Introduction

> Since I became a tramp, I'm a somewhat better man. I couldn't preach to 'em anymore.
>
> —The Chaplain in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Bertolt Brecht perceived clear parallels between the human cost of religion in the seventeenth century and the human cost of radical politics in the twentieth century. In the wake of the Munich agreement that opened Eastern Europe to Nazi expansion, and the growing recognition among communists of the excesses of Stalinist absolutism, Brecht composed the *Life of Galileo,* a play, as he describes it, concerned not with ecclesiastical resistance to scientific inquiry so much as with 'the temporary victory of authority,' and meant to reflect upon 'present-day reactionary authorities of a totally unecclesiastical kind.'[1] If the moment of the play's initial composition suggests a comment upon Nazism especially, its subsequent revisions and performances suggest other reactionary authorities: staged in the wake of the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the 1945 American version raises questions on the ethical content of scientific discovery; and the 1955 performance in Cologne, Germany—the final one that Brecht oversaw—seemed to speak to the death of Stalin in 1953. In the former context, Brecht toys with including a Hippocratic Oath for the natural sciences, the absence of which has reduced its investigators to 'a race of dwarfs who can be hired for any purpose who will, as on islands, produce whatever their masters demand.'[2] In the latter context, his editors note, '[T]he parallels are too clear: the Catholic Church is the Communist Party, Aristotle is Marxism-Leninism with its incontrovertible scriptures, the late "reactionary" pope is Joseph Stalin, the Inquisition

the KGB.'[3] Similar concerns animate *Mother Courage and Her Children*, which was initially intended to raise the memory of the Thirty Years' War as Europe seemed ready to run headlong into conflagration yet again: 'As I wrote,' Brecht later declared, 'I imagined that the playwright's warning voice would be heard from the stages of various great cities. . . . Such productions never materialised. Writers cannot write as rapidly as governments can make war, because writing demands hard thought.'[4]

Brecht's turn to the seventeenth century at the outbreak of the Second World War implies that comprehensive doctrines lend themselves readily to the assertion of oppressive authority, be they religious or secular, be they of the political right or left. But he is equally skeptical of the lack of conviction serving the interests of the bourgeois 'center.' On one hand, the passage spoken by the Chaplain in *Mother Courage* that is the epigraph of this introduction suggests that something of humanity is lost in an absolute fidelity to principle. On the other hand, Brecht claims that the politicians faced by Galileo were refreshingly guided by spiritual and scientific commitments in a way that their bourgeois counterparts are not.[5] Adherence to doctrine can elevate human endeavor beyond mere interest; in the same stroke doctrine denies non-adherents full participation in the society it imagines.

That Brechtian concern is very much at the heart of this book, which explores the turn in current thought to the realm beyond contingent events. Skepticism on its own, the worry seems increasingly to run, can devolve into a nihilist acceptance of the given eschewing strong ethical and political engagement. And despite its critique of axio-teleology, current skepticism can take as axiomatic the ambiguity of phenomena and see its own rationalism and self-conscious discursiveness as the end of a *telos* where grand narratives are meant to be outgrown. In this climate contingency and ambiguity have become the Castor and Pollux of the humanities in whose temple books and articles are blindly offered. Devotion to these twin gods can be as uncritical as any doctrine, and have its own troubling implications.

Perhaps more than any other poet, John Milton makes us keenly aware of the limits of an emphasis on ambiguity, for his writings continually subsume contrary energies to a truth presenting itself phenomenologically through the workings of an enlightened soul. With iconoclastic verve he launches salvoes of believed truth against tyranny in church and state.

As we shall see, Milton makes us equally aware of the limits of a view of human liberty growing out of an adherence to truth, a view that does not fully accept the principle of equality. That shortcoming can be reproduced in the present-day thought that we will explore.

I. The post-secular defined

Which life is more human, Brecht leads us to wonder, the tramp's disengagement from the bloodsport of asserting truth, or the preacher's commitment to a cause larger than material life? Negotiations of that question tend in our moment to be gathered under the broad, and slightly nebulous, category of the 'post-secular.' To clarify this term, we might identify three of its tendencies, and point to thinkers significant to this book exemplifying each one: (1) an argument for subjectivity grounded fully in belief, rather than a dialectic of intuition and knowledge (Alain Badiou); (2) a renewed interest in what Immanuel Kant would call a 'theological philosophy' (late Jacques Derrida), which can at times make strong claims for the metaphysics of a particular religious tradition (John Milbank); and (3) an adjustment of liberal views of modern civil society responsive to the growing relevance of religiosity (Jürgen Habermas).

