Crawford, Joseph. "Milton's Ghost." *Raising Milton's Ghost: John Milton and the Sublime of Terror in the Early Romantic Period*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. 21–50. Science, Ethics and Society. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849664233.ch-002>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 11:34 UTC.

Copyright © Joseph Crawford 2011. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER TWO

Milton's Ghost

I

On 6 August 1788, a curious article appeared in *The Times*. *A propos* of nothing whatsoever, it related an 'Anecdote of Milton (not generally known)'. This 'anecdote' was a story of how, after the Restoration, John Milton had faked his own death in order to escape punishment for his actions during the Interregnum; his friends had held a mock funeral, and buried a coffin containing 'a figure of him, as large and as heavy as life', while the poet himself remained in hiding until the danger was past. The article was anonymous, cited no sources and has never been taken seriously by any modern Milton scholar.¹ But it was a sign of things to come; the first of many suggestions that John Milton was not nearly as dead as he ought to be.

John Good, who first noticed the increasing prominence of Milton in British culture at the end of the eighteenth century, suggested that Milton's popularity was enhanced by an increased interest in him as a political figure, an interest triggered by the American and French Revolutions.² Clearly, some of the renewed interest in Milton was politically motivated; the republications of his prose tracts in the 1790s certainly were. But there were also other factors at work, of which perhaps the most powerful was sheer national anxiety. For most of the eighteenth century, Great Britain had by contemporary standards been a remarkably stable and successful state: it had grown in power and prosperity, seen off the Jacobite threat, defeated France in a series of wars and added many territories to its growing empire. But following the loss of the American colonies, and the consequent rapid fall of the North, Shelburne and Rockingham ministries, there was a growing feeling that all was not well in Britain, a sense of unease that deepened with the arrival of the French Revolution. Some hoped for a similar uprising in Britain, and some feared it; some called for the invasion of France, while others predicted a French invasion of Britain; but everyone with any interest in politics at all felt that momentous changes were about to unfold. In this mood of expectant uncertainty, Milton's cosmic drama of good and evil – the closest thing that Britain had to a national epic – served as a reassuring touchstone of British identity, but its meaning was contested: Milton's history was adopted by both

parties. Was Milton a champion of orthodox British liberty and Christianity, or an ideological precursor to the French and American revolutionaries? If Milton *had* faked his own death, if he *was* still alive – which side would he be on?

In 1788 and 1789, the French Revolution was widely viewed in Britain as a positive development: France, it was thought, was finally beginning to abandon absolutist monarchy, moving towards a constitutional model of government inspired by the post-1688 British state. Even many Tories, the ex-Whig Prime Minister William Pitt among them, initially greeted the Revolution with cautious approval as a step in the right direction, while the likes of Charles James Fox welcomed it with open arms, seeing it as proof that the French had finally seen the light and decided to embrace the principles of the Whig party.³ At the 1789 meeting of the Revolution Society – founded the year before to celebrate the centenary of the Glorious Revolution – the radical Dissenter Richard Price delivered a *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* which explicitly linked the events in France to those in England a century before. In both cases, Price explained, the groundwork for the subsequent revolution had been laid by earlier philosophers: just as English republicans like Milton had cleared the way for the Glorious Revolution, so the French *philosophes* like Rousseau had prepared the path for the French, who could now expect to enjoy the fruits of liberty just as the British had been doing for the last 101 years.⁴

Price's *Discourse* was a classic elision of the two seventeenth-century English revolutions. He presented 'Milton, Locke, Sidney, Hoadley, &c' as a unified body, a phalanx of philosophers marching shoulder to shoulder against the forces of despotism, overlooking the fact that while Locke had written in favour of William III and 1688, Milton had defended the rather different principles of Oliver Cromwell and 1649.⁵ Price probably scarcely gave a second thought to this as he penned his sermon; for liberal Dissenters such as him it was axiomatic that Milton, Locke, Hoadley and the rest of the Whig worthies formed a single glorious tradition of religious tolerance and political liberty, whose writings had led first to the Glorious Revolution and now to 'those revolutions in which every friend to mankind is now exulting', i.e. the American and French Revolutions.⁶ Edmund Burke, however, did not see matters in quite the same light, and he rapidly wrote a response to Price's sermon in the form of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a work that became an instant bestseller and the bible of counter-revolutionaries all

over Europe. In his *Reflections*, Burke insisted that the French Revolution was nothing like the Glorious Revolution; instead, it resembled the tumults of the Interregnum, and the learned men like Price who supported it were equivalent, not to the sober philosophers like Locke who had helped to build the Glorious Revolution, but to the fanatical preachers of Oliver Cromwell who, in Burke's view, had contributed to the destruction of the nation (*Reflections*: EB 8:63). In effect, Burke drove a wedge between the two wings of historical supporters that Price marshalled in his sermon. On one hand were wise men like Locke, who had supported the Glorious Revolution, while on the other hand were turbulent republicans like Sidney, who had supported the Commonwealth; and Burke made it clear that, in his view, only the latter group would have had much sympathy for the French Revolution. Although Burke does not once mention or quote from Milton in the *Reflections*, it seems probable that he, like Warton, would have seen Milton's political writings as falling squarely into the second group: fit, as Warton put it, for 'a fast-sermon before Cromwell' (TW 588). Thus he and Price might well have agreed that Milton's political philosophy was ideologically similar to that of the French *philosophes*, which both men saw as being the guiding influence behind the unfolding French Revolution. Where they would have disagreed was over where that ideology led: Price believed that it would bring to France the liberty and prosperity that Britain had gained after 1688, whereas Burke held that it would culminate in the kind of regicidal extremism that Britain experienced after 1649.

Burke's silence over Milton, however, is both revealing and representative. The British had so much cultural capital invested in Milton that they were extremely unwilling to be pushed into attacking or disowning him on political grounds, even after it became clear that the French revolutionaries really were using the trial and execution of Charles I – events that Milton had defended in print – as a template for their own proceedings against their king.⁷ The year 1798, for example, saw the publication of Mark Noble's *Lives of the English Regicides*, a work entirely devoted to demonstrating to the French the sorry fates that awaited those who dared to kill their kings. In its Dedication – which is addressed to the Jacobins – Noble snarls:

Preparatory to the murder of your own gracious sovereign, you printed the mock trial of our own unhappy monarch. You will now also see, as a prelude to your own fate, that of Charles I's judges.⁸

Yet this book, otherwise so comprehensive in its coverage of regicidal misery, does not mention Milton once – not even to repeat the old Royalist jibe that he was struck blind as a divine punishment for having written in praise of his sovereign's execution. The friends of the Revolution were eager enough to claim Milton for their cause, but those who opposed it much preferred to avoid mentioning him altogether, allowing him to retain his distance from the messy business of current affairs. Cromwell's preachers, Charles I's judges: *they* were mere rebels, and could be vilified accordingly. But Milton was a national institution, and as such Burke and Noble refrained from attacking him along with his old comrades, probably thinking with Johnson: 'What Englishman can take delight in transcribing passages, which, if they lessen the reputation of Milton, diminish in some degree the honour of our country?'⁹

But events were moving beyond their control; for however much Burke would have liked to keep Milton out of view he would not stay buried, either figuratively or literally. Milton's works were being reprinted in unprecedented numbers, while in 1790 repair works at St Giles' Cripplegate provided an ideal opportunity for the disinterment and breaking-open of what was believed to be Milton's coffin. Philip Neve, a local magistrate who questioned many of the people involved in the disinterment and subsequently wrote a narrative of the event, described the scene of its discovery thus:

