

# MILTON, MARVELL AND "THE STRUGGLE"

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## I

The genesis of the brief and tentative exploration that I wish to conduct was a remark made to me, a year or so ago, by a friend of mine who is a poet (a very good poet, I may add). 'Some people have suggested to me', he said in rather shocked tones, 'that maybe in the present situation of crisis I should give up writing poetry'. He was dismayed, as well he might be, by the suggestion that the flow of history, the pressure of political necessities, could - like one stream countermarching another - block up the onrush of an individual's creative energy. How could it? And why should it? For after all human and social life and its vicissitudes are, or can be, the very stuff of poetry. A similar point is made, in the last critical article that he published, by the late Richard Rive: Commenting on Lewis Nkosi having wondered in 1965, 'whether it might not be prudent to renounce literature temporarily... and solve the political problem first', Rive says, 'There is no place whatsoever for reckless pronouncements such as that' (*Staffrider*, 1989:48-54).

But the thought struck me: Milton gave up, or almost gave up, writing poetry for about eighteen years. At a time of dramatic social upheaval, he allowed political, religious and civil urgencies to make him postpone the writing of the epic poem that he had long contemplated. And Milton (I need hardly say) is no mean poet - no mere political fanatic or maverick songster.

So I thought it might prove interesting to try investigating Milton's case with the current South African situation in mind. But before long I realised that if one were to consider Milton, it would only be fair to consider Marvell too; for Marvell became a friend and colleague of Milton's and shared his political and religious commitment, but he was in several respects a very different kind of person. Moreover he wrote his best poems during the period of Milton's poetic silence.

## II

Looking at England in the mid-seventeenth century from the standpoint of contemporary South Africa is a fascinating exercise. But one is immediately aware not only of the potential fruitfulness but also of the awkwardness of the juxtaposition. Certainly the crisis of the civil wars, the execution of Charles I and the institution of a republic or commonwealth represented an alteration in the structure of society which produced profound and permanent results in every sphere of human life. And it is just such a structural change that South Africa is now slowly, painfully and rather confusedly, moving into. But the points of conflict in English society in the 1640s, though they were obviously in many ways similar to what we find in the South Africa of the 1980s, were nevertheless also significantly different. As in our situation, socio-political antagonisms were

accompanied by and in many respects caused by economic, religious and cultural conflicts of interest; and in both crises an inexorable and humane historical movement is discernible. But - to put it simply - the English royalist cause was a more reasonable and plausible one than that of white South African nationalists and conservatives. The movement of history seems in that situation to have been rather less apparent to many thinking people than it tends to be with us in *our* situation; and in certain respects - in its attitude (for example) to the monarchy, to ceremony and celebration, to the theatres - the royalist point-of-view can be said to have been at least as cogent as the puritan or parliamentary one. And of course it is important to remember that after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 the country moved towards political and social arrangements which might be said to have suggested that the great impassioned mid-century contest had ended in a sort of draw.

There is no possibility of a draw in South Africa. The movement of history, the claims of justice and humanity, the force of popular resistance, the weight of demographic realities, the pressure of world opinion, add up to an inevitability of a kind that can hardly have been conceivable in seventeenth-century Europe. To say this is not to say, of course, that the construction of a new, transformed South African society won't be a uniquely complex and difficult task, far more difficult, perhaps, than the task which faced the English after 1660. But the need for change in South Africa is so pressing that it is even acknowledged (though in a largely verbal and manipulative way) by those who most notably need to change and to be changed, in fact to be replaced; and the present political structure of the country is so ignoble, shoddy and humanly wasteful that it is unthinkable that any magnanimous opponent of the current system could speak of it in the tones of tragic respect and recognition that we find in Marvell when he says in his "Horatian Ode" that Cromwell

Could by industrious valour climb  
To ruin the great work of time,  
And cast the Kingdom old  
Into another mould. (33-36)

One of the crucial aspects of this difference between the English crisis of the 1640s and 50s and the South African crisis of the 1980s and 90s is that, whereas in the mid-seventeenth century many poets, indeed most poets of any stature, were on the royalist side (either actively or fairly passively), in South Africa, no serious poet - as far as I know - speaks for and celebrates the status quo. Of course some will argue that a poet who doesn't specifically address socio-political issues is supporting the status quo, either implicitly or by default, but that is a rather different question. Intellectually and imaginatively the ruling powers in South Africa are bankrupt. But in the England of Charles and Cromwell, as I say, things were different: Vaughan, Lovelace, Herrick, King, Cowley, Davenant, Fanshawe were all royalists and almost all of them were involved in, or affected by, the political crisis in one way or another. Indeed Milton and Marvell, as committed puritans, were distinctly the exception among the poets. Yet I feel justified in focussing my paper on them, not only because they are poets of quite unusual power, but also because, by being on the side of far-reaching social transformation, they provide models which contemporary South

African poets and critics must surely at the very least acknowledge to be challenging and thought-provoking.

