Essays and *Pensées* on Milton and Camus

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By

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To Stephanie Reynolds and Colton Howard and their colleagues in the extraordinary seminars that they led; and to my father, Michael Lewis, who of this book as of his life, caveated, "Not done yet."

In narrow room Nature's whole wealth, yea more,
….

—*Paradise Lost*, IV.207

Solely the balance between evidence and lyricism can allow us to achieve simultaneously emotion and lucidity.

—*The Myth of Sisyphus*

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Preface

A Note on This Text

The genesis of this two-fold text ensued from the pandemic lockdown. Given our somewhat paradoxically shut-in and virtual circumstances (—though, indeed *because,* quarantined, we were prompted to explore facsimiles of myriad locales and engage alternative stratagems that might bear fruit—), I recorded the lectures for my Milton seminar, conducted roughly triennially over nearly thirty years at UIS, for 2020 Spring term delivery online. The combination of what I'd drawn from consistently for ten semesters; the particular innovations inspired by this avatar of (and by this particular exceptional corps of students in) the seminar; and, most importantly, the precision and keener clarity predicated from the discipline of writing/typing out these lectures, yielded a cohesive transcript on John Milton and his work—disclosing further what I'd sensed but, heretofore, absent recorded evidence, had not the means to fully comprehend: namely, how inextricably woven were that man and his work.

Meanwhile, given the crisis, for respective "World Literature" and "Introduction to Fiction" courses, I could not *not* conceive of our scrutinizing *The Plague.* Though more than merely resonant with the times, not to mention a magnificently constructed piece, that novel and Camus' absurdist cast of thought, like Shakespeare, like Milton, met the criteria limned by Ben Jonson's line in tribute to the Bard: *not of an age, but for all time*. Hence, enamored with his style, and fixated on Camus' relevance, I subsequently read, and wrote as much as possible upon, his every book, play, and philosophic essay on which I could get my hands and cast my eyes.

A two years' harvest from the seeds inventoried in the preceding paragraphs, yielded this two-fold text. I must, again, acknowledge that duality. *Essays and Pensées on Milton and Camus* compasses a collocation of critical writings on discrete works by these respective authors, with approximately half the volume devoted to each writer —to discerning and detailing their stylistic nuances and ethical premises.

Nevertheless, however strange the pairing might at first appear, Milton and Camus make complementary book-fellows. Notably, both espouse and practice *a vigilant attentiveness; the obligation to strive for good by one's lights, and to create lest history repeat; and on rare occasions, a duty to engage in moral contradiction for a higher cause, though only after the most scrupulous reflection.* Moreover, their ingenious artistry, undergirded by philosophies that cast each other's thought into relief, afford much opportunity for informative analyses—and even suggest hermeneutic strategies. To cite two examples of such reading techniques, one proffered by each author: 1) Milton's longer poems necessitate a dialectical approach, whereby one registers, and relishes, the "broad sweeping effects" (C. S. Lewis) of extended passages; then returns to scrutinize, and marvel at, particular linear phenomena; 2) Camus saliently explicates *style* as the imposition of the artist's idiom to reshape material conditions. In effect, and in turn, his *identification of style as a rebellion* sharpens readers' interpretative sensibilities and skills.

As it's hoped what heretofore is stated indicates, the short, but intensive studies in this compendium ought to engage and excite; they are intended, and conscientiously presented in a style academic though also inviting, for both readers already passionate about Milton, and/or Camus; and for lovers of literature generally, for whom reading Camus, and/or Milton, shall open new vistas.

