

# MILTON'S WORDS

ANNABEL PATTERSON

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many years ago, it was reported to me that Arthur Barker wished I would write a book on Milton. He was, is, one of the many Miltonists, dead and alive, who made me feel that I was somehow under contract to do just that; several essays, articles, and chapters on Milton notwithstanding, I still had not tackled the most demanding topic, passed the most rigorous test, that literary studies in the early modern period offers. 'Yet ease and leasure', I can imagine Barker saying reproachfully, 'was given thee for thy retired thoughts out of the sweat of other persons.' That ease and leisure was never more demanding than during the last two years, during which I was the recipient of an Emeritus Fellowship from the Mellon Foundation, a brilliant device to keep retirees at their desks. First, I wrote *The Long Parliament of Charles II*, which continued my lifelong interest in Milton's friend Andrew Marvell. Then I was supposed to be working on a book on representations of democracy in American culture, when I suddenly got waylaid by the idea of a little book that would draw on some of my previous Milton work, revised and expanded, but tie everything together under the concept of 'Milton's Words', an old-fashioned omnibus that we need to see back on the road. So my first thanks are to the Mellon Foundation and the Yale Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty, where I sit in a gracious office surrounded by my Milton library, a privilege that many retirees miss. In this

arena I am particularly grateful to the help, practical, social, and psychological, that Bernard Lytton, Alan Trachtenberg, Patricia Dallai, and Margaret Hionis provide at the Koerner Center.

It would be quite impossible to specify the personal and professional riches that I have inherited or extracted from the world of Milton scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. I must start with David Quint and Nigel Smith, who generously read the whole manuscript and claimed to enjoy it, John Rogers and Dayton Haskin, who helped me out with *Paradise Regained*, and Martin Dzelzainis, who did the same with *The Readie and Easie Way*. It turns out, when I look back on my life, that nine-tenths of my closest friends are Miltonists, and every time I meet up with them again I am enlightened, occasionally chastened, but always re-energized. Joseph Wittreich is perhaps my oldest Miltonist friend, providing years of encouragement, and I am particularly grateful to him for writing *Why Milton Matters*. Stanley Fish and I have been affectionate competitors for ever, it seems. Albert Labriola has shepherded the Milton Society of America with wit and fairness for so long that he has become an allegorical personage. If I start listing all the others I might lose a friend whose name went somehow missing. So I'll stop here, and just thank you all. You know who you are.

A.P., 2009

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## ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

<i>CE</i>	F. A. Patterson et al. (eds.), <i>The Works of John Milton</i> , 18 vols. in 21, New York, 1931–8. Columbia Edition.
<i>CPW</i>	Don M. Wolfe et al. (eds.). <i>Complete Prose Works of John Milton</i> , 8 vols. New Haven, 1953–82
<i>PL</i>	<i>Paradise Lost</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Paradise Regained</i>
<i>RCG</i>	<i>Reason of Church Government</i>
<i>REW</i>	<i>Readie &amp; Easie Way</i>

# Introduction

In 1963 Oxford University Press published a short book with a large title: *Milton's Grand Style*. Its author was Christopher Ricks, who at the then prodigious age of 30 took on two of the great arbiters of English literary criticism and taste, F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, who in tandem established the reign of Modernism. Neither Leavis nor Eliot approved of the way Milton wrote poetry. They did not care a jot about his work in prose, despite the fact that it was the source of his fame in his lifetime, the admiration of eighteenth-century Whigs, and the inspiration of several of the Founding Fathers of America. Instead Leavis and Eliot had inherited from eighteenth-century editors and critics, most notably Dr. Johnson and Richard Bentley, the belief that poetry should be judged, word by word, phrase by phrase, according to current tastes. Both Johnson and Bentley, for different reasons, judged that Milton's poetry was florid, unnatural to the ear, over-Latinate, and generally over-written. Leavis and Eliot fastened on the idea of unnaturalness (as if poetry were ever a natural way to communicate), and with Shakespeare and John Donne as their standards from the past, wrote new laws. In Milton's poetry, Eliot declared in his British Academy lecture of 1947:

There is always the maximal, never the minimal, alteration of ordinary language. Every distortion of construction, the foreign idiom, the use of a word in a foreign way or with the meaning of the foreign word from which it is derived rather than the accepted meaning in English, every idiosyncrasy is a particular act of violence which Milton has been the first to commit. There is no cliché, no poetic diction in the derogatory sense, but a perpetual sequence of original acts of lawlessness.

