

JOHN MILTON, POET AND REVOLUTIONARY

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I.

The English patriot, poet, and revolutionary, John Milton, was born on the 9th December, 1608, eight years before the death of Shakespeare, who had still to write several of his greatest plays. Milton died in 1674; thus, he lived through the period of the great English bourgeois revolution, in which — as we shall see — he played an outstanding part; he survived its betrayal — the restoration of the monarchy — which came in 1660.

He was one of the mightiest figures of his age, indeed of any age, of English history. Had he been no more than a poet and a writer of great prose in the finest period of the English language — doing, of course, much to constitute it the finest period — he would be a mighty figure, for he wrote the English language more strongly, more beautifully, and more sensitively than perhaps anyone else. But he was of far more importance as a conscious, bold, and thoughtful revolutionary, as the iconoclast of the conception of monarchy and of many other reactionary conceptions at a time when they were almost universally accepted, as a prophet, advocate, and active worker for the revolution in its difficult beginnings, in its vigorous life in the Commonwealth, and in the sad days of its betrayal. It is in that capacity, at any rate primarily, that Englishmen — and all men — should recognise, understand, and venerate him, particularly since it is just that side of his life and work that English bourgeois critics have sought to conceal.

II.

He was not just an Englishman; he was an international figure. By virtue both of his direct appeals to scholars and statesmen throughout Europe in defence of the English revolution, and also of the profound influence which his writings in prose and verse have had on popular movements ever since he wrote them, he belongs to the progressive heritage of all mankind. We English are proud to share him with the whole world.

It would be difficult to glean from the writings of most modern English and American commentators anything of the revolutionary importance of Milton. They do what they can to belittle that side of his greatness, and to keep him far from the common people for whose sake he wrote and worked. The English

bourgeois critics cannot, so to speak, accept their own hero; they dare not let the light of the great exponent of genuine democratic liberty shine on their so-called "free world". They concentrate their praise on his style, in order the better to ignore the substance. They even sneer at him as foreign in his influence. And they damn him — one of the greatest and most vivid pamphleteers in history — as a writer of dull pamphlets, lest the young should read his challenging advocacy of revolution. They call him an unpractical dreamer. They slander him as a coward who — they falsely say — submitted to the counter-revolution, or at least "had second thoughts" about it. And, finally, they label his ideas as out of date, and assert that the controversies in which he played his part have no meaning or lesson for us to-day!

But it is they who are out of touch, both with Milton and with the spirit of our age. Unlike the progressive forces who can see how fully applicable to the struggles of our day are the bases of his ideas and arguments, they have no revolutionary outlook in common with him. Thus, the classic exponent of the English bourgeois revolution belongs to us, not to them.

They can misrepresent Milton, but they cannot destroy his work; at best they can conceal it for a while, and from a few. We, to-day, can see it and understand it for ourselves, and follow the part he played in it for so long.

III.

He was 31 years old in 1640, when the revolutionary struggle really began to get rid of feudalism, of the absolute power of the king, and of the power of the State church, and to carry into being the world's first bourgeois revolution. He was 40 in 1649, when the commonwealth was set up, and 52 in 1660, when the revolution was betrayed and the monarchy restored. For the 14 years that remained to him, after he had devoted twenty years of the prime of his life to active and prominent work in bringing about the revolution, explaining and defending it, and in the administration of the Commonwealth, he lived in poverty, in some danger, and in total blindness; but in that period he wrote his two great epic poems, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, besides other splendid writings.

IV.

Let us give a little consideration to the atmosphere in which he lived. The seventeenth century was a period of stormy revolution in much of Europe. In various countries, a new class was rising, conscious of its power, and waging war on every front against the feudal fetters which the decaying ruling class blindly sought to maintain upon it. It was mainly, although not only, in his own country that Milton played a great part in making that rising class fully conscious of itself and of its aims. When the English Commons gained

ascendancy in Parliament and began their long struggle against the absolutist powers of the monarchy in the person of Charles I, the eyes of all Europe were turned on England, and every ear was attuned for news of its happenings. For these — as well as for his own people — the young Puritan scholar and writer, John Milton, who had already many associations with Continental scholars, was soon to be the spokesman; he used Latin, the then universal language for the exchanges of thought in Europe; he was thus able to write directly to them, and he commanded their respect.

And the revolution of which he wrote was indeed an event of importance for them. As Marx tells us, it came as a thunderclap. In 1846, in a letter to P. V. Annenkov, he wrote:

“The institution and privileges of guilds and corporations, the regulatory regime of the Middle Ages, were social relations corresponding only to the acquired productive forces and to the social conditions which had previously existed, and from which these institutions had arisen. Under the protection of this regime of corporations and regulations, capital was accumulated, overseas trade was developed, colonies were founded. But the fruits of this would themselves have been forfeited if men had tried to retain the forms under whose shelter these fruits had ripened. Hence came two thunderclaps — the revolutions of 1640 and 1688. All the old economic forces, the social relations corresponding to them, the political conditions which were the official expression of the old civil society, were destroyed in England.”

Marx wrote further in “The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution”:

“The revolutions of 1648 and 1789 were not English and French revolutions, they were revolutions of European significance.... In them the bourgeoisie was victorious; but the victory of the bourgeoisie meant at that time the victory of a new social order, the victory of bourgeois over feudal property, of nationality over provincialism, of free trade over the guilds, of subdivision of property over primogeniture, of landownership over the subordination of the owner by means of the land, of enlightenment over superstition, of the family over the family title, of industry over heroic idleness, of bourgeois right over mediaeval privileges... The revolution of 1648 was the revolution of the 17th century against the 16th.”

It is as interesting for us, almost, as it must have been for those who lived through it, to see how the rising bourgeoisie was forced, for the achievement of its aims, to establish a new and revolutionary army, to make a revolutionary bid to seize state power, and, when it had succeeded in this, to establish its own dictatorship, the first of modern times. All this led to six years of civil war, to the abolition of the monarchy, and to the trial and execution of the king, a step the boldness of which was more remarkable in the seventeenth century than it would have been in later times. It led, too, to the transformation of Parliament by the abolition of the Second Chamber (the House of Lords), and — in short — to the setting up of an advanced bourgeois state, the republican Commonwealth. The measures taken included the abolition of re-

strictive trade monopolies, and the further expropriation of church lands, which already a century earlier, in the struggle between the English crown and the Papacy, had been partly broken up and vested in new owners. Thus were the last barriers to the development of capitalist agriculture removed.

V.

In this tremendous event in the lives of the four or five million people who then inhabited England, a country whose economies and class relations were somewhat different from those of the Mainland, there were influences and cross-currents which the modern student will not always find it easy to follow. Marx helps us to understand some of them:

"In 1648 the bourgeoisie was allied with the new nobility against the monarchy, against nobility, and against the established church. In 1789 the bourgeoisie was allied with the people against the monarchy, nobility, and established church."