Of Milton and Camus

In one major respect, our authors cast each other in relief by most marked chiaroscuro. It will not do to construe Satan in the role of bad faith (i.e., self-deceptive) absurdist hero, as once I'd conceptualized Milton's creation. The inevitably, yet indefatigably conducted, "sterile" assault on the impossible (to overthrow God, in the specific context) is *not* bereft of its nobility, of "the staggering evidence of man's [and {*Hamlet*} "what a thing is man" *but* a fallen angel?] sole dignity: the dogged revolt against his condition, perseverance in an effort considered sterile.… All that 'for nothing'" (*MS*, 115)—is not attenuated by the antagonist's naïve conviction that he just *might*

prevail. In fact, like Sisyphus, Satan, at least intermittently, acknowledges the futility of his efforts:

> All hope excluded thus,…
> So farewell hope and with hope farewell fear!
> Farewell remorse! All good to me is lost.
> Evil, be thou my good. (*PL*, IV.105)

Thus, what applies to the eponymous champion of Camus' philosophical expatiation—

> If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?...lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (*MS*, 121)

—likewise tallies with the cognizance of the prince of darkness, as the epic poet portrays him.

But *our* subjects, the authorial voices behind these respective personae—the one creator congruent with his conception of Sisyphus' "conscious"ness; the other antipathetic to his version of Satan's cast of mind (Milton no more numbering among "the devils' party" than so aligning proves the mark of "a true poet"[1])—the authors herein collocated operate from disparate premises: for of course, to Milton the universe inherently proves meaning-*full*; with (to boot, in further contradistinction to Camus) that purport bestowed by a just God. The poet would thus reject any notion that Satan embarks on a noble task as in the first place, if you will, absurd. *And so, too, would Camus, a stringent moralist for dire times, if he believed that God exists*. Or at least, if acknowledging that Divine, putatively absent presence, which he would reject for man's greater good. Postulated novelistically, via Dr. Bernard Rieux:

> "[S]ince the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heavens where He sits in silence?"(*P*, 128)

Or as explicitly philosophized:

> I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? What I touch, what resists me—that is what I understand.… This hell of the present is his [man's] Kingdom at last. All problems recover their sharp edge. Abstract evidence retreats before the poetry of forms and colors. Spiritual conflicts become embodied and return to the abject and magnificent shelter of man's heart.… At last man will find there the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness.
>
> (*MS*, 51-2)

But just where for Camus the sacramental is transposed upon the terrestrial—which corresponds with Milton's acknowledgement that *Paradise* [*is*] *Lost*—our authors mutually accord. Jean Tarrou, Dr. Rieux's confederate and friend, lives by a "'code of morals'" summed in one word, "'Comprehension.'" Rieux himself adds, "The evil that is in the world always comes from ignorance … it is this that we call … vice" (*P*, 130-1). And how does one combat the absurdity of ignorance? By constant open-eyedness, limned by Tarrou as "'a vigilance that must never falter'" (*P*, 253); and espoused by his puppet-master in terms of entering into the lists for the cause of "human lucidity" rather than retreating by a "leap" of (into) faith:

> If there is an absurd, it is in man's universe. The moment the notion transforms itself into eternity's springboard, it ceases to be linked to human lucidity. The absurd is [then] no longer that evidence that man ascertains without consenting to it. The struggle is eluded [when] man integrates the absurd and in that communion causes to disappear its essential character, which is opposition, laceration, and divorce. (*MS*, 35)

I am not sure that Milton, however wittingly, does not even intimate this wariness in an Edenic state, perhaps despite himself.

"Know to know no more" (*PL*, IV.725) deconstructs to 'No to know no more,' and even 'No to no. Know more.' And first Adam, then more so Raphael, archangelic prototype for the epic poet, practically contort themselves in "Cycle and epicycle" by protesting not to speculate on geo- vs. heliocentric theories, for close on two hundred lines. *Viz*., "This to attain, whether heav'n move or earth, Imports not if thou reckon right"; but "What if the sun Be center to the world and other stars"; "What if that light Sent from her through the wide transpicuous air To the terrestrial moon be as a star"; "But whether thus these things or whether not, Whether the sun predominant in heav'n Rise on the earth or earth rise on the sun"; and so on, notwithstanding "Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid"; "Dream not of other worlds"; "That not to know at large of things remote From use, obscure and subtle, but to know That which before us lies in daily life Is the prime wisdom." (*PL* VIII, 15ff.)

