

Milton's Nimrod and the Renaissance Debate

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Milton's presentation of Nimrod at the beginning of Book XII of *Paradise Lost* is a crucial part of the political theme that runs through *Paradise Lost*. It is also a late seventeenth century statement of a key political debate that dominates the English Renaissance and, in fact, the Renaissance as a whole. This is the debate between the two models of natural law, the one propping up monarchical authority, the other sanctioning revolt against tyranny. The latter is related to the tradition of reformed theology but also to Jesuit thought. The former is the favoured model of Tudor and Stuart autocracy. The later portion of the article discusses how certain of the 'New Historicists' are deficient in claiming that religion in the Renaissance is a tool of Machiavellian authority without acknowledging that it is also one of the prime sources of politically revolutionary ideas and the growth of democracy. An analysis of aspects of New Historicist methodology is attempted.

In the beginning of Book XII of *Paradise Lost*, the story of Noah just completed at the end of the previous Book, Milton has his narrator tell the story of Genesis Chapter Ten. Mankind is off to a new start, but soon trouble arises with Nimrod. This is what the narrator says:

till one shall rise
Of proud ambitious heart, who not content
With fair equality, fraternal state,
Will arrogate Dominion undeserv'd
Over his brethren, and quite dispossess
Concord and law of Nature from the Earth;
Hunting (and Men, not Beasts, shall be his game)
With War and hostile snare such as refuse
Subjection to his Empire tyrannous:
A mighty Hunter thence he shall be styled
Before the Lord, as in despite of Heav'n,
Or from Heav'n claiming second Sovranty;
And from Rebellion shall derive his name,
Though of Rebellion others he accuse.
He with a crew whom like Ambition joins

With him or under him to tyrannise,
Marching from *Eden* towards the West, shall find
The plain

(*Paradise Lost* XII 24-41)

What then follows is the well known story of the tower building and many tongues of Babel, at which 'great laughter was in heav'n'. Adam comments bitterly on this distant offspring of Nimrod saying that he claims 'authority usurped, from God not given'. Man has dominion over the beasts:

but Man over men
He made not Lord; such title to himself
Reserving, human left from human free.
But this Usurper his encroachment proud
Stays not on Man; to God his Tower intends
Siege and defiance

(Lines 69-74)

Michael adds to the political sermon, which is a very considerable expansion and interpretation of the biblical narrative, by saying:

Justly thou abhorr'st
That Son, who on the quiet state of men
Such trouble brought, affecting to subdue
Rational Liberty; yet know withal,
Since thy original lapse, true Liberty
Is lost, which always with right Reason dwells
Twinn'd, and from her hath no dividual being:
Reason in man obscur'd, or not obey'd,
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart Passions catch the Government
From Reason, and to servitude reduce
Man till then free.

(Lines 79-90)

Man allows unreason to rule within himself (an echo of the opening paragraph of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, defending the execution of Charles as a tyrant). Therefore God subjects man to 'violent lords' as a punishment, enthralling man's 'outward freedom'. 'Tyranny must be, though to the tyrant thereby no excuse'. Reason and choice go together, as God's key speech in Book III tells us. This in turn echoes similar statements in the *Areopagitica*. We are reminded, too, of the exercise of unfallen reason between Adam and Eve in Book IX. Reason, twinned with delight,

prevents Adam from authoritarianism. Paradoxically, Eve then goes out into the garden to meet the serpent. Miltonic rationality is a dangerous basis for existence.

It is quite clear that Genesis 10 is a parallel to the rule of the Stuart monarchy and the Anglican Church. Milton shows how fallen nations fall to idol worship as well as succumbing to political tyranny. But he did not invent his expansion of this portion of the Bible. He was working in a tradition that goes at least as far back as the Geneva Bible, that English translation produced by English exiles during the Marian persecutions. The Geneva Bible (also known as the 'breeches Bible' because Adam and Eve make themselves 'breeches' from fig leaves) has extensive marginal glosses, sometimes of a specifically political nature. The description of Nimrod as 'a mighty hunter before the Lord' is explained in a gloss as 'meaning a cruel oppressor and tyrant'. Nimrod's 'tyrannie came into a proverbe as hated both of God and man, for he passed not to commit crueltie even in God's presence'.

