterpiece of the revolutionized early modern worldview. The great Theodicy staggers under the weight of what it seeks to encompass, throwing into doubt the paradigmatic fiction-reality boundaries of the post-Tudor social imaginary.

Religious Wars and Natural Rights: Providence and Exile

The English Revolution confronted the central Machiavellian problem of hegemony, or consent among an often-resistant population, within a centralizing regime newly established through traumatic political violence. Cromwell saw Providence at work behind the curtain of history, linking violence and the sacred to England's national destiny. He opposed Providence to betrayal. To see the king's trial in terms of worldly calculations made one "the greatest traitor in the world", since "providence and necessity had cast (us) upon it" (Wedgwood, p. 80). Cromwell allied himself with

believers in millennium. That Christ and the saints might reign on earth for a thousand years, he initiated the first phase of godly rule in 1653. Moral reform, he believed, would secure national order, and godly dictatorship would speed the process. These were the millennially charged political events that Milton witnessed, and which found their way, through subverted allegories, into *Paradise Lost*. Milton, later reflecting upon these times, wrote: "(why) proclaim these deeds done by the people", when they "bear witness everywhere to the presence of God? ... he was the leader and we followed ... his divine footsteps" (Milton, 1991, p. 52).

The enabling framework of mass national participation was, in contrast with law-based institutions, the coercive and dynamic power of the newly national military institution. Institutions produced new values, thought modes, and power redistribution in the English Revolution. The New Model Army, a parliamentary creation of 1645, was unique in operating on a nationwide basis, as a professional (rather than mercenary) army, based on merit rather than birth. The revolutionary Commonwealth bid for hegemony, however, was undermined by widespread fury at Parliamentary and military rule (Barnard, p. 67). At stake was the conjoined double conundrum: defining state power limits, and managing religious diversity within the self-defining early modern nation. This concerned practical ethics. Yet it had explosive consequences for identity, as thousands were forced anonymously into exile because of religious belonging. Practical ethics and religious identity became tragically confused, between liberty and authenticity.

The English Puritans were colourfully creative, hermeneutically re-rendering received religious tradition, "with a literary backing ... strengthened by a whole battery of pamphlets" (Ashley, p. 41). The central Reformation injunction, of basing authority on the Divine Word, instead of received tradition, inevitably opened a hermeneutical labyrinth of formlessness, within a minimalist framework. If the Puritans looked back, it was to a past so creatively conceived, it could only be the future or the moment. Thus, Milton, in the Puritan tradition, defended Galileo against the Inquisition, and speculated about an infinite universe in the intellectual company of Giordano Bruno, while articulating an early discourse of Natural Rights. Within the same Puritan tradition, we find Parliamentarian Robert Harley (1579-1656) smashing the stained-glass windows of Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's Church, and burning the embroidered alter cloth of Canterbury Cathedral, driven by an inquisitorial morality (Ashley, p. 19).

How can we explain such a contradiction? The Puritan revolt against monarchy was hermeneutics based, for they rejected Divine Right, with “little in the Scriptures to support it, and much to contradict it” (Wedgwood, p. 12). In sum, the wide latitude of possible interpretation testifies to human imaginative power in engaging given texts, but hermeneutics provides no secure foundation for the respect and freedom of the person. Hence, Milton faced the fundamental Enlightenment conundrum of secular institutions and practical ethics in complex societies. The social reality of Chaos ruptured the porous outlines of Providence.

The religious conflagrations that bloodily drenched Europe, in which Milton participated, are suspected of ultimately being cyclically futile, a local power struggle in an indifferent universe. *Paradise Lost* testifies to the “dynamic power” of “new secular forces” transforming “Western civilization”, as competing religions, harnessed in “the service of God”, entered “the last medieval crusade”, and “the first modern war between nation-states” (Dunn, pp. 11-12). The temptation to link political violence and the sacred was a tragic certainty, not least for a revolution’s chief propagandist. The ideology of religious mission, or Providence linked to military violence, importantly effected the ‘Puritan turn’ in English revolutionary politics. Milton argued, in 1644, his optimistic heyday of revolutionary enthusiasm, that “Truth” consists in the “all concurrence of signs,” by which “God is decreeing to begin some new and great period” (Milton, 2017, p. 36). This portended the mobilising role of revolutionary Puritan discourse, linking sacred truth and violence, through the successful New Model Army in 1645. A germinal moment flowered, interweaving popular movements and military institutions, as a modern revolutionary agency mode (Gonzalez, p. 12). It also exhibits the formless identity flux sustaining modern radical religious fundamentalist movements as a mass phenomenon.

