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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can God's work in history be discerned? The ambiguities of providence in the poetry of John Milton

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Abstract

Is the doctrine of providence a guide to interpreting history? The early work of John Milton is optimistic about the possibility of such providential discernment. Milton lived during one of the most turbulent periods of English history and was actively involved in the cause of revolution and social reform. His poems typically centre on moments of historical change that seem to illuminate the ultimate meaning of history. After his revolutionary hopes had been shattered, Milton came to perceive a much more ambiguous relationship between history and providence. What history reveals, he now thought, is mostly a pattern of repetition and decline. Milton ends *Paradise Lost* with the reflection that belief in providence is not so much a species of knowledge as a practice of life. This article traces Milton's movement from providential optimism to providential pessimism and argues for a conception of history in which even acts of divine intervention do not unambiguously alter the course of history.

Keywords: history; John Milton; poetry; providence; Puritans

Is the doctrine of providence a guide to interpreting history? Can believers discern God's purposes from events in time? The early work of John Milton (1608–1674) is optimistic about the possibility of such providential discernment. Milton lived during one of the most turbulent periods of English history. Within less than twenty years he witnessed three civil wars, the judicial execution of a king, the installation of a revolutionary government and finally the defeat of the revolution and the restoration of monarchy. Milton was not a passive observer of these events but an active participant. He was immersed in controversy on account of his outspoken advocacy for radical Protestant principles in government, law and church. He praised the execution of Charles I; he petitioned the Westminster Assembly to revoke centuries of canon law concerning marriage and divorce; he argued against the censorship of books and the suppression of heterodox opinions; he worked tirelessly – literally worked himself blind – in the service of Cromwell's revolutionary government. After the restoration

of the monarchy, he went into hiding and was briefly imprisoned in the Tower of London. His writings were burned. Former political associates were put to death. Milton was spared that fate, perhaps partly out of sympathy for his blindness, and was consigned for a time to the enforced isolation of house arrest. In his last years, when he was composing his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, he lived through the Great Plague of London in which a quarter of the city's population died, as well as through the Great Fire of London which displaced hundreds of thousands of people and destroyed nearly one-sixth of the city's buildings.

It is unsurprising then that Milton had such an acute sense of living in the midst of history. In both his early and later poetry, Milton directed enormous attention to what Blaine Greteman calls 'presentness' – the import of the present moment as a revelation of history.[1] Emily Griffiths Jones has spoken of Milton's 'poetics of sacred temporality'.[2] Each of his great poems centres on a single moment in time, a moment of historical change that seems to illuminate the ultimate meaning of history in relation to God. What J. Martin Evans calls 'the Miltonic moment' is one of the most characteristic features of Milton's poems. Evans notes that each of Milton's major poems tends to 'concentrate on the "decisive instant", the narrative juncture at which the climactic sequence of events is just about to happen'.[3] William Kerrigan has interpreted these 'moments of historical density' in the context of Milton's belief in a prophetic vocation: in the moment – understood as both a unique historical event and the time in which the poet writes about it – 'something in past time comes to an end' and 'something in future time begins to appear'.[4] In the Miltonic moment, both past and future become contiguous. To the inward eyes of the prophetic poet, all past events appear to have been leading up to the present moment, while all future events are destined to follow from it. Hence the present moment takes on a revelatory quality. It reveals the meaning of the past – even the distant past, as far back as the creation of the world – while also reaching forward through time into the fiery depths of apocalyptic finality.

The assumption that moments in time can disclose God's providential designs was one of the most characteristic features of the theological culture of early modern English Protestantism.[5] Calvin had taught that general providential principles are, to the eyes of faith, visible in human affairs, but he was reticent about applying providential thinking to specific world events. Believers can perceive God's care during good times and God's paternal correction during times of affliction; but beyond these general principles, one cannot make precise calculations about God's purposes in contemporary events.[6] Protestants in England took Calvin's doctrine of providence and united it with an almost empirical sensibility regarding the observation of contemporary social and political events. Foxe's 1563 *Acts and Monuments* (commonly known as the *Book of Martyrs*) fused a theology of divine providence with an almost journalistic eye for human detail, and in doing so set in train a tradition of English providential

[1]Blaine Greteman, 'Milton and the Early Modern Social Network: The Case of the *Epitaphium Damonis*', *Milton Quarterly* 49/2 (2015), p. 79.

[2]Emily Griffiths Jones, *Right Romance: Heroic Subjectivity and Elect Community in Seventeenth-Century England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 136.

[3]J. Martin Evans, *The Miltonic Moment* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), pp. 1–2.