The passage in *Paradise Lost* is not Milton's first discussion of Nimrod. *Eikonoklastes* at times resembles the Geneva Bible in its mention of Old Testament kings who could be considered tyrants. Nimrod's name appears on the list. He is reported by ancient tradition to have founded monarchy and professed to hold his kingly right by law. Milton uses Nimrod to launch into an argument that it was parliament that first created kings so that no law could come into existence without there first being an assembly. Milton waxes satirical about the theory that kings are somehow produced by nature, so that kingly 'procreative' reason is the origin of law, and parliament 'but a female' (405). The 'right reason' of *Paradise Lost* forms a neat contrast to kingly reason in *Eikonoklastes*.

Nimrod is briefly discussed by David Loewenstein both with regard to *Paradise Lost* and *Eikonoklastes* (1990: 109ff). Loewenstein's point could be usefully extended to the whole Renaissance debate about natural law. The relation of Nimrod to Charles gives additional point to the line in *Paradise Lost*, 'Though of Rebellion others he accuse', although the line is a statement about monarchical tendencies generally.

For the understanding reader, the Nimrod passage is the tip of a huge iceberg, the whole Renaissance and Reformation political debate and English history of the seventeenth century. It was risky for Milton in the Restoration to be more specific. The analysis of tyranny becomes briefly apparent elsewhere in *Paradise Lost*, too. Satan on his barbarous and oriental throne at the beginning of Book Two, represents tyranny, however much he might try to be the mouthpiece of revolt against what he alleges is divine tyranny. The Romantic critics were sometimes seriously misguided. It is difficult to see how Shelley could have missed the relation of Satan on his throne to, for example, *Ozymandias*.

Nimrod is debated in contemporary political literature. There is a royalist Nimrod as well, for example in Sir Thomas Craig's *The Right of Succession to the Kingdom of England in Two Books; against the Sophisms of Parsons the Jesuit*. The sub-title *against the Sophisms of Parsons the Jesuit* will be explained later. The dedication to King James talks about 'the destructive Principles, which serve to render Kings themselves obnoxious to the judgement of the rash unthinking Mob'. Kings, according to the expanded title, have a 'Sacred Authority'. Monarchy is 'of Divine Original; ordained of God' and is further 'agreeable to the Laws of God and Nature'. The Old Testament is a monarchical tract.

Nimrod is 'a great man and the first who made Justice to be duly regarded', he is a builder of cities and the 'first that reformed Mankind from their brutal and wild way of living'. The concept is rather similar to that of the fascist strong man who is needed in difficult times, or to Hobbes's Leviathan who imposes the peace that rescues man from the state of nature in which every man is at war with every man and 'the life of man nasty, brutish and short'. Man becomes reasonable under strong authority, is not reasonable in a state of freedom. The concept of reason and of natural law is different from Milton's.

Craig's hierarchical view of nature, of natural law and order, is similar to that popularised by Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Monarchy is conformable to the law of nature. Chapter Three of his book considers Vergil on bees, the stag that leads the herd, the pre-eminence of the eagle, whale and lion. The natural instincts of man as well as of brutes, the particular sense of law engrafted onto man's nature, are the basis of monarchy. Fathers are naturally the heads of families, kings the natural heads of the larger family of the state. The word 'instinct' reminds us, however, of the fooling of Falstaff and the Prince after the Gadshill episode: 'beware instinct, the lion will not touch the true prince' pleads Falstaff. The Prince replies that Falstaff did indeed run away 'on instinct' (*King Henry IV*, Part 1, II iv). Was 'instinct' one of the key words of political debate?

To complete Sir Thomas Craig's arguments, succession proceeds by divine right. Kings, obviously, do not owe the crown to the people. A tyrant is he who has no right to the kingdom. An unjust but legitimate king is not a tyrant. Popular rule brings with it the danger of 'the grievous cruelties of the people'. Obedience, a key word in the debate, is owed even to the king who commands what is unlawful. Only God may be the judge. Obedience and patience are key concepts in the Elizabethan Homily of 1572, so Craig is arguing along well-established pro-monarchical lines.

Of course, he has an intellectual problem with William the Conqueror. Chapters VI and XVII assert, nevertheless, that this conquest was the will of God and that the line of kings that followed was legitimate. The overthrow of the Tarquin Kings in Rome is argued away by saying that

they were not lawful kings. The developing democracy that followed is condemned as unstable, a matter the Caesars put to rights.