And again:

"Charles I of England also appealed from his Estates to his people. He called his people to arms against Parliament. But the people declared themselves against the King, ejected from Parliament all the members who did not represent the people, and finally allowed the Parliament — thus rendered really representative of the people — to decapitate the King. So ended Charles I's appeal to his people."

And Engels, in his "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific", has pointed out how the bourgeoisie, which by its very nature would tend to compromise when the élan of the revolution had inspired the popular forces, was in fact driven forward against its own will:

"Had it not been for the yeomanry and the plebeian element in the towns, the bourgeoisie would never have fought the matter out to the bitter end, and would never have brought Charles I to the scaffold. In order to secure even those conquests of the bourgeoisie that were ripe for gathering at the time, the revolution had to be carried considerably further."

VI.

We should know, too, how the developments of this English revolution were related to the earlier and more general European development of the Reformation. In England that development had in reality stopped short with the breach between the English Crown and the Papacy; it had been concentrated in the struggle between those two powers for the right to appoint the great dignitaries of the Church, the bishops — to uphold or deny the Apostolic Succession. The king's victory in this, as the revolution saw it, had done little more than to transfer powers from the Pope of Rome to an "English Papacy" under the King. These king-appointed bishops corresponded in no way to what the Church re-

formers had sought — liberty of conscience and of religious thought, and self-government of the church. Church congregations were as strictly dominated as ever by bishops, appointed by the Crown at its own will instead of by the Pope; they were the King's political servants.

The prominent role of religion in all these events and struggles must be understood. Whilst much of the atmosphere and problems of John Milton's time are comprehensible enough for the modern Marxist student, the religious position is not so familiar. The seventeenth century was in truth a profoundly religious one; and it is quite consistent that we should find Milton an earnest Christian. He was confident that England could carry through her revolution and build herself a new and freer life under the Protestant faith, if only the land-owning and political powers of the Established Church, and above all of the bishops (who were not merely appointed by the King, but also formed an important and direct support in the House of Lords for all his policies), were brought to an end. That he was right in view, in his attitudes to the Established (Protestant) Church, and in his hostility to the Roman Catholic Church, is clear. As Engels wrote:

"The great international centre of feudalism was the Roman Catholic Church. It united the whole of feudalised Western Europe, in spite of all internal wars, into one great political system...

Now, up to then, science had been but the humble handmaid of the Church, had not been allowed to overstep the limits set by faith, and for that reason had been no science at all. Science rebelled against the Church; the bourgeoisie could not do without science, and therefore had to join in the rebellion...

The class most directly interested in the struggle against the pretensions of the Roman Church was the bourgeoisie; every struggle against feudalism at that time had to take on a religious disguise, had to be directed against the church in the first instance. But if the universities and the traders of the cities started the cry, it was sure to find, and did find, a strong echo in the masses of the country people, the peasants, who everywhere had to struggle for their very existence with their feudal lords, spiritual and temporal...

Calvin's church constitution was thoroughly democratic and republican; and when the kingdom of God was republicanised, could the kingdoms of this world remain subject to monarchs, bishops, and lords? While German Lutheranism became a willing tool in the hands of the princes, Calvinism founded a republic in Holland, and active republican parties in England and above all in Scotland.

In Calvinism the second great bourgeois upheaval found its doctrine ready cut and dried. This upheaval took place in England...

Calvinism justified itself as the true religious disguise of the interests of the bourgeoisie at that time, and on this account did not reach full acceptance, as the revolution was completed in 1689 by a compromise between one part of the nobility and the bourgeoisie. The English state church was re-established; but not in its earlier form of a Catholicism which had the king for its pope, being instead calvinised."

VII.

Now let me give an outline of the "curriculum vitae" of John Milton. He was the son of a "scrivener"; the scriveners of that time were the forerunners of the English notaries, bankers, and money-lenders. He was born in the City of London, and lived most of his life there. He was educated at Cambridge University, and was intended to become a priest; but he rejected this career, as he saw that the Church could not be reformed from within, and that as a priest he would have no religious freedom.

After taking his degree at the University, he at first decided to devote himself to poetry and writing. He wrote in English, Italian, and Latin. One of his earliest poems, *Lycidas*, written in 1637, contained his well-known attack on the greedy and ignorant "placeseeking" priests of the day:

"Enough of such as, for their bellies' sake,
Creep, and intrude, and climb into the fold.
Of other care they little reckoning make,
Than now to scramble, at the shearers' feast,
And shove away the worthy bidden guest;
Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
A sheephook, or have learnt aught else, the least,
That to the faithful herdsman'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."

A year later, in 1638, he travelled in France, where he met Grotius, and in Italy. In that country, he visited Galileo, who was a prisoner of the Inquisition. By this visit, and by too frankly discussing church reformation, he gave offence to the English Jesuits in Rome, whom he records as having formed a plot against him.

In 1639, news reached him in Italy that the struggle between Parliament and the king was coming to a head. He thus described his reaction to the news:

"When I was preparing to pass over into Sicily and Greece, the melancholy intelligence which I received of the civil commotions in England made me alter my purpose; for I thought it base to be travelling for amusement abroad, while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home..."

I returned to my native country, after an absence of one year and about three months; at the time when Charles, having broken the peace, was renewing what is called the episcopal war with the Scots, in which, the royalists being routed in the first encounter, and the English being universally and justly disaffected, the necessity of his affairs at last obliged him to convene a parliament."

VIII.

Back in London, and earning his living as a tutor, Milton began his series of famous pamphlets, which covered many years, and dealt among other topics with Church reformation; social questions such as divorce and education; freedom of speech; directly political questions, including the justification of the Commonwealth, of the abolition of the monarchy and of the trial and execution of the monarch; and a plea to resist the Restoration.

He himself described, in 1654, how he came to undertake such a volume of exacting ideological work, in which the power of his writing crushed his opponents:

"The vigour of the parliament had begun to humble the pride of the bishops. As soon as the liberty of speech was no longer subject to control, all mouths began to be opened against the bishops; some complained of the views of the individuals, others of those of the order. They said that it was unjust that they alone should differ from the model of other reformed churches; that the government of the church should be according to the pattern of other churches, and particularly the word of God. This awakened all my attention and my zeal. 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."

The royalist side, although it commanded the services of nearly all the skilled writers of the day, had none who could stand up against Milton's magnificent onslaughts, which form an important — if sadly neglected — part of England's revolutionary heritage.