"Be that as may be"[2]: Adam's last lines, excerpted, i.e., his exhortation that "to know That which before us lies in daily life is the prime wisdom" resonates alongside Camus' "What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me?" For more so than in Paradise, indeed doubtless in a post-fallen world, "As therefore the state of man now is:

> I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust or heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.[3]

This passage from *Areopagitica* anachronistically accords with *The Myth of Sisyphus*, on "the absurd's essential character … operation, laceration, and divorce"; likewise with the closing comments to a lecture on the responsibility of the artist to "Create Dangerously" (1957):

> Danger makes men classical, and all greatness, after all, is rooted in risk … wisdom has never declined so much

> as when it involved no risks and belonged exclusively to a few humanists buried in libraries. But today, when at last it has to face real dangers, there is a chance that it may again stand up and be respected.… One may long, as I do, for a gentler flame, a respite, a pause for musing. But perhaps there is no other peace for the artist than what he finds in the heat of combat. (*RRD*, 271-2)

Differing in premise, yet according on attentiveness, and on the consequent necessity of virtuous struggle whether against senseless or inimical "adversar[ial]" "dangers"—these men of arts and letters, subjects of the subsequent eclectic pieces, also correlate ideologically: that is, in their works of activism, often enough *lived by* their words.

Given the years further study would require, I treat little of Milton's prose, hence skirt for the most part his overtly political writings. The scope of my own reflections on his work is shaped by the seminars on his poetry I've conducted. Yet Camus' politics, like his philosophy, are inextricably woven with his art, and the composite need be analyzed accordingly: "a man's sole creation is strengthened in his successive aspects: his works.… At the moment of death,… the creator has managed to repeat the image of his own condition" (*MS*, 114-5). Still, even in Milton's poetry, we can discern a tenet most explicitly articulated in Camus' "Appeal for a Civilian Truce" in Algeria (1956); it may be condensed: *history must create lest it repeat*. Set forth more discursively, and more graphically, when rejecting "resign[ation] to fatality," instead "to favor freedom against the fatalities that close in,"

> That is the condition under which history really progresses, innovates—in a word, creates. In everything else it repeats itself, like a bleeding mouth that merely vomits forth a wild stammering. (*RRD*, 141-2)

Effectively concurring, Milton similarly conjoins the abstract and the visceral, in his 1652 sonnet appeal that the Lord Protector preserve religious liberty:

Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud
Not of war only, but detractions rude,
Guided by faith and matchless fortitude
To peace and truth thy glorious way hast ploughed,
And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud
Hast reared God's trophies and his work pursued,
While Darwen stream and blood of Scots imbrued,
And Dunbar field resounds thy praises loud,
And Worcester's laureate wreath; yet much remains
To conquer still; peace hath her victories
No less renowned than war, new foes arise
Threat'ning to bind our souls in secular chains:
Help us to save free conscience from the paw
Of hireling wolves whose Gospel is their maw.

One notes a coincidence of the imagery in the couplet (exacerbated by the grating sound of "paw/maw") with repeating history likened to "a bleeding mouth that merely vomits forth a wild stammering." A similar correlation in spirit—as free speech proves paramount to utmost cognizance—and style, is evinced by "as good almost kill a man as kill a good book" (*Areopagitica*) and "only the word fed by blood and heart can unite men" ("Homage to an Exile"). More than personifications, given the characters of their authors, but also *personalifications*. With a heightened rhetorical flourish on the poet's part, compared to direct transference, even infusion, conducted by the novelist; "the word," "a good book" stand as men, for Camus and Milton—no pair more so—stand in / by letters.[4]

Notes

1. Camus refrains from stating whether such as Blake and Shelley rightly intuited Milton's sentiments; but remarking on the Romantic "imperialism of evil, whose aim is to annex everything, even the most orthodox geniuses" intimates a more measured understanding of Milton than such as Blake and Shelley possessed. (Cf. *The Rebel, 23, 47-8*)

2. Robert Frost's cadence in his sonnet lauding Eve, "Never Again Would Birdsong be the Same," line 9.

3. *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England* (1644) [Hughes, 728].