[4]William Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1974), p. 228.

[5]See Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 1999).

[6]See Barbara Pitkin: *Calvin, the Bible, and History: Exegesis and Historical Reflection in the Era of Reform* (Oxford: OUP, 2020); as well as her earlier treatment of providential faith in *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in its Exegetical Context* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 98–130.

historiography.[7] The Puritans took history with great seriousness; it was, for them, 'theology exemplified'.[8] Perhaps surprisingly, English Calvinists did not have a monopoly on the impulse to interpret history providentially. In the civil war period, both royalists and parliamentarians understood themselves to be aligned with God's intentions for English history, and each side advanced providential interpretations of the political upheavals of the time.[9]

The providential outlook of seventeenth-century England found its most eloquent expression in the works of John Milton. In his civil war treatise, the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, written just weeks after the execution of Charles I in 1649, Milton spoke of the 'providence and high disposal' of God which had delivered the king into the hands of the revolutionaries. With an acute sense of the significance of this providential moment, Milton exhorted his brethren

> not to startle from the just and pious resolution of adhering with all their strength and assistance to the present parliament and army, in the glorious way wherein justice and victory hath set them – the only warrants through all ages, next under immediate revelation, to exercise supreme power.[10]

The success of the revolutionary cause, so Milton argues, is evidence of its rightness. Success on the stage of history does not have quite the same authority as 'immediate revelation'; but Milton can still mention history and revelation in the same breath, as if there were only a shade of difference between special revelation and political triumph as manifestations of the divine will. Indeed, as David Loewenstein has argued, Milton, especially in his civil war writings, seems to have understood his own literary production as a participation in God's providential designs. Milton's literary work imposes form on to the material of life in time, bringing history's providential patterns to the surface.[11] Yet Milton was also quick to denounce his adversaries for their seemingly arbitrary appeals to providence. In his polemical 1649 pamphlet, *Eikonoklastes*, Milton derides the late Charles I's tendency to interpret his own life as the centre of a providential pattern: 'He, who without warrant but his own fantastic surmise, takes upon him perpetually to unfold the secret and unsearchable mysteries of high providence, is likely for the most part to mistake and slander them.'[12] Yet some six years later the same Milton could acclaim the newly installed Members of Parliament as 'God's miraculous providence among us'.[13] Takashi Yoshinaka has wryly observed that both royalists and parliamentarians 'could confidently discern God's purpose

[7]See Alice A. Dailey, 'Typology and History in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*', *Prose Studies* 25/3 (2002), pp. 1–29.

[8]Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York: American Book Co., 1938), p. 82.

[9]See Takashi Yoshinaka, *Marvell's Ambivalence: Religion and the Politics of Imagination in Mid-Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2011).

[10]John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953–82), vol. 3, p. 194. This edition is hereafter cited as *CPW*. In my quotations of Milton's prose works, I have modernised spelling and typographic conventions.

[11]David Loewenstein, *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).

[12]Milton, *Eikonoklastes* (1649), in *CPW*, vol. 3, p. 564.

[13]Milton, *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* (1659), in *CPW*, vol. 7, p. 274.

when things went well whereas they tended to emphasize the inscrutability of providence when they went badly'[14] – or when they wanted to reply to the providential reasonings of their adversaries. Both sides assumed that their own providential reading of the times was divinely authorised while their opponents' providentialism was an arbitrary arrogation of knowledge that, after all, belongs only to God. What united these warring parties was, as Raymond Waddington notes, a 'vision of life as a continuous, if not always translatable, semiotic communication of God's will'.[15]

But Milton's confidence in a providential interpretation of history was shaken by the experience of defeat. After the restoration of the monarchy, the great poet and revolutionary began to speak in darker tones about the ambiguities of God's will in history. Even moments of direct divine intervention, he now saw, do not necessarily alter the course of history in any discernible way. In his later years, Milton remained profoundly invested in the doctrine of providence. He wrote *Paradise Lost* to 'assert eternal providence' (*PL* 1.25).[16] The great works of his later years return consistently to questions of the ultimate triumph of good over evil, truth over lies, the righteous few over the wicked multitude. But Milton now came to see the doctrine of providence less as an interpretation of world events and more as a practical doctrine that brings consolation and strength to believers in a fallen world.