Edward II and Richard II, the two deposed kings of England, are (according to Craig) England's 'eternal reproach'. Richard is 'the Lord's annointed', as Shakespeare's king says of himself. The corrupt Chief Justice Tresilian of the *Woodstock* play is unrecognisable in Craig's version, Richard's treatment of Gaunt in Shakespeare's version is not there and Richard is praised for his moderate treatment of Bolingbroke and Norfolk and for his long toleration of his uncle Gloucester. The speech that Holinshed attributes to the Bishop of Carlisle is, of course, mentioned. It is, naturally, in Shakespeare's play, as one of the many points of view by which the political theme is treated.

Before returning to Milton's Nimrod to look at the model of natural law to be found there, some other Stuart, royalist, uses of the Bible as a political source book could be mentioned. *Bishop Overall's Convocation Book* of 1606 was also prompted by the ideological depredations of Parsons, mentioned in the title of Sir Thomas Craig's book. The *Convocation Book* was written by the assembled bishops of Anglicanism who had been asked by James to scan the Bible for favourable arguments. They found examples from Adam's patriarchal power, through Noah and his sons, to the Kings of Israel, examples which, to them, excluded any possibility of an initial contract between King and people. However, in this case the 'mild and regal' rule of Adam is distinguished from Nimrod's tyranny. Here the writers differ, obviously, from Sir Thomas Craig in their defence of monarchy. Nevertheless, they do not introduce Milton's version of the natural law theory, nor do they say that tyrants may be deposed. The awkward prophets are permitted the right to speak but no action is to follow. Going outside the Bible, the overthrow of the Tarquin Kings of Rome is declared not to have been a blessing.

No subject may shake off the yoke of obedience, that key concept. Strangely, comically, the Bishops applied this doctrine of the unassailability of monarchy so thoroughly as to take it further than James wanted them to. The poor Bishops were blind to contemporary European politics. They said that no neighbouring ruler could rightfully help an adjacent people to depose a tyrant. However, James wanted to continue to help Holland against Spain and wrote the erring Bishops a stiff note saying that they had peered too deeply into the *arcana imperii*.

James himself, in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, bases his arguments on Samuel's formulation of kingly power. In this work he states that the king is not subject to the law except of his own good will. Bad kings, James says, are still sacrosanct. The unhappy subjects must exhibit obedience, to which is added patience, another key word, but they can do no more than to resort to prayer. Obedience, patience, prayer, those are the

key words in a long tradition of documents, including the Henrician Homily in the Prayerbook of 1547 and the Elizabethan Homily of 1572. The source of these ideas is ultimately Luther, but more immediately those early Tudor theologians Tyndale and Barnes. William Tyndale, in *The obedience of a Christian man* (1528) and Robert Barnes in *Mens Constitutions Bynde not the Conscience* (1532) expounded doctrines of passive submission even to bad rulers that are in sharp contrast to the more belligerent Protestantism of the reformed tradition. They provided a theological basis for the actions of Henry VIII in rejecting the power of the Pope and a basis for the heightened monarchical absolutism of the Tudor dynasty.

What we are dealing with is two models of natural law and with the growth of the language of human rights and of the rule of law. For Milton, Nimrod the tyrant offends against the law of nature which is part of God's law. Nimrod's actions are a rebellion against God, though Milton says that Nimrod, in defence of his authority, accuses others of rebellion, claiming legitimacy. God does not make man lord over man; the king figure however, in doing this, is the usurper, an ironical play with the usual connotations of usurpation and legitimate monarchy. Although tyranny is the result of the fall, tyranny is still not acceptable. The way is left open for action. Milton's most significant interpretation of the Biblical narration is his addition of this natural law model. In the other model Nimrod is either the needed strong man or, if a tyrant, still not to be deposed. Kings are kings by nature, their position unassailable by law or contract. No action, apart from obedience, patience and prayer, is possible: God may take action, man may not. Of course, how God takes action, whether through rebellious men or a thunderbolt hurled from the heavens, or a paroxysm occasioned by a surfeit of lampreys, is the question avoided.

Both sides of the debate, both models of natural law, are supported by religion. Both parties to the debate, up to now, have been Protestant: the clash is between Tudor and Stuart establishment theory on the one hand, and the radical, revolutionary, Calvinist/Puritan tradition on the other. Charles I was defended in terms of natural law and executed in terms of natural law.