On Tuesday afternoon, August 3rd, notice was brought to Messrs. *Strong* and *Cole*, that the coffin was discovered. They went immediately to the church; and, by the help of a candle, proceeded under the common-council-men's pew, to the place where the coffin lay. It was in a chalky soil, and directly over a wooden coffin, supposed to be that of *Milton's* father; tradition having always reported, that *Milton* was buried next to his father. [...] When he and Mr *Cole* had examined the coffin, they ordered water and a brush to be brought, that they might wash it, in search of an inscription, or initials, or date; but, upon its being carefully cleansed, none was found.¹⁰

Thomas Strong, a solicitor, was the vestry-clerk of St Giles' Cripplegate; John Cole, a silversmith, was a churchwarden there. St Giles' church would have been an important part of both men's lives, and its association with Milton was, then as now, one of its chief claims to fame, so they may have been

somewhat disappointed at the stubborn muteness and anonymity of the leaden coffin they had discovered, even after they had 'carefully cleansed' of the 'chalky soil' of Cripplegate. We know that they discussed investigating further, because they subsequently made a point of telling Neve that they had ultimately resolved not to do so:

Conjecture naturally pointed out, both to Mr *Strong* and Mr *Cole*, that, by moving the leaden coffin, there would be a great chance of finding some inscription on the wooden one underneath; but, with a just and laudable piety, they disdained to disturb the sacred ashes, after a requiem of 116 years ...¹¹

That evening, Cole attended a 'merry-meeting' at a public house belonging to a Mr Fountain, who was one of the parish overseers of St Giles. Cole told the assembled company that he had unearthed Milton's coffin, and 'several of those present expressing a desire to see it, Mr *Cole* assented'.¹²

The next morning, Fountain and his friends – Mr Laming the pawnbroker, Mr Taylor the surgeon and, appropriately enough, Mr Ascough the coffin-maker – visited the church. 'Just and laudable piety' was evidently in shorter supply among this second party, for they had no reservations about pulling the coffin out into the light of day, and requesting one of Ascough's journeymen to break it open so that they might see the body within. The scene that followed shifted rapidly from the reverent to the grotesque, as Neve relates:

Upon first view of the body, it appeared perfect, and completely enveloped in the shroud, which was of many folds; the ribs standing-up regularly. When they disturbed the shroud, the ribs fell. Mr *Fountain* told me, that he pulled hard at the teeth, which resisted, until someone hit them a knock with a stone, when they easily came out. There were but five in the upper-jaw, which were all perfectly sound and white, and all taken by Mr *Fountain*: he gave one of them to Mr *Laming*: Mr *Laming* also took one from the lower-jaw; and Mr *Taylor* took two from it. Mr *Laming* told me that he had at one time a mind to bring away the whole under-jaw with the teeth in it; he had it in his hand, but tossed it back again. Also, that he lifted up the head, and saw a great quantity of hair ... Messrs *Laming* and *Taylor* went home to get scissors to cut-off some of the hair: they returned about ten; when Mr *Laming* poked his stick against the

head, and brought some of the hair over the head, but, as they saw the scissors were not necessary, Mr *Taylor* took up the hair, as it lay on the forehead, and carried it home. The water, which had got into the coffin on the Tuesday afternoon [i.e. when Strong and Cole washed it], had made a sludge at the bottom of it, emitting a nauseous smell ...¹³

Laming then pulled one of the corpse's legs off, but threw it back in, perhaps deciding on further consideration that a human femur was not the sort of relic he wanted for his pawnbroker's shop. When the group departed, the leaden lid was bent back and the coffin returned to its original position, but neither the coffin nor the hole was closed up; so Elizabeth Grant, the gravedigger, and the workmen carrying out the repair works in the church began 'exhibiting' the coffin, the latter demanding beer-money from curious visitors to let them into the church, and the former escorting them down to see the corpse, 'at first for 6d and afterwards for 3d and 2d each person'.¹⁴ Many of the visitors took teeth, bones and locks of hair from the rapidly diminishing corpse; the teeth had all been taken or lost among the 'sludge' by Wednesday evening, and more must have been taken before the coffin was reburied on Thursday afternoon, for when it was reopened once more on 17 August the corpse was 'found entirely mutilated', with 'almost all the ribs, the lower jaw, and one of the hands gone'.¹⁵ Hearing of these events, Cowper was moved to indignant verse:

Who then but must conceive disdain,
Hearing the deed unblest,
Of wretches who have dared profane
His dread sepulchral rest?
Ill fare the hands that heaved the stones
Where Milton's ashes lay,
That trembled not to grasp his bones
And steal his dust away!¹⁶

The violation of Milton's grave is an extraordinarily suggestive event, as it occurred at the very historical moment when Milton-the-author was changing from being something known, safe, distant and inert to something dangerously ambiguous, powerfully immediate and threateningly active. It is curiously fitting that the fragments of Milton's body should have been

unearthed and circulated in the very year that his political pamphlets began to be reprinted, some of them for the first time in one-and-a-half centuries; and it is entirely appropriate that, in the midst of debates over Milton's true ideological sympathies, a series of doctors should have been called in to attempt to discern whether the corpse that was being so rapidly dismembered and distributed was really that of Milton at all. (His skull proved, if the phrase may be allowed, to be a particular bone of contention among these learned men.)¹⁷ The playwright James Boaden, who within a few years would begin his career as a writer of Gothic melodramas, was convinced that the body was not Milton's; he was thus perplexed by why it should have been found buried under Milton's tombstone, and formulated two possible theories to account for this. The more innocent explanation was that Milton's body might simply have disintegrated entirely: 'one hundred and sixteen years was a period adequate to the demolition of all but the *literary* remains of Milton'. But he also speculated that 'the actual coffin of the great Republican' might have been switched with someone else's during repairs to the church in 1682, by parish elders fearful that vengeful Royalists might be meditating 'some violation of the Poet's remains' – in which case, where Milton's real corpse and coffin might now be was anyone's guess.¹⁸ Whatever might have happened to his body, Milton's spirit seemed to be abroad in more senses than one; and it is hardly surprising that the *St James Chronicle* should have reported that one of the men responsible for the disinterment was haunted for months afterwards by the feeling of being clutched by an icy hand.¹⁹ Following the depredations of the souvenir-hunters, the gravediggers at St Giles' reburied much less of Milton (if it was he) than they unearthed; and from 1790 onwards Milton's books, Milton's body and quite possibly Milton's spirit were back in circulation.

He seemed to be especially active in France, where Mirabeau's translations of the *Defensio* and *Areopagitica* were reprinted twice and three times, respectively, between 1788 and 1792; the second reprinting of the *Defensio* was issued by the Jacobins, with a new preface stating explicitly that the same arguments Milton used to condemn Charles I could and should be used to condemn Louis XVI.²⁰ In 1792 Milton was one of an international group of eight 'friends of liberty' whose busts were commissioned to adorn the interior of the Jacobin Club in Paris; Helen Maria Williams, who was present when the busts were voted for, rejoiced to have hailed from the same country as so great a man (HMW I:2:113–14). Whether or not his head lay mouldering

under Cripplegate, it certainly stood frowning over the progress of the French Revolution, and it was perhaps as a kind of symbolic counter-spell that in the same year Samuel Whitbread commissioned another bust of Milton to stand over his violated tomb in London, as if to affirm that Milton's head was really with the English, not the French – however doubtful the doctors had found his skull to be.²¹ But the French took no notice, and touring the front later in the same year, one Englishman found the Jacobin emissary Jean Louis Carra drawing upon the old Commonwealthman pantheon of 'Milton, Sydney, Harrington, and Locke' in order to educate the French troops in their revolutionary duty – perhaps using Mirabeau's translations of Milton to ease his task (HMW 1:3:68–9). For people who had been raised since childhood to revere Milton as, in Warton's phrase, 'one of the highest honours of his country', hearing of such things must have been disconcerting at the very least; and when they did hear them, Burke, Noble and the rest must often have wished that Milton could have remained decently dead and buried beneath St Giles'.