In the pages that follow I trace the course of providential theology in Milton's poetry. I consider first the providential triumphalism of Milton's early *Nativity Ode* (written in 1629). Then I turn to the apocalyptic interpretation of world events in two poems, *Lycidas* and Sonnet 18, both written during the turbulent, revolutionary decades of the 1630s–1650s. Finally, I contrast these earlier works with the sadder, wiser, more ambiguous vision of history in the last two books of *Paradise Lost* (first published in 1667). Based on this reading of Milton's changing conception of history as the domain of God's activity, I conclude by offering some tentative answers to the theological question of what it means to believe in divine providence amid the uncertainties and perplexities of life in time.

Revelatory moments: The *Nativity Ode*

Milton's early poem, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, was written in 1629 in the poet's twenty-first year. It is the first great example of Milton's lifelong preoccupation with decisive moments in time – in this case, the moment of Christ's birth. As Emily Griffiths Jones notes, the poem 'dips us in historical time and then draws us upward out of it with the ecstatic promise that we are about to be granted our own vision of an event that transcends history'.[17] The singular moment in time will function as a revelation of God's eternal purposes. The poem's opening lines call attention to this heightened sense of presentness:

[14]Yoshinaka, *Marvell's Ambivalence*, p. 38.

[15]Raymond Waddington, *Looking into Providences: Designs and Trials in Paradise Lost* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 26.

[16]Quotations of Milton's poetry are from *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007). References to *Paradise Lost* are abbreviated as *PL*.

[17]Jones, *Right Romance*, p. 137.

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> This is the month, and this the happy morn
> Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
> Of wedded maid, and virgin mother born,
> Our great redemption from above did bring. (ll. 1–4)

The first line has a telescopic effect in focusing our attention on a single moment: this is the month that we've been waiting for, in fact the very day, in fact the very morning. By the last stanza, the Virgin mother will have 'laid her babe to rest' (l. 238). The action of the poem unfolds within this little sliver of time between Christ's birth and his falling asleep. The poem will try to show that all history turns on the hinge of this moment.

The *Nativity Ode* presents an 'allusive reconciliation of diverse points in time'.[18] It compresses time together so that moments far removed in history appear to be concurrent. The first line is already an example of this compression: 'This is the month, and this the happy morn'. Our attention is directed to the moment of Christ's birth, but that moment is said to be happening right now. Milton even claims to be composing in haste because he wants to beat the Magi to the scene:

> See how from far upon the eastern road
> The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet:
> O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
> And lay it lowly at his blessed feet. (ll. 22–5)

This Christmas hymn, written sixteen centuries after the birth of Christ, is going to be the first gift laid at the baby's feet. The poem invokes the reader's time as well by inviting the reader to 'see'. We are to 'see' the Magi on the road (l. 22) and then, in the poem's closing lines, to 'see' the infant falling asleep with his mother (l. 237). The time of reading, the time of composition and the time of Christ's nativity are all collapsed into one moment. Everything is happening now. Time past and time future have been absorbed into the *now* of Christ's birth.

The poem is, nevertheless, profoundly concerned with the past. From the first lines, Milton keeps situating the birth of Christ against earlier historical epochs. He invokes the history of Israel as a history of anticipation leading up to this moment. The poem's opening announcement that 'This is the Month, and this the happy morn' is presented as a fulfilment of ancient Israelite prophecy: 'For so the holy sages once did sing' (l. 5). The section of the poem on the departure of the pagan gods also situates the nativity against the backdrop of world history. In this long catalogue, various gods and cultures are brought into relation to the birth of Christ. At the moment of Christ's birth, the oracle of Delphi falls dumb. The religious culture of the Greeks has come to an end. The Roman gods likewise utter a dying moan. The gods of the Ammonites and Phoenicians and Egyptians all flee from their temples and do not heed the cries of their forsaken worshippers. These diverse deities all feel from afar the influence of 'The dreaded infant's hand' (l. 222) and depart, leaving their places of worship empty. Milton has covered wide swathes of world history in this account of the departing gods, seamlessly blending classical and biblical sources. As if to cover all his bases, he even includes the benign nature spirits known to various cultures, the nymphs with

[18]Frank S. Kastor, 'Miltonic Narration: "Christ's Nativity"', *Anglia: Journal of English Philology* 86 (1968), p. 348.

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garlands in their hair who now – perhaps regrettably – depart forever from their sacred springs and groves.

Milton's account draws on a familiar patristic tradition in which the coming of Christ is linked theologically to the decline of 'pagan' religious cults. Athanasius' fourth-century treatise *On the Incarnation* develops a providential argument for the power and superiority of Christ. Since the coming of Christ, Christianity has grown rapidly and spread throughout the known world, while Greco-Roman religious culture has declined: 'the gods and the demons of the faithless … fall dead at the advent of Christ'.[19] History, for Athanasius, is transparent to the designs of divine providence. Milton similarly links the birth of Christ to the triumph of Christianity as a religion and the concomitant eclipse of ancient religious traditions. The light of Bethlehem falls across the past and future of the human story. The *now* of Christ's nativity, charged with revelatory significance, discloses the direction of history.