The Academy Lecture was supposed to be a softening of Eliot's original position, as laid down in *Essays and Studies* in 1936, that Milton was just a bad writer, but it was an apology that left the main reason for disapproval untouched. 'A perpetual sequence of original acts of *lawlessness*', according to a penal code not in existence when Milton wrote! As for Leavis, in 1947 he published *Revaluation*, including an essay on 'Milton's Verse' that celebrated Eliot's 'dislodgement' of Milton from the English literary pantheon. In 'cultivating so complete and systematic a callousness to the intrinsic nature of English, Milton forfeits all possibility of subtle or delicate life in his verse'. Milton deserved what he got—demotion.

Christopher Ricks turned this evaluative principle upside down. In his clever hands, the Grand Style proved itself endlessly capable of yielding small gems and subtle effects. Ricks's book changed the way critics and teachers could evaluate Milton's style, but its argument remained within the frame of taste, of approval or disapproval, already established. Its point was that Leavis and Eliot were not good enough readers to see, if one had

not decided against it in advance, how constantly *interesting* Milton's style actually was. *Milton's Grand Style* was followed, in 1990, by Thomas Corns's *Milton's Language*, which adopted the Ricksian position but backed it up with stylistics, which substitutes for the special and fascinating instance a generalizing impulse, supported where possible by computer-derived statistics. And in 1997 Corns was followed by John Hale's *Milton's Languages*, the first book to deal thoroughly with the fact, and the consequences of the fact, that Milton was multi-lingual, and wrote as much in Latin as in English. Hale countered the charge that Milton's style was over-Latinate by applying Ricks's methods to some of Milton's most Latinate words and constructions, to happy effect.

As the titles above reveal, 'style' is just another word for 'language', and 'language', of course, means primarily *words*, the choice of words and their arrangement in units of sense and communication. But because of the apologetic or defensive structure of pro-Milton criticism in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century, sense and communication as the goal of word-use in poetry have been largely ignored in favor of 'effect'. Now, about half a century after Leavis wrote the 'stern letter' that provoked Ricks to his brilliant and salutary reply, we are free to admire Milton again; but, oddly, the positive reassessments we now take for granted have not much advanced our understanding of *how* and *why* Milton used words in the extraordinary ways (for there were many) that he did. To some extent, this kind of inquiry *has* been initiated in the study of Milton's prose works, increasingly the center of attention since Milton studies became explicitly (as distinct from secretly, as in

Johnson and Eliot) a site of struggle between different political persuasions. But nobody, to my knowledge, has attempted to chart, analyze, and understand Milton's use of words, in both the poetry and prose, as the product of a single mind and a writing life; still less as a product that changed in response to different circumstances.

A couple of salient examples may help explain what needs to be done.

**UNLIBIDINOUS.** Suppose we take Milton's editorial comment on his statement that while Adam and the archangel Raphael ate the food she had prepared, 'Meanwhile at Table | Eve ministered naked ... | ... but in those hearts | Love unlibidinous reign'd' (*PL* 5: 443–49). 'Unlibidinous' is clearly one of those words to which Leavis and Eliot should have objected, both on the grounds of its Latin origin and on its 'unnatural' placement between 'Love' and 'reign'd', whereas normal English would say either 'in those hearts unlibidinous Love reign'd', or, less likely, 'in those hearts Love reign'd unlibidinous'. To which Ricks would have replied that the word's euphonious central placement, the 'syntactical fluidity' thereby created (p. 138) allows it to refer in meaning in both directions, thus making the statement worthy of more careful attention. At this point in the conversation, Corns (pp. 85–86) identifies it both as Milton's coinage (whereas 'libidinous' was well established) and as one of a series of negative compounds beginning with 'un' of which Milton is particularly fond, and which can also be found in the prose. Corns does not, however, exert his own stylistic principles to document just how fond, numerically, or draw