II

Thomas Warton did not live to hear of such things: he died in 1790. Among his papers were found the complete notes for a second edition of Milton's *Poems on Several Occasions*, which was duly published in 1791. In the end, he had managed to find Milton's will after all: it was a document dated fifteen days after the poet's death, purporting to contain the desires he had expressed in life for the division of his property, witnessed only by his estranged brother Christopher and signed only by the X of his illiterate serving maid Elizabeth Fisher. Unsurprisingly, his daughters – whom this questionable document had disinherited in favour of their stepmother – had mounted a legal challenge to it, which had eventually succeeded. Clearly, Milton's legacy had been confused, doubtful and disputed from the very beginning.²²

After Warton's death the office of Poet Laureate was offered to William Hayley, who refused it; instead it passed to Henry Pye, who is best remembered today as the target of some lines in Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*.²³ Hayley worshipped Milton almost to idolatry, and considered him and his fellow Commonwealthmen to be the guiding stars of the Whig party, of which he was a devoted supporter. But he was not, by any means, a radical: he believed in constitutional monarchy, and held that the ideals of Milton and his fellows had been realised in the Glorious

Revolution. Initially he had welcomed the French Revolution, and the French had reciprocated his regard: in 1790, during the first flush of his revolutionary enthusiasm, Hayley had been hailed by the revolutionary Société de 1789 as one of 'the two best poets in England', the other being the similarly pro-revolutionary Robert Merry.²⁴ However, Hayley's enthusiasm cooled rapidly once it became clear that the Jacobins would not be content with turning France into a British-style constitutional monarchy, and that they had rather more radical reforms in mind than those championed by moderate Whigs such as himself.

The years immediately following the French Revolution were difficult times for admirers of the old English republicans. As Hayley later recalled, it was:

... a period when a very extraordinary panic possessed and overclouded many of the most elevated and enlightened minds of this kingdom – a period when the retired student could hardly amuse himself with perusing the nervous republican writers of the last century, without being suspected of framing deadly machinations against the monarchs of the present day ...²⁵

They were also, however, years in which interest in Milton was at an all-time high. Editions of Milton's works poured from the presses, with *Paradise Lost* alone being reprinted thirty-four times between 1790 and 1799. Gillray's 1792 cartoon of 'Sin, Death, and the Devil', whom he depicted as Queen Charlotte, William Pitt and Lord Thurlow respectively, also contained a side-swipe at the contemporary Milton industry in its caption, which read:

N.B. The above performance containing Portraits of the Devil & his relatives, drawn from the life, is recommended to Messrs. Boydell, Fuzelli & the rest of the Proprietors of the Three Hundred and Sixty Five Editions of Milton, now publishing, as necessary to be adopted, in their classick Embellishments.²⁶

'Three Hundred and Sixty Five' was a comic exaggeration of the number of Milton editions then in preparation – eight would have been nearer the mark – but Gillray was quite right to recognise that Milton editions, especially

illustrated Milton editions, were being produced in unprecedented numbers; indeed, Gillray's choice of the number 365 suggests that a new one seemed to be appearing every day. They ranged from cheap duodecimos through luxury quartos and illustrated octavos, but one edition stood head and shoulders above them all: Josiah Boydell's three-volume luxury folio edition of the *Poetic Works*, published from 1794 to 1797.²⁷ Knowing of Hayley's reputation as a Milton scholar and enthusiast, Boydell commissioned Hayley in 1792 to write a book-length biography of Milton to act as an introduction to his great edition. Hayley accepted, seeing his biography as a chance to set the record straight about Milton's life after what he felt were the slanders and misrepresentations of the last major Milton biography, Dr Johnson's 1779 'Life of Milton'. Hayley felt that Johnson had allowed his political disagreements with Milton to prejudice his biography, leading him to depict his subject as a far less attractive and admirable person than Hayley was sure that he had really been, and now it fell to Hayley to establish the truth about his hero's life.

What Hayley produced, two years later, was both an impressive work of biographical scholarship and a monument to Hayley's adoration of his subject. Far from being 'surly and acrimonious', as Johnson had claimed, Hayley's Milton comes across as a living saint, a model of wisdom and honesty, masterfully steering his way through his troubled times with righteousness and virtue as his guides. Hayley is so carried away by his love of Milton, and his anger at those who have dared profane his memory, that he more than once fantasises about Milton returning to life to rebut his detractors:

[Milton's] attachment to truth was as sincere and fervent as that of the honest Montaigne, who says: 'I would come again with all my heart from the other world to give any one the lie, who should report me as other than I was ...'

Could [Milton] revisit earth in his mortal character, with a wish to retaliate, what a picture might be drawn by that sublime and offended genius of the great moralist [i.e. Johnson] who had treated his with such excess of asperity ...²⁸

Had Hayley merely limited himself to hagiography, he would have been on safe ground; he was, after all, hardly the first person to idolise Milton in print. But rather than glossing over Milton's political career as so many other

biographers had done, he devoted the central third of his *Life* to it, praising Milton throughout for the wisdom and virtue he displayed even when he was working for the Commonwealth. This was an extremely risky step for Hayley to take, and Boydell, alarmed by his recklessness, cut several sections from the *Life* as too politically sensitive for the tenor of the times.²⁹ His concerns were raised by passages such as this:

The odium which [Bradshaw] justly incurred in the trial of Charles seems to have prevented even our liberal historians from recording with candour the great qualities he possessed [...] He regarded it as meritorious to have pronounced sentence on his king [...] Whatever we may think of his political tenets, let us render justice to the courage and the consistency with which he supported them. – The mind of Milton was in unison with the high-toned spirits of this resolute friend ...³⁰

This passage may seem balanced and moderate enough. Indeed, when the still-radical Coleridge read it in 1796, he exploded with rage at Hayley's temerity in calling Bradshaw's odium 'justly incurred': 'Why *justly*? What would the contemptible Martyr-worshippers (who yearly apply to this fraudulent would-be-despot the most awful phrases of holy writ ...) what would even these men have?' (Coleridge's annotations to Hayley's *Life of Milton*: C 12:2:970). But for Boydell, it was dangerously extreme. To praise the moral character of a regicide is dangerously close to praising regicide itself, and to associate Milton with such people was to risk placing him beyond the pale of what was politically acceptable in 1794 – perhaps especially among the sort of wealthy bibliophiles who comprised Boydell's target audience. It is possible that Hayley wrote this passage, and others like it, in 1792, before Louis XVI lost his head; but to keep it in 1794, by which time the French royal family had been virtually exterminated, must have appeared to Boydell an outrageously impolitic move, and he insisted on the removal of all such passages from Hayley's *Life*.

Hayley grudgingly accepted Boydell's cuts, but he also had the *Life of Milton* published independently by Thomas Cadell as a separate work; and when, in 1796, it reached its second edition, he restored the excised passages. He must have felt some qualms about doing so, however, because he also added a new dedication to his *Life* – a dedication addressed to none other than Joseph Warton, the elderly, impeccably respectable clerical brother of the late poet

laureate. This dedication, which seems to be addressed as much to the dead Thomas Warton as to his living brother, justifies the study of Milton's prose works and political career in terms like these:

Mr [Thomas] Warton had fallen into a mistake, which has betrayed other well-disposed minds into an unreasonable abhorrence of Milton's prose; I mean the mistake of regarding it as having a tendency to subvert our existing government ... His impassioned yet disinterested ardour for reformation was excited by those gross abuses of power, which that new settlement of the state [i.e. the 1688 Revolution] very happily corrected.³¹

This was the claim that Whigs had been making since the 1690s; that Milton was never opposed to monarchy as such, only to monarchy as it then existed. In his dedication Hayley argues over and over again for Milton's harmlessness, his visionary unworldliness and the inapplicability of his ideas to the political landscape of the 1790s; he emphasises Milton's moral excellence rather than the soundness of his politics, which he often deplores, and makes abundantly clear that he himself is a believer in constitutional monarchy, with no desire to see Britain transformed into a Miltonic commonwealth. He dismisses concerns about the subversive potential of Milton's prose works as 'prejudices' produced by 'a very extraordinary panic', and goes on to write:

The panic which I alluded to has speedily passed away, and a man of letters may now, I presume, as safely and irreproachably peruse or reprint the great republican writers of England, as he might translate or elucidate the political visions of Plato ...³²

To write this in 1795 was, as Phillip Cox puts it, 'either naïve or an attempt to deny [Milton's] relevance'.³³ Probably it was the latter; Hayley knew that by publishing his *Life* unabridged he was treading on dangerous ground, and thus used his Dedication to pre-emptively reassure his readers that however alarming some of the material that followed might sound, it presented no threat to the modern British government. He was carefully disassociating himself from those who used Milton's works for overtly political ends, insisting instead that he viewed them with as much scholarly detachment as the works of Plato, and his readers should do the same. Given that Hayley

wrote his Dedication in the same year that Pitt's Government passed the Two Acts, tightening the laws against seditious libel to make it easier to prosecute the authors of radical publications, he may have felt that such manoeuvring was the only prudent thing to do.³⁴

Such concern was very much a sign of the times. In the prefatory biography to his variorum edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1749 – the centenary of Charles's execution – Thomas Newton had been able to write of Milton's regicidal leanings in terms like these:

The Presbyterians declaiming tragically against the King's execution, and asserting that his person was sacred and inviolable, provoked [Milton] to write the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, proving that it is lawful to call a tyrant to account and to depose and put him to death, and that they who of late so much blame deposing are the men who did it themselves: and he published it at the beginning of the year 1649, to satisfy and compose the minds of the people.³⁵

Newton felt no need to add any disclaimers to this, to apologise for Milton's actions or to make clear how much he disapproved of them. Similarly, he gives a matter-of-fact account of Milton's *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, which Hayley did not even dare to comment on, except to assure his readers that it was 'a work not approved of even by Republican writers'.³⁶ Newton was not by any means a radical; in fact, as a liberal Whig supporter of constitutional monarchy, his politics were very similar to Hayley's. But he lived in an age where such regicides seemed to belong firmly in the past, and could thus be contemplated with equanimity; whereas for Hayley, the execution of kings lay not in the comfortably remote region of History, but in the dangerously pressing domain of current affairs. The French Revolution had made the events of 1649 much more topical in 1796 than they had been in 1749.

Nor was Boydell's edition of Milton the only one to be affected by the mood of caution that now surrounded the merest mention of Milton's political career. Reading the biographies of Milton that often prefaced editions of his work in the 1790s, one often feels that their authors are trying to play it safe, to steer clear of contentious issues in an attempt to alienate as few potential readers as possible. Fenton's biography remained popular in the cheap duodecimo editions, probably because its brevity made it cheaper to

print, but perhaps also because it paid so little attention to Milton's political activities that it was unlikely to offend any section of the wide audience such editions aimed at. Even Fenton's biography was not short or inoffensive enough for George Cawthorn, who in 1797 published *Samson Agonistes* with a prefatory 'Life' that reduced Milton's political career to this:

For (at the age of forty-one) he was now grown famous by his polemical writings of various kinds, and held in great favour and esteem by those who had power to dispose of all preferments in the state. Although the spoils of his country lay at his feet, neither his conscience nor his honour could stoop to gather them: for it is affirmed, that he lived always in a frugal retirement ...³⁷

From here the author hurries on into conventional Milton hagiography, evidently glad to have left the dangerous ground of political history behind him. This edition was produced as part of the 'Bell's British Theatre' series, which aimed at a wide and popular audience, and Cawthorn – who seems to have tended towards conservatism in any case, publishing works such as Jean Baptiste Duvoisin's anti-revolutionary *Examination of the Principles of the French Revolution* (1796) and Robert Bisset's conservative *Life of Edmund Burke* (1798) – must have been keen to avoid courting controversy. Similar tactics can be seen in other editions of the 1790s: a 1795 edition of *Paradise Lost* published 'at a price which may render its reception general', in the publication of which the radical publisher Joseph Johnson was involved, reprinted Fenton's biography alongside Dr Johnson's critical remarks on *Paradise Lost* and a eulogy on Milton's moral character taken from Hayley's *Life of Milton*.³⁸ Both the Hayley and Johnson pieces were extracts from longer works which were anything but silent about Milton's politics, but the book's editors kept only these apolitical fragments, perhaps because they feared that either Johnson's attacks or Hayley's praise of Milton's political life might have made its reception less general than they hoped. John and Henry Richter's luxury illustrated quarto of 1796 was most cautious of all, as it had need to be: John Richter was an active member of the radical London Corresponding Society, one of those arrested for high treason in 1794 and released following the acquittal of Thomas Hardy and John Horne Tooke.³⁹ Henry Richter, the younger of the two brothers, was an artist, and an acquaintance of William Blake, notable for painting portraits of the men imprisoned in the Tower of

London while awaiting trial for treason; he provided thirteen illustrations for his brother's edition of *Paradise Lost*, which may indeed have been intended from the start as a platform for him to showcase his artistic talents.⁴⁰ Their edition was dedicated, 'with his permission', to the Prince of Wales, and evaded the sticky situation of having a suspected traitor praise the life of a defender of regicide in a work dedicated to a member of the royal family by simply including no biography whatsoever.⁴¹

Finally, in 1801, Henry John Todd's great edition of Milton's *Poetical Works* appeared. While admitting that Milton had been a 'thorough republican', Todd's prefatory biography went out of its way to dismiss the idea that Milton had anything in common with the contemporary radical movement.⁴² Taking it as given that radicalism was inseparable from immorality and irreligion, Todd reassured his readers that Milton was a good Christian, and would thus never have supported the French Revolution:

When modern Republicanism pretends to consider Milton as her auxiliary, let her remember, with shame, the sanctity of manners which his pages breathe, and the Christian lessons which they inculcate. To *him* 'sight more detestable' than the object of her hopes could not possibly be presented. The designs of the crafty sensualist, and of the besotted ungrateful atheist, it was *his* constant endeavour, not to promote, but to overthrow.⁴³

As a whole, the Milton industry in the 1790s tried hard to follow Warton's advice of the decade before, and teach its readers to forget Milton the politician. In many cases, they doubtless succeeded, and throughout the period many readers of Milton probably remained as oblivious as ever to his political career, believing that his legacy had been purely poetic. But there were also printers and booksellers in London who saw Milton's political works as resources to be tapped, not embarrassments to be avoided; and during the 1790s they took it upon themselves to bring Milton's political pamphlets once more before the eyes of the public.

III

As discussed in Chapter One, in the eighteenth century most of Milton's prose works were not easy to obtain. Milton's *Tractate on Education* had been readily available, and his *Areopagitica* had been reprinted in pamphlet

form at least twice, in 1738 and 1772.⁴⁴ *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* had remained popular among the dissenters, with pamphlet editions being published in 1717, 1723, 1736, 1743 and 1787, as well as the American editions of 1770 and 1774 that appeared on the eve of the American Revolution. But these three tracts were the only ones which were reprinted in any numbers. Hollis had sponsored the printing of the century's only edition of *Eikonoklastes* in 1770, and in 1715 a single edition had been printed of Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. But for the most part, Milton's political tracts remained buried in the great folio editions of his prose compiled by Toland (1698), Birch (1738) or Baron (1753). All were forbiddingly expensive even when first printed, and by 1790 the most recent of them had been out of print for almost forty years. In 1808 Coleridge paid three guineas for a copy of Birch's edition, a price that for most readers was well out of reach (Coleridge's annotations to Birch's *Milton*, C 12:3:883).