Christians have always understood the incarnation of God in Christ to be a revelatory moment that illuminates the beginning and end of time. The Fourth Gospel links the incarnation to the creation of the world and portrays the incarnate Jesus as a revelation of the world's final judgment. The events described in that Gospel occur at a particular time and place but are said to elucidate the meaning of all times and places, from the beginning of history to its end. In a theological study of the concept of revelation, H. Richard Niebuhr compares moments of revelation to illuminating passages in a difficult book:

> Revelation means for us that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible. Sometimes when we read a difficult book, seeking to follow a complicated argument, we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole. Revelation is like that. … Revelation means [one] intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.[20]

The world's history, certainly, is a hard text to read. For Milton, the event of the incarnation functions like an intelligible sentence that illuminates the meaning of the whole difficult text of human history. In the *Nativity Ode*, Milton was preoccupied by the challenge of relating classical Greek and Roman history to the events of biblical revelation, and he solved the problem by portraying the incarnation as a decisive moment not only for the people of Israel but for the whole ancient world with its diverse myths and cults.

The *Nativity Ode* reaches back even beyond history to the mythical origins of the world. When the shepherds hear the angel's song, it calls up memories of the world's creation:

> Such music (as 'tis said)
> Before was never made,
> But when of old the sons of morning sung,
> While the Creator great
> His constellations set,

[19]Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), p. 117.

[20]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 50.

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And the well-balanced world on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the welt'ring waves their oozy channel keep. (ll. 117–24)

The moment of the nativity is charged with such revelatory significance that, in observing this moment, one seems to be peering into the depths of time and observing the divine order even in the very act of creating the world. Two stanzas later, the angels' song also anticipates the world's end:

For if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,
And speckled Vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And lep'rous Sin will melt from earthly mold,
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

Yea Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
The enamelled arras of the rainbow wearing,
And Mercy set between,
Throned in celestial sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering,
And Heav'n as at some festival
Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall. (ll. 133–48)[21]

This section of the poem is a powerful early instance of Milton's technique (on full display in *Paradise Lost*) of ranging expansively through time in order to encompass the whole drama of history at a single glance. At the moment of Christ's birth, the world's beginning and ending seem almost close enough to touch. The whole arc of history, including its ultimate destiny, becomes transparent in the revelatory moment.

Secular apocalypse: Sonnet 18 and *Lycidas*

There is nothing controversial for Christians about representing the incarnation as a revelatory moment. But in other works Milton applies the logic of revelatory moments to other historical events, including events that are not part of biblical history.

A convenient example is Milton's eighteenth sonnet, 'On the Late Massacre in Piedmont'. Like most of Milton's sonnets, the poem was written in response to a particular occasion. In April 1655, Protestants throughout Europe were profoundly shaken by the news that Catholic troops had brutally massacred thousands of Waldensian Christians in the Piedmont Valley in northern Italy. Cromwell proclaimed a public fast and threatened military intervention. Milton's sonnet preserves the shock and outrage that so many Protestants felt at the time, while also casting the massacre in the light of divine providence and biblical prophecy.

[21]Following the 1645 version, not the amended 1673 edition. For details, see the textual note in *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, p. 25.

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Avenge O Lord thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold,
Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old
When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones,
Forget not: in thy book record their groans
Who were thy sheep and in their ancient fold
Slain by the bloody Piemontese that rolled
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To Heav'n. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
O'er all th' Italian fields where still doth sway
The triple tyrant: that from these may grow
A hundredfold, who having learnt thy way
Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

The event of the massacre takes on gigantic theological significance in Milton's sonnet. It is already a striking move for Milton to use the sonnet form – conventionally associated with love poetry and the inner life – to comment on world affairs. As Ryan Netzley notes, in Milton's hands the sonnet becomes a political instrument for exploring 'what it means for an event to happen presently, immediately, and potentially'.[22] Like a lightning flash, the massacre illuminates the ancient past as well as the distant future. In the revelatory moment, the direction of history is laid bare. The ancient history of the British people flashes into view, back before the arrival of Christianity in the sixth century, 'when all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones'.[23] This recollection of Britain's pagan past is overlaid with intimations of the medieval church's lapse into superstition under the papacy, whose claim to antiquity is 'evoked and rejected' in contrast to 'the true antiquity' of the faith of the Waldensians.[24] In the same instant, the future course of history stretches out before the poet's eyes. If the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church, Milton sees a hundredfold crop of faithful Protestants springing from the seed of the fallen saints. And each stanza calls to mind the Book of Revelation with its visions of apocalyptic judgment. The opening words – 'Avenge O Lord' – are taken from Revelation 6:9–10:

> And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?[25]

[22]Ryan Netzley, *Lyric Apocalypse: Milton, Marvell, and the Nature of Events* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 72.