any conclusions from the observation. In 'Negativity' I show that Milton's attraction to such negative positives is characteristic of his style from the beginning, and that it has its origins both in his Latin training and in his agonistic image of himself as a writer. In this particular instance, 'unlibidinous' answers his complaint in the autobiographical section of *Reason of Church Government* (1641) about the 'writings and interludes of libidinous and ignorant Poetasters' who are corrupting their Stuart audiences and whom he hopes one day in the future to shame and replace with himself (*CPW* 1: 818). Between the two words and eras lie the vast tracts of his writings in favor of divorce on the basis of incompatibility, in which Milton wrestled with the vocabulary of the libido and the carnality of canon law; and (to use quite a different critical approach) the rampant libidinousness of the court of Charles II, to which 'unlibidinous' may compare itself in a non-syntactical form of reference. Finally there is Milton's peculiar introduction of divorce and polygamy as a topic into his Latin treatise *De Doctrina Christiana*, where a Hebrew king, Joash, 'was induced to take two wives, not by licentious passion (*non regia libido*), but by the advice of a wise and holy priest' (*CE* 15: 150). This is what Ricks would have called 'cross-reference' in Milton's works, but he only traces it in the poetry, and only in terms of patterns of imagery. That certain words, already dense with meaning, could perform acts of cross-reference to themselves, could argue with each other, was not part of his remit.

**I N D E F A T I G A B L E**. Six syllables long, 'indefatigable' is clearly a Latin adjective, found in Seneca (*De Ira*, 2.12.7). As an

adjective it had been transported into English by Robert Burton, in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which we know Milton read. As an adverb, it had been adopted much earlier by William Webbe, in his *Discourse of English Poetry* (1586), in a context that would have interested Milton:

Master Arthur Golding, which...traveleth as yet indefatigably, and is addicted without society by his continuall laboure, to profit this nation and speech in all kind of good learning. (ciii<sup>r</sup>)

The word was often used in the context of reading or scholarly endeavor. Milton himself adopted it to his praise of the Long Parliament in the exordium to *Areopagitica* (CPW 2: 487), where their ‘laudable deeds’ and ‘indefatigable vertues’ in bringing the second English Reformation so far are mentioned as the basis and motive for now recalling a noxious piece of legislation, the Licensing Act of 1643. *Areopagitica* was, of course, a tract that used heroic language in favor of scholarly freedom. We know that Andrew Marvell read it, and can assume he had done so by 1650, when he took it adverbially to motivate Oliver Cromwell to more military victories at the end of the *Horatian Ode*:

But thou the Wars and Fortunes Son  
March indefatigably on.

And Marvell was quoting himself when in 1654, in the *First Anniversary of the Government under O.C.*, he contrasted Cromwell to the ‘heavy’ and unproductive kings of Europe who ‘neither build the Temple in their days | Nor Matter for succeeding

Founders raise'. Meanwhile 'indefatigable Cromwell hyes, | And cuts his way still nearer to the Skyes' (ll. 45–46). Marvell had achieved the seemingly impossible task of bending an uneuphonious six-syllabled word, a mouthful, to iambic verse.

It is possible that by now 'indefatigable' (unwearied, incapable of being tired) will once more need a gloss in student editions. It is not a word to which Milton's editors have paid any special attention when it appears in *Paradise Lost*, Book 2, in Satan's phony description of his intended assault on Eden as a heroic enterprise for which a special candidate (himself) is required:

Who shall tempt with wandring feet  
The dark unbottom'd infinite Abyss  
And through the palpable obscure find out  
His uncouth way, or spread his aery flight  
Upborne with indefatigable wings  
Over the vast abrupt. (ll. 404–09)

You can see that Milton has learned from Marvell the art of fitting that 'uncouth' word smoothly into verse. You can see that here the first two un-words are not positives disguised as negatives but actual negatives, scary with the ideas of free fall and unknown territory. You might infer, therefore, and especially because it is Satan speaking, speaking speciously, that 'indefatigable' is here also not a positive disguised by syntax as a negative, but a negative doubly darkened by its context. So what does it say to Marvell's second Cromwellian 'indefatigable', which also imagines a flying superhuman figure? I cannot



believe that these astonishing words, used only twice by Milton, are not cross-references to each other and Marvell's, implying that Satan is the dark shadow of Marvell's heroic Cromwell. We know that by 1667, when he published *Paradise Lost*, Milton no longer shared his friend's admiration for Cromwell; he had also, by the way, demolished his own image of a heroic Long Parliament.