In the year 1641 Milton wrote five pamphlets on Church reform. The most important of these was "Of reformation touching church discipline in England and the cause that hath hitherto hindered it". He argued that the bishops were the main obstacle to the further reformation of the church, and that their election should be in the hands of the people, not of the king. Shrewdly, he made no direct attack on the king, with whom there was as yet no irrevocable breach. He directed his criticisms to the King-appointed bishops, not for their dogma, not for their failure to carry out their dogma, but for their interference in political life — they were all busy as political figures, in such offices as private secretaries to the king, and, as already mentioned, they held thirty seats in the (then somewhat small) House of Lords, and guaranteed the King their master and patron a reliable majority there. Knowing full well that they were

the King's creatures, Milton argued that their misdeeds would cause civil war between the King and the people. One passage from the pamphlet may be quoted:

"What more baneful to monarchy than a popular commotion? For the dissolution of monarchy slides aptest into a democracy; and what stirs the Englishmen, as our wisest writers have observed, sooner to rebellion, than violent and heavy hands upon their goods and purses? Yet these devout prelates, spite of our Great Charter, and the souls of our progenitors that wrested their liberties out of the Norman gripe with their dearest blood and highest prowess, for these many years have not ceased in their pulpits wrenching and spraining the text, to set at nought and trample under foot all the most sacred and lifeblood laws, statutes, and Acts of Parliament, that are the holy covenant of union and marriage between the king and his realm, by proscribing and confiscating from us all the right we have to our own bodies, goods and liberties. What is this but to blow a trumpet, and proclaim a firecross to an hereditary and perpetual civil war?"

IX.

By 1642, the breach between King and Parliament was definite. Parliament had set to work to change existing relations, substituting bourgeois property relations for feudal ones, by an important series of legislative measures. These included the abolition of monopolies, of the remnants of feudal land tenures, and of special privileges of many kinds. One very important measure was the abolition of the press licensing laws, under which the King had exercised an absolute prior censorship on the written word, appointing licensors to examine and approve everything before publication. It was the repeal of this censorship — a temporary repeal, as we shall presently see — that let loose a flood of pamphlets, from Milton and from many others, against the bishops. Milton could then use his pen against other targets than the bishops; as he wrote in 1654:

"When the bishops could no longer resist the multitude of their assailants, I had leisure to turn my thoughts to other subjects; to the promotion of real and substantial liberty."

With the final taking over of power by Parliament in 1642, when the King fled from London to Nottingham to launch civil war against the people, there was plenty to reform. Milton, then aged 34, changed the line of his pamphleteering:

"When, therefore, I perceived that there were three species of liberty which are essential to the happiness of social life — religious, domestic, and civil; and as I had already written concerning the first, and the magistrates were strenuously active in obtaining the third, I determined to turn my attention to the second, or the domestic, species. As this seemed to involve three material questions, the conditions of the conjugal tie, the education of the children and the free publication of the thoughts, I made them objects of distinct consideration."

He wrote three pamphlets on the subject of divorce — in 1634, 1644, and 1645 — displaying a startlingly advanced viewpoint for those days. The title of the first sufficiently indicates his approach: "The doctrine and discipline of divorce, restored, to the good of both sexes, from the bondage of the Canon Law and other mistakes, to Christian freedom, guided by the rule of charity". He even seemed to think that freedom would do no harm — in moderation — to women; but his attitude to women in general was not as advanced as his views on other matters.

I need not discuss fully his views on education, but two points in connexion with them are worth mention. The first is that his pamphlet "Of Education" was addressed to Master Samuel Hartlib, an adherent of the great Czech educationist and reformer Comenius; and the second is his expression of the main purpose of education:

"To principle the minds of men in virtue, the only genuine source of political and individual liberty, the only true safeguard of states, the bulwark of their prosperity and renown."

X.

The best known of his pamphlets, however, was one written in 1644 in the form of an imaginary speech to be delivered in Parliament, entitled: "Aeropagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England".

It is a part of the stock-in-trade of present-day English liberalism, in its attempt to disguise Milton's true revolutionary position and put him forward as the prophet of twentieth-century bourgeois Liberalism, to treat this pamphlet as an abstract plea for press freedom, and to invoke it for the protection of what is in truth its exact opposite, the present concentrated press monopoly, which is the negation of popular press freedom. This trick is played by generalisations, and by quotations from the pamphlet, taken out of context. But if one reads the pamphlet, one sees how remote from this false liberalism Milton stood. He advocated the abolition of licensing in order to enable the popular forces to defeat their enemies, and was opposed to freedom being granted to the enemies of the people, to those whose purpose was to undermine popular freedom and restore reaction and the traitorous ruling-class.

The pamphlet was written in the course of the civil war, when the result still hung in the balance, and the urgent need was to draw the largest possible number of people into the defence of the country and parliament against the king. At that moment, conservative influences in parliament were strong enough to secure the re-introduction, on the 14th June, 1643, of the "Order for Licensing the Press", calling for the submission of all published writings to prior censorship, which would certainly be exercised in a reactionary sense. Milton, as a citizen and a revolutionary even more than a writer, was incensed by this

proposal. He had already begun to mistrust the Presbyterians, a section of the Commonwealth forces which to-day would be called the Right Wing; Marx aptly named them "the Girondists". Their main pre-occupation, even at this stage, lay in the classic fear of the democratic revolution "going too far", the fear of the popular forces. (As we shall see, it was this body that, seventeen years later, moved by the same fears, took a large part in bringing about the restoration of the monarchy). Licensing in their hands would stop the publication of educational pamphlets and propaganda, and hinder the development of the ferment of ideas that were to find expression later in the "Agitators" of Cromwell's famous "New Model Army" and in the great document, "the Agreement of the People", which was to the English Revolution what the Declaration of the Rights of Man was to the French Revolution 150 years later.

"Areopagitica" is imbued with Milton's confidence in the people as the only safeguard against the "Fifth Column" of secret intriguers with the counter-revolutionary forces, the enemy within their ranks.

Writing of this pamphlet in 1654, ten years after its publication, when these intriguers had grown in power, Milton expressed himself thus:

"Lastly, I wrote my *Areopagitica*, in order to deliver the press from the restraints with which it was encumbered; that the power of determining what was true and what was false, what ought to be published and what to be suppressed, might no longer be entrusted to a few illiterate and illiberal individuals, who refused their sanction to any work which contained views or sentiments at all above the level of the vulgar superstition."

Against this background, some extracts from the pamphlet make the essential points of Milton's position clear. That he did not favour any absolute abstract freedom to publish anything and everything can be seen from the following passage:

"I deny not but that it is of the greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth to have a vigilant eye how books demean themselves, as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors. For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them, to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are... I know that they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon's teeth; and, being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men...