Badiou offers an ontology of truth fully divorced from the constraint of a theological transcendence. 'Mathematics is ontology' in his formulation, because set theory provides a model of infinite multiplicity that does not imply the existence of an external referent, a multiplicity that Badiou attributes to the realm of Being.[6] The point may be clarified by comparison to a more familiar Neoplatonic ontology, where the realm of Idea has less multiplicity than that of matter, narrowing to the One above Being from which all necessarily proceeds and to which all returns. For Badiou, there is no limit to the multiplicity of Being, no constraining One above Being, and nothing requiring Being to be presented to the realm of intelligibility. Being does not, however, stand entirely apart from experience. Presentation occurs in an 'event,' the 'immanent break' in which a truth appears. No existing knowledge can account for the event, making adherence to the truth it offers not a matter of learning but of faith, and not the province of an expert but that of a militant. Because the realm of truths is one of unending multiplicity, no single believing community can claim a monopoly on truth itself, even as it is defined by adherence to a point of truth.

In his arguments against transcendence, he suggests that belief can take on forms beyond those abstract absolutes that have been associated with divinity: one can be faithful to the truth of romantic love, or to Cubism, or to the *Sans culottes* uprising of 1792. Because he is an avowed atheist who places belief at the center of his vision, he represents to my mind the post-secular at its purest, and figures prominently in this book: he provides a glimpse of the possibility of a fully unreligious turn away from a secular view of belief. Charles Taylor avers that secularism is that condition where one recognizes adoption of a belief system as one option among many. Badiou imagines fidelity to truth as effecting a removal from this arena of contending options: '*To the extent that it is the subject of a truth*,' he claims, '*a subject subtracts itself from every community and destroys every individuation*.'[7]

Reason does have a role in Badiou's thought, though that role is not disjoined from truth. Drawing on the recent work of Philip Gorski and Gauri Viswanathan, we might query the valuation of reason that is often taken to be a defining mark of secularism. The rationalistic faith of the early modern period, Gorski observes, was faith nonetheless, but one different in kind to its medieval predecessor, which tended to emphasize institutions and ceremonies as mediating divine mystery.[8] More productive in defining secularism may be the dissociation of belief and imagination: it is when myth serves as epistemic ground that we are in a frame of mind at odds with secularism, though that frame of mind can still give ample space to reason as a hermeneutic tool and can interrogate institutions and ceremonies claiming to embody divine will.[9]

In placing reason within the framework of belief, Badiou is a current thinker with particular relevance to discussion of Milton and to the seventeenth-century idea of *recta ratio*, or 'right reason.' Unlike instrumental reason, *recta ratio* is a mental unfolding of right order. It does not cast rival claims in the scales and decide which carries the greater weight of evidence; it seeks to determine the terms consistent with divinely ordained principles, placing reason in the service of faith. As Milton describes it in *De doctrina Christiana*, the divinely implanted capacity for *recta ratio* 'establishes a dividing line between right and wrong.' Without this guide, '[W]hat was to be called virtue, and what vice, would be guided by mere arbitrary opinion' (*YP* 6: 132). Marking his distance from Taylor's secular age, Milton describes every mind as carrying this divinely granted brand of

conscience, so that denial of God's existence is equivalent to insanity (*YP* 6: 130). His rationalism is what Gorski has called the 'religious rationalization' of the early modern period, which rejects a 'magical, ritual, and communal' religiosity in favor of an 'ethical, intellectual, and individual' one. These are not, Gorski observes, 'so much different *levels* of religiosity, one of which is less Christian than the other, as two different *kinds* of religiosity, one of which is less rationalistic than the other.'[10]

As in Badiou's post-secular formulation, Milton's pre-secular reason is the means by which the subject cleaves to the path of truth in the wild wood of competing claims. The reader of Milton will instantly apprehend what Badiou is driving at when he tells us that democracy is necessary to philosophy, which removes the search for truth from princes and priests, but a difficulty after philosophy, which offers a truth that becomes a positive obligation for every fit mind. The younger Sir Henry Vane (1613–62), a contemporary who shares a good many of Milton's opinions, defines freedom as the 'power to will immutably that which is good . . . not only without any resistance or hindrance from within him that wills or does it, but against all the tempting or attempting power of any other person or thing without him.' Badiou analogously claims that 'being free does not pertain to the register of relation (between bodies and languages) but directly to that of incorporation (to a truth).'[11]