In broadly outlining the Providential nation-making politics in Milton’s time, we better understand the *Paradise Lost* conundrum. Its general European background was the post-Reformation religious wars, the French Wars of Religion (1562-98), the Netherlands Revolt (1568-1648), Philip II’s global Spanish empire, and the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which saw the German population reduced by half, with famine, disease, roaming packs of wolves, witch trials, and mass migrations to America (Gombrich, pp. 194-196). The 1684 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and Philip II’s

Inquisition, exemplified Providence as a national religious homogenization program. This political instrument aimed to eliminate religious pluralism, and thus resolve conflicting political obligation, through a policy of violence based on Divine Right. For Philip II, the Inquisition in Spain, the Netherlands, and Latin America, beyond faith, was “an instrument of political consolidation”. The Catholic clergy, as his political arm, provoked revolts, and wars, which “forcibly resettled 80,000 Morisco survivors in other provinces of Spain”. Their “silk industry was obliterated”, and the “last remnants of Arabic scholarship for which Spain had once been famous were also destroyed” (Rothermund, pp. 9-27).

In the English context, Milton invested utopian expectation – fired by a brilliant literary imagination – in a variant of this politics, tempered by Natural Rights convictions. The English Puritans represented “a minority’s imposition of doctrinal and moral Puritanism by law not only on conservative and royalist Anglicans, but on dissenting religious minorities” (Roberts, p. 284). Yet their brief period of political ascendancy also contained the doctrinal seeds of the West European Enlightenment, in Natural Rights. In this sense, Milton’s political career presents a puzzle quite as intractable as *Paradise Lost* itself. Providence grounded Cromwell’s understanding of political power, as he spoke of “strange providences” having placed “the forces of this nation ... into the hands of men of other principles”, or the elect (Cromwell, pp. 9-10). The concept of “the elect” explained the transfer of political authority from the traditional monarch to the republic, through transcendental agency superseding Divine Right. Milton, in this vein, argued that “God shakes a kingdom with strong and healthful commotions to a general reforming”, and “then raises to His own work men of rare abilities” (Milton, 2017, p. 43).

The Providence ideology responded practically to institutional pressures. Cromwell vied to recreate the nation from disorder, appealing to “strangers ... coming from all parts”, and evoked the hegemony crisis by reference to “the people dissatisfied in every corner of the nation” (Cromwell, pp. 24/13). Throughout his life, Cromwell held dear the ideal of liberty of conscience, asserting that “the judgement of truth will teach you to be as just towards an unbeliever as towards a believer” (Cromwell, p. 21). Cromwell permitted the return of the Jews to England in 1655, after their expulsion at the end of the thirteenth century (Katz, p. 40). This outlook inherently, if unreflectingly,

clashed with Cromwell's ideal of the nation as vehicle for public salvation, as a "door to usher in things that God had promised and prophesied of" (Cromwell, p. 25). These two ideals clash at the uncertain frontier between power, violence, and the sacred, the volatile historical crucible of the Commonwealth.

The troubling question of violence was never far from Cromwell's reflections. He mused over the "strange windings and turnings of providence", those "great appearances of God in crossing and thwarting the designs of men", and marvelled that God might "raise up a poor and contemptible company of men" to power over the nation. He linked violence to the sacred, asserting that "God blessed them and all undertakings" by "that most improbable, despicable, contemptible means", i.e. violence. The "act of violence" finds its "justification" in "our hearts and consciences", based not on "vain imaginings", but "things that fell within the compass of certain knowledge", i.e. sacred signs (Cromwell, p. 14).