[23]Milton knew that the Waldensian movement arose in the twelfth century, but he alludes to a tradition according to which the Waldensian communities dated back to the fourth century, or even to the time of the apostles. Milton discusses this tradition in his 1649 prose work *Eikonoklastes* (*CPW,* vol. 3, p. 514): 'And if we may believe what the papists themselves have written of these churches, which they call Waldenses, I find it in a book written almost four hundred years since … that those churches in Piemont have held the same doctrine and government, since the time that Constantine with his mischievous donations poisoned Sylvester and the whole church. Others affirm they have so continued there since the apostles.'

[24]Kathryn Gail Brock, 'Milton's Sonnet XVIII and the Language of Controversy', *Milton Quarterly* 16/1 (1982), pp. 3–6.

[25]Biblical quotations are from the King James Version.

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The 'book' in which God recalls the sufferings of the Waldensians invokes the apocalyptic book, 'sealed with seven seals', in Revelation 5:1. And the Babylonian 'triple tyrant' of the last stanza – Milton's depiction of the Roman church – invokes Revelation 17–18 with its vision of Antichrist, the one who murders the saints and prophets (Rev 18:24) and is finally destroyed in the judgment to come. This tapestry of biblical references gives Milton's poem the quality of a miniature apocalypse – a vision that encompasses thousands of years, reaching from the ancient past to the last day when Antichrist is judged and the righteous are vindicated. This apocalyptic compression of time centres on the present. Today is the appointed time to 'fly the Babylonian woe'.

For Milton, the massacre of April 1655 functioned as a revelatory moment, a secular apocalypse that laid bare the direction of history. Milton's sonnet is intensely biblical, not because it concerns events recorded in the Bible but because it uses biblical imagery to uncover the providential meaning of a contemporary event.

Milton's works from the turbulent decades of the 1630s–1650s are filled with such moments of secular apocalypse. Milton's *Lycidas* was an elegy for the young poet Edward King who drowned off the coast of Wales in 1637. In this poem Milton interprets the young man's death as more than just a tragic moment in time. The death of Edward King becomes an apocalyptic moment that reveals God's providential purposes for history.[26] The opening line of *Lycidas* already evokes motifs of biblical apocalyptic:

> Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more
> Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
> I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
> And with forced fingers rude,
> Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year. (ll. 1–5)

The first line fuses classical Greek culture with biblical eschatology. The poet's laurel crown, sacred to Apollo, is addressed with the words of biblical prophecy from Hebrews 12:26–27 (quoting Haggai 2:6–7):

> Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

The focus here is on identifying the exact nature of the present moment. The poet's laurels are still ripening into maturity. But Milton has come to pluck the unripe berries and to tear the leaves apart. He is doing this 'before the mellowing year', before the time of ripeness sets in. Milton has the attitude of someone apologising to time, noting that he is compelled to interrupt the cycle of the seasons:

> Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
> Compels me to disturb your season due:
> For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
> Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer. (ll. 6–9)

[26]On the theme of time in *Lycidas*, Edward W. Tayler's illuminating study remains unsurpassed: '*Lycidas* in Christian Time', in his book *Milton's Poetry: Its Development in Time* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1979), pp. 45–59.

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It is the untimely death of Edward King – now given the classical name of Lycidas – that has so abruptly interrupted the flow of time. The whole poem concentrates on this untimely moment and what it portends for nature and for the future. The world itself has been changed by this event:

> But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,
> Now thou art gone, and never must return! (ll. 37–8)

The death of Lycidas becomes a revelatory window that opens on to the depths of time. Hence Milton's elegy has an unsettling tendency to blend imperceptibly into prophecy. The resurrection of the righteous on the last day is related in the past tense, as something already achieved – as if, in the present moment, the whole of time is already revealed as something we can now look back on:

> So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
> Through the dear might of him that walked the waves. (ll. 172–3)

In a celebrated passage, Milton's meditation on the drowned youth erupts into a prophetic denunciation of the corruptions of the English clergy under Archbishop Laud. Amid an abundance of characters and allusions from Greek and Roman literature, St Peter suddenly makes his imposing appearance in the poem. He holds the keys that bind and loose on earth and in heaven, and as a fisherman he moves commandingly upon the waters beneath which Lycidas lies drowned.