Much less strident in its defense of belief, the late Derridean ethics that we shall explore in chapter two argues for a 'messianicity without messianism' or, in another of its phrases, for the adoption of a 'nondogmatic doublet of dogma . . . a thinking that "repeats" the possibility of religion without religion.'[12] In this view the inscrutable Other makes demands of infinite love never fully discharged, calling us to strive for fuller manifestations of justice and democracy, always in the mode of 'to come.' Derrida confesses his proximity to Kant, to Walter Benjamin, and to Emmanuel Lévinas. Like Kant and Lévinas, he avers that we cannot fully know the transcendent Other who makes these constant demands. But unlike Kant he does not adopt an Aristotelian *telos* where imperfect human virtue necessarily implies the existence of perfect virtue in the afterlife, being more interested in the ethical pressure felt by the subject than in metaphysical questions of whence that pressure arises and where it ends. The paradox of 'religion without religion' that he employs is a device suggesting the existence of moral intuitions constantly urging us to make the world fit for

messianic arrival. Though Derrida's late affinity for theological language is sometimes deemed a post-secular turn, it is also consistent with his long-standing worrying over the pursuit of the good deferred by the language games he famously describes.

Metaphysics are taken up more fully by John Milbank, who argues for the possibility of infinite truths within an ostensibly Christian account of transcendence. There are, as he describes it, 'infinitely many possible versions of truth. . . . Objects and subjects are, as they are narrated in a story. . . . If subjects and objects only are, through the complex relations of a narrative, then neither objects are privileged, as in premodernity, nor subjects, as in modernity.'[13] If Kant responds to the 'immense depth behind things' by distinguishing 'what is clear from what is hidden,' Milbank would 'trust the depth, and appearance as the gift of depth, and history as the restoration of the loss of this depth in Christ.'[14] His 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism' adds a theistic strain to post-modern emphasis on contingency and narrativization. Rather than a void beyond the perceptible, we find a benevolent divinity and the possibility of harmonious society, or what Milbank describes as an Augustinian *societas perfecta*.

His 'radical orthodoxy' is 'orthodox' in its reclamation of actual divine presence in the universe, as opposed to the liberal theology that it accuses of giving over God's transcendence, and in its rejection of Protestant historical teleology in favor of the pure contingency of the given.[15] It is 'radical' in the sense that it conceives of this return to orthodoxy as a critique, indeed as the strongest possible critique, of the nihilist materialism that the secular tradition breeds. 'The secular natural law model,' Milbank argues, 'establishes "autonomy" with the fiction that fundamental social arrangements can be deduced simply from the formal requirements of reason. (These deductions then, of course, unconsciously reproduce bourgeois property laws and understandings of the individual.)'[16] This is equivalent to the public space of violence that Augustine finds in Rome, against which the Church offers a 'new social order based on love and forgiveness.' Only through the example of Christ is God fully connected to the visible world, to which He offers peace beyond the civic peace that secularism continually defers, and points to salvation as the possibility of human harmony freed from the prevailing authorities of the political domain. That possibility is not an opiate, but a foundation for social formations fully rejecting bourgeois individualism, as Milbank makes clear in *Theology and Social Theory*.[17]

What we have called the third kind of post-secular thought argues for an adjustment of our view of modernity in the face of the persistent, indeed the increasing, relevance of religion in large segments of civil society. Given that relevance, the principle of equality requires secular citizens to engage, as Habermas describes it, in 'a self-reflective transcending of a secularist self-understanding of Modernity.'[18] No longer can it be expected that all publicly legitimate discourse be expressed in secular language; to do so is to impose a cognitive burden upon religious citizens and to deprive them of the full rights of citizenship. Also to be abandoned is the modern secular state's aspiration of training a citizenry of freely reasoning subjects, which views religion as a vestige of pre-modern irrationality.

As we saw in introducing Badiou, secularism's claim to a monopoly on reason may not hold up to scrutiny. When that claim occurs at the level of politics, it can be an instrument of power deployed to harass religious minorities. A recent example is Switzerland's December 2009 referendum banning the construction of minarets, first conceived as an openly bigoted gimmick of the right-wing Swiss People's Party and ultimately passing by a popular vote of 57 percent—hardly a rational turn of events in a nation with a 4 percent Muslim population and exactly four minarets.[19] Daniel Pipes, a U.S. Republican thinker and Taube Visiting Fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, sees the referendum as legitimizing Europe's widespread and justifiable resistance to 'Islamisation,' citing newspaper polls conducted in France, Germany, and Spain all with 73 to 93 percent support of a minaret ban. That irrational fear and majoritarian bullying can masquerade as enlightened defense of liberal values does indeed demand that we re-evaluate the aggressive form secularity can take in its domination of public discourse.

