
John Milton: Postmodern Hero?

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John Milton: A Hero of Our Time, by David Hawkes. *Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2009. 354 pp. \$28.*

Instead of putting John Milton in the context of his own time, David Hawkes proposes in this study to put him in the context of ours. He refutes the anticipated charge that such an attempt would be anachronistic by pointing out that Milton thought of himself as a prophet who was speaking to the future. Hawkes believes that the great poet and political writer's life and work offer solutions to our own predicament. A prophet not honored in his own country or time, Milton was often considered an extremist in his political views—he not only favored deposing the king of England but justified his execution—and his private ones: he wrote several tracts arguing that divorce on the basis of incompatibility was justifiable. That the citizens of his own country failed to adopt his views he attributed to

their slavish mentality, a state of mind natural to human beings but which the poet thought could—and should—be resisted. Hawkes agrees, and he enlists Milton as an ally in his own iconoclasm regarding perceived evils of the present day.

If there is a salient characteristic that organizes Milton's life and work, Hawkes believes it is that he stood for an "ethics of signification." By this he means that images, including those created by words, law, religion, and customs of all kinds, should be truthful representations of reality. If they are not, then they must be reformed lest they enslave humanity to various falsehoods. Hawkes finds that this principle governs Milton's views of politics, religion, and personal conduct. For example, King Charles I, Milton felt, had become an idol that attracted an undeserved reverence, and his true nature and the true nature of his relationship to the

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English people had been lost in the unreality of a fetish. Likewise, Milton and his fellow Puritans thought the Church of England, which had recently re-instituted icons in its liturgy, was fostering the worship of idols rather than of God. Finally, Milton believed that the law, which made adultery the only legitimate grounds of divorce, privileged the physical relationship over the intellectual and spiritual one. Outworn custom essentially made an idol of the physicality of marriage at the expense of more important aspects of the relationship. To Hawkes, Milton's writing acted as "the antidote to idolatry." He cut to the truth, and that characteristic, Hawkes believes, makes his work even more essential to our times than to his.

A motif related to idolatry in this study is usury. Chapter one, in fact, is entitled "The Fruit of Usury." Hawkes is at his best as he establishes the importance of money-lending and, more generally, an emerging market economy in Milton's time. Milton's father was disinherited from his family's landed estate because he became a committed Protestant. He went to London and learned to make a living as a scrivener and money-lender. Therefore, the poet son's welfare, including the leisure he had for study, was entangled with the dubious practice of usury. Hawkes explains that the "breeding of money"—charging or paying interest—was looked upon with suspicion and even as Satanic at that time because it gave power to something not originally existing

in nature and created an adversarial relationship between lender and borrower. Son John himself became responsible for some of his father's accounts, and thus was implicated in the practice. Having a father who was emblematic of a change from landed wealth to mercantile wealth put Milton in the middle not only of an essential debate on the ethics of usury itself, but also on what Hawkes sees as the larger issue of idolatry. To Milton, the source of slavery since the Fall of Mankind was idolatry. Money, seeming to take on a life of its own, easily mutated into an idol.

The author of this book argues that we in the modern world would do well to share some of the seventeenth century's suspicion of usury rather than taking the "money breeding" that is the basis of our market economy for granted. Here Hawkes uses Milton's opposition to idolatry as a pretext for lambasting capitalist society which "is idolatrous to a degree surpassing the worst nightmares of seventeenth-century iconoclasts." With its dependence on images, the market economy has enslaved "virtually everyone in capitalist society." Firmly believing that being ruled by images is evil, Hawkes enlists Milton, who consistently fought against the sources of enslavement, to his cause even though he has to admit that the poet's attitude toward usury *per se* was ambivalent rather than condemnatory.

Milton argued that the slavish mentality was one that could not

go beyond the material world, the world of appearance, and reach the spiritual reality behind it. Hawkes believes this conviction set him against the Cavaliers politically, biblical literalists religiously, and his first wife domestically. That Hawkes has a political bias in this book is indicated by this nudge in its direction: "The religious fundamentalists of the twenty-first century would, by Milton's standards, exhibit a slavish mentality." Who, then, would Milton have felt most comfortable with in our time? It is quite obvious to Hawkes that he would have hung out with Revolutionaries of the Left. Milton's revolutionary asceticism, for example, is compared to Robespierre, Lenin, and Che Guevara's. The interregnum, to the author of this study, resembled Pol Pot's Cambodian revolution. One soon realizes that the enterprise of turning Milton into a modern hero is a more particular attempt to claim him as a *Leftist* hero. Hawkes does not address the rather obvious objection that the philosophical materialism of these modern revolutionaries would certainly have been anathema to Milton. Nor does one recognize in the postmodern, Hawkesian hero the Milton who had committed the Bible to memory, helped administer a theocracy, and composed *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Samson Agonistes* (1671).

Indeed, part of the author's effort to make Milton relevant is to de-emphasize, update, or distort his religious beliefs. For example, he writes, "we do not need to be-

lieve in God to appreciate Milton's ideas." Did Adam, Eve, Satan, and Gabriel actually exist? Not in Milton's mind, argues Hawkes: "Milton consistently opposed literalistic [sic] interpretations of scripture. [His] figures are personified concepts, ideas, psychological states and experiences. As soon as we understand Milton's religious terminology as a network of tropes and metaphors, a mythologized mode of expressing philosophical, political, even sexual positions, then their implications for our own situation will become clear." Unfortunately, this argument reduces Milton's art to just another idol, one that twenty-first century skeptics can worship because it hollows out anything resembling a seventeenth century Puritan's religious beliefs. In a remarkable example of tendentiousness, Hawkes claims that in *Paradise Lost* Milton "comes close" to equating Christ with reason thus anticipating the Deism enforced by Robespierre in the French Revolution. "Milton could never believe anything irrational, and so he boldly advances an anti-Trinitarian theology." Such an outlandish conclusion suggests a kind of twenty-first century secular wishful thinking rather than scholarship rooted in supportive evidence.