We should be wary therefore what persecution we raise against the living labours of public men, how we spill that seasoned life of man, preserved and stored up in books; since we see a kind of homicide may be thus committed, and if it extend to the whole impression a kind of massacre; whereof the execution ends not in the slaying of an elemental life, but strikes at that ethereal and fifth essence, the breath of reason itself, slays an immortality rather than a life. But lest I should be condemned of introducing licence, while I oppose licensing, I refuse not the pains to be so much historical as will serve to show what hath been done by ancient and famous commonwealths against this disorder,

till the very time that this project of licensing crept out of the Inquisition, was caught up by our prelates, and hath caught some of our presbyters."

Nor was he opposed to the prosecution of writers after publication; his whole resistance was to prior licensing. He went on to recall that in Athens books were banned for blasphemy and libel, and that in Rome libellous books were burnt. He held no brief for press freedom for Malignants.

Instances can be found again and again in the pamphlet of his distrust of the Presbyterians:

"I shall for neither friend nor foe conceal what the general murmur is; that if it come to inquisitioning again and licensing, and that we are so timorous of ourselves, and so suspicious of all men, as to fear each book and the shaking of every leaf, before we know what the contents are; if some who but of late were little better than silenced from preaching shall come now to silence us from reading, except what they please, it cannot be guessed what is intended by some but a second tyranny over learning; and will soon put it out of controversy, that bishops and presbyters are the same to us, both name and thing."

We find, too, some fine expressions of his patriotism and of his belief in the people; and incidentally we get glimpses both of how events in England were regarded abroad, and of Milton's close contacts on the Continent:

"I could recount what I have seen and heard in other countries, where this kind of inquisition tyrannises; when I have sat among their learned men, for that honour I had, and been counted happy to be born in such a place of philosophic freedom as they supposed England was, while themselves did nothing but bemoan the servile conditions into which this learning amongst them was brought; that this was it which had damped the glory of Italian wits; that nothing had been there written now these many years but flattery and fustian. There it was that I found and visited the famous Galileo, grown old a prisoner to the Inquisition for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought..."

And though I knew that England then was groaning loudest under the prelatical yoke, nevertheless I took it as a pledge of future happiness that other nations were so persuaded of her liberty. Yet was it beyond my hope that these Worthies were then breathing in her air, who should be her leaders to such a deliverance as shall never be forgotten by any revolution of time that this world hath to finish. When that has once begun, it was as little in my fear that, what words of complaint I heard among learned men of other parts uttered against the Inquisition, the same I should hear by as learned men at home uttered in time of Parliament against an order of licensing."

And again:

"Lords and Commons of England, consider what Nation it is whereof ye are, and whereof ye are the governors; a Nation not slow and dull, but of a quick, ingenious, and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point, the highest that human capacity can soar to. Therefore the studies of learning in her deepest sciences have

been so ancient and so eminent among us, that writers of good antiquity and ablest judgment have been persuaded that even the school of Pythagoras and the Persian wisdom took beginning from the old philosophy of this island.

And that wise and civil Roman, Julius Agricola, who governed here once for Caesar, preferred the natural wits of Britain before the laboured studies of the French. Nor is it for nothing that the grave and frugal Transylvanian sends out yearly from as far as the mountainous borders of Russia and beyond the Hercynian wilderness, not their youth but their staid men, to learn our language and our theologic arts.

What could a man require more from a nation so pliant and so prone to seek after knowledge? What wants there to such a towardly and pregnant soil, but wise and faithful labourers, to make a knowing people, a Nation of prophets, of sages, and of worthies?"

And once more, in a very famous patriotic passage:

"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 mid-day beam; purging and unscaling her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance; while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.

What would ye do then? Should ye suppress all this flowery crop of knowledge and new light sprung up and yet springing daily in this city? Should ye set an oligarchy of twenty engrossers over it, to bring a famine into our minds again, when we shall know nothing but what is measured to us by their bushel?"

XI.

By now, Milton was fully established as a pamphleteer. After his pamphlets on Divorce, and Areopagitica, such an outcry was raised against him that he wrote in answer his famous sonnet: "On the Detraction which followed upon my writing certain Treatises, 1645". I would like to quote this excellent illustration of his capacity to defend himself:

"I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs,
By the known rules of ancient liberty,
When straight a barbarous noise environs me
Of owls and cuckoos, asses, apes, and dogs
As when those hinds, that were transformed to frogs,
Rail'd at Latona's twin-born progeny,
Which after held the sun and moon in fee.
But this is got by casting pearls to hogs
That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
And still revolt when truth would set them free;
License they mean, when they cry liberty;

For who loves that must first be wise and good;
But from that mark how far they rove, we see,
For all this waste of wealth, and loss of blood."

If Milton were alive to-day, and writing as progressively for our age as he then wrote for his own, the corresponding "Asses, Apes, and Dogs" would set up a like "bawling" against him. They are not unknown to us to-day in England, in various contexts.

XII.

From then on, Milton turned to the central and crucial political questions; justification of the Commonwealth; arguments in favour of deposing kings; justification of the trial and execution of Charles I. The first of these pamphlets, written in 1648—9, was entitled "The tenure of Kings and Magistrates". Milton, writing in 1654, gives his reasons for writing it:

"Nor did I write anything on the prerogative of the Crown till the King, voted an enemy by the Parliament, and vanquished in the field, was summoned before the tribunal which condemned him to lose his head. But when, at length, some presbyterian ministers, who had formerly been the bitter enemies to Charles, became jealous of the growth of the Independents¹⁾ and of their ascendancy in the parliament, most tumultuously clamoured against the sentence, and did all in their power to prevent the execution, though they were not angry so much on account of the act itself as because it was not the act of their party; and when they dared to affirm that the doctrine of the protestants, and of all the reformed churches, was abhorrent to such an atrocious proceeding against kings, I thought that it became me to oppose such a glaring falsehood; and accordingly, without any immediate or personal application to Charles, I showed in an abstract consideration of the question what might lawfully be done against tyrants...

That book did not make its appearance till after the death of Charles, and was written rather to reconcile the minds of the people to the event than to discuss the legitimacy of that particular sentence, which concerned the magistrates, and which was already executed."

In this pamphlet Milton sets out to present a history of the theory of government and of the sources of authority. His theory was closely akin to what, one hundred years later, was to be called the Social Contract. Let me quote:

"No man who knows aught can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were, by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey; and they lived so till, from the roots of Adam's transgression falling among themselves to do wrong and violence, and foreseeing that such courses must needs tends to the destruction of them all, the agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury, and jointly to defend themselves against any that gave disturbance or opposition to such agreement.

¹⁾ the progressive section of the Commonwealth, opposed to the Presbyterians

Hence came cities, towns, and commonwealths. And, because no faith in all was found sufficiently binding, they saw it needful to ordain some authority that might restrain by force and punishment what was violated against peace and common right.