The most famous natural law statement of the Elizabethan Age is, of course, Richard Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. This was not a statement of the assured truths believed by the Elizabethan Englishman. Hooker's *magnum opus* is a symptom of debate. It is an answer to the Puritan threat, theologically and ecclesiastically, and also specifically politically. The specifically political becomes overt in Book VIII, which attacks a certain Junius Brutus. Junius Brutus, famous ancestor of Marcus Brutus in Shakespeare's play, was the tyrannicidal overthrower of the Tarquin Kings. The Elizabethan Englishman knew of him from

North's Plutarch. But North's Plutarch was a translation not from the Greek but from a French translation, probably by a Huguenot. The Junius Brutus that Hooker attacks in Book VIII is the pseudonymous author of the *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*. The real author was also a Huguenot: he may have been Languet or more probably du Plessis Mornay, who was Henry of Navarre's ambassador to the court of Elizabeth. This is argued by Harold Laski in his extensive introduction to his 1972 edition of *A Defence of Liberty against Tyrants*.

Appearing in 1579, it was partially translated into English in 1588. This was the fourth section that stated that neighbouring rulers could interfere with a tyrant to free an oppressed people. As Elizabeth was helping the Dutch and was about to help the Huguenots, the proposition was opportune, though embodying a dangerous principle. The debate in *Bishop Overall's Book*, mentioned a little earlier, shows this. Elizabeth had also, of course, assisted in the dethronement of Mary Queen of Scots, finally executed in 1587, who on the scaffold pointed out that her royal cousin's actions towards her were indeed highly inconsistent with monarchical principle (Rait 1899: 25, 305).

This then, was the context for the first, partial, translation of the *Vindiciae*. The second translation, complete, was at the beginning of the Puritan revolution. It was, then, part of the intellectual climate of Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. The *Vindiciae* appeared in English again in 1689, gracing the Bloodless Revolution, the time of John Locke, and so perhaps influencing the American colonial revolt. It is fascinating to speculate whether any Huguenot emigrant to the Cape brought a copy with him. Would it have changed South African history? There has certainly been reference in the political debates in recent South African history to the origins in the Reformed tradition of political revolution.

The full English title of the translation of the *Vindiciae* is 'A Defence of Liberty against Tyrants or, of the lawful power of the Prince over the People and of the People over the Prince'. The lawful power of the prince is that which does not exceed due bounds. A prince can act unlawfully. Charles was put on trial as King. The basis of the argument is, of course, natural law: the King is God's vassal, hence he may be deposed in God's name. To support the religious basis of his argument, Brutus/Mornay cites Romans 13. This much debated text, often cited as the justification for civil power (by Luther among others), is interpreted as showing that power comes from God and must, therefore, be lawfully used. Kings are, in fact, created by the people: a theory of contract lies behind the arguments. Even hereditary right is a form of election. The whole body of the people is above the king.

Mornay does, however, tread cautiously. The Anabaptist disturbances of Munster make him wary. He is inclined to look to the lesser magistrates,

including the nobility, to apply the necessary curbs. Nevertheless, a private individual, convinced of a divine calling, may dispose of a bad king. Among tyrants named is, obviously, Tarquin the Proud. Julius Caesar, for assuming power, is also a tyrant. Do we have a source for Shakespeare's play in this text, as well as in North's Plutarch?

Theoretical arguments about natural law do not always exist in isolation from circumstances. The Huguenots were impelled towards a doctrine of rebellion by the St Bartholemew massacre. The English tradition, stemming in part from such things as the Nimrod gloss in the Geneva Bible, predates Mornay. The English tradition was provoked by Mary Tudor. Goodman and particularly Ponet are the chief expositors of this early stage while Knox and Buchanan established a Scots tradition. Ponet's *A Short Treatise of politike power* of 1556 certainly deserves to be more read, as an excellent pioneering natural law statement, limiting state power by God's law and giving the people a controlling right. Before Mornay, he uses Romans 13 as a text to limit the authority of the ruler. But, apart from God's law, he makes the King subject to the laws of his own country; he is a constitutionalist, drawing on an English tradition of law predating the Reformation. It is the tradition of Sir John Fortescue (1394 - 1476), for example, who described the monarchy as *dominium politicum et regale*, constitutional rule, and not just as *dominium regale*. This in turn builds on Bracton's thirteenth century defence of custom. More widely, if Quentin Skinner is to be believed, a body of radical ideas was built up in the Middle Ages which reached a new peak in the sixteenth century. Monarchical absolutism is not a medieval doctrine: 'Had there been no Luther there could never have been a Louis XIV' (Skinner 1978: 114).