4. Henceforth, my pieces treat our subjects discretely with one exception. The apologia in *Samson Agonistes* "to exempt chosen individuals from moral prescripts" for the purpose of executing God's will (Grierson), as it correlates with a "principle of reasonable culpability" toward effecting the greater good (cf. *The Rebel;* "Letters to a German Friend") will be examined in the *Samson Agonistes* essay, wherein Camus prominently appears.

Acknowledgements

"[Their] name is Legion: for [they] are many," though in a wholly antithetical, i.e. positive, laudatory context, to that for which the Gospel phrase (Mark 5:9) applies. (Albeit that the subsequently thanked can lay claim to the devil in the details of this text.)

Ms. Nikola Sowa devoted hours upon hours to transcribing my Milton lectures, and her accuracy proved unerring (sometimes to my embarrassment, though her precision made possible a plethora of corrections). For the services of Ms. Sowa, a student at UIS, I am keenly indebted to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Michael Lemke, and to the extraordinary faculty at our university's Center for Online Learning, Research, and Service (COLRS): namely, Kara McElwrath, Vickie Cook, and Allana Gomoll. Of course, my colleagues in the English Department, notably Drs. Tena Helton, Lan Dong, and Donna Bussell, offered invaluable support and encouragement. And as this paragraph comprises plaudits to those on campus, it proves the proper locus to thank, again (*qv*. the "Dedication") all the students in respective "Milton" and "World Literature" seminars, and in the "Introduction to Fiction" course wherein we jointly read *The Plague*. At an institution oriented toward teaching, it proves blessingly necessary that scholarship and pedagogy coalesce. From my students I have learned so much, and most of this book's content initially appeared in the form of writings, responses, lectures to them.

Milton and Camus: Essays and Pensees marks (what's *in* a name) a fourth partnership in publication with my dear friend and master formatter/editor/advisor Mr. Mark Pence. With Ms. Sowa and myself, no one has spent more time on our endeavor. Mark and his dear wife Cheryl Pence merit more gratitude than I can summon; and I would (must) add this disclaimer, from the "Acknowledgments" page of a prior cooperative work: "Whatever fault may be found with the composition of this text, its *orchestration* by Mr. Pence must be deemed impeccable." At this juncture, it behooves Mark and myself to thank our colleagues at Cambridge Scholars

Publishing, notably but not exclusively, Amanda Miller and Adam Rummens, for their many facilitations.

The friendship and guidance of Corrine Frisch, Ken Greenfield, James Myers, Michael Lewis, Stephanie Reynolds, Colton Howard, Damon McParland, Robert Kuhn McGregor, Rosina Neginsky, Mark Kazarosian, Steve Bravman, and Keith Huddleston deserves particular mention. Though giving thanks to all others (and surely, I'd err in forgetting some) who, often unwittingly but always kindly, lent me impetus to persevere, would swell this note three-fold.

This book constitutes my eighth—which means I've sinned (that's not too strong a word) seven times in failing heretofore to thank the author-subjects of my analyses. (Good God, forgive me, Shakespeare!) Credit for standing corrected to Carlo Rovelli, who in his riveting and lyrical *Helgoland: Making Sense of the Quantum Revolution* (2021), lauds at the culmination of his "Acknowledgments," Werner Heisenberg and Aleksandr Bogdanov. "Death never comes between true friends," said Camus of his amity with Simone Weil. And indeed, Milton's company (and that of all his avatars) for close on forty years; and Camus' more recent, though equally intense veritable kinship (—he numbers among my favorite writers; but he is unquestionably my favorite person *who* writes) have yielded such joys as are partly symbolized in the pages that follow.