This authority and power of self-defence and preservation being originally and naturally in every one of them, and unitedly in them all: for ease, for order, and lest each man should be his own partial judge, they communicated and derived either to one whom for the eminence of his wisdom and integrity they chose above the rest, or to more than one, whom they thought of equal deserving; the first was called a king; the other, magistrates, not to be their lords and masters (though afterwards those names in some places were given voluntarily to such as had been authors of inestimable good to the people) but to be their deputies and commissioners, to execute, by virtue of their intrusted power, that justice which else every man by the bond of nature and of covenant must have executed for himself and for one another...

These for a time governed well, and with much equity decided all things as their own arbitrament, till the temptation of such a power, left absolute in their hands, perverted them at length to injustice and partiality. Then did they, who now by trial had found the danger and inconveniences of committing arbitrary power to any, invent laws, either framed or consented to by all, that should confine and limit the authority of whom they chose to govern them....

When this would not serve, but that the law was either not executed, or misapplied, they were constrained from that time, the only remedy left them, to put conditions and take oaths from all kings and magistrates at their first instalment, to do impartial justice by law; who upon those terms and no other received allegiance from the people, that is to say, bond or covenant to obey them in execution of those laws, which they, the people, had themselves made or assented to. And this oftentimes, with express warning, that if the king or magistrate proved unfaithful to his trust, the people would be disengaged. They added also counsellors and parliaments, not to be only at his beck, but, with him or without him, at set times, or at all times when any danger threatened, to have care of the public safety....

The power of kings and magistrates is nothing else but what is only derivative, transferred, and committed to them in trust from the people, to the common good of them all, in whom the power yet remains fundamentally, and cannot be taken from them without a violation of their natural birth-right."

Milton also boldly put forward arguments to maintain that the actions of a monarch should be subject to legal sanctions:

"Proving that it is lawful, and hath been held so through all ages, for any who have the power to call to account a tyrant or wicked king, and after due conviction to depose and put him to death, if the ordinary magistrates have neglected or denied to do it; and that they who of late so much blame deposing are the men who did it themselves..."

What can be more just and legal, if a subject for certain crimes be to forfeit by law from himself and posterity all his inheritance to the king, than that a king, for crimes proportional, should forfeit all his title and inheritance to the people. Unless the people must be thought created all for him, he not

for them, and they all in one body inferior to him single; which were a kind of treason against the dignity of mankind to affirm...

It follows that to say kings are accountable to none but God is the overturning of all law and government. For if they refuse to give account, then all covenants made with them at coronation, all oaths, are in vain, and were mockeries; all laws which they swear to keep made to no purpose; for if the King fear not God (as how many of them do not) we hold then our lives and estates by the tenure of his mere grace and mercy, as from a God, not a mortal magistrate; a position that none but court-parasites or men besotted would maintain."

In the course of this pamphlet, departing from any idealist approach, he makes such powerful denunciations of monarchy as have rarely been penned in any age. For example:

"One there be by whose commission whole massacres have been committed on his faithful subjects, his provinces offered to pawn or alienation, as the hire of those whom he had solicited to come in and destroy whole cities and countries; be he king, or tyrant, or emperor, the sword of justice is above him; in whose hand soever is found sufficient power to avenge the effusion, and so great a deluge of innocent blood."

And again:

"A tyrant, whether by wrong or by right coming to the crown, is he who, regarding neither law nor the common good, reigns only for himself and his faction; thus St. Basil among others, defines him. And because his power is great, his will boundless and exorbitant, the fulfilling thereof is for the most part accompanied with innumerable wrongs and oppressions of the people, murders, massacres, rapes, adulteries, desolation and subversion of cities and whole provinces; look how great a good and happiness a just king is, so great a mischief is a tyrant; as he the public father of his country, so this the common enemy. Against whom what the people may lawfully do, as against a common pest and destroyer of mankind, I suppose no man of clear judgment need go further to be guided than by the very principles of nature in him...

No prince so native but professes to hold by law; which when he himself overturns, breaking all the covenants and oaths that gave title to his dignity, what differs he from an outlandish king, or from an enemy? For look how much right the king of Spain hath to govern us at all, so much right hath the king of England to govern us tyrannically. If he, though not bound to us by any league, coming from Spain in person to subdue us or to destroy us, might lawfully by the people of England be slain in fight or put to death in captivity, what hath a native king to plead, bound by so many covenants, benefits, and honours to the welfare of his people, why he through the contempt of all laws and parliaments, the only tie of our obedience to him, for his own will's sake and a boasted prerogative unaccountable, after seven years' warring and destroying of his best subjects, overcome, and yielded prisoner, should think to scape unquestionable, as a thing divine, in respect of whom so many thousand Christians destroyed should lie unaccounted for, polluting with their slaughtered carcasses all the land over, and crying for vengeance against the

living that should have righted them? Who knows not that there is a mutual bond of amity and brotherhood between man and man over all the world, neither is it the English sea that can sever us from that duty and relation; a straiter bond there is between fellow-subjects, neighbours and friends. But when any of these do one to another so as hostility could do no worse, what doth the law decree less against them than open enemies and invaders? Or if the law be not present, or too weak, what doth it warrant us to less than single defence or civil war? And from that time forward the law of civil defensive war differs nothing from the law of foreign hostility. Nor is it distance of place that makes enmity, but enmity that makes distance. He, therefore, that keeps peace with me, near or remote, of whatsoever nation, is to me, as far as all civil and human offices, an Englishman and a neighbour; but if an Englishman, forgetting all laws, human, civil, and religious, offend against life and liberty, to him offended, and to the law in his behalf, though born in the same womb, he is no better than a Turk, a Saracen, a heathen."

And again:

"And certainly if men, not to speak of heathen, both wise and religious, have done justice upon tyrants what way they could soonest, how much more mild and human then it is, to give them fair and open trial; to teach lawless kings, and all who so much adore them, that not mortal man or his imperious will, but justice, is the only true sovereign and supreme majesty upon earth. Let men cease therefore out of faction and hypocrisy to make outcries and horrid things of things so just and honourable: Though perhaps till now no protestant state or kingdom can be alleged to have openly put to death their king, which lately some have written, and imputed to their great glory, much mistaking the matter. It is not, neither ought to be, the glory of a protestant state never to have put their king to death; it is the glory of a protestant king never to have deserved death. And if the parliament and military council do what they do without precedent, if it appears their duty, it argues the more wisdom, virtue, and magnanimity, that they know themselves able to be a precedent to others, who perhaps in future ages, if they prove not too degenerate, will look up with honour and aspire toward these exemplary and matchless deeds of their ancestors, as to the highest top of their civil glory and emulation; which heretofore, in the pursuance of fame and foreign dominion, spent itself vaingloriously abroad, but henceforth may learn a better fortitude, to dare execute highest justice on them that shall by force of arms endeavour the oppressing and bereaving of religion and their liberty at home. That no unbridled potentate or tyrant, but to his sorrow, for the future may presume such high and irresponsible license over mankind, to havoc and turn down whole kingdoms of men, as though they were no more in respect of his perverse will than a nation of pygmies."