### III

In the last sixty years or so, since Marvell's poetic reputation first rose so high, it has become customary to call his *Horatian Ode* the finest political poem in the English language. It is indeed a very remarkable poem. And yet this evaluation of it perhaps tells us something about most literary critics: as scholarly humanist intellectuals, often disdainful of the vulgarity of politics, they feel at home with what they take to be Marvell's careful even-handedness. But if such critics are prepared to praise robust passionateness in other spheres of poetic response, why should they undervalue it in socio-political discourse? Would it not be reasonable to recognise that parts of Milton's *Lycidas*, say, are equally fine as political poetry (though they have of course a distinctly religious flavour)? In fact don't the following lines resonate powerfully for us in our southern world of financial corruption and callous political bullying?

Of other care they little reckoning 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 aught 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 scarnel pipes of wretched straw... (116-124)

For all his sophistication and learning, Milton was an enthusiast, a committed person, indeed an activist. In late 1638, a year after the composition of *Lycidas*, when he was in southern Italy and about to embark for Sicily and Greece, he heard that the Scots had rebelled against Charles I, and he decided to head for England, thinking it (as he later said) 'base to be travelling for amusement abroad while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home' (Milton, 1958:343). When he had returned to England he made a further decision:

I saw that a way was opening for the establishment of real liberty; that the foundation was laying for the deliverance of man from the yoke of slavery and superstition; that the principles of religion, which were the first objects of our care, would exert a salutary influence on the manners and constitution of the republic; and as I had from my youth studied the distinctions between religious and civil rights, I perceived that if I ever wished to be of use, I ought at least not to be wanting to my country, to the church, and to so many of my fellow-Christians in a crisis of so much danger. I therefore determined to relinquish the other pursuits in which I was engaged, and to transfer the whole force of my talents and my industry to this one important object (Milton, 1959:344-45).

In the next years he plunged into pamphleteering on a number of issues: the episcopacy, divorce, education, the freedom of the press and then, after the execution of Charles I, the correctness of deposing and punishing tyrants. In

March 1649, two months after the execution, he became Latin Secretary to the newly formed Council of State: this meant that, as a person brilliantly skilled in the lingua franca of Europe, he became the official apologist for the daring new republic. His powerful texts astounded and angered many people in Europe; his *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano*, published in 1651, was publicly burned in Paris and Toulouse. At about the same time, having laboured earnestly and urgently for years, he became totally blind. His enemies saw this as God's punishment for his blasphemously anti-royalist views; he himself came to see it as God's chastening way of preparing him for the task of becoming the English Homer.

During these activist years, he wrote a handful of sonnets. Most of them tell of his reactions to personal and public events, often warning of new dangers and corruptions. Several of the sonnets offer a superb foretaste of the titanic exploratory and expository methods and style that were to burst forth later in *Paradise Lost*.

From the early 1640s to the mid-1650s, Milton experienced many moments of expectation and of disillusion. He believed in the revolution passionately, but he was dismayed by the ways in which its supporters tended often to betray themselves and others into new forms of mental captivity. (In certain respects, indeed, Milton's responses to the experience of revolution are similar to the reactions to the French Revolution recorded in Wordsworth's *Prelude*.) But at the same time he felt the opponents of the republic to be benighted and evil. Certainly by 1657 or 8, when he began to write *Paradise Lost*, he must have been aware that the hope of a socio-political and religious millennium to be brought about in his lifetime by God's grace and by human activity was an empty one. The imaginative energy channelled into *Paradise Lost* was clearly largely generated during the period of Milton's activism, but the epic poem, though it bristles with political implications and messages, is at the same time an attempt to transcend the political realm, to locate the great battle for freedom and for obedience, for truth and for integrity, mainly in the psychological and spiritual order.