The medieval tradition of natural law limiting monarchical absolutism through Papal agency brings us to Parsons, alias Doleman, the Jesuit mentioned earlier. In the Renaissance, Jesuit political thinkers revived natural law principles. Most strangely, then, we have Jesuit and Calvinist attacking the Anglican / Lutheran tradition with very similar arguments. Parsons is, however, broadly opportunistic and he uses any argument that comes to hand. Parsons's work is not an open piece of Catholic apologetics. It appeared in 1581, dedicated to the Earl of Essex under the name R. Doleman. The tactics are a pretended discussion by a group of honest, loyal Englishmen about the succession, that rather delicate Elizabethan topic. It is called *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crown of England*. To stir up trouble, much of the discussion deals with the deposition of Richard II, with the leading disputants taking Bolingbroke's side. Sir Thomas Craig, you will remember, said that this episode was one of the reproaches of English history. In pursuing Lancastrian history Doleman finally comes to the conclusion that the real heir to the English throne is the Infanta of Portugal. His more theoretical arguments on natural law

undermine legitimate primogeniture in favour of the common law and the people's choice. Monarchy is based on contract. Monarchy itself is only one of many possible systems. The Bible does not necessarily endorse Kingship. Bad kings may be deposed: he mentions Tarquin the Proud and Julius Caesar, the latter being slain by Senators, as Doleman puts it, in revenge for his breaking all law, both human and divine. The similarities to Mornay and Ponet are clear enough and no theory or precedent embarrassing to Tudor thinking is missed. It is a most adroit piece of subversion.

This, then, was the pattern of Renaissance political debate. It was a debate that was thoroughly theological much of the time. The most untheological was, of course, Machiavelli, who saw religion as one more instrument of manipulation open to the Prince.

Milton's passage about Nimrod, the tip of a vast Renaissance debate on religion and politics, differs from, for example, Mornay's statement of similar ideas, by being written not in hope, but in knowledge of failure. The ideas of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* had come to nothing and the particular role of England in leading mankind to a new dispensation seemed to have collapsed. The Puritan project had failed. The Fall had determined mankind's political perverseness. The last political word of *Paradise Lost* is millennial, but the millennialism is of a chastened kind. This is our last strand of Renaissance religious politics to complete the pattern. But this, too, has medieval roots, going back to Joachim de Fiore's apocalyptic foretellings of history of the very early thirteenth century. The story of Puritanism's failure is the story of failed expectation. At the beginning the Puritan parliament listened to millennial sermons. Milton shared this, as the close of *Of Reformation* illustrates. Also, in *Eikonoklastes* of 1649, Milton sees the death of Charles as marking an important stage in the overthrow of the institution of monarchy that had begun with Nimrod, using the Book of Revelation as a frame of reference. But this was still the time of euphoria. As successive parliaments failed and as Cromwell became Protector, the main stream lost this vision. It survived in the Fifth Monarchy movement, which attempted unsuccessful rebellions against Cromwell and again in 1666. These were the last blows in the struggle against Antichrist and the last manifestations of the radical, antinomian, Anabaptist movement that rejected all civil and moral authority in expectation of King Jesus himself.

Milton, when he wrote *Paradise Lost*, knew that the church, in whatever form, would not be triumphant on earth. There are hints of this in *Of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* (1659). The few suffer while the church is just as likely to be a tyrant as the political ruler, as the passage about suppression of the Spirit tells us, in Book XII. 'So shall the world go on', except for those privy to 'the paradise within thee / Happier far', as Book

XII also says.

The theologically inspired tradition of rebellion that is apparent in the natural law debate shows that religion in the Renaissance and Reformation is far from being a force for conformity or a force that favoured the king or ruler. However, some New Historicists in recent years have tried to assert that religion was a tool in the hands of the Renaissance ruler, without seeing the other side of religion and without showing awareness of the natural law debate. It is worth expanding a little on this point and showing in conclusion how these new historicists seem to have missed one of the main ideological features of the age. The argument leads on to a consideration of other features of The New Historicists' work.