In his *Life of Milton*, Hayley tells us that 'Gibbon himself ... held it hardly compatible with the duty of a good citizen to re-publish, in these present times, the prose of Milton, as he apprehended it might be productive of public evil'.⁴⁵ Given Gibbon's well-known opposition to the French Revolution in the last years of his life, 'these present times' must refer to the early 1790s; yet, in spite of this warning from one of the elder statesmen of British letters, at least six Milton tracts were republished as pamphlets in the 1790s.⁴⁶ One appears to have been lost: Benjamin Flower, in his *French Constitution* of 1792, refers to an edition of *Areopagitica* 'lately published in duodecimo by Dilly', an edition of which I have been unable to locate any surviving copies.⁴⁷ Of the remaining five, one was published anonymously. But the five known publishers span the political spectrum: R. Blamire, John Deighton, Charles Dilly and Joseph Johnson were, respectively, a Tory, a moderate Whig, a liberal Whig and a pro-reform radical, while James Ridgway was an associate of the Whigs who was a committed radical during the 1790s.⁴⁸ Yet all five reprinted 150-year-old tracts by Milton, not as literary works, but as pamphlets intended to sway readers to their causes. That Milton was resurrected in this way, to fight new battles with old words, speaks volumes for his cultural authority. But it also says a great deal about the changing light in which his political works were being seen. They were no longer just remnants of an obsolete political movement, espousing ideals no sensible person still believed, or honourable but harmless ancestors of contemporary liberalism, addressing

problems long since solved by the cure-all of constitutional monarchy; they were works of immediate relevance, with important messages concerning the most pressing issues of the day.

The first of these pamphlets was *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, printed and sold by Joseph Johnson in 1790. Johnson was at the heart of London's radical intelligentsia; he printed works by Wollstonecraft and Paine, and invited both – along with various other radical luminaries such as William Godwin – to his famous literary dinners. His pamphlet was dedicated to 'Rev. Richard Price, D.D. L.L.D. F.R.S., Fellow of the American Philosophical Societies at Philadelphia and Boston':

This manual of John Milton is now most justly inscribed, as the assertor and protector of the civil and religious rights of mankind ... [Milton] maintained those principles which at present enlighten the world, and give assurances that human nature will be improved to the utmost of its faculties, resting with deity alone to fix their boundary.⁴⁹

This is Milton re-invented as a 1790s liberal, the kind of man who, like Price, might join American philosophical societies and talk about 'the civil and religious rights of mankind'.⁵⁰ The claim that Milton's principles 'at present enlighten the world' elides the gap between the 1650s and the 1790s, making Milton and Price companions in the same cause, and concealing the historical and ideological differences between a seventeenth-century Puritan arguing for freedom of Protestant dissent and an eighteenth-century Unitarian arguing for universal religious toleration. (As we have seen, Price himself had used the same device in his *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* the year before.) This was a common manoeuvre among Whig admirers of Milton in the eighteenth century; but the dedication to Price makes clear that this tradition *also* includes the French and American Revolutions, both of which Price had championed in print. Thus, while the chief purpose of the pamphlet is to bring the authority of Milton's name to bear on the question of religious freedom, it also serves a secondary aim: to align Milton, even if only implicitly, with the cause of the Revolution.

Two more of Milton's tracts appeared as pamphlets in 1791: *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, printed for James Ridgway, and *Areopagitica*, printed for John Deighton. Deighton was a Whig, and at this stage he was generally publishing works sympathetic to the French

Revolution; however, like many Whigs, after the Terror he changed his views and began to print hair-raising works like William Cobbett's *Annals of Blood*, a catalogue of atrocities 'committed by the authors and abettors of the French Revolution'.⁵¹ Deighton's *Areopagitica* was dedicated to Charles James Fox, and its dedication proper reads as follows:

TO THE/RIGHT HON. CHARLES JAMES FOX,/THIS WORK IS DEDICATED/AS A/MARK
OF RESPECT,/FOR/HIS PARLIAMENTARY ENDEAVOUR/TO SECURE/THE LIBERTY OF THE
PRESS;/BY/THE AUTHOR.⁵²

This is a classic Whig appropriation of Milton; indeed, by putting Fox's name on its title page, it ensured that it could not possibly be mistaken for anything else. In 1791 the liberty of the press was much discussed in parliament, in debates that would lead ultimately to the passing of Fox's Libel Act of 1792. As with Johnson's *Treatise*, this *Areopagitica* clearly aimed not only to bring Milton's arguments to bear on a contemporary debate, but also to influence it by aligning Milton with one of the debate's participants in the minds of its readers, showing that they fought for the same cause. The title page also bears a quotation from *Areopagitica* itself, beginning: 'And now the time in special is by privilege to write and speak what may help to the farther [*sic*] discussing of matters in agitation.'⁵³ Milton was writing about 1644, but the title page implies that his words are just as relevant to 1791 – and thus, implicitly, that if Milton were alive in the 1790s, he would be supporting Fox in his battle for the liberty of the press. Charles Dilly's lost edition of *Areopagitica* was probably very similar to Deighton's, and may well have been published for the same reason, for Dilly was also a Whig, and a member of the Society for Constitutional Information: exactly the kind of man who might invoke Milton to help Fox defend the constitutional liberties of England.

James Ridgway, for whom *The Ready and Easy Way* was printed the same year, was much more radical than Deighton or Dilly. Originally a printer, blackmailer and pornographer close to Sheridan and his circle, in 1791 he was, like Deighton, printing works in support of the French Revolution; but the paths of the two men diverged rapidly thereafter, for while Deighton turned away from the Revolution in horror, Ridgway became more and more involved with the British radical movement.⁵⁴ He joined the London Corresponding Society (LCS), and spent the years 1793–7 in Newgate Prison for publishing Paine's *Rights of Man* and other seditious texts; according to

government spies within the LCS, he also masterminded a planned Newgate jailbreak in 1794.⁵⁵ He was involved throughout the 1790s in the publication of works like *A Voyage to the Moon Strongly Recommended to All Lovers of Real Freedom* (1793) or the pro-French *Explanation of the Conduct of the French Government* (1798), before finally returning to a more mainstream Whig position around 1800.⁵⁶ Nor was this pamphlet Ridgway's only foray into the republication of seventeenth-century works; in 1792 he republished Colonel Titus's infamous 1657 justification of tyrannicide, *Killing No Murder*, and warned the kings of the world in its Dedication that 'those whom the law cannot reach, the dagger can'.⁵⁷ (Small wonder William Hayley complained it was impossible to read seventeenth-century republican works without being suspected of plotting against monarchy, when such works were being reprinted with prefaces encouraging their readers to carry out political assassinations!) Thus, while more moderate printers invoked Milton's cultural authority to defend freedom of religion, or the freedom of the press, Ridgway did so to attack the institution of monarchy. The Advertisement of his *Ready and Easy Way* mentions the scarcity and general neglect of Milton's prose works:

The prose works of that writer [i.e. Milton] are in possession of much less celebrity than it might be supposed their high merit must have insured them. Whether his fame, as a poet, may have overshadowed that which belongs to him as a prose writer, whether the prejudices many among us foolishly indulge, against the age in which he wrote, or whether the size of his works, which seems to exclude them from the attention of common readers, have been the most powerful cause of this neglect, no attempt will here be made to decide ...⁵⁸

All of these were, indeed, factors in Milton's neglect – although, in 1791, only a radical would have described a dislike of the English Commonwealth as a foolish prejudice. The mention of 'common readers' being excluded by 'the size of his works' emphasises how strongly Milton's prose works were associated with the gigantic Toland, Birch and Baron editions: huge, expensive, unobtainable tomes that might very well deter 'common readers'. Part of the purpose of pamphlets like Ridgway's was precisely to get Milton's ideas out of the folios and onto the bookstalls, into the hands of the common readers who, in Ridgway's view, most needed to hear Milton's republican message.