We shall seek in the following chapters a mutually critiquing dialogue between Milton's pre-secular thought and current post-secular formulations. Along the way we shall also explore the ways in which language is made to represent the existence of absolute truth. The first chapter deals with an epistemology where belief requires no dialectical engagement of empirical knowledge. We find the myth believed as truth in moments of plain style in *Paradise Lost*, where Milton displays precisely the epic tendency that Badiou associates with Brecht: 'The epic is what it exhibits . . . the *courage* of truth. For Brecht, art produces no truth, but is instead an

elucidation—based on the supposition that the true exists—of the conditions of a courage of truth.'[20] Though Milton's epic has famously been described as grand in its style, we can see that the poet circumscribes limits upon literary sumptuousness by speaking truth in the plain voice of such characters as God the Father, Abdiel—the poem's most courageous truth warrior—and Michael. In those moments we learn that revelation is not to be modified through a rationalist thrust and parry of contending claims, and is neither generated by nor circumscribed within the poem as aesthetic object. The plain style of Milton's revealed truth is considered in this chapter alongside Badiou's appreciation of Saint Paul's adherence to the fable of the Resurrection, which, he claims, embraces plainness and dispenses with languages of received knowledge, whether Hebrew law or Greek philosophy.

The second chapter focuses on the ethics of reading suggested in Milton's *Areopagitica* and on recent engagements of ethics, which has been described as the most contentious branch of current philosophy. The occasion of *Areopagitica* is the Licensing Order of 1643, a law reviving a system of pre-publication censorship. Milton goes well beyond the immediate demands of responding to that order, dazzling us with claims on the nature of knowledge in his most beautiful prose tract by far. The rhetoric of *Areopagitica* thus shows an excess quite at odds with the plainness that we emphasize in chapter one.[21] The sometimes conflicting statements of that excess can be likened to the Freudian 'kettle logic' that Slavoj Žižek has discerned in the justification of the Iraq War, where the 'too many reasons' given for the war served as cover for imperialist ideology. That parallel suggests the presence of the political in the ethical determination of the good, which has been explored in a 2007 dialogue on *Areopagitica* by Marshall Grossman and Sharon Achinstein, and that is also silently at work in recent formulations of ethics by Jacques Derrida, Simon Critchley, and Alain Badiou. This chapter finds promise in Gayatri Spivak's ethics of responsiveness to human others—rather than the more infinite, Levinasian Other adopted by Derrida—a responsiveness foreclosed by the privileged ethos with which we are presented in Milton's tract and which resurfaces in Žižek's attempts to defend the flirtations with radical politics of Heidegger, De Man, and Foucault.

Turning to political theory's engagement of post-secularity, the third chapter concerns itself with the challenge to the secular state mounted in

our time by religious communities. With such communitarian critique in view, several political theorists have presented ours as a post-liberal age—as in such titles as Paul Edward Gottfried's *After Liberalism* (1999) and Robert B. Talisse's *Democracy after Liberalism* (2005). As Paul W. Kahn suggests in *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* (2004), we might distinguish between 'liberalism of speech,' where the state secures an arena of free expression to which all have equal access, and 'liberalism of faith,' which constrains the state so that it does not interfere with the freedom to pursue the ultimate meaning that is beyond its bounds. We find that distinction dramatized in the development of Milton's politics: where the prose of the early 1640s casts the political realm as an expression of the nation's reforming spirit, the tracts of 1659–60 limit the authority of church and state so that the individual can follow divine promptings. We can again see this development present itself in Milton's language by charting the relationship between the form of political speech and its conception of the *polis*: where the literary flourishes of the early prose draw reforming energies into the political sphere, the plainness of 1659–60 expresses a politics of restraint where the state is perceived to be menacing to true reformation—the energy of reform is now separated from the government of externals with which the magistrate should be concerned. Contrary to Kahn, I argue that 'liberalism of faith' is not liberalism at all: it is a believing community's agitation for exceptional recognition that does not recognize the similar rights of other groups, as John Rawls recognizes in calling such groups 'free-riders' in the liberal state. With this in view, I turn to the compromise on religion in the public sphere recently proposed by Jürgen Habermas, which compromise I find generally congenial.

The final two chapters turn to the subject of religious violence, where belief most aggressively asserts its opposition to existing politics. Reading *Samson Agonistes* on its own terms and in light of relevant contexts—Milton's disgust with church and state in the Restoration; his plans for tragedies; his handling in the three major poems of the heroes of faith of Hebrews 11; and the writings of those close to Milton, such as Henry Lawrence and the younger Sir Henry Vane—it is quite clear that Samson's divinely inspired massacre of the Philistines was much more a source of comfort than distress for the poet. Distancing him from what we would now call an ethic of religious violence thus performs the ideological work of expurgating that ethic from the Western tradition, or of locating it in a

distant and irrelevant past, so that it might be uncomplicatedly associated with a cultural Other. We might find the same ideological work performed in Milbank's partial reading of pre-modern Christian orthodoxy, particularly in the claim that such orthodoxy completely and uniquely embraces difference in its vision of divine order. Continuing this book's exploration of language in chapter five, and drawing on the insights of Talal Asad, I describe the self-immolation of the suicide bomber as a radical self-effacement. On the silence of the suicide bomber the order of narrative is imposed, whether hagiographical or demonizing, a tendency evident in Milton's handling of Samson and in literary representations of suicide bombers in our own moment, such as those of John Updike and Mohsin Hamid.