Milton, a true believer in the Puritan cause, championed Natural Rights doctrine, insisting that men "should be free ... openly to give opinions of (any doctrine)", and "to write about it, according to what each believes" (Hill, 1977, p. 154). He argued that "all men naturally were born free", and denied that either the church or the magistrate may "impose their own interpretations on us as laws, or as binding on the conscience" (Milton, 1991, pp. 8/126).

But Milton failed to differentiate soteriological concerns of salvation, and secular political liberty, and confused freedom and authenticity. Following the disappointments of the revolution, Milton affirmed "that a convergence of the human with the divine would be necessary before a good society could be built" (Hill, 1977, p. 336). This was the black mood pervading *Paradise Lost*. He argued, in 1670, that, "when God hath decreed servitude on a sinful nation", "all estates of government are unable to avoid it" (Hill, 1977, p. 349). Milton thus tacitly asserted that forms of political organisation are irrelevant, compared with public ontological proximity to God. Milton echoed this in *Paradise Lost*: "Since thy original lapse, true liberty is lost" (Milton, 2003, p. 273). True liberty, being not of this world, depends upon the appeasement of unknowable powers. Even so, God must show himself to man, and neither will nor reason are adequate for knowing him. This excludes practical ethics, where concrete social problems are

overcome through the analysis of causes. Ultimately, the “brow of God appeased”, Milton embraced a discourse of divine appeasement as the only effective mode of revolutionary social change (Milton, 2003, 270).

This fatalistic outlook contrasts with Milton’s activist stance in earlier years. The engulfing climate of violence, through the long religious wars, provided, as Milton argued, a “ready and easy way” to establish a republic (Milton, 1931-40, pp. 111-144). Yet, in *Paradise Lost*, he conceded, in the hidden language of antinomies, that “long is the way and hard” (Milton, 2003, p. 35). Did a contradiction of means and ends mar Milton’s embrace of the opportunity of violence to implement radical social reform, and his utopian call for “reconcilement; wrath shall be no more”? (Milton, 2003, p. 59). He hints at this very conclusion: “never can true reconcilement grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep” (Milton, 2003, p. 76). This contradiction was perhaps the poison in the machine of the early modern struggles with the problem of state collapse. For state collapse was the fundamental issue, as Hobbes mapped in *Leviathan*, based on a fixed and permanent order of mechanics gone awry, dismissing as irrelevant the ferment of new ideas on liberty. Between Hobbes’ conviction, that “the heart is but a spring”, the “nerves so many strings”, and the “imagination nothing but decaying sense”, and Milton’s ethics as divine obedience, there was hardly the space for a rational critique of the politics of violence in nation-making (Hobbes, 1985, pp. 81, 88). For such violence was either natural, as for Hobbes, or holy, as for Milton.

Finally, we should outline the wider European context for the Natural Rights discourse, to situate its proper place in relation to the politics of Providence. There was a curious dialectical relation. The question of secular conflict resolution, or managing the viral spread of religious violence, was central to Natural Rights, of which Milton was a pioneering voice. In tracing the European Enlightenment back to its 17th century intellectual roots – in Deism and Natural Rights – we are struck by how often the individuals who conceived them were political refugees, victims of religious wars. There were opposed parallel lines, between Natural Rights based on tolerance as ‘multiple ways’, and Providence as a ‘single way’. The ‘single way’ obsession – fusing religious dogma with new capitalist social power - in economics, the military, print media, and the state - produced disastrous bloodshed. This ethical conundrum pervades *Paradise Lost* in the encrypted language of the antinomies.