> Last came, and last did go,
> The Pilot of the Galilean lake;
> Two massy keys he bore of metals twain
> (The golden opes, the iron shuts amain).
> He shook his mitred locks, and stern bespake,
> 'How well could I have spared for thee young swain,
> Anow of such as for their bellies sake,
> Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold?
> Of other care they little reck'ning make,
> Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast,
> And shove away the worthy bidden guest.
> Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
> A sheep-hook, or have learned ought else the least
> That to the faithful herdman's art belongs!
> What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;
> And when they list, their lean and flashy songs
> Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw;
> The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
> But swoll'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
> Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread:
> Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
> Daily devours apace, and nothing said.
> But that two-handed engine at the door
> Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.' (ll. 108–31)

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Such an apocalyptic tirade against the Anglican clergy might seem out of place in an elegy about a young poet who died at sea. But the youth's untimely death has punctured time and exposed to view the whole sweep of history under God's providential direction. Like the massacre of the Waldensians, the death of Edward King has become for Milton a secular apocalypse. In each case Milton perceives a moment of crisis in time as a moment of divine revelation that lays bare the direction of history and the hidden workings of providence.

Pessimistic providentialism: *Paradise Lost*

If until the 1650s Milton had remained confident of his ability to discern God's work in history, things look very different in the great poems of Milton's riper years. By the time he composed his greatest poem, *Paradise Lost*, Milton's hopes for this world had all come to nothing. He had lived with a seemingly invincible sense of standing in the stream of history. But his perceptions of the direction of history and the designs of providence had turned out to be illusory. God had not continued the great work of the reform and spiritual purgation of the English people. In the prose work *Areopagitica*, addressed to parliament at the height of civil war in 1644, Milton had raised his voice and prophesied a spiritual awakening of the nation – a nation that had been uniquely elected to bring to completion what the Protestant reformers had begun a century before:

> Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam, purging and unscaling her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance.[27]

Milton had lived in that moment when it seemed that everything would change. But nothing changed, or not in the way he had hoped. The monarchy was restored; the bishops were brought back; the righteous few were silenced; divergent opinions were suppressed. The English people, as Milton saw it, preferred an easy servitude to a hard freedom.

When Milton turned his mind to the problem of history in *Paradise Lost*, he still believed in divine providence. But he was less trusting now of his own – or anyone's – ability to discern God's providential designs in the upheavals of history. Now, what Milton sees in history is, as Loewenstein puts it, mostly a matter of 'repetition and decline'.[28]

Paradise Lost ends with an apocalypse. After Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, have repented and have been regenerated, the angel Michael descends to earth and reveals to Adam the unfolding history of the world. The whole of time is encompassed in this account, from Cain and Abel to the Flood to the eventual coming of the Messiah, and the subsequent history of the church down to Milton's own day. As all this unfolds before him, Adam is quick to draw optimistic conclusions from what he sees and hears. Witnessing the cultured and sophisticated descendants of Cain, Adam

[27]Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644), in *CPW*, vol. 2, p. 558.
[28]Loewenstein, *Milton and the Drama of History*, p. 94.

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congratulates the angel on giving him 'hope' for humanity's future, which, he thinks, will be 'fulfilled' at last (*PL* 11.598–602). The angel corrects Adam, pointing out that he has misjudged the meaning of the vision:

> Judge not what is best
> By pleasure, though to nature seeming meet,
> Created, as thou art, to nobler end
> Holy and pure, conformity divine.
> Those tents thou saw'st so pleasant, were the tents
> Of wickedness, wherein shall dwell his race
> Who slew his brother; studious they appear
> Of arts that polish life, inventers rare,
> Unmindful of their Maker, though his spirit
> Taught them, but they his gifts acknowledged none. (*PL* 11.603–12)

Similarly, after seeing a vision of the great flood, Adam quickly supposes that this divine intervention in history will now set things moving in a better direction. But once more Adam's hope has 'deceived' him:

> I had hope
> When violence was ceased, and war on earth,
> All would have then gone well, peace would have crowned
> With length of happy days the race of man;
> But I was far deceived; for now I see
> Peace to corrupt no less then war to waste.
> How comes it thus? (*PL* 11.779–85)

When he sees Noah's salvation from the flood, Adam draws the hasty conclusion that a new world will now arise from that one righteous man, and all God's wrath will be forgotten (*PL* 11.870–8). But the angel shows Adam the history of Noah's offspring and their descendants, culminating in the Tower of Babel. Though God has intervened directly in history, destroying the world's evil and raising a new world from the waters of the flood, the course of history remains fundamentally unchanged:

> Thus will this latter, as the former world,
> Still tend from bad to worse, till God at last
> Wearied with their iniquities, withdraw
> His presence from among them, and avert
> His holy eyes, resolving from thenceforth
> To leave them to their own polluted ways. (*PL* 12.105–10)

Next the angel reveals to Adam the calling of Abraham, the growth of his offspring into a great people, their subjugation to the Egyptians and their exodus under the leadership of Moses. Adam learns of the giving of the Law and the establishment of true religion under Moses, and again he is quick to embrace a hasty consolation:

> now first I find
> Mine eyes true op'ning, and my heart much eased,

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> Erewhile perplexed with thoughts what would become
> Of me and all mankind; but now I see
> His day, in whom all nations shall be blest. (*PL* 12.273–7)

Once more the angel corrects Adam's interpretation of history. 'Doubt not but that sin / Will reign among them' (*PL* 12.285–6), Michael cautions. The Law and ceremonies given to the people of Israel will not dispel sin's power but will, on the contrary, amplify and expose it (*PL* 12.287–9).

After Adam hears of the coming of the Messiah and the great redemption he will bring, he is overjoyed. He rightly perceives the power of providence to bring so much good from evil, and for a moment he wonders whether it's a lucky thing after all that he plunged the human race into ruin through his disobedience so that 'much more good thereof shall spring' (*PL* 12.476). There is a grain of truth to Adam's providentialism but once more his conclusions are misguided. The angel goes on to tell him of the church's history. The glorious time of the apostles is followed almost immediately by 'grievous wolves, / Who all the sacred mysteries of Heav'n / To their own vile advantages shall turn / Of lucre and ambition, and the truth / With superstitions and traditions taint' (*PL* 12.508–12). While in the *Nativity Ode* Milton had followed the classic Christian account of the triumph of Christ over the pagan religions, in *Paradise Lost* even the Christian religion is represented as a history of falsehood and spiritual tyranny which does not alleviate humanity's burden of sin but rather increases it:

> Whence heavy persecution shall arise
> On all who in the worship persevere
> Of Spirit and Truth; the rest, far greater part,
> Well deem in outward rites and specious forms
> Religion satisfied; Truth shall retire
> Bestuck with sland'rous darts, and works of faith
> Rarely be found: so shall the world go on,
> To good malignant, to bad men benign,
> Under her own weight groaning till the day
> Appear of respiration to the just,
> And vengeance to the wicked. (*PL* 12.531–41)

To say that the world is 'benign' to the wicked but 'malignant' to the good is, for a seventeenth-century Puritan, an exceptionally pessimistic assessment of history – and this in a passage describing the history of the church! Across the whole history of the church, faith is 'rarely … found'. The wicked prosper and are many; the righteous are few and are put down. In *Areopagitica*, Milton had passionately proclaimed the triumph of truth in any social crisis:

> For who knows not that Truth is strong next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious, those are the shifts and the defences that error uses against her power. Give her but room and do not bind her when she sleeps…[29]

[29]Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644), in *CPW*, vol. 2, pp. 562–3.

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But now, in his later years, Milton's sad assessment of the church's history is that 'Truth shall retire / Bestuck with slanderous darts' (*PL* 12.535–6). One could scarcely imagine a starker contrast with the providential optimism of the civil war period. In the crookedness of history, truth does not come out on top – not until the end, anyway, at the last judgment. But that is not part of history. The last judgment is not, for Milton, a logic embedded within history but a divine act that finally puts an end to history with its insane and pointless repetitions. The Son of God will come at last, Milton writes,

> to dissolve
> Satan with his perverted world, then raise
> From the conflagrant mass, purged and refined,
> New heav'ns, new earth, ages of endless date
> Founded in righteousness and peace and love
> To bring forth fruits, joy and eternal bliss. (*PL* 12.546–51)

In the meantime, even moments of divine intervention, divine judgment and divine redemption do not fundamentally alter the course of history. History remains what it always is – 'Part good, part bad, of bad the longer scroll' (*PL* 12.336). The Adam of books 11 and 12 needs to learn how to 'read' history. And what he learns is that history consists mostly of futility and repetition. Moments of historical upheaval, moments in which a righteous visionary arises, even moments of divine revelation narrated in biblical history – these do not determine the direction of history. They do not render any less obtuse what George William Smith has called, in a different connection, the 'indirection of providence'.[30]