The thread running through this dialogue between post-secular thought and a pre-secular poet is the fundamentally asocial nature of the language of believed truth. Rather than participating in dialogue and seeking consensus, the language of strong belief stakes unassailable claims. With Ezekiel its truth drapes flesh over the dry bones of unbelief in the hope of raising an army of the faithful. Its ethical commitment is not primarily defined in terms of obligation to human dialogue and institutions; its politics not primarily defined as a contract securing the participation of the greatest number of citizens. At their best, those qualities can turn absolute principles of compassion and justice into a powerful critique of the given. At their worst, they produce the suicide attacker's terrifyingly complete disregard of the realm of the living.

II. On the present and the historical Other

Reading Milton in light of pressing political and intellectual concerns is a practice as old as reading Milton.[22] Shortly after being published, the republican spirit of *Paradise Lost* was praised by the parliamentarian Sir John Hobart, though received with mixed emotions by John Beale, a country minister in the national church who was also a Fellow of the Royal Society sympathetic to the epic's encyclopedic inclusion of new learning.[23] That 'villainous leading Incendiarie *John Milton*' was a bogey conveniently raised by Tories wishing to cast their Whig opponents as anti-monarchical during the Exclusion Crisis.[24] Toryism would find itself more conflicted in its view of monarchy during James II's reign, as signaled by conservative involvement in the 1688 folio edition of *Paradise Lost*. Following such

sympathetic Tory response is Anthony à Wood, who embellishes the poet's connection to Oxford in the 1691 *Fasti Oxoniensis* though hardly endorses Milton's defense of the regicide styled the 'monstrous and unparallel'd height of profligate impudence.'[25]

In writing his 1698 biography, the freethinker John Toland clearly had applications to his own context in view, intentions made explicit in his discussion of the anti-Presbyterian sentiment of Milton's prose defense of tyrannicide, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. Having faithfully reproduced Milton's objections to Presbyterian hypocrisy, Toland turns his attention to those 'now cal'd *Presbyterians*,' who are as self-seeking and anti-tolerationist as ever.[26] The concerns of his own moment likewise explain his scorn for Milton's younger brother Christopher, who:

> more resembling his [Popish] Grandfather than his Father or Brother, was of a very superstitious nature, and a man of no parts or ability. . . . [T]he late King *James* [the Second], wanting a set of Judges that would declare his Will to be superior to our Legal Constitution, created him the same day a Serjeant and one of the Barons of the Exchequer, knighting him of course, and making him next one of the Judges of the Common Pleas: But he quickly had his *quietus est*, as his Master not long after was depos'd for his *Maladministration* by the People of *England*, represented in a Convention at *Westminster*.[27]

We do not know with certainty whether the younger Milton converted to Catholicism, though a group of seamen did storm his private chapel in the heat of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and burn its 'Popish trinkets.'[28] Through this digression in his discussion of Milton's family, Toland vents hostility toward James II's favorites, along with the king's absolutism and religion.

Perhaps none were more emphatic about their application of Milton to their own concerns than the Romantics. William Wordsworth's 'Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour' conveys an attitude shared by John Keats's ode on Milton's lock of hair and William Blake's illuminated poem *Milton*. The last of these certainly justifies Joseph Wittreich's observation on the Romantic reading of Milton not only in present but in 'future tense, so that poems emerging from one moment of crisis could reflect upon, and explain, another crisis in history when, once again, tyranny and terror ruled.'[29] That tendency persists into the twentieth century. During the Second World War, G. Wilson Knight's *Chariot of Wrath* associates

Milton's Satan with Adolf Hitler in its account of the values threatened by fascism; this despite Knight's earlier critique of *Paradise Lost*, 'The Frozen Labyrinth,' which scorns Milton in a way made fashionable for a time by Ezra Pound, F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot.[30] In '*Paradise Lost' in Our Time*, a book arising from lectures delivered at Cornell in 1943–44, Douglas Bush notes the change in sentiment, cringing over Knight's tendentiousness:

> In 1942, having felt the impact of the war, Mr. Knight mounted the architect of the frozen labyrinth in a chariot of wrath as the great apostle of national liberty and destiny. One may respect the feeling behind the change while thinking that Milton might have preferred relatively intelligible criticism to a whirlwind apotheosis.[31]

A sophisticated poet, Bush rightly argues, certainly deserves a more sophisticated reading.