But it would be misleading only to focus on the kind of learned or invented polysyllabic words to which Leavis and Eliot objected. Milton could, when he thought it appropriate, use plain 'native' words better than anyone. His *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* uses the little word 'no' multiple times to powerful effect, not least in its rebuke to premature optimism: 'But wisest Fate says No, | This must not yet be so'. And one of its most memorable lines defines this moment of world peace as that time when 'Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave'. 'Birds', 'sit', 'brooding', and 'wave' (from 'waw') are all Anglo-Saxon, 'calm' and 'charm' were naturalized from middle French in the fourteenth century. Note that Milton does *not* use the learned but then fashionable word 'halcyon', a favorite with the Caroline poets. Milton is far more likely to use predominantly 'native' words, especially monosyllables, when writing in rhyme, in order to exploit the 'natural' force of the plain, the common, but common because vital word, when in rhyming position; or, to reverse this point, far more likely to use learned, polysyllabic words when reinventing blank verse, which of course he learned from Shakespeare. One has only to compare his 1634 *Maske at Ludlow*, his first experiment with blank verse, with his subtly rhymed 1637 elegy, *Lycidas*, to see this distinction in early action.

This little book begins the long project of seeing what Milton's words look like when we acknowledge their freight of personal and political history; when we track them from text to text; when we consider not only the big, important, learned words but also the very small ones, such as 'perhaps', which Milton deployed with consummate skill at some crucial moments in both poetry and prose, or the phrase 'he who', which replicates the Latinate 'ille qui', but to which Milton gives a psychological twist; when we consider not only word frequency, but infrequency, uniqueness or near uniqueness, as a signal of Milton's interest in a word; when we tackle these issues in the Latin texts for which there is not, as yet, a concordance; when we consider the possibility that certain words gain or lose value for Milton as he proceeds through his writer's life, and that certain words become keywords to a particular text, as 'book' becomes to *Areopagitica*; when we reconsider the question of Milton's coinages not from the stern legalistic perspective as to whether he should have made them, but why he needed them. No one person could complete all these tasks, and nobody would wish to read a book that appeared to have completed them. Understanding Milton's words is, and should remain, a work in progress.

But close attention to Milton's words is not all that this book offers. It tells a slightly different story about Milton himself than the ones we have been used to. Starting with an abbreviated *Life*, it explains the shape of Milton's writing career, the life-long tension between his literary ambitions and the pressure of exhilarating political circumstances. The Milton you will find here walked no straight path from his Cambridge degree to the

epic he had been talking of writing when he was still at university, but instead cut his teeth as a writer in an entirely different field, political controversy. The effect on his vocabulary of his campaign to reform his country's church government and its divorce laws was galvanic, not least because he had to reconstitute his own image from that of a shy and bookish person to that of a crusader. He discovered that he enjoyed not only verbal conflict, but also mudslinging, and rude words became part of his arsenal in his very first prose tract. 'Marriage' and 'divorce', on the other hand, became loaded words for Milton for personal reasons, and he developed a new set of verbal resources, which I call 'words of avoidance', to help him tackle the subject. He never got over the experience of writing the divorce tracts. It was still on his mind when at the end of his life he revised his Latin treatise on theology, *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Then, for about a decade, he was called upon to justify the Long Parliament's execution of Charles I, which forced him to come to terms with the political keywords of his generation, words such as 'king', 'liberty', 'tyranny', and 'the people'. When the republican experiment collapsed on the death of Oliver Cromwell, after one last brave salvo against the restoration of the monarchy Milton retired back into the role of private intellectual and poet. This we all know; but because the poetry and the prose have been segregated for so long, and still tend to be read as separate enterprises, we have not tended to track Milton's favorite political words into the great poems, where, as we *perhaps* unwillingly will see, they change their valence. In general, though it is impossible to do justice to all of Milton's feats of word-use and arrangement, this book will tell a complete

tale of Milton the man; his psychological trajectory as well as that more formal notion, his 'character'; his mistakes as well as his masterpieces.