Jonathan Dollimore and Stephen Greenblatt have written intriguing accounts of their interpretations of how Tudor and Stuart absolutism used religion in Machiavellian fashion and of how religion was so much part of Tudor and Stuart culture and discourse that its Machiavellian, although sometimes unconscious, use made it a convenient ideological force in dealing with Algonquin Indians in the early Virginian colony. Dollimore, commenting on Greenblatt's essay 'Invisible Bullets', says '[he] takes as his position that religion was a kind of false consciousness perpetuated by the rulers to keep the ruled in their place' (Dollimore 1985: 11). Intriguing and thought-provoking as these New Historicist lines of argument are, there is a gap that relates to the preceding exposition of the natural law debate with Milton's *Nimrod* as a late presentation of a political controversy with a long history going back to before the reign of Elizabeth I. Religion was much more than a way by which rulers kept ruled in place, it was part of a powerful and open discourse about rebellion.

In going for the Machiavellian use of religion, and in making religion a prop for state authority, they show no sense of the relation of religion to political revolt. Religion is Marx's opium of the people, and no more (Dollimore 1989: 9). Both refer to Marlowe's covert 'atheism', to the effect that the beginning of religion was to keep man in awe. And both refer to Tillyard (Dollimore 1989: 6-7, Greenblatt 1988: 33). No-one doubts that Tillyard's was a very simplified view of Elizabethan 'culture' but Dollimore's and Greenblatt's restricting of religion to its Machiavellian use by Tudor authority is almost as restrictive as Tillyard's concept of the universally held views on order of the average Elizabethan, including Shakespeare. What both lack is the view of political theology that starts with Ponet and Christopher Goodman in Mary's reign, moves through du Plessis Mornay and the Doleman controversy and culminates in the execution of Charles I, with Milton's *Nimrod* as a final statement in the Restoration, after the Good Old Cause had failed.

Louis Montrose (1996: 9), in reviewing Greenblatt's work at a distance of some years in a chapter which tries to encapsulate the New Historicist

project, also talks of Tudor and Stuart ‘culture’ (quoting Greenblatt) as if this were all that needed saying. He furthermore still concerns himself with Greenblatt’s ideas of ‘containment’ without dealing with all those aspects of this ‘culture’ that were increasing making ‘containment’ impossible. And the whole argument about ‘containment’ that Greenblatt so persuasively expounds really collapses in the face of the vigorous revolutionary ideology that flows from Reformed theology’s political implications. Greenblatt (1988: 38) talks of ‘the self-validating, totalising character of Renaissance political theory’. What is lacking is the insight given by a book such as Quentin Skinner’s *The Age of Reformation*. He misses a whole tradition vital to the development of modern democratic thought. What we have to do with here is the early growth of the language of human rights and of democracy in the course of which two opposed concepts of natural law came into being. What is this ‘totalising character of Renaissance political theory’? Montrose is wrapped up in his own rhetoric rather than talking about the Renaissance.

Dollimore (1989: 13) cites Richard Hooker on the ‘politic’ use of religion, pointing out that Hooker was opposed to Machiavelli. It would have been more to the point to say that *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* was directed chiefly at the Puritans, at that time still mainly inside the Church of England, who were becoming increasingly subversive of what the establishment regarded as wholesome discipline. This early movement in the Church itself was to cause James’s outburst, soon after succeeding to the throne, at the Hampton Court conference of 1604: ‘No bishop no King, if they do not conform themselves I will harry them out of the land’.

Dollimore (1989: 106) does mention *Paradise Lost*, but only to suggest that Adam comes close to accusing God of being a ‘powerful sadist’ (citing Book X 743ff). In doing so, Dollimore is attempting the kind of argument that Shelley and Empson have produced more fully. This goes in the same paragraph as a reference to William Perkins, one of the most prolific of those orthodox neo-Calvinists, with whom Milton in *Paradise Lost* differs so radically, on the doctrine of election and on the psychology of the repentance and conversion process. Paradoxically, Milton was a much more orthodox Puritan in his doctrine of political rebellion. Dollimore should have looked more carefully at what Adam says before the Fall and after the process of reconciliation with both God and Eve with which Book X is concerned. He should then have proceeded through the political history of Book XI to the Nimrod passage in Book XII, and to the statement about the wolves in the Church later on, and finally to the statement about the ‘paradise within thee’, the last mode of resistance in a fallen world and Restoration England.