Does this mean that in the end Milton abandoned or despaired of politics? In one sense, of course he did; he had to. At the Restoration he was lucky not to be executed. There was clearly no political task for him to perform in the London of Charles II. But in a larger sense *Paradise Lost* and the two works that followed it represent not a negation of politics but the integration of politics into a larger human, social and theological scheme. In the end, for Milton, politics is set free: it is able to be seen in a right relation to all other human and divine realities. And "the struggle" -- the political and religious struggle, the struggle for human freedom -- becomes the unending, wearying, rich, subtle struggle of everyday human striving. We are told at the end of the poem of Adam and Eve:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;

The world was all before them, where to choose

Their place of rest, and Providence their guide...(XII 645-7)

It could be argued, I think, that all political writing, or at least all political writing that argues and criticises, aims finally to transcend politics, to point towards and to prepare for a situation in which political arrangements do not

impede but serve to facilitate, the full development of human and social possibilities.

#### IV

So much, for the time being, for Milton. What of Marvell?

He seems in every respect to have been a more equivocal character than Milton. One is tempted to call him more complex - until one remembers that Milton's passionate poetic engagement with his chosen subjects is structured in sophisticated ways and achieves profoundly subtle effects. In Marvell, complex and subtle effects seem often to be produced not by head-on engagement but by a tactic of detachment; as a follower of Donne's line of metaphysical wit, Marvell in many of his richest poems makes us aware of the poet or speaker as a person who observes, who muses, who half-attempts but half-refuses, to evaluate.

Marvell was thirteen years younger than Milton. In his years at Cambridge he seems to have had various political and religious attachments. He was on the Continent for the period of the Civil War. It may have been only in the late 1640s that he finally committed himself to the parliamentary and Cromwellian cause. But then, while also writing poems on a variety of pastoral, love, philosophical and religious themes, he became a sort of unofficial laureate for Cromwell; he wrote several poems about him and about his rule, and he even composed two songs for the wedding of his daughter Mary. In 1657 he was officially appointed assistant secretary to the blind Milton. For all his Cromwellian allegiances, however, he was given a fairly easy passage at the Restoration: he had had, after all, nothing to do with the execution of the king and only one of his eulogistic poems had been published and that anonymously. From just before the Restoration until his death in 1678, Marvell was the Member of Parliament for Hull. In this capacity he was steadily puritan in his thinking and therefore critical of the government though in a canny way. He was also the author of many satires.

Marvell's mode of commitment then was not such as to induce him to abandon the practice of poetry, as Milton had done. And yet in the opening lines of his *Horatian Ode* he envisages precisely such a course of action:

The forward youth that would appear  
 Must now forsake his Muses dear,  
 Nor in the shadows sing  
 His numbers languishing.  
 'Tis time to leave the books in dust,  
 And oil the unused armour's rust,  
 Removing from the wall  
 The corslet of the hall. (1-8)

The tone and the style are distinctly different from Milton's, however. Marvell is not quite expressing a personal commitment, he is setting the scene and, though the scene is a very serious one, there is a faint flicker of ironical humour in the evocation of the changes in lifestyle brought about by a civil war.

Perhaps the major difference between Milton and Marvell - and it is a difference visible principally in their poetic styles - is that while Milton, within his faith in God, sees human imaginative and physical action as a prime agent of moral and social transformation, Marvell finds himself to be the witness, the sympathetic

observer, of supernatural and natural forces which are distinctly less dependent on the individual's participation. The individual, the poet, still has an important role to perform, but it is as commentator, as teacher, as careful analyst. With Milton on the other hand the poet is constantly trying, though in humility, to speak from (as it were) the molten centre of the transformative process.

Marvell, then, though deeply committed to the puritan and Cromwellian cause, does not seem to have been caught up in it in quite the same way as Milton was. The Restoration in 1660 was for Milton a tragic and traumatic disaster; for Marvell it may well have been an intensely unhappy occasion, to be negotiated with characteristic finesse. Marvell went on to become the witty, influential but always cautious M.P. for Hull; Milton transposed some of the underlying themes of the English revolution into the greatest long poem in the English language.

Marvell's sense that significant historical change may come about through people and through events which have a fierce providential inevitability is expressed clearly in his comment in the *Horatian Ode* on the Cromwell phenomenon:

'Tis madness to resist or blame  
The force of angry Heaven's flame. (25-6)

In fact Marvell is able to portray Charles admiringly and sympathetically because the king is clearly a victim and accepts his role graciously:

He nothing common did or mean  
Upon that memorable scene,  
But with his keener eye  
The axe's edge did try;  
Nor called the Gods, with vulgar spite,  
To vindicate his helpless right;  
But bowed his comely head  
Down, as upon a bed. (57-64)