A Further Acknowledgement, in Two Senses

Critical integrity behooves me to note a disparity in my approach to our authors. Whereas Milton I've treated mainly according to his chronology of works—a methodology consistent with my contention as to the trajectory of his self-conceived destiny—my investigations of, and first ventures in writing about, Camus, due to my late discovery of him and avidity to digest what next of his came to hand, ensued according to my chronology of reading him. That procedural discrepancy, since I've adjusted for it, does not flaw my analysis. Indeed, the order in which I encountered Camus juxtaposed works in such a way as to lend insights and trace connections

plausibly not otherwise discerned. Nevertheless of course, as in Milton's case, accounting for Camus' order of composition sheds considerable informative light. Camus himself (notably in his 1950 essay "The Enigma") expressed pointed resentment at "the failure of French critics and journalists to realize that his attitude was constantly evolving, and that *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* did not necessarily contain all his ideas" (Thody, *LCE*, 154). From *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

> A profound thought is in a constant state of becoming. Likewise, a man's sole creation is strengthened in its successive and multiple aspects: his works. One after another, they complement one another, correct or overtake one another, contradict one another too. If something brings creation to an end [as it did on a fateful winter afternoon in Villeblevin], it is not the victorious cry of the blinded artist: "I have done everything," but the death of the creator which closes his experience and the book of his genius. (*MS*, 114)

The adjustment referenced to accord with this conviction I owe to Robert Emmet Meagher, on whose *Albert Camus and The Human Crisis* (2021), keenly sensitive to the stages of Camus' thought, as sketched by Camus relatively early on, according with (though hardly encompassed by) a projected schema of "Myths" ("of Sisyphus [absurd]," "of Prometheus [revolt]," "of Nemesis [judgement, measure]," respectively—a precis somewhat correlative in kind with, and authored round the age of, Milton's outline that he details in *The Reason of Church Government* [1642]—) I have conscientiously reflected in a late phase of preparing these *Essays and Pensées*. To Dr. Meagher, my gratitude.

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That what follows forwarded ***Millions of Strange Shadows*** *and* ***Modern Sonneteers, Hilary Mantel, and Critical Letters: A Triptych****, and mentions the modus operandi of two other books of mine, underscores an essential contentual facet of all my texts.*

Nota Bene

… this note on the "Notes"—placed purposefully in near proximity to their primary texts, vis-à-vis compiled *en masse* at book's close, which might intimate (mere) afterthoughts. Nor set in bottom margins, where at times they might have appeared to wage a page war with the matter above. Always I have plied annotations as a venue for *pensées*. The jacket blurb for *The Shakespeare Project* overgenerously advertised "mini master-essays on minutiae." Though accurately in the preface of that text, I credited their corpus as "the third part of a three-part book." And in *Reflexive Poetics*, I limn their purpose in terms of "verbal off-ramps toward productively harnessing energies"—citing for precedent the practices of Stephen Booth (his edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*) and F. O. Matthiessen (*The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*), respectively.

The Notes are intended to constitute an edifying, entertaining supplement—divagations that insertion of which within the main material had plausibly interrupted the flow. Though often enough, to peruse in the process of reading "the above" (really, *the before*) oughtn't deter, and much may be garnered from the detours. As Hamlet noted of the recorders, "there is much music in th[ese] little organ[s]" (*Ham*. III.ii.368).

Abbreviations of Titles in This Text

Milton's works

C—Comus
CD—Christian Doctrine (*De Doctrina Christiana*)
L—Lycidas
PL—Paradise Lost
PR—Paradise Regained
SA—Samson Agonistes

Camus' works

C—Caligula
FM—The First Man
EaK—Exile and the Kingdom
F—The Fall
HD—A Happy Death
JA—The Just Assassins
LCE—Lyrical and Critical Essays
L'E—L'Étranger
M—The Misunderstanding
MS—The Myth of Sisyphus
P—The Plague
R—The Rebel: *An Essay on Man in Revolt*
RRD—Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: *Essays*
SOLS—Speaking Out: Lectures and Speeches, 1937-1958
SS—State of Siege
TP—The Possessed