One virtue of this study is Hawkes's analysis of what are called the pamphlet wars. He introduces and analyzes Milton's political pamphlets with which most readers would not be familiar and thereby emphasizes Milton's deep involvement in the English Civil War. Sev-

eral times, however, he uses Milton's inflammatory rhetoric to paint a portrait of a warped and disgusting man to whom modern readers can condescend. For example, in *Of Reformation* (1641-42), when Milton hopes that corrupt bishops will spend eternity in hell, Hawkes describes him as "slavering with anticipation at the prospect" and attributes his attitude to "the tradition of perverted sadism in Christian depictions of Hell." Moreover, Hawkes applies some twenty-first century pop psychology, averring that Milton could not have made such statements and maintained "a soul at ease with itself." A similar example of simplistic psychological analysis is the assumption that, in *The Reason of Church Government* (1641-42), Milton's vehemence against churchmen who profited from ecclesiastical practices was the result of "guilty neurosis." The reason for that guilt, Hawkes asserts, was that he and his father had loaned money to others in return for interest. In *The Second Defence of the English People* (1654), Milton "bitchily" (Hawkes's word) attacked Alexander More, writer of the preface to the anonymous *The Cry of the Royal Blood* (1652), leading the author to imagine that "his various personal and political travails had driven Milton beyond the point of reason." It is true that his pamphlets were usually bitter in tone, but beyond reason?

The final chapter of this study is devoted at least ostensibly to *Paradise Lost*. However, a good quarter of it takes up the contemporary po-

litical causes of the author of this book apparently with the hope that Milton will give those causes standing. If there is one quality that a postmodern cultural critic delights in discovering in a writer, it is that he or she is "subversive." Hawkes finds Milton so. He sees in the blind poet's epic the inspiration for multifarious revolutionary movements, making no distinctions between the American, French, and Russian nor the Romantic and Socialist; nor does he justify the linking of the revolutions to particular positions that Milton adopted, seeming to take it for granted that any revolution justifiably can claim Milton as one of its progenitors. One doubts that Milton would agree. The chapter also denies any Christian intentions in the poem, making the astonishing argument that Milton's purpose in writing a twelve-book epic about God and Satan's warfare and the fall of man is "to explore psychological states and experiences," as if he were a modernist. Here Hawkes is guilty of blurring essential differences between two different ages to stretch the case that moderns can find relevance, and validation, in Milton.

Although the author does not follow the Romantics in making Satan the hero of the work, he does suggest that Milton's personal grudge against God was the reason he sought to justify the ways of God to man and, perhaps as Satan did, challenge God. Hawkes believes that the aging poet had much to be angry about including the failure of

the Puritan cause, his blindness, and the deaths of two wives and some of his children. However, Milton's valiant references to Paul's words that God's strength is made perfect in weakness, his recalling the precedents of blind seers who saw more clearly than their sighted fellows, and his own words to an opponent that he was no longer distracted by superficial images but focused on the truth (all cited by Hawkes) would argue even more persuasively that he was reconciled. The following quote, in fact, indicates serenity: ". . . in my blindness, I enjoy in no inconsiderable degree the favour of the Deity; who regards me with more tenderness and compassion in proportion as I am able to behold nothing but himself."

The beauty of this sentiment, however, is lost in a chapter that becomes a veritable compendium of the academic Left's *causes célèbres* . . . and its fears. Terrified of organized religion, Hawkes asserts it "a commonplace" that contemporary society is in a "post-secular age" with a resurgence of religion occurring "from Alabama to Jerusalem to Pakistan." But he associates himself with Milton and "those of us who . . . follow no organized religion." Second, Hawkes seeks to capitalize (if the pun can be excused) on the recent worldwide recession by discovering as the most malevolent of evils "the particular, peculiar way in which money behaves today. . . ." Through usury, money is out of control, and we are blind to it because ours is the only society in history,

save for Milton's England, not to regard usury as sinful. Third, the author sees in Milton a sexual liberationist. In his most contrary textual interpretation, Hawkes claims that the passage in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* that begins "Hail wedded love" advocates "the permissibility, even the preferentiality, of extramarital sex." Hawkes's reasoning is that there would not have been a marriage ceremony in Eden; Milton himself had a disastrous first marriage; therefore, the passage implies that any couple who is compatible intellectually qualifies as "wedded." This interpretation suggests that establishing an older writer's relevance to our time depends most heavily on a postmodern critic's ingenuity in constructing perverse readings of him.

John Milton: A Hero of Our Time suffers from a serious lack of unity, not only of intention but of method. The study seems to be two books, one a fairly well documented account of the seventeenth-century John Milton and another that consists of scattered assertions about his potential role in the postmodern world. When the two intentions collide, interpretations of Milton's life and work are frequently tendentious, unsupported by specific documentation, and animated by questionable assumptions. Professor Hawkes's views of the modern world are predictable and shallowly presented, as if they do not require the level of evidence and scholarship that his work on seventeenth-century culture exhibits. Thus the

welding of the present and past in this study is not very sound, and Milton's poetry suffers when it is made the servant of ideology. Furthermore, the intensity of this book's

political advocacy, not to mention the false pretenses under which it is offered, is irritating to a reader who picks up this study wanting to know more about a great poet.