It is perhaps because he felt that historical forces, though they involved him, were at the same time fairly independent of him, that Marvell was able to write poems on a fairly wide variety of themes. *To his Coy Mistress*, *A Definition of Love*, *The Garden*, *Upon Appleton House*, *The Picture of little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers*, the dialogue poems, the mower poems, the religious poems, represent an oeuvre of astonishing beauty and subtlety. Marvell's example shows clearly that a concern with a socio-political crisis is not necessarily incompatible with poetic versatility. (It is only fair to add that Milton's sonnets, and indeed *Paradise Lost* itself, do also offer considerable variations of theme.) But even in his pastoral or love poems Marvell sometimes reveals a background awareness of strife and warfare. In *To his Coy Mistress*, for example, Time has a frightening winged chariot (22), and the poet thinks of the two lovers as becoming a cannon-ball which will 'tear [their] pleasures with rough strife Through the iron gates of life' (43-44). And the gardens that he writes of so often are a refuge not only from the "incessant labours" of his fellow human beings but also from war:

Unhappy! shall we never more  
That sweet militia restore,  
When gardens only had their towers,  
And all the garrisons were flowers,

When roses only arms did bear,  
 And men did rosy garlands wear?  
 (*Upon Appleton House*, stanza 42)

Marvell's most remarkable statement of a paradoxical detachment from the cause in which he believed appears in his prose work, *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*, published in 1672. He says:

I think the Cause was too good to have been fought for. Men ought to have trusted God... For men may spare their pains when Nature is at work, and the world will not go the faster for our driving (Marvell, 1971:135).

Now one has to approach that pronouncement with some circumspection, as it was written at a time when a puritan could not play his cards openly. But Marvell's view is a coherent one: he is stating again, perhaps overstating, his sense that the great rhythms of social progression are so powerful as to render human interventions almost irrelevant. In some respects Marvell's attitude seems a little like that of Karl Kautsky, the Marxian theorist who believed that revolution would come inevitably and that Lenin was wrong to have induced it by artificial means.

## V

How is one to relate or apply the history that I have sketched to the present South African situation? In what ways precisely is the story of the mid-seventeenth century, the story of Milton and Marvell, relevant to our immediate political, cultural and poetic concerns?

Well, of course one slice of history is never applicable or appropriate to another in any simple manner: the circumstances and the pressures are always different in innumerable obvious or subtle ways. And indeed, though (as I said earlier) I have tried to keep the current South African situation in mind, I have also tried to offer something of the complexity of the contrast between Milton and Marvell without pushing towards carefully prearranged conclusions.

I must say too that, in my view, particularly in the matter of poetic creativity, the degree to which one person's, or one epoch's, story or experience can validly influence or be relevant to another's is distinctly limited. I have grave doubts about over-confident theories - wherever they emanate from - about how at a particular time and place the creative imagination ought to be expressing itself.

Having established then, I hope, an atmosphere of sober tentativeness, I should like to rephrase the question I posed a few moments ago: what modest hints or pointers might contemporary South African poets or critics extract from a brief study of mid-seventeenth century England?

Immediately we come across another problem. There is little that is totally objective about historical pointers or parallels. Whether we realise it or not, we are apt to take from history the lessons that we are predisposed to discover. A classic recent instance of this, in political conversation among white South Africans, is the example of Zimbabwe: people on the left side of the spectrum point conclusively to the pretty successful and peaceful transformation of Zimbabwe, while people on the right clinch their arguments with a baleful reference to 'what happened in Rhodesia'. (I need hardly add that my sym-

pathies are with the former interpretation.)

And so a person who dislikes poetry on political subjects might find in the Milton story strong support for his or her aversion. After all, such a person might argue, Milton was sensible enough to realise that poetry and pamphleteering are quite separate activities. While he was politically active, he stuck on the whole to prose; when he moved back to more worthy topics, he became a poet again. It's an interesting argument, and it is certainly a valid one as far as the distinction between poetry and pamphleteering, or mere pamphleteering, is concerned, though one has to add that some of Milton's 'pamphlets' are monuments of English prose. But in its main thrust the argument seems to me misguided. Milton himself wrote political poetry, in *Lycidas*, in some of his sonnets, in some sections of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*; but even if he had not done so, and Marvell had not done so, the example of more recent poets - from Dryden, Pope, Blake and Wordsworth to Auden, Brecht and Neruda (to say nothing of writers from Africa) - would strongly suggest that the non-viability of political poetry is not a very sensible notion to draw from the study of Milton.

What, then, would I offer as reasonable tentative pointers?