Other works referenced in this text

ACHC—Robert Emmet Meagher, *Albert Camus and The Human Crisis*
AtQ—Haruki Murakami, *After the Quake*
OPP—T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*
PPL—C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*

Milton

Prolusion[1] and the Individual Talent[2]

[—introductory essay compassed in the syllabus to a Milton seminar (Autumn Term 2020); for our purposes, prologue to the pieces that follow]

Northrop Frye lauds *Paradise Lost* as "the story of all things."[3] The initial invocation in the poem so attests, more than might meet the mind's eye. Grant the "Heav'nly Muse" to "Sing" "Of Man's first disobedience"; that tale entails a still earlier Fall (Satan's and the rebel host's), predicating plantation "Of that forbidden tree" in the first place; with "fruit … whose mortal taste Brought death into the world and all our woe With loss of Eden"—"woe": dearth which in the context necessitates narration of Creation, that we might comprehend privation of Paradise; hence, the genesis of what, completed, compasses millennia—times not only past but to come:

> Brought death into the world and all our woe
> With loss of Eden till one greater Man
> Restore us and regain the blissful seat

Hence, intimated in this one sentence (microcosmic to the contents of one volume): biblical, British, and future history (detailed in Books XI-XII); *along with* the War in Heaven (Books V-VI), *plus* proceedings of our first seven days (VII)—*and*, as advertised, the sagas both of Our Parents and Their (Our) Tormentor—*concomitant with* construction of Pandemonium, a tour through Chaos, and the frolics sadistically enjoyed by Sin, the devil's daughter/paramour, and her son/sibling Death. But wait, there's more, since an epic proper (the "diffuse" vis-à-vis "brief" sort, as distinguished by Milton) is "encyclopedic"[4]: add, then, a critique of Paganism; discourses on astronomy; and an *ars poetica*, principally (not, of course, exclusively) focused on that genre (epic) here containing it.

Dr. Frye, famed for his *Anatomy of Criticism*, further dissects the myriad strands of allness. "Let us visualize the dial of a clock," he analogizes, "with the presence of God where the figure twelve is." Thereby, he limns the actions as a book of hours[5]:

1. First epiphany of Christ: generation of Son and Father.
2. Second epiphany of Christ: triumph after three-day conflict with Rebel Angels.
3. Establishment of the natural order in the creation.
4. Establishment of the human order: creation of Adam and Eve.
5. Epiphany of Satan, generating Sin and Death.
6. Fall of the human order.
7. Fall of the natural order: triumph of Sin and Death.
8. Re-establishment of the natural order at the end of the flood.
9. Re-establishment of the human order with the giving of the law.
10. Third epiphany of Christ: the Word as gospel.
11. Fourth epiphany of Christ: the apocalypse or Last Judgment.[6]

[12. The final point in the vast cycle corresponds with the beginning, with yet the endpoint renewed and transformed by the heroic quest of (not Aeneas, or Odysseus, or Dante, or Dorothy, but rather) Christ.[7]]

The beauty of this formulation, over and above its comprehensiveness, inheres in the prevailing figure, a horologe, which dictates the chronology of the entirety. "Only through time time is conquered": Of necessity we experience the element sequentially. But our sequence of experiences oft counters chronology—notably in epics, which commence *in medias res*. Realign according to narration, and Milton's *plot of all things* (acknowledging elliptic leaps and overlaps) unfolds thus: 5, 1[8], 4, 3, 2, 6, 7, 10 (its promise), 8, 9, 10 (its fulfillment), 11, 12. And the resultant collocation intimates an apprehension of eternity. "To be conscious is not to be in time"[9]: Milton superposes times to vertiginous effect (even once chronology is restored, he genuinely *presents* the future), to produce by virtue of negation through overload, a liberation from the fourth dimension.[10] Like transports occur when he intensifies the surfeits of chiaroscuro, yielding "darkness visible" at one extreme (*PL* I.63),

"Bright effluence of bright essence increate" (III.6) at the other; when he evokes sublimities in quantity ("an host Innumerable as the stars of night" [V.744-5]), in size ("many a province wide Tenfold the length of this terrene [VI.77-8]); and when he plies proportional paradox: "In little room"—analogously, set forth in a single line—"nature's whole wealth, *yea more*" (IV.207, *i.a.*). In one sentence, all time; in a single book, twelve books; the story, and plot, of all things.