The New Historicism exists on two foundations, the uncovering of discourse and the textuality of history, being the heirs of neo-marxism,

Foucault and of post-structuralism. However, a fair amount of citing of texts and of what is really positivist research is evident in the work discussed immediately above. While discourse and textuality make against any statement of truth, the element of moral fervour in, for example, Dollimore's discussion of the Algonquin Indians, felled by the invisible bullets of the white man's diseases, shows that truth is indeed being asserted. An early colonial discourse is undermined and shown for what it is by facts. Foucault's own researches, by which he then points to the existence of dubious discourses, were apparently based on much archival work. The New Historicists are actually strongly positivistic in their research, relying on contemporary texts.

To assert that there are gaps in the knowledge and range of insight of the New Historicists themselves in their dealings with religion in relation to Renaissance politics and society has itself to be based on reference to Renaissance texts. One has to admit what Louis Montrose says (1996: 6) to the effect that when one discusses the past all one has is the surviving texts. These texts themselves form a greater text. One does not know what texts have been lost. Even if one had all the texts one would still not know what people said to one another or thought privately.

History can, indeed, be positivist only in a qualified way. One does not need post-modernism to tell one this. It is hardly a new discovery. As J.A. Froude says in *The Science of History*, a lecture to the Royal Institution on 5 February, 1864, the linking of 'science' and 'history' is dubious. 'Where it is so difficult to make out the truth on the commonest disputed fact in matters passing under our very eyes, how can we talk of a science in things long past, which come to us only through books? It often seems to me as if History was like a child's box of letters, with which we can spell any word we please. We have only to pick out such letters as we want, arrange them as we like, and say nothing about those which do not suit our purpose.' However, when we deal with a past represented by texts, we still have to consider the frequency of texts, whether the texts can be grouped or categorised, and whether the full spread of relevant texts has been taken into account. In other words, we must do the best we can, and some attempt at objectivity and truth must be made. As J.H. Plumb says 'the modern historian is crucified by this dilemma: he must act like a scientist although historical objectivity cannot exist' (1964: 30).

While one grants the case for a constrained objectivity, texts are still all one has to go on, and the neglect of a substantial body of texts, and hence of an important aspect of the thought of an age, cannot go unremarked. The political function of religion in the Renaissance cannot be limited to its Machiavellian use by authority. Neither can Montrose's rejection of positivism be allowed to pass without some demurral. A measure of positivism, as far as it can be taken, must be part of the historian's approach,

and the New Historicists place liberal reliance on texts and on positivistic research. As an example of yet another text which might have been known, and as a means to return to the theme of natural law, Innocent Gentillet's *A Discourse Upon the Meanes of Wel Governing* is useful. It was published in French in 1577 and translated into English in 1603. It is another example of French Huguenot influence in England, and of the broad tradition of Reformed political thought that existed in Tudor England and overflowed into the period of Stuart rule. It is, of course, an attack on Catholic monarchy in France. Its appeal to English Puritanism is its appeal to both natural justice and also to traditional law as bastions against overweening monarchical power. Part of the Puritan defence was the common law tradition, as is mentioned earlier in this article. Lastly, Gentillet's work is an attack on Machiavellianism for its failure to consider the moral imperatives of natural law.

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Opsomming

Milton se vertolking van Nimrod in die begin van Boek XII van *Paradise Lost* maak 'n uiters belangrike bydrae tot die politiese tema wat dwarsdeur *Paradise Lost* loop. Dit is ook 'n laat 17de eeuse uiteensetting van 'n sleutel politieke debat wat die Renaissance van Engeland, en eintlik die hele Renaissance, oorheers het. Hierdie debat is dié tussen modelle van die 'natuurlike reg', waarvan een koninklike gesag gesteun het en die ander die omverwerping van tirannie regverdig het. Laasgenoemde model stam uit 'n tradisie van gereformeerde teologie maar ook uit Jesuitiese denke, terwyl eersgenoemde model deur die outokratiese Tudor- en Stuart-heerskappy verkies is. Die laaste gedeelte van die artikel spreek sommige van die 'Nu-Historici' se verkeerdlike bewerings aan dat godsdien in die Renaissance deur staatsgesag op Machiavelliaanse wysegebruik is om gesagstrukture te handhaaf, aangesien hulle nie erken dat godsdien ook een van die belangrikste bronne van idees oor revolusie is nie. 'n Ontleding van aspekte van die metodologie van die Nu-Historici word ook aangepak.

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