Milton's growing — and justified — mistrust of the Presbyterian compromisers, whose objection to the execution of the king was a sign of their betrayal to come, is well marked in another passage in the same pamphlet:

"As for the party called presbyterian... Let them beware an old and perfect enemy, who, though he hope by sowing discord to make them his instruments, yet cannot for bear a minute the open threatening of his destined re-

venge upon them, when they have served his purposes. Let them fear, therefore, if they be wise, rather what they have done already than what remains to do, and be warned in time that they put no confidence in princes whom they have provoked, lest they be added to the examples of those that miserably have tasted the event."

Those who nowadays try to insist upon the "Liberalism" of Milton do not quote this pamphlet!

XIII.

Immediately after the publication of this powerful document, Milton was appointed to be "Latin Secretary of State", an office of great importance. The title by itself carries little meaning; the Latin Secretary of State was in fact the Minister entrusted with all communications that had to be written in Latin, the then universal language of European international communication, and so of diplomacy; thus Milton's real charge was to explain and defend the policy of the Commonwealth to the various European governments.

XIV.

A few weeks after his appointment, a book appeared, under the title of "Eikon Basilike" (the image of the king) attacking the execution of the king. It had great effect in Europe in setting opinion against the Commonwealth, not the less because it was written under the pretence that it had been written by the dead king himself. Milton wrote a powerful answer to it in his "Eikonoklastes" (breaker of images — Iconoclast). He explains how he came to write it:

"A book appeared soon after, which was ascribed to the king, and contained the most individious charges against the parliament. I was ordered to answer it, and opposed the Iconoclast to his Icon. I did not insult over fallen majesty, as is pretended; I only preferred queen truth to king Charles."

In the previous poem, he had denounced the monarchy; now, he demolished the picture of the "Martyr King". He wrote:

"Were that true, which is most false, that all kings are the Lord's anointed, it were yet absurd to think that the anointment of God should be, as it were, a charm against law, and give them privilege, who punish others, to sin themselves unpunished..."

To receive him back again from the accomplishment of so many violences and mischiefs, dipped from head to foot and stained over with the blood of thousands that were his faithful subjects, forced to their own defence against a civil war by him first raised upon them; and to receive him thus, in this gory pickle, to all his dignities and honours, covering the ignominious and horrid purple robe of innocent blood, that sat so close about him, with the glorious purple of royalty and supreme rule, the reward of highest excellence and virtue here on earth, were not only to swear and covenant the performan-

ce of an unjust vow, the strangest and most impious to the face of God, but were the most unwise and unprudential act as to civil government.

For so long as a king shall find by experience that, do the worst he can, his subjects, overawed by the religion of their own covenant, will only prosecute his evil instruments, nor dare to touch his person; and that, whatever hath been on his part offended or transgressed, he shall come off at last with the same deference to his person, and the same honour, as for well-doing, he will not fail to find them work; seeking far and near, and inviting to his court all the concourse of evil counsellors, or agents, that may be found...

But when kings themselves are made as liable to punishment as their civil counsellors, it will be both as dangerous from the king himself as from his parliament, to those that evil counsel him; and they, who else would be his readiest agents in evil, will then not fear to dissuade or to disobey him."

Once again in this pamphlet he showed how well aware he was of the dangers of backliding and compromising:

"Others there be in whose consciences the loss of gain, and those advantages they hoped for, hath sprung a sudden leak. These are they that cry out: 'The covenant broken,' and, to keep it better, slide back into neutrality, or join actually with incendiaries and malignants."

During the next few years, as part of his duties as Latin Secretary of State, he wrote two more major pamphlets in justification of the Commonwealth and of the action against the king. They were written in Latin, being particularly addressed to scholars and statesmen abroad; the first of them was "A defence of the people of England against Claud Salmasius' Defence of the King"; and the second of them was "A second defence of the people of England against the infamous anonymous libel entitled 'The cry to heaven of the royal blood against the English parricides'".

XV.

His last important pamphlet was the "Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth", written in 1659—60. By this time, the approach of the betrayal — the Restoration — could be clearly foreseen. Two forces were mainly responsible; the compromising — indeed treasonable — activities of the mercantile and other similar interests that had once been so vocal against the king, working with émigrés on the Continent to that end, and — more profoundly — the weakness inherent in all bourgeois revolutions, that the clashes of interest between the various classes and groups that have combined to start the revolution, and even more their fear of the "dangerous" social ideas which the revolution itself brings to the surface among the peasants and artisans, (and to some extent the petit-bourgeois), on whom they have had to rely to carry through the struggle, make them always, in the end, into counter-revolutionaries against their own revolution. They cannot be consistently revolutionary, for their aim is to take power in order to replace one old minority

ruling-class by another, and to win freedom not to end class society but to change and develop it. When they have achieved their aim, they must always work to stop things from developing too far, and to prevent freedom from reaching down to the property-less common people, whom they are seeking freedom to exploit.

Marx wrote clearly of this, in "Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution":

"It is the fate of all revolutions that this union of different classes, which in some degree is always the necessary condition of any revolution, cannot subsist long. No sooner is the victory gained against the common enemy than the victors become divided themselves into different camps and turn their weapons against each other."

Engels, too, dealing specifically with the English Revolution, wrote in "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific":

"Upon this excess of revolutionary activity (1640—60) there necessarily followed the inevitable reaction, which in turn went beyond the point when it might have maintained itself. After a series of oscillations, the new centre of gravity was at last attained, and became a new starting point. This grand period of English history, known to respectability under the name of „The Great Rebellion,“ and the struggles succeeding it, were brought to a close by the comparatively puny event entitled by liberal historians „The Glorious Revolution“. The new starting-point was a compromise between the rising middle-class and the ex-feudal landowners... There might be squabbles about matters of detail, but on the whole the aristocratic oligarchy knew too well that its own economic prosperity was irretrievably bound up with that of the industrial and commercial middle classes. From that time the bourgeoisie was a humble but still recognised component of the ruling classes of England."