Though he is himself the finest of readers, Bush tends to turn Milton into the avatar of a tradition of Christian humanism threatened by fascism—and by the various forms of modern philistinism to which he objects in haughtier moments. In this vein he takes Milton's views on *recta ratio* apiece with those of Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor.[32] The war had made obsolete the skepticism, cynicism, and 'sensual irresponsibility' that made Donne seem relevant to 'defeatist intellectuals' of the Armistice period of 1918–39.[33] Milton's Christian humanism, by contrast, is a 'noble anachronism . . . in an increasingly modern and scientific world.'[34] That non-Christian forms of humanism are a sidelight in Bush's anachronism make it seem rather more anachronistic today—unless one feels with Milbank that Christianity opens vistas of human harmony unavailable in any other religion or philosophy. But one must note that his standard of Christian humanism allowed Bush to mount a strong critique of the moderns' flirtations with fascism and to remain skeptical of the New Humanism advocated by his Harvard professor Irving Babbitt, with its unabashed neoroman elitism.[35] In ways that Bush is sometimes reluctant to acknowledge, Milton is more than a little sympathetic to such neo-roman meritocracy, and placing him in a tradition of Christian humanism can downplay his considerable heterodox energies. Bush's handling of the poet is a studied apotheosis, but an apotheosis nonetheless.

That kind of presentism was duplicated in the Cold War preparation of Milton's prose works by Don M. Wolfe, and has surfaced again

in the context of the 'war on terror.'[36] Wittreich finds liberating energies especially in the ambiguity of Milton's poetry, which 'confronts the perils' of our time by impressing upon us 'the smallness of our understanding of them.'[37] Praising G. Wilson Knight's comprehension, Wittreich joins him in finding the final poems prophetic in their prefiguration of present-day global conflict, with Samson especially 'a weapon of mass destruction' whose brutality Milton deploys to arraign all those who would engage in divinely inspired slaughter. John Carey takes a similar view in his now infamous pronouncements on the first anniversary of 9/11. 'September 11 has changed *Samson Agonistes*,' he declares, 'because it has changed the readings we can derive from it while still celebrating it as an achievement of the human imagination.' It is the task of literary criticism, by this standard, to celebrate human imagination in a way untroubling to current political sensitivities and the casual bigotries they breed. One can only paraphrase Milton's response to the Remonstrant's defense of the English liturgy as being so wisely framed as to be inoffensive to the pope: O new and never-heard of Supererogative height of wisdom and charity in our criticism![38]

This brief survey suggests that the presentist reading of Milton has a long history though not an especially distinguished one. When deployed to read current concerns, Milton tends to take one of two shapes: an uncomplicated champion of liberty summoned to arraign unjust authority, or a demonized anti-monarchist representing the horrors of anarchy among defenders of order. The first of these tends to glide past those aspects of the poet's thought not entirely humane and democratic. The second tends to inflate those aspects of his thought. That Milton takes for granted the divine inspiration of Samson's mass slaughter is only one reason for the untenability of the poet's uncomplicated heroism, which feminist interpretation of his works should have made untenable some time ago. But sensitivity to that feminist interpretation should not take the form of Samuel Johnson's infamous charge of a 'Turkish contempt for women,' itself an alibi for politically motivated disparagement—its casual swipe at Turks now also given renewed relevance by a potential association of Milton with Muslim backwardness.

The shortcomings of presentism are no less apparent in Shakespeare studies, where the term has come increasingly to appear and where it has seemed at times like a facile rejection of the careful evaluation of works in

their original contexts. Its privileging of the present moment tends blithely to claim, as Linda Charnes does, that it is 'fine' to 'use' Shakespeare in a 'pliable deployability' striving for 'timely/polemical intervention.'[39] Ewan Fernie legitimately asks what purpose the historical otherness of Shakespeare's oft-read and oft-staged plays serves in our moment, but proceeds in the process to describe as unnecessary that scholarly work providing any 'extra' historical account beyond this aura. His presentism ultimately rests on a textual 'presence' conceived as a transhistorical aesthetic response, a 'powerful *imminence* of sense' that is 'ineffably beyond thought.'[40] Though it spends much time setting itself against the ascendancy of New Historicism in studies of early modern drama, this presentism does retain one of the most dubious assumptions of that movement: the sloppy Habermasianism of the notion that literature shapes its political circumstances as much as it is shaped by them. It does, however, differ from New Historicism in seeking more fully to liberate that presupposition from the burden of proof.[41]

'Presentism' thus seems a term worth disowning, and I do not use it to describe the approach of this book. I accept the basic premise of historicism, namely that understanding contexts—artistic, intellectual, political, material—is necessary to understanding a written work, literary or nonliterary, and that scholarship must strive for as rigorous and balanced an account of those contexts as is possible. (This is not to say that literary works are reducible to historical data, or that history as such is the agent of cultural production, or that the internal textures of literature should be overlooked; none of these is a principle fundamental to historicist criticism, though each can be implied in the blunders of critics.)