All? What other "stories"—not narratives *per se*, but symbolic truths discernible within this blank verse almanac—might we find, or rather *mine* (in both senses of that word). In "Discovery as Form in *Paradise Lost*," composed during his salad days of Reader-response theorizing, Stanley Fish equates one's own "consciousness of the poem's personal relevance" with its "true center." Thus, engaging the poem, each of us encounters our particular biography; "if the meaning of the poem is to be located in the reader's experience of it, the form of the poem is the form of that personal experience."[11] When we number, too, among its readers, one John Milton, his own biography is therein encoded.

In fact, though, you will find his fingerprints on every page throughout the *oeuvre*.

> The intellect of man is forced to choose
> Perfection of the life, or of the work.[12]

Not so, regarding Milton—nor really, for W. B. Yeats, issuer of "The Choice," whose rhetorical query (closing "Among Schoolchildren"), "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" better applies to JM than to most anyone. Milton's every situation afforded matter for his legacy, perhaps especially in those lyrically fallow decades preoccupied by the polis. Outraged at the Church? Pen *Of Reformation in England* (1641), which entwined your feelings with Parliament's. Incensed by the crown? Write *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) and the *Defenses* ('51, '54, '55) that steeped your own hand in blood. Marital problems? Proffer *The Doctrine of Discipline and Divorce* ('44). Censored? Bring out *Areopagitica* ('44), the optimum apologia in English for free speech. And so it went: preoccupation

with tutoring prompted *Of Education* ('44 again; *annus mirabilis Miltoni*); and his longstanding theological concerns (not to mention mastery of Latin) *elicit*ed *De Doctrina Christiana* (c1660).[13]

Though we shall peruse some of Milton's prose, we focus mainly on the poetry, where in various works he predicted his destiny. From his "Vacation Exercise" as a Cambridge lad, young John veritably (albeit with varied explicitness[14]) trumpeted his intent to follow in the wake of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Spenser, and compose an epic both *religious* and *national*.[15]

Milton limned his master project prior to the Civil War, though the breaking loose of that hell prorogued completion of the Great Poem for a quarter century. Still, we can take him at his early words:

> Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
> It shall be still in strictest measure ev'n
> To that same lot, however mean or high,
> Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n; (*S*7.9)

The verdict turns upon a liberal rendering of "same lot." Surely, had he not "st[oo]d and wait[ed]" on the text to "serve" "In liberty's defense, my noble task," "overplied" on which he lost his (outward) vision—he had perhaps composed *an* epic; just not *that* one "With inward eyes illuminated," singing "Of things invisible to mortal sight!"[16]

Fish underscores Milton's constancy, albeit fraught with drama. In a felicitous comparison to contemporary icons, the critic likens him to Dorothy vis-à-vis Captain Kirk. Rather than "go boldly where no man has gone before," the Miltonic wayfarer seeks his way home. His discovery inheres in recognizing that he's always worn the silver slippers bestowed by the Almighty. Legions of temptations to seek elsewhere for salvation, but in fact even what one thought unprecedented proves uncanny[17]:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[18]

So T. S. Eliot, whose antipathy toward our poet (*see* his first "Milton" essay [1936]) was eventually displaced (*see* his "Milton" retrospective [1947]).

To point up another paradox by way of Eliot: what he remarked of the Bard likewise holds for this (though not designated by a capital, equally extraordinary) bard.