If in *Paradise Lost* history is essentially directionless, that is not to say it is hopeless. Milton's revolutionary optimism is gone. In its place is a providential pessimism, closer now to the eschatology of Augustine's *City of God*, where hope for humanity is deferred to the world to come. What history reveals in the meantime is mostly the futility of sin. Yet even such pessimism is still an expression of belief in providence. After all, Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* to 'assert eternal providence, / And justify the ways of God to men' (*PL* 1.25–6). In his later years, Milton has come to see history as a whole – bounded by the fall on one side and the last judgment on the other – as a hidden manifestation of divine providence. God's goodness is at work in history, but it does not form an observable pattern by which our own, or other, times could be interpreted. Only the last judgment will furnish the standpoint from which history will appear in its true light as one long theodicy from start to finish. And by then there will be no more need of theodicies, for 'God shall be all in all' (*PL* 3.341).

Conclusion: Can God's work in history be discerned?

God's work in history, for Milton, turns out to be darker and more ambiguous than he and his contemporaries had supposed during the heady days of the civil wars. Milton came to see that even moments of divine revelation have an unresolved element of ambiguity. The event of the incarnation, for example, reveals something of humanity's ultimate destiny, but it does not alter the course of historical events in a straightforwardly teleological way. In his youthful *Nativity Ode*, Milton had taken up the

[30]George William Smith, Jr., 'Milton's Method of Mistakes in the Nativity Ode', *Studies in English Literature* 18/1 (1978), p. 112.

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optimistic assumption from patristic literature that the incarnation precipitates a flourishing of true religion and a banishment of false gods. By the time he wrote *Paradise Lost*, he no longer saw such a stark division between the direction of history before and after Christ. Even Christianity, Milton now believed, is mostly a history of falsehood and 'superstitions' (*PL* 12.512). The incarnation changes what is possible for human beings. It changes their ultimate destiny. But it does not determine the direction of history or make it any easier to relate specific events to a larger providential pattern. History remains opaque even when, under the light of revelation, we perceive its central event and final destination.

Can our experience in time yield up knowledge of God's providential designs? The young Milton, like virtually all his English contemporaries, was quick to conclude that God's hand was revealed in the great upheavals of history. The older, sadder – and, I think, wiser – Milton was more circumspect. He had learned to distrust theological interpretations of world events. He had come to admit that history moves more in futile circles than in lines of development. What looks to human beings like progress might be the beginning of decline; what looks like decline might be a hidden means by which God is working to bring 'more good' from evil (*PL* 12.476).

Is there any benefit then to believing in providence? I think so. Not because the doctrine of providence tells us anything precise about events in time, or about where things are heading, or why things happen as they do; but because it is a practical doctrine that commends a disposition of basic trust as believers make their way through the uncertain paths of life. Believing in God's providence is, like all other Christian belief, based not on evidence or certainty but on trust in God's promise. Believers often have a sense – usually in hindsight – of the way God has providentially been at work in their lives. Such an awareness is very different from any claim to be able to discern God's work in history. To perceive God's work in my own life is a kind of devout hypothesis. It is not knowledge in the strict sense, but an expression of the hope that arises from trust in God's care.

Milton had spent a lifetime trying to discern the movements of providence in the great events of his day. In *Paradise Lost* he concluded with the reflection that belief in providence is not so much knowledge as a practice of life in which believers entrust themselves to God's care and take a stand for truth even when nothing, in this world, will come of it. After the angel has revealed to Adam the whole course of world history from Cain and Abel to the last judgment, Adam finally learns the right lesson from everything he has seen and heard:

> How soon hath thy prediction, seer blest,
> Measured this transient world, the race of time,
> Till time stand fixed: beyond is all abyss,
> Eternity, whose end no eye can reach.
> Greatly instructed I shall hence depart,
> Greatly in peace of thought, and have my fill
> Of knowledge, what this vessel can contain;
> Beyond which was my folly to aspire.
> Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,
> And love with fear the only God, to walk
> As in his presence, ever to observe
> His providence, and on him sole depend. (*PL* 12.553–64)

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To 'observe' providence here does not mean to see or understand it. It means to hold fast to it devoutly, in the same way that the people of Israel were commanded to 'observe' God's commandments.[31] Belief in providence does not unriddle the perplexities of life in time. It does not explain why things happen, or what they mean, or what God intends. But it reminds us of God's presence and God's care, and assures us that history – the world's history, and our own – is close to God at every moment.

[31]'Observing' God's commandments is a constant refrain in Deuteronomy (e.g. 5:32; 6:3; 8:1; 11:32; 12:1; 15:5; 31:12).

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