The necessity of careful attention to historical contexts might be demonstrated by the unsettling consequences of Wittreich's presentism, with its emphasis on ambiguity and its labile 'shifting contexts.' In the view advanced especially in his studies of *Samson Agonistes*, new contexts can unfurl a text's latent meanings. One of the most suggestive applications of that approach is his reading of the boy guide who leads Samson to the temple, which applies to Milton's dramatic poem questions raised by the character Body in Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*: '[Do] you remember in the Bible where it tells about Samson and it says he had him a boy to lead him up to the wall, so he could shake the building down? . . . Well answer me this, you think that little boy got killed?' That question alerts us to Milton's fleeting mention of Samson's guide:

he his guide requested
(For so from such as nearer stood we heard)
As over-tir'd to let him lean a while
With both his arms on those two massie Pillars
That to the arched roof gave main support.
He unsuspitious led him[.] (1630–35)

Wittreich takes the description of the guide as 'unsuspitious' as a 'telling emendation of the Judges story' by which Milton 'deepens the horror of the final catastrophe' and 'acknowledges as Ellison seems to comprehend, that Samson is a fixture within a culture of supposed heroes who, "killing multitudes," are themselves in need of the deliverer they sought to be.'[42] The Samson story teaches Milton that 'blood spilled in violence begets more violence,' making him in turn the teacher not only of Ellison, but also of Malcolm X, whose reading of *Paradise Lost* in prison planted the seed of his eventual turn away from an ethic of violence; and Toni Morrison, who in her novel *Paradise* evokes Milton's poetry as 'a model for mounting her own critiques of God and religion, theology and politics.'[43] In what Wittreich describes as 'Milton's (post)modernity,' poetic ambiguities liberate us from political absolutism and religious dogma supporting violence, liberating energies not lost on the African-American thinkers to whom he draws our attention.

Inviting. But much as I would like to imagine Milton marching on Washington, such reverie is quite at odds with the stubborn fact of his casual attitude toward the African slave trade. In *Paradise Lost* the Archangel Michael makes that trade an instance of divine justice in his account of the curse of Ham:

Witness th'irreverent Son
Of him who built the Ark, who for the shame
Don to his Father, heard this heavie curse,
Servant of Servants, on his vitious Race. (12.100–104)

Handling this biblical episode in her long poem on the book of Genesis, Milton's contemporary Lucy Hutchinson (1620–81) emphasizes the fault of Noah, whose actions hardly befit patriarchal dignity:

Noah of the sparkling juice drunk deep,
And, stupefied with liquor, fell asleep,
Whom Ham, his scoffing son, in lewd plight found
Immodestly incovered on the ground.[44]

In the *First Anniversary*, Andrew Marvell (1621–78) uses Ham as an emblem of ungrateful irreverence applied to those radicals opposing Cromwell's reign who celebrated the national crisis threatened by his overturned coach.[45]

Unlike Hutchinson, Milton places blame for the episode entirely on Ham, departing from form in not making this an instance of Noah resigning his manhood through intemperate indulgence. And unlike Marvell, Milton reads the Curse of Ham all too literally: he applies it to the Canaanites and by implication to their seventeenth-century descendants through Ham's son Cush, those sub-Saharan Africans whose abject servitude is justly imposed. The point is not lost on the eighteenth-century philologist James Paterson in his commentary on *Paradise Lost*: '[Ham's] *Curse* has lain heavy upon his *Posterity* to this Day: For the *Old Carthaginians, Grecians, Romans*, and all the *Nations of Europe*, made *Slaves* of the *Africans*: Let all Children take Care of *Disobedience* to their Parents.'[46] In this light, a program of reading Milton that would make him the great tutor of those black thinkers dismantling the vicious legacy of slavery is not only imprecise, it also imposes upon Ellison, Malcolm X, and Morrison the intellectual paternity of a poet blithely accepting precisely the racial attitudes that they resist. A presentist program of reading that would 'use' Milton according to the pliable deployability emerging from 'shifting contexts' covers up our knowledge of his participation in a culture of white supremacy.