This pamphlet, constituting a noble and courageous attempt to restore the revolution and avert its then imminent betrayal, was written at a time when most writers were beginning to "hedge" or dissemble, or at the very least to keep silence. It was written by a man already blind, swimming against the tide of reaction, with the glories of the revolutions already almost a thing of the past, and the counter-revolution which was to bring to an end his political hopes and his political usefulness — and in all probability his personal liberty — on the threshold. But he wrote it; and it was perhaps the most powerful of all his pamphlets, if one of those least quoted to-day by bourgeois commentators. Among its admirable features were clear demonstrations of Milton's consciousness of how the future would judge the revolution, and judge too those who fought for it and those who betrayed it. I am tempted to give much of it, but I must limit myself to a few of its greater passages:

"After our liberty and religion thus prosperously fought for, gained and many years possessed... to fall back, or rather to creep back so poorly, as it

seems the multitude would, to their once abjured and detested thralldom of kingship, to be ourselves the slanderers of our own just and religious deeds... and by thus relapsing to verify all the bitter predictions of our triumphing enemies, who will now think they wisely discerned and justly censured both us and all our actions as rash, rebellious, hypocritical, and impious; not only argues a strange, degenerate contagion suddenly spread among us, fitted and prepared for new slavery, but will render us a scorn and derision to all our neighbours.

And what will they at best say of us, and of the whole English name, but scoffingly, as of that foolish builder mentioned by our Saviour, who began to build a tower, and was not able to finish it? Where is this goodly tower of a Commonwealth, which the English boasted they would build to overshadow kings, and be another Rome in the West? The foundation indeed they laid gallantly, but fell into a worse confusion, not of tongues, but of factions, than those at the tower of Babel; and have left no memorial of their work behind them remaining but in the common laughter of Europe!

Besides this, if we return to kingship, and soon repent (as undoubtedly we shall, when we begin to find the old encroachment coming on little by little upon our consciences, which must necessarily proceed from king and bishop united inseparably in one interest), we may be forced perhaps to fight all over again all that we have fought, and spend over again all that we have spent, but are never like to attain thus far as we are now advanced to the recovery of freedom, never to have it in possession as we now have it, never to be vouchsafed hereafter the like mercies and signal assistances from Heaven in our cause, if by our ungrateful backsliding we make these fruitless; flying now to regal concessions from his divine condescensions and gracious answers to our once importuning prayers against the tyranny which we then groaned under; making vain and viler than dirt the blood of so many thousand faithful and valiant Englishmen, who left us in this liberty, bought with their lives; losing by a strange after-game of folly all the battles we have won,... all the treasures we have spent, not that corruptible treasure only, but that far more precious of all our late miraculous deliverances; treading back again with lost labour all our happy steps in the progress of reformation, and most pitifully depriving ourselves the instant fruition of that free government, which we have so dearly purchased, a free commonwealth...

A free commonwealth, wherein they who are the greatest are perpetual servants and drudges to the public at their own cost and charges, neglect their own affairs, yet are not elevated above their brethren, live soberly in their families, walk the street as other men, may be spoken to freely, familiarly, friendly, without adoration. Whereas a king must be adored like a demigod, with a dissolute and haughty court about him, of vast expense and luxury, masks and revels, to the debauching of our prime gentry, both male and female; not in their pastimes only, but in earnest, by the loose employments of court-service, which will then be thought honourable. There will be a queen of no less charge, in most likelihood outlandish and a papist; besides a queen-mother such already; together with both their courts and numerous train; then a royal issue, and ere severally their sumptuous courts; to the multiplying of a servile crew, not of servants only, but of nobility and gentry, bred up then to the hopes not of public but of court offices, to be stewards, chamberlains, ushers, grooms even of the close-stool; and the lower their minds

debased with court-opinions, contrary to all virtue and reformation, the haughtier will be their pride and profuseness. We may well remember this not long since at home; nor need but look at present into the French Court, where enticements and preferments daily draw away and pervert the protestant nobility...

It may well be wondered that any nation, styling themselves free, can suffer any man to pretend hereditary right over them as their lord; whenas, by acknowledging that right, they conclude themselves his servants and his vassals, and so renounce their own freedom. Which how a people and their leaders especially can do, who have fought so gloriously for liberty; how they can change their noble words and actions, heretofore so becoming the majesty of a free people, into the base necessity of court flatteries and prostrations, is not only strange and admirable, but lamentable to think on. That a nation should be so valorous and courageous to win their liberty in the field, and when they have won it should be so heartless and unwise in their counsels as not to know how to use it, value it, what to do with it or with themselves; but after ten or twelve years' prosperous war and contestation with tyranny, basely and besottedly to run their necks again into the yoke which they have broken, and prostrate all the fruits of their victory for nought at the feet of the vanquished, besides our loss of glory, and such an example as kings or tyrants never yet had the like to boast of, will be an ignominy if it befall us, that never yet befell any nation possessed of their liberty...

But admit that monarchy itself may be convenient for to some nations: yet to us who have thrown it out, received back again, it cannot but prove pernicious. For kings to come, never forgetting their former ejection, will be sure to fortify and arm themselves sufficiently for the future against all such attempts hereafter from the people; who shall then be so narrowly watched and kept so low, that though they would never so fain, and at the same rate of their blood and treasure, they never shall be able to regain what they now have purchased and may enjoy, or to free themselves from any yoke imposed upon them. Nor will they dare to go about it; utterly disheartened for the future, if these their highest attempts prove unsuccessful; which will be the triumph of all tyrants hereafter over any people that shall resist oppression; and their song will then be, to others, 'How sped the rebellious English?' To our posterity, 'How sped the rebels, your fathers?' "

XVI.

But not even Milton could avert the disaster. As he was writing this great pamphlet, in March 1660, the famous Long Parliament was dissolved. His voice was disregarded, the Presbyterians went over to the enemy, coming to a compromise with the émigré royalists from which the democratic movement in Britain has suffered ever since. The son of the executed Charles Stuart was brought back in May 1660 to take the throne, with the state apparatus and the state church. True, his wings were clipped, he was no absolute monarch; but the Commonwealth, with its great aspirations, achievements, and promises for the future, was at an end, and bourgeois rule was firmly established for at any rate 299 years.

Milton, the bold author of so many effective and influential writings that were anathema to kings, bishops, and all reactionaries, was of course dismissed from office. He was already blind. He was in poor material circumstances. He is said to have escaped arrest, imprisonment, and perhaps worse, only through the intervention of poets and scholars, including one whom he had himself defended as a prisoner during the civil war. His pamphlet written in defence of the execution of the king was ordered to be publicly burnt on the 16th June, 1660.

XVII.

His public life was at an end, but in the dangers of defeat he refused to lend his pen to the support of the victors. He did not cease to write, even though he scarcely had a public free to read and discuss his writings. Even as late as the year of his death he was writing a pamphlet on "the best means to be used against the growth of Popery". Other prose works written after the restoration included "The History of Britain" and "A brief History of Muscovia and other less known countries". But his main works of that closing period of his life were the great epic poems for which he is world-famous, "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained", both of which are imbued with the spirit of humanism, and his most revolutionary and perhaps greatest poem — his swan-song — "Samson Agonistes", written in 1671.