To me the most fascinating and challenging aspects of the story of Milton and Marvell are the degree to which they were both committed to the puritan and revolutionary cause and engaged at or near the centre of political action, and at the same time the ways in which, though they were friends who admired each other, both their modes of commitment and their poetic styles and productions differed so markedly. And they were, we must remember, in the view of most twentieth-century critics the two finest poets of the period that I have been discussing. Moreover it was the poet who was most fully committed to political activism, Milton, who in the end produced the more massive and profound poetic performance though, in saying that, I don't wish to underplay the degree to which English poetry would be impoverished if it lacked the powerfully acute and delicately nuanced poems of Marvell.

What am I suggesting? Am I drawing the conclusion, however tentatively, that all poets ought to be politically involved, and that the more involved they are the better? What about Shakespeare, or Keats, or Hopkins, or a hundred others?

No, I am not prescribing anything nor am I hinting that political commitment is a necessary attribute of successful poetry, though I do believe incidentally that most important poets have been rather more concerned about political matters than our seemingly neutral literary critical tradition has allowed. What I find significant is that Milton and Marvell both responded vigorously, as imaginative and intelligent people, to the great and shattering social crisis of their time. They lived, after all, at a moment of almost unique socio-political upheaval. So, it could be argued, do we, here in South Africa.

Again, what am I suggesting? I am proposing that we might valuably consider the possibility that - though, as I have said, creative writers must make their own decisions and cannot be prescribed to - a peculiarly fruitful array of poetic materials, of urgent human and social themes and experiences, may be found to lurk within the very texture of the current socio-political situation. (In saying this, I don't wish to suggest that Milton and Marvell took up a cause primarily because of its poetic potentiality, or that any contemporary writer should do so:



commitment is above all a moral matter.) It may turn out to be true, also, that, as in the 1650s, those who are close to the centre of the action have special advantages. But who, it may be asked, is close to the centre of political action in present-day South Africa? As I've suggested earlier, there don't seem to be many poets stalking the dark corridors of the Union Buildings. But in the last few years, of course, the ANC has moved from the periphery of the South African political scene, from the wings, right towards the centre of the stage. Recently I was a member of the delegation from UDUSA, the new progressive South African university staff association, which visited Lusaka. Two of the people we met there were Wally Serote and Jeremy Cronin, both of them significant South African poets. They are, it seems to me, very interestingly placed. (Serote, by the way, is at present going through a fallow period a little like Milton's: he is too busy in political and cultural affairs to be able to write. I asked him if he didn't feel like tossing off the contemporary African equivalent of a few sonnets...)

This is all very well in theory, some people might say, but what about the question of poetic *quality*? Isn't it perhaps an absurdity or an impertinence even to think of the literature of the contemporary South African social crisis as being in any way comparable, either actually or potentially, with the majestic literature of the seventeenth century? Isn't the South African revolution or transformation partly an ill-educated or illiterate one? Aren't any budding local Miltons likely to be, because of the Bantu Education system, of the 'mute inglorious' kind spoken of by Gray in his *Elegy*?

These questions take me up to and probably beyond the borders of my topic, so I shall not attempt to answer them fully. I offer instead a few propositions.

The illiteracy rate in present-day South Africa is not likely to be any greater than it was in seventeenth-century England. The question of education is a complex one. Certainly Milton and Marvell, both Cambridge graduates, were extremely well-read; in fact Milton was perhaps the most learned of all English poets. But education isn't everything, and in any case education may come (as the lives of many writers illustrate) in many different forms. I don't believe that there is any reason for assuming that contemporary South African literature is not in many respects comparable, in its achievements and its potentiality, with the literature of England in the mid-seventeenth century.

I think a considerable amount of fine South African poetry has been written in recent years. The best pieces by Brutus, Clouts, Livingstone, Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla, Mann, van Wyk, Gwala, Cronin deserve to stand in the presence of anything written in the English language. 'But the craft', a voice utters, 'some of these people haven't mastered the craft of verse'. To which I would answer: all effective poetry needs to be crafted, to be written precisely, evocatively and with rhythmic subtlety and animation but there is no such thing as 'the craft of verse'. There are many 'crafts'. Consider, for example, the differences between Tennyson and Whitman, who were contemporaries, or between Yeats and Lawrence. People who harp excessively on the craft of verse seem usually to be advertising their own preferred brand.

And the ways in which poetry constantly seeks new modes of expression brings me back to Milton and Marvell. They were, we can now say, traditional poets,

poets within a tradition that has become remarkably potent; but at the time their subject matter and their styles were in many respects totally new.

**Note**

1. This is a slightly modified form of a paper that was delivered at the annual conference of the Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa, held at the University of Pretoria in July, 1989.

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