The dialectical tensions between Providence and Natural Rights expose the experience of exile haunting Milton's world. The Natural Rights defence of pluralism, the work of vulnerable political refugees, included: Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), founder of modern natural right theory, a Dutch refugee living in Paris in 1625 during the religious wars, urging that the supernatural and divine be substituted with the imminent order of nature. The "secret" designs of God, used to justify atrocities in the name of Providence, could thereby yield to an accessible and neutral Natural Law, through which human agency might abolish these atrocities (Hazard, p. 256). Pierre Bayle, a French Protestant refugee in Holland, argued, in 1686, that "concord in a state with ten religions" would follow, if "each religion adopted the spirit of tolerance", because it is "impossible in our present condition to know with certainty whether or not what appears to us to be the truth (of religions) is absolute truth" (Kramnick, p. 79). He thus introduced the epistemic grounds for non-violence, or sceptical reason, a secular and disenchanted space for understanding and law. The discourse of tolerance, very often articulated by the underdog, was obviously an attempt to present an alternative to political violence as a solution to problems of religious pluralism in the early modern state. It challenged the core notion of Providence, in denying political violence any sacred character.

In this spirit, as the most celebrated example, Benedict Spinoza (1632-77) argued: he "who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return" (Beardsley, p. 19). A radical religious thinker of the Dutch Jewish community, whose family had escaped the Spanish Inquisition, his writings caused exile from the Jewish community in 1656, and later banishment from Amsterdam by the civil authorities. Rejecting Providence, Spinoza argued that citing "the will of God" to explain events was "the refuge for ignorance" (Beardsley, p. 233).

As a major voice in early Natural Rights discourse, where does Milton stand in relation to these individuals? For, although Milton also endured the plight of a political refugee for several dark years, he also briefly enjoyed the summits of state power and influence during the English Revolution. Ultimately, Milton was torn between Natural Right and Providence. He was unable to reconcile his warring selves, and this unresolved antinomy – not merely an intellectual, but personally existential source of suffering - explains the disturbing electricity of *Paradise Lost* as a quest to understand the supreme authorship of good and evil in the world.

Conclusion

What is *Paradise Lost* about? Doctor Samuel Barrow, Milton's friend, explained: "What do you read but the story of everything? The book includes all things, and the origin of all things, and their destinies and ends" (Milton, 2005, p. 2). In Peter Singer's interview with Bryan Magee, when asked what Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* is about, he similarly replies "everything" (Magee, p. 188). It is neither about individuals nor societies; it is about *Geist*, Mind, the Eternal, working itself out through history. Both Milton and Hegel (1770-1831) express nostalgia for the Absolute, while embracing important aspects of Enlightenment rationalism. Their arguments for Theodicy failed to convince. Once the violence of the colonial world rebounded upon Western Europe in the devastation of World War I, these arguments became still less fashionable. As temporal growth can scarcely be reconciled with the cold eternal, so Theodicy fails to justify the real-world consequences of appalling but preventable suffering.

Both Milton and Hegel wrote theodicies for the violent early modern interstate matrix. Few philosophers have changed the world as dramatically as Hegel, whether through remaking German nationalism, or viewing reality as a historical process, or his influence on Karl Marx. Powerful nostalgia fuelled feelings of cosmic inadequacy. Hegel wrote: "Virtue in the ancient world had its own definite sure meaning, for it had in the *spiritual substance* of the nation a foundation full of meaning" (Hegel, p. 234). Like Hegel, there is a strong dialectical current in *Paradise Lost*. But Milton lived the revolution, and lost it. Far closer to the action than Hegel, who was a relative spectator when Napoleon arrived at Jena, Milton eventually wrote: "What folly then To boast what arms can do" (Milton, 2003, p. 99). In this lucid moment, he articulated the futility of the violent politics of Providence. But this was not Milton's view when his imaginative universe is assessed on balance. What would it mean to understand the practical consequences of Milton's ideas, in the space between his political role in the English Civil War, and his visionary writing of *Paradise Lost*? This article has provided one answer to this question. It examined, firstly, the submerged world of Milton's visions and dreams in *Paradise Lost*, and, secondly, the visible side in the institutions, monuments, and actions that characterized his political life in the English Revolution. Milton's conundrum and his imaginary are very much alive today. The "red right hand" persists, where powers "subdue nations, and bring home spoils with infinite manslaughter", and "riches grow in hell" (Milton, 2003, p. 265/20).

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