If we read Milton's less appealing moments aright we will see that they are not exceptions to his eloquent demands for liberty but are corollaries of the brand of liberty to which he subscribes. Internal fitness is always a prerequisite in Milton's terms to outward liberty.[47] Milton's first *Defence* cites Aristotle and Cicero in claiming that 'the peoples of Asia readily endure slavery, while the Jews and Assyrians were born for it. I confess that those who long for liberty or can enjoy it are but few—only the wise, that is, and the brave; while most men prefer just masters so long as they are in fact just' (*YP* 4: 343). Such liberty assumes its enjoyment to be above the capacity of the common herd, whose inner servility takes naturally to outward servility.

A similar exclusivity operates in Milton's thought on Christian liberty. Critiquing the reading of *Samson Agonistes* that appears in chapter four of this book, Paul Stevens has described toleration and zeal as 'rival

desires' in Milton's thought.[48] That strikes me as imprecise. Toleration of sectarian Protestantism—the only brand of toleration that Milton ever defends—resists those institutions interfering with individual seeking of a divinely appointed path, which path can in some cases lead one to righteous destruction of idolaters. Toleration is the condition by which zeal can find appropriate expression, and is never extended to those whom Milton identifies as enemies of truth. As with his neo-roman principles, his views on Christian liberty assume internal fitness as a prerequisite.

Any approach striving for clear-sighted reading—the only aim that matters in criticism—must make an accurate reckoning of Milton's thought and work with little heed for what inspires and what offends. Presentism tends to fall short of this measure, and to be prone to three pitfalls in particular: (1) the dead end of relevance; (2) the 'wisdom of the ancients' fallacy; and (3) rewriting an author to suit our interests. Relevance can serve as a barker's call when one wishes to enliven for a moment a room full of undergraduates in various stages of sleep. As an end in itself, it really cannot be deemed productive in any other way. And those who attempt to make relevance seem critically productive can often fall into the comfort of the 'wisdom of the ancients' fallacy, which holds not only that Milton (or Shakespeare, or Sophocles) is engaged by concerns like ours, but possesses by virtue of age the insights we so desperately need. That is a fine view of literature for Matthew Arnold or Lynne Cheney; those seeking engaging and nuanced criticism will not find it compelling. Which leads us to the height of critical hubris, draping an author in those fabrics fashionable in our own moment while covering the dated and unseemly attire of his or her own selection. The theoretical insight that all criticism is a form of re-writing should not lead us to view re-writing as our primary task.

We shall seek to avoid these traps, and to discern order and fundamental principles rather than to take the *a priori* road of presentism. Our approach will aim to offer, as the chapters on *Samson Agonistes* in this book hope to show, the strongest possible critique of a program of reading that would surround unscrutinized assumptions of our time with the *gravitas* of cultural heritage. Even though the launching point of this book's historicist inquiry is current concern, it must be mounted in a way that respects historical otherness insofar as criticism can. That is nothing new. More novel is allowing that historical Other to yield in turn an anachronism informing inquiry into the present, which might then also be explored with

some of the rigor and critical distance that historicism lends to a study of the past, so that we might better perceive the limits of orthodoxies pervasive in our own moment.[49] Such an approach lends the historical otherness of the past an active charge in its critique of the present, rather than being ossified as part of a 'tradition' or obscured by the demands of polemical intervention.

I do not call this a dialectic between past and present because it is in fact an interruption of the progressivism implicit in a Hegelian view of history, a view suggesting that the new emerges as a synthesis retaining finer elements of the old. What I propose comes much closer to Benjamin's 'Theses on Historical Philosophy' in treating each historical moment as a monad: we might pick up two objects from the wreckage at the feet of Benjamin's Angel of History and ask what each one tells us about the other.[50] Comparison need not subscribe to—and can indeed provide a strong resistance of—the notion that one of these monads anticipates or is superseded by the other. Its concern with two temporally discrete moments remains largely agnostic on the big question of historical appearance, not necessarily subtending materialism or idealism, Whig historiography or absolute contingency. The focus of this book may be on literary criticism in light of intellectual history, but its approach will certainly lend itself to other kinds of focus. Properly conducted, such inquiry critiques historicism's tendency toward implicit progressivism, and presentism's tendency toward brazen partiality.

Rather than tossing a concern for evidence in the dustbin, we shall aim for precise handling of artifacts and careful questioning of historical narrativization. But we shall also view the present not as an obstacle to the 'scientific' study of the past, but as potentially fructifying—to say nothing of it being an inescapable fact to be confronted head on. The readings that follow will strive toward a mutual critique of past and present. While they worry about anti-humane and anti-democratic forces in both of those moments, they shall open, rather than foreclose, the complexities of the writers and thinkers under discussion, and explore pre-secularity and post-secularity on their own terms.