Let me recall the wonderful description of 'Master Arthur Golding' that, in all probability, Milton encountered in reading William Webbe's guide to late sixteenth-century poetry: Golding 'travelleth as yet indefatigably, and is addicted without society, by his continuall laboure, to profit this nation and speech in all kind of good learning'. Webbe must mean 'travaileth as yet indefatigably', and by 'without society' he must mean alone, without colleagues. That sounds like Milton, who believed he had a lonely mission, a calling, to educate the English, and was more indefatigable a reader than we can imagine, demanding similar standards from his students. In the last book of *Paradise Regained*, however, he seems to acknowledge weariness:

However, many *books*  
Wise men have said are wearisome; who reads  
Incessantly, and to his reading brings not  
A spirit and judgment equal or superior  
(And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek)  
Uncertain and unsettl'd still remains,  
Deep verst in *books* and shallow in himself, (4: 321–27)

Framed by two dubious appearances of the word 'books', Milton's great keyword in *Areopagitica*, when he wrote at the height of enthusiasm for books and reading, these lines are delivered by Jesus in his notorious rejection of a life of scholarship, the last of the kingdoms offered by Satan as bait. I take these

lines to be autobiographical not only for Milton at almost the end of his life, but also for myself, who in this short book have taken the liberty to be frugal, not to say parsimonious, with references to other scholars. Reading Ricks's deft but deferential pages, promiscuous with references to Mr. This and Dr. That, very few of whom we still recognize, it seems time for a change in procedure. Especially given the tendency of literary criticism to go out of style, Leavis and Eliot being two of the most striking instances, it is better to focus the reader's attention on Milton's words alone. The final list of works used, if not cited, is intended to partially cover this lapse of due deference; and the community of scholars from whom I have learned, for half a century, to understand Milton better, are here nonetheless, as geniuses of the shore, or guardian angels, or just good friends.

# A Writing Life

At the prodigious age of 19, John Milton was chosen to address his fellow undergraduates at Cambridge at a 'Vacation Exercise', which he conducted partly in Latin, partly in English. When he came to the English section, he produced his first writer's manifesto or statement of ambition:

Hail native Language, that by sinews weak  
Didst move my first endeavoring tongue to speak,  
And mad'st imperfect words with childish trips,  
Half unpronounc't, slide through my infant lips,

. . . . .  
Here I salute thee and thy pardon ask,  
That now I use thee in my latter task;

That is, in the second part of his performance, rather than the first. The lines are almost doggerel, a presumably intentional comic self-deflation, as this is a parody of a poet's invocation of his muse. The doggerel continues:

I have some naked thoughts that rove about  
And loudly knock to have their passage out;

And weary of their place do only stay  
Till thou hast deck't them in thy best array.

But we can tell it is self-mockery by what follows, immediately recognizable as *our* Milton, however young:

Yet I had rather, if I were to choose,  
Thy service in some graver subject use,  
Such as may make thee search thy coffers round,  
Before thou clothe my fancy in fit sound:  
Such where the deep transported mind may soar  
Above the wheeling poles, and at Heavn's door  
Look in . . .

But the young Milton had no idea how long it would take him to achieve this linguistic and imaginative goal—almost forty years—nor for how many other purposes he would search the coffers of the English language.

What follows is a very short *Life* of Milton that aims to introduce to the readers of this book, should they need such an introduction, the man who wrote the words that are our focus. There are three governing premises: first, we cannot understand Milton's use of words if we exclude from our inquiry the very large body of work he wrote in prose; second, our renewed freedom to venerate him does not require us to admire everything he wrote; and third, his life is more truly interesting if we recognize in it, rather than a coherent pattern of intentions fulfilled and principles clear from the start, a series of changes of direction, impulsive gestures, apologies, revisions, and thoughts worked out in the very process of writing them down.