> [T]he unity of [Milton's] work is such that you not only cannot understand the later [texts] unless you know the early ones: you cannot understand the early [texts] without knowing the late ones.[19]

How this proves true when Shakespeare never enters his plays, whereas Milton in one guise or another appears ubiquitously in his works, hearkens back to Fish ("the form of the poem is the form of the reader's experience"); but more profoundly to Borges' musing that the Bard (like God) is "many, yet no one."[20] Milton would insist that only God is one—and that a fallen man finds himself in many.

Notes

1. *prolusion*: "… a preliminary dissertation on a subject which the author intends to treat more fully; a preliminary essay or article; a slight literary production" (***OED 2***). While a student at Cambridge, JM delivered (at least) seven prolusions. What we might term his self-prolusion he also composed at college, and recited in the verse of "A Vacation Exercise" (1628): "*The Latin speeches ended*," he "Hail[s his] native language"—not without some gently pointed dissing. Is it after all, his "sinews weak" or the idiom's, that "mad'st imperfect words with childish trips, Half unpronounced, slide through my infant lips" (ll. 1, 3-4). In fact, granted great past achievements in the medium, Milton here intimates that, like himself, English has yet to mature. Both will do so together, when Milton pens the great English epic. For his "graver subject," however, notwithstanding, in these verses, allusions to Gods and Kings, he shall pass on classical material, even on creating a once-intended Arthuriad. The matter shall compass the universe, "where the deep transported mind may soar Above the wheeling poles, and at heav'n's door Look in" upon arcane creation itself ("At a Vacation Exercise," ll. 29ff.).

2. The title *in toto* plays on Eliot's seminal "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), perhaps the single most important literary essay of the twentieth century—certainly none more pertinent toward contemporary interpretation of Milton, who, not surprisingly (given young Eliot's aversion to and attempts to avert Milton), goes unmentioned in the piece. The interinvolvement of Eliot

and Milton would fill a book in which psychodynamics proved but a (long) chapter. Milton veritably haunts the essay by virtue of his absence, particularly in Eliot's insistence (the poet doth protest too much, methinks) on the severance of "the man who suffers" from "the mind which creates." The creative influence (and poets' concomitant joys and angsts) exercised by and upon Milton becomes a major staple of the criticism of Harold Bloom. Cf. especially Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976).

3. Cf. Frye's eponymous essay (1965); rpt. in *Paradise Lost*, the first Norton Critical Edition, ed. Scott Elledge (New York, 1993), 509-36.

4. *See* JM's prolegomenon in his *Reason of Church Government* [1642], where he catalogues genres in reflecting on which to create. That he should execute all listed forms (Epic *diffuse* [*PL*] and *brief* [*PR*]; Tragedy (*Samson Agonistes*) and Lyric (on Greek and Hebrew models) points up a personal encyclopedism corresponding with that criterion of epic. Cf. Frye, op cit., 512-3; Lewis, his preface to *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford, 1942), 3ff.

5. The religious bells toll again, with reference to *The Book of Hours*: a devotional text.

6. Frye, "The Story of All Things," 519.

7. "[W]hen," as prognosticated in Book III of *Paradise Lost*, "Thou thy regal scepter shalt lay by, / For regal scepter then no more shall need: / God shall be All in all" (III.339).

8. In Milton's narrative (Book III), for *generation of Son and Father*, we have, effectively, a symbolic metonymy: *exaltation of Son by Father*.

9. Cf. *Burnt Norton* (II.38), first of Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

10. A sensation like unto that described by the Master in "On Time":

> Then all this earthy grossness quit,
> Attired with stars, we shall for ever sit,
> Triumphing over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time.

Moreover, given *PL*'s cosmic scope, to borrow words from Ezra Pound, "the presentation of such a complex gives that sense of sudden liberation … from time limits *and space limits*; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." ("A Retrospect" [1918], *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot [{1935} New York: New Directions, 1970], 4 [*i.a.*].)

11. Elledge, 527. Cf. Fish's still more elaborated approach throughout *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: St. Martin's P, 1967), from which the