That Ridgway intended the pamphlet as an immediate intervention into contemporary politics is clear from the Advertisement, which continues:

[This tract] furnishes a rational and satisfactory answer to the splendid sophistry of Edmund Burke. On this ground the editor introduces it to public attention; and if it shall contribute, in the smallest degree, to enlarge the general stock of political information, or kindle a sentiment of liberty in the breast of an individual in the community, his wishes will be completely fulfilled.⁵⁹

This language of 'liberty' is similar to that used in Deighton and Johnson's pamphlets, but its context gives it a different, specifically anti-monarchical, significance. To say that the *Areopagitica* will encourage 'liberty' is to associate liberty with free speech; to make the same claim for the *Ready and Easy Way* is to associate liberty with republicanism. The *Ready and Easy Way* is full of attacks on the 'abjur'd and detested thralldom of kingship', and the reference to Edmund Burke makes clear the editor's desire that it will act as an antidote to Burke's recent defences of monarchy, both in England and France.⁶⁰ It was a significant development: Johnson and Deighton's liberal Whig Milton, defender of freedom and friend of constitutional monarchy, was a figure familiar to the eighteenth century, but Ridgway's radical Milton, champion of republicanism, was a newer and much more threatening arrival.

In 1792, a second *Areopagitica* was printed for Blamire. He was no radical publisher – his output in this period included the anti-democratic *Thoughts on Equal Representation* (1783), the anti-radical *Liberty and Equality* (1792) and the anti-French *Thoughts on the Theory and Practice of the French Constitution* (1794) – but belief in English liberty and the freedom of the press was by no means the exclusive preserve of radicals, and Blamire (or the pamphlet's editor) was plainly willing to invoke Milton's name and enlist his aid when he found it possible to do so. The author of its (unsigned) preface writes:

Milton's *Areopagitica* has not, I believe, been ever reprinted separately from his other prose works; at least it is not now to be met with in the Booksellers shops. As it is a treatise in every respect worthy of its author, I need make no apology for giving it in this form to the Public.⁶¹

This is intriguing, because it is incorrect. Aside from its original 1644 publication, *Areopagitica* had been published separately at least three times, in 1738, 1772 and – as we have just seen – in 1791, not to mention Dilly's 'lost' edition. It is unsurprising that the author should have been unaware of the earlier two, which probably had relatively small print runs, but that he should also not have known about its publication in the same city just the year before is a testament to the low profile Deighton's *Areopagitica* must have had. Probably none of these pamphlets were widely known or circulated; they may well have been sold only in the shops of the men who printed them. The author's claim that he need not apologise for republishing the *Areopagitica* because 'it is a treatise in every respect worthy of its author' implies that he is motivated purely by the love of literature, but he goes on to write:

The circulation of every thing which can explain the true principles of the liberty of the press, which is the watch and guardian of all other liberty, must be always useful; and is at this period peculiarly necessary.⁶²

It is this passage that makes the author's intention clear. This edition of the *Areopagitica* was not intended merely for scholarly and literary reading; rather, like Deighton's edition the year before, it was a contribution to current debates on censorship and the liberty of the press. Again, it makes the claim that Milton's prose is 'peculiarly necessary' to the age. It was certainly topical: for as well as witnessing the passage of Fox's Libel Act, which was in all likelihood the peculiar necessity which Blamire had in mind, 1792 also saw one of the most momentous free speech trials in British history, in which Thomas Erskine defended Paine against a charge of seditious libel brought against him *in absentia* by the government. At that trial, Erskine quoted from *Areopagitica* in defence of the principle of free speech, and it is ironic that he could have checked his quotation before the trial in an edition recently published by a man who was almost certainly no friend of Paine himself.

Finally, in 1797, a duodecimo edition of Milton's *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* was printed in Edinburgh. This pamphlet is a strikingly anonymous publication; its title page lists no printer or publisher, its preface is unsigned and it has no dedication. Its preface is very blandly written, claiming that the tract has been republished simply because it had 'now become exceeding scarce', and because 'the *subject*, and the *author* ... will be inviting enough to any curious

and unprejudiced reader'.⁶³ This claim of scarcity should again alert us to just how rare Milton's prose works were at the time: if five eighteenth-century editions had not been enough to keep the *Considerations* from growing 'exceeding scarce', how swiftly must the single editions of *Eikonoklastes* or *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* have vanished from sight? But the editor's subsequent claim that they had republished it simply because they thought it might be of interest to a 'curious and unprejudiced reader' seems disingenuous. Some of the material in this brief tract was incendiary:

Our ministers think scorn to use a *trade*, and count it the reproach of this age, that *tradesmen* preach the gospel. It were to be wished they were all *tradesmen*; they would not then so many of them, for want of another *trade*, make a *trade* of their *preaching* ... they themselves are the worst *tradesmen* of all.⁶⁴

To republish this at a time when fears of political and religious 'enthusiasm' among workers and tradesmen were running high seems unlikely to have been the disinterested work of literary endeavour the preface implies.⁶⁵ Perhaps the blandness and anonymity of the pamphlet were intended to be deceptive; those who knew Milton only as 'the author of *Paradise Lost*' (as the title page calls him) might be drawn by his name to purchase it, and would find no hint of its radical nature until they began to read the work itself. Perhaps they merely stemmed from the extreme caution of the publishers, to make it harder to trace to them – and easier for them to deny any seditious intentions even if they were. Either way, it seems unlikely that the pamphlet's republication was not politically inspired. Edinburgh was a centre of Scottish radicalism, the birthplace of the Scottish Friends of the People and the site of the ill-fated National Convention of 1793, and it is easy to see how this slender pamphlet could have formed part of a broader radical campaign.⁶⁶

What do these pamphlets tell us about Milton's political significance? They show his name and works were being deployed by British liberals and radicals, either implicitly or explicitly as responses to the contemporary political situation. However, they also suggest that he was still primarily being invoked by the Whig liberal elite, men like Dilly and Deighton who believed in toleration of dissenters and freedom of speech, but had little sympathy for projects such as the abolition of the monarchy. Of the five, only Ridgway's *Ready and Easy Way* could really be called a radical publication: the sole

attempt to resurrect Milton's republican legacy, and attach his name to a clearly revolutionary cause. Furthermore, they show that the liberals were willing to take advantage of Milton's high cultural status to enhance the impact of his political works. Of the five surviving pamphlets, three appeal to Milton's reputation: Johnson's *Treatise*, Blamire's *Areopagitica* and the Edinburgh *Considerations* all state, more or less, that people should pay attention to them because they are by Milton, with the implicit assumption that their readers know that Milton was a very great man, and whatever he had to say on these matters was probably worth reading. Intriguingly, Ridgway's *Ready and Easy Way* makes no such appeal, suggesting that Milton may not have enjoyed the same status among the lower-class radicals who formed Ridgway's target audience – presumably because, unlike their liberal Whig superiors, they had not been taught to revere his poetry from childhood onwards. This may be the key fact in explaining why Milton's republican writings seem never to have been deployed to any great extent by British radicals in the 1790s: the sections of the British radical movement most in sympathy with their ideals were also those least likely to be aware of their existence, or to attach any particular importance to them when they did come across them. For the Society for Constitutional Information, most of whose members were educated men, it was worth printing Milton's opinions on free speech and religious toleration rather than (say) another edition of Priestley's because of the talismanic power that Milton's name had among them. For the average member of the London Corresponding Society, however, there was probably nothing in Milton's *Ready and Easy Way* or *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* that could not be learned from Paine's *Rights of Man*, which also had the advantages of being more famous, easier to read and much, much easier to get hold of.