Milton wrote two dramatic works. The first, "Comus", written in 1637, was a masque after the style of the Jacobean playwrights, such as Ben Johnson, Middleton, and Shakespeare himself. Then, after a third of a century, he moved to the model, not of the Jacobean but of the Attic theatre; and with a majesty not unlike that of Aeschylus and the other ancient Greek dramatists he created "Samson Agonistes".²⁾ This great revolutionary tragic poem, written eleven years after the Restoration, breathes the spirit of one who has lived through a great historic moment, who has fallen helpless — and blind — into the hands of his enemies, with no hope of deliverance, and who yet will not yield.

The sentimental, naturally, find this poem moving because Milton was blind; but it is more truly moving because he too was a revolutionary patriot, and was ready, like Samson, to pull down the evil structure and to die in its ruins:

²⁾ It is a part of Milton's classical development that already in the preface to "Paradise Lost" he rejects the use of rhyme — "the invention of a barbarous age" — of which in his youth he had a singular mastery, and makes blank verse the vehicle for the epic and dramatic poems of his maturer years. This standpoint was emphasised by his scornful permission to John Dryden, who had asked if he might do a rhyming version, and got the dry response: "Aye, young man, you may tag my verses if you will."

Like Samson, Milton was

“Betrayed, captived, and both my eyes put out,
Made of my enemies the scorn and gaze.”

Like Samson, he knew

“Life in captivity
Among inhuman foes.”

Like Samson, he had known the joy of great strength put to the service of his people:

“Promise was, that I
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver.
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
Eyless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves,
Himself in bonds, under Philistian yoke.”

Like Samson, Milton had the agony of seeing

“Nations grown corrupt,
And by their vices brought to servitude...
To love bondage more than liberty,
Bondage with ease, than strenuous liberty.”

Like Samson, he refused, as some other writers did not, to put his genius at the service of his captors:

“Wilt thou then serve the Philistines with that gift
Which was expressly given thee to annoy them?
Better at home lie bed-rid, not only idle,
Inglorious, unemploy’d, with age outworn.”

All this is poignant; but what moves us much more is his magnificent refusal to despair, his spirit of revolutionary defiance:

“Oh how comely it is, and how reviving,
To the spirits of just men long oppress’d,
When God into the hands of their deliverer
Puts invincible might
To quell the mighty of the earth, the oppressor,
The brute and boisterous force of violent men,
Hardy and industrious to support
Tyrannic power, but raging to pursue
The righteous, and all such as honour truth;
He, all their ammunition
And feats of war defeats
With plain heroic magnitude of mind,
And celestial vigour, arm’d,
Their armouries and magazines contemns,
Renders them useless, while
with winged expedition,
Swift as the lightning glance, he executes
his errand on the wicked, who, surprised,
Lose their defence, distracted and amazed.”

XVIII.

Let us now contemplate the influence exerted by Milton's work, not only in his lifetime but in later years and centuries. The revolution — and his work — ended; looked at superficially, they ended in defeat, but in reality they achieved great and permanent results, and what they achieved affected deeply all the countries of Europe, and not of Europe alone. The effect in the English colonies of America was very great. Many of the ideas proclaimed by Americans during their war of independence against Britain, a century after the end of the Commonwealth, were drawn from those of the Commonwealth, and above all from those expressed by Milton himself. It is significant that, in 1788, the reactionary Dr. Samuel Johnson, writing his "Lives of the Poets", showed the fiercest animosity to Milton — an animosity somewhat slavishly repeated by too many critics and so-called teachers of literature ever since. For the ideas of Milton, who wrote and fought for freedom, were then finding new expression in the American colonies. Milton's ideas were still alive, just as they were a dozen years later in the French Revolution; and just as they are alive to-day, in the ferment of liberation now widespread in all Continents.

XIX.

It is undoubtedly worth while, at this moment of history, to concentrate on the value, too much obscured by many critics, of Milton's work in the service of the revolution; but I would not neglect or belittle the sheer magnificent strength and beauty of his poetry, which is surely unsurpassed by any other English poet of any age. I would like to quote a few examples of this. I select some of the poems in which he expressed his longings for democratic peace.

For example, in 1629, when he was just 21. he wrote the famous "Ode on the morning of Christ's Nativity":

"The meek-ey'd Peace;
She, crown'd with olive green, came softly sliding
Down, through the turning sphere,
His ready harbinger,
With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing;
And, waving wide her myrtle wand
She strikes an universal peace, through sea and land.
"No war, or battle's sound,
Was heard the world around;
The idle spear and shield were high up hung.
The hooked chariot stood
Unstained with hostile blood,
The trumpet spake not to the arm'd throng;
And kings sat still, with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by."

Nineteen years later, he wrote his Sonnet to the Lord General Fairfax:

“O yet a nobler task awaits thy hand,
For what can war but endless war still breed?
Till truth and right from violence be freed,
And public faith cleared from the shameful brand
of public fraud. In vain doth valour bleed,
While avarice and rapine share the land.”

Four years later again, in his sonnet to the Lord General Cromwell he wrote:

“Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud
Not of war only, but detractions rude,
Guided by faith and matchless fortitude,
To peace and truth thy glorious way has plough’d,
And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud
Hast reared God’s trophies, and his work pursued,
While Darwen stream, with blood of Scots imbrued,
And Dunbar field resounds thy praises loud,
And Worcester’s laureat wreath. Yet much remains
To conquer still, Peace hath her victories
No less renown’d than War: New foes arise
Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains:
Help us to save free conscience from the paw
of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw.”

Then, in 1655, he wrote one of the most famous of his sonnets “On the late massacre in Piedmont”:

“Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter’d saints, whose bones
Lie scatter’d on the Alpine mountains cold:
Even them, who kept thy truth so pure of old,
When all our fathers worshipp’d stocks and stones,
Forget not; In thy book record their groans,
Who were thy sheep, and, in their ancient fold
Slain by the bloody Piedmontese, that roll’d
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To heaven. Their martyr’s blood and ashes sow
O’er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway
The triple Tyrant; that from these may grow
A hundred fold, who, having learn’d thy way,
Early may fly the Babylonian woe.”

XX.

So that was, that is, John Milton. English to the core, yet international; born into a stormy period, equal to the storm; faithful to the revolution, bringing to it a great understanding, a sublime mastery of his native tongue, and an unflinching courage; and unbroken in defeat.

On his shoulders, as on those of many others of his time, and before, and since,

we can all stand, in every country, as we work unremittingly to build the better world, the world of peace, which shall come for all of us, black and white and yellow.

Let me finish this study devoted to John Milton in the valedictory which he himself wrote to Samson Agonistes:

"Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail,
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us, in a death so noble."