Six pamphlets, probably each with a small print run, and none of which seem to have run into a second edition, represent a drop in the ocean of the pamphlet wars of the 1790s. In all likelihood, their combined print runs only totalled a few thousand copies, in a decade when Burke was counting his sales by tens of thousands and Paine by hundreds of thousands. That their circulation and impact were probably extremely limited is suggested by an examination of Thomas Spence's *Pig's Meat*, a miscellaneous collection of radical and anti-monarchical texts sold for a penny an issue, with the intention of supplying literate but uneducated lower-class radicals with the ideas and quotations they needed to reinforce their arguments and clarify

their political thinking. Spence admired the seventeenth-century republican tradition, and across the three volumes of *Pig's Meat* he reprinted large sections of Harrington's *Oceana*, as well as the entirety of a vanishingly obscure pamphlet of 1659, *A Modest Plea for an Equal Common-wealth against Monarchy* by the minor republican author William Sprigg. He never reprinted any of Milton's polemics; but he did reprint Erskine's defence of Paine, which included substantial quotations from Milton's *Areopagitica*. Spence thought these quotations worthy enough of interest to give them separate entries in the volume's index, so that his readers could find – and, presumably, quote – 'Milton on the Liberty of the Press' or 'Milton's Vision of a Rousing Nation' without having to flick through the whole of Erskine's lengthy speech.⁶⁷ This suggests to me that Spence recognised the potential value of Milton's prose works for his cause, both for their ideas and for the cultural authority carried by Milton's name, and the only reason I can think of for why he did not reprint more of them was that he simply could not get hold of them. If he thought even Sprigg's defence of republicanism was worth reprinting, he would surely have reprinted Milton's if he could. But, by the time he started publishing *Pig's Meat* in 1794, the ephemeral tracts of 1791 and 1792 had probably already vanished from sight, and Hollis and Baron's edition of Milton's prose would have been well beyond his means.

With such limited range, the direct influence of these pamphlets could not have been great. They are significant, not because of their immediate effect on contemporary politics (which was probably negligible), but as signs of Milton's changing cultural status. After decades of gathering dust on Whig bookshelves, revered but unread relics of battles long since won, Milton's political works were starting to be read seriously again. Nor were they now the exclusive ideological property of respectable Whigs, or even of idealistic Commonwealthmen. Instead they were finding their way into the hands of people, both in England and France, who had much more radical agendas. For the first time since the seventeenth century, Milton's name was being linked with groups who were actively anti-monarchist, even regicidal. In such a context, it is clear why Boydell made cuts to Hayley's *Life of Milton*, and the editors of Milton editions vied with one another to produce the most politically bland prefatory biographies possible.

Tellingly, I have been unable to trace a single surviving copy of Ridgway's *Ready and Easy Way* in Britain; all nine surviving copies of which I am aware are presently located in the United States.⁶⁸ The cover of the copy I have seen,

which resides in the Public Library of Cleveland, Ohio, is signed 'Thomas Brand Hollis'. Thomas Brand, who took the name Hollis after being made the heir of the venerable Commonwealthman of that name, was an admirer of the American republic, and as a founder member of the Revolution Society he would probably have been in the audience when Price made his 1789 speech in praise of the French Revolution. Initially he, too, believed that the French Revolution would be a force for good in the world, but he rapidly disassociated himself from it as it diverged from the course that the Americans had taken. By 1791, when he presumably picked up Ridgway's pamphlet, he had resigned from the Society for Constitutional Information – a political club that he had helped to found – on the grounds that it had become too radical for him.⁶⁹ He probably bought Ridgway's pamphlet because it had Milton's name on it, and for him, as for his mentor Thomas Hollis, Milton was a matchless hero of liberty; but he must have felt little sympathy for Ridgway's wider political programme. One can imagine Brand Hollis, a Whig Commonwealthman of the old style, distastefully picking his way between copies of *Rights of Man* and other seditious material in Ridgway's shop in order to purchase his Milton pamphlet, and then proprietorially writing his name on its cover the moment he got home, as if to counteract the taint of Ridgway's radicalism. In such a scene, one can see how much and how swiftly the French Revolution had changed the ideological company that Milton kept.

IV

In 1792, Thomas Paine was tried *in absentia* for writing Part II of *Rights of Man*. Defending him was the famous advocate Thomas Erskine, a leading Whig and a supporter of the French Revolution.⁷⁰ Paine, Erskine argued, had not called for the overthrow of the British government; he had merely expressed his opinions on how nations in general should best be governed, which as a free citizen of Britain he had a perfect right to do. Freedom of debate on such matters, Erskine maintained, was essential; and a free press, far from weakening the state by reducing it to anarchy, would in fact reinvigorate the nation. In support of this viewpoint, he quoted Milton's *Areopagitica*: 'Methinks I see, in my mind, a noble and puissant nation rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.' 'Gentlemen', Erskine continued, 'what Milton only saw in his mighty imagination, I see in fact; what he expected, but which never came to pass, I see now fulfilling ...'.⁷¹ Milton, in other words, had been a prophet, and his prophecy

was only now being fulfilled: Britain, with the aid of its free press, was rising upwards into glory, 'shaking her invincible locks'. It was hard to miss the implication that Milton, were he still alive, would have viewed the political discussions and pamphlet wars of the 1790s with approval: that he would have been, if not quite on Paine's side, then at least opposed to the government's attempts to silence him.

Edmund Burke, however, read Paine's *Rights of Man* as a much less favourable omen of things to come. It was, he wrote in 1796, 'a portentous comet ... ("which from its horrid hair shakes pestilence and war", and "with fear of change perplexes monarchs")' (*Letter to a Noble Lord*: EB 9:151). The quotations are from Milton; the latter line so alarmed the Royalist censors of 1667 that they almost refused to allow *Paradise Lost* to be published.⁷² I find it suggestive that both Erskine and Burke should have reached for Milton quotations to describe *Rights of Man*; suggestive both of the possibly subconscious links in both men's minds between Paine and Milton as prophets of revolution, and of the cosmic scale of the events they felt were now at hand. Possibly Burke had Erskine's 'invincible locks' in mind when he mentioned the 'horrid hair' of the comet. And both men may have been thinking of some other 'horrid hair': the clumps of hair torn from Milton's skull when his grave was broken open in 1790, and sold to collectors or admirers by the lock. Supply being unable to keep up with demand, enterprising sellers of relics soon began selling fakes, so that Milton's horrid hair was soon proliferating as fast as splinters of the True Cross – or, indeed, copies of *Rights of Man*.⁷³ Prophets have always had difficulty staying dead, and the Miltonic views that Erskine admired and Burke feared certainly seemed to have escaped from their coffin that year, spreading as rapidly and irrecoverably as the fragments of Milton's body itself. Both the strong man rising from his sleep, and the portentous comet striking fear into monarchs, seem apt images for the role of Milton in this troubled time, and Burke, for one, was afraid that the war-bringing hair of this comet would prove not just horrid but invincible. In his last years he became gloomily convinced that the radicals would sweep all before them; and when he died in 1797 he left instructions that his place of burial should be kept secret, to ensure that his grave would not be desecrated after the inevitable revolution.⁷⁴

The trope of Milton's return or resurrection appeared repeatedly in the 1790s. Newlyn notes that in 1792 Cowper, who at the time was struggling to write a commentary on *Paradise Lost*, wrote to Hayley about his frustrations

at not being able to make better progress: 'Milton especially is my grievance, and I might almost as well be haunted by his ghost, as goaded with continual reproaches for neglecting him.'⁷⁵ By 1793 there was no longer any 'almost' about it, and the figurative haunting had become actual: Cowper had a dream in which Milton confronted him face to face, and promptly wrote again to Hayley to tell him everything. 'My first thought was wonder, where he could have been concealed so many years', Cowper wrote; 'my second, a transport of joy to find him still alive ...'.⁷⁶ The key idea animating Cowper's dream was that Milton was *still alive*, still active in the world: Cowper did not dream of a meeting with Milton's soul in heaven, but an encounter with him on Earth, to which he had returned after spending a century in concealment. Similar ideas can be seen in Coleridge's 1795 article *The Plot Discovered*, in which he reacted furiously to the limits that Pitt's Government wished to impose on freedom of assembly and the freedom of the press. Pointing out that Pitt's laws against seditious publications would logically require the suppression of many classic works of political philosophy, including those of Milton, Coleridge wrote:

Sages and patriots that being dead do yet speak to us, spirits of Milton, Locke, Sidney, Harrington! that still wander through your native country, giving wisdom and inspiring zeal! the cauldron of persecution is bubbling against you – the spells of despotism are being muttered! Blest spirits! assist us, lest hell exorcise earth of all that is heavenly! (*The Plot Discovered*: C 1:290–1)

For Coleridge, as for Cowper, Milton's spirit seemed to be a real, immediate presence in those years. If Pitt had his way, it would be exorcised; but if the Revolution won out, it could expect a more glorious fate. In his *Religious Musings*, Coleridge imagined that the French Revolution might usher in the Millennium:

The SAVIOUR comes! While as the THOUSAND YEARS
Lead up their mystic dance, the DESERT shouts!
Old OCEAN claps his hands! The mighty Dead
Rise to new life, whoe'er from earliest time
With conscious zeal had urg'd Love's wondrous plan,
Coadjutors of God. To MILTON'S trump

The high Groves of the renovated Earth

Unbosom their glad echoes ...

(*Religious Musings*, ll. 359–66: C 16:I:1:188)

Here, Milton is imagined as the first of the 'mighty Dead' restored to life at the first resurrection, and his 'trump' is presumably the poetry that the resurrected Milton recites in the regenerated world. But Coleridge's language leaves open the possibility that 'MILTON'S trump' is actually the Last Trumpet itself, the signal of the resurrection, a reading which would make Milton angelic, if not divine. Either way, Coleridge imagines that the first effect of this revolutionary resurrection will be Milton's triumphant return. No wonder Burke feared for the safety of his bones.

Milton was reappearing in other places as well. Every good ghost story of the late eighteenth century featured sinister paintings, and Milton's was no exception, for in the 1790s artists filled entire galleries with paintings of both Milton himself and of scenes from his works. As Marcia Pointon notes, 'the sudden increase in illustrated editions and the noticeably greater number of artists painting subjects from Milton in the years around 1795 is very remarkable'.⁷⁷ Works on Miltonic subjects were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1782, 1785, 1786, and then every year from 1790 to 1796, often with multiple Miltonic paintings by different artists appearing in the same year; an edition of Milton featuring a new set of illustrations was published in 1792, two more in 1794, another two in 1796 and yet another in 1800.⁷⁸ In the 1780s, the Royal Academy offered prizes for the best works on subjects drawn from *Paradise Lost*.⁷⁹ James Barry, Professor of Painting at the Academy from 1782 to 1799, produced many designs and drawings on Miltonic subjects; but even his enthusiasm for Milton was eclipsed by that of the Academy's next Professor of Painting, Henry Fuseli, who painted no less than forty-seven huge canvasses of Miltonic scenes in rapid succession.⁸⁰ Gathering these together, Fuseli brought a decade of Milton painting to an appropriate climax with the opening of his Milton gallery in 1799: an entire exhibition devoted to his paintings of scenes from the poet's works. Fuseli had become famous as the great master of the gothic and the macabre, and his Milton exhibition did not disappoint, with relatively sober paintings of Milton himself placed alongside paintings such as 'Sin and Death' (which depicted Death's rape of Sin), 'Lapland Orgies' and a disproportionate number of pictures of Satan. One contemporary reviewer of the gallery praised Fuseli's ability 'to embody

the imagery of our great heroic Bard, to render his thoughts visible, and to give to airy nothings "a local habitation and a name": in other words, to make Milton and his creations seem visible, concrete and immediately present once more.⁸¹ Had that airy nothing, Milton's ghost, decided in about 1800 to take up a local habitation, stepping down from his portrait in the true gothic style, he could hardly have asked for a more appropriately sinister location in which to manifest himself than Fuseli's Milton gallery.

The Milton painting and publishing industries mutually reinforced one another: a publisher who could obtain a new set of illustrations for his edition had something with which to distinguish it from those of his competitors, while an artist who could find a publisher interested in printing his works was, if he drove a good bargain, guaranteed a decent rate of payment for his designs. As a result, by 1796 anyone who regularly visited the Royal Academy's exhibitions or perused the latest illustrated luxury books would find depictions of scenes from Milton among them, and even those who had never read the epic itself could have gained some familiarity with its key scenes simply by browsing through the print shops and art galleries of London.

All these things – the paintings, the pamphlets, the prints, the dreams, the invocations, the *Life of Milton*, the illicitly traded relics, the newly carved bust over Milton's recently desecrated grave – testify to the extraordinary power that he exercised over the imagination of the 1790s. Partly, this was due to the resurgence of the political causes that Milton had championed in life, with all the anxieties attendant upon it. But many of the participants in the Milton cult of the 1790s – the men and women who bought editions of his works, or fragments of his bones, or prints and paintings of scenes from his epics, men and women without whose custom and participation the phenomenon could never have attained the scale it did – probably had little sense of Milton's political relevance to the times. The most overtly political manifestations of the Milton phenomenon were also the most marginal: few of the subscribers to Boydell's edition of Milton, or visitors to Fuseli's Milton gallery, or purchasers of spurious locks of Milton's hair, can have been primarily motivated by their admiration for Milton as one of England's great republicans. Instead, they bought Miltonic paintings, read Milton's poems and saw Milton's ghost because of their powerful sense that they lived in Miltonic times.

If Milton's name meant anything to the great majority of people in England it stood for the poet of cosmic drama, of the war in heaven and the lords of hell. In much the same way as Dante was (and is) associated by most people

almost exclusively with his *Inferno*, so Milton was primarily associated with the idea of the universal struggle between superhuman forces of good and evil, and such a struggle was felt by many people to be exactly what they were living through. The political writings of the time were laced with hysteria, decrying either the French republic or its royalist enemies as utterly, unspeakably evil, if not literally demonic: many observers felt that they were witnessing a gigantic, possibly even eschatological, clash between good and evil, and it is hardly surprising that, as Garrett has demonstrated, many people believed the end of the world was imminent, or that, as Paley has shown, the artists of the period increasingly turned their talents towards such subjects as the Deluge and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.⁸²

Milton's works, with their warring angels and cosmic evils, resonated with such apocalyptic fears; indeed, his Satanic scenes seemed only too applicable to contemporary affairs. Satan had been almost as active as Milton in 1790s Britain: in 1791 the self-declared prophet Richard Brothers had seen the Evil One 'walking leisurely into London ... dressed in White and Scarlet Robes', while in 1802 Brothers's prophetic rival Joanna Southcott spent seven days battling and disputing continually with the Devil, eventually triumphing over all his assaults.⁸³ In 1794, Isaac Cruikshank drew a cartoon entitled 'A Picture of Great Britain in the Year 1793', which depicted the Temple of the Constitution being attacked by a demon brandishing a trident labelled 'reform' and saying as it does so: 'Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven'.⁸⁴ Other Miltonic quotations appear elsewhere in the cartoon: to the reformers are attributed the words of Milton's fallen angels, resolving that 'to do ought good shall never be our task', while the on-looking conservatives quote Milton's God:

... So bent they seem
On desperate Revenge, that shall Redound
Upon their own rebellious Heads.

It was against the backdrop of that 'Britain in the Year 1793' that Nelson is said to have instructed his midshipmen: 'You must hate a Frenchman as you do the devil'.⁸⁵ Taking such a view of the conflict at hand, surrounded by enemies who seemed to be living demons and fighting, they hoped, on the side of the angels themselves, it is hardly surprising that so many readers turned in these years to *Paradise Lost*, or desired – and, in many cases, actually felt – the renewed presence of its author among them.