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James S. Baumlin

Missouri State University

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“Foretell[ing] Ruin”: The Prophetic *Ethos* Of Milton’s “Lycidas”

James S. Baumlin
Missouri State University

Yet once more I find myself indebted to Mr. Thomas Johnson, not just for his invitation to speak on the subject of John Milton (1608-1674), but for opening his living room to my class in Renaissance literature. Here I stand, surrounded by book shelves, a cozy fire to my left, my well-fed students before me. (Ah, the scholar’s life!) For this evening, my subject will be Milton’s famed funeral elegy, “Lycidas,” which I will read against the backdrop of the age’s religious politics. Actually, I’ll begin and end with “Lycidas.” In between, I’ll be presenting the “proof texts,” mostly from Milton’s prose works, that sustain my reading of the Miltonic *ethos*. I’m struck by the poem’s inclusion of a second voice: in the midst of his lamentations, the speaker is interrupted, answered by an allegorized Spirit. It is this interruption, this co-presence of a second subjectivity (which I’ll identify with the Augustinian-transcendent “inner Teacher”) that makes Milton’s a “prophetic” *ethos*. This lecture, I should add, expands on materials from “The Protestant Allegory of ‘Lycidas,’” a chapter from my forthcoming book, *Theologies of Language in English Renaissance Literature*.¹

¹ See *Theologies of Language in English Renaissance Literature: Reading Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012). *Theologies* will be in print by the time this present essay appears, and I thank the press editor at Lexington (a scholarly division of Rowman and Littlefield) for permission to draw from these materials. Quotations from Milton’s prose are taken from the Columbia Edition (henceforth CE): *The Works of John Milton*, 18 vols., ed. Frank Allen Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-38). Quotations from the poetry are from *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957). Note the abbreviations for *Paradise Lost* (PL) and *Samson Agonistes* (SA).

“Lycidas” was first published in 1637, at a time when Archbishop William Laud’s “policy of Thorough” was in force, imposing the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and Anglo-Catholic ceremonialism upon the church service while silencing the Bible-preaching of Puritan and Nonconformist pastors. When republished in his 1645 collection of poems, Milton prefaced his pastoral with a prose abstract: “In this monody the author bewails a learned friend, unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637; and by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted Clergy, then in their height.”² By this later date, Laud had been executed by a Presbyterian Parliament now in open rebellion against the King and his Anglican bishops. In this prose abstract, then, Milton could openly boast of what his pastoral had dared not state explicitly, without fear of censorship and reprisal.³ So, I begin with Milton’s declaration, innocuous to most modern readers, that the poem “foretells the ruin of our corrupted Clergy.” How seriously are we to take this claim?

Much is at stake in the declaration. The poem’s “grim wolf” (128)—which “creep[s] and intrude[s], and climb[s] into the fold” (115), preying upon the spiritually “hungry Sheep”

² *Complete Poems*, p. 120.

³ For “Lycidas” borders on libel (if not outright treason) in its attack against the person of Archbishop Laud. Also attacked is the Laudian Church’s elevation of ritual over preaching; its distribution of plural benefices to churchmen neglectful of their pastoral duties; and its “feeding” of congregations with presumably false (Anglo-Catholic) doctrine. As the poet writes, “The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed, / But swoll’n with wind, and the rank mist they draw, / Rot inwardly” (125-27).

In *John Milton and the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1977), historian Christopher Hill writes: “it is difficult for us to grasp today how severe government censorship was in the early Seventeenth Century” (p. 65); sporadic but harrowing, it sought to deter public criticism by making violent spectacles of offenders. Copies of “Lycidas” could have been burned; under the earlier Tudor monarchs, Milton himself could have burned, had the extent of his treason been proved. Under the Stuarts, imprisonment was more likely, though the executioner’s scaffold remained a threat. In 1649, Charles I would himself ascend this scaffold, his head removed by order of Parliament. (Proudly, Milton would declare himself among the regicides or “king killers.”)

In his *Defence of Poesie* (1595), Sir Philip Sidney observes the pastoral’s “pretty tales of wolves and sheep” (p. 362 in *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian Vickers [Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1999]). Since an “open crying out against naughtiness” (*Defence*, p. 362) might get one’s books burned, authors sought more subtle means of criticism. “Conveying an attitude rather than a precise statement” (Hill, p. 51), “sharp criticisms could be made” under the guise of pastoral, with the key supplied “to those in the know” (Hill, p. 50): it so happens that Milton presents the age with its most impressive poetic model.

(125) or English flock—makes for a thinly-veiled attack against Laud. To treat the Archbishop's execution as a "prophecy fulfilled" justifies it as an act of Providence, making Parliament God's agent. Similarly, the Civil War being waged at that moment against Charles I would become a Holy War, necessary if bloody. So, if "Lycidas" in 1637 was a veiled attack that, by 1645, had become a prophecy fulfilled, then the next (theo-)logical step would be to declare its shepherd-poet a prophet indeed. It's easy for readers to declare Milton's "foretell[ing]" a mere metaphor or to say that he "got lucky" in predicting the episcopal clergy's "ruin." (Nowadays, we might call this an "I told you so" moment.) But Milton's typological understanding of Providential History—as presented most famously in his prose treatise, *Areopagitica* (1644)—is unambiguous: Milton's England is God's chosen people, "a Nation of Prophets" (*CE* 4: 341) called to rise up against the yoke of tyranny. And, if England becomes the new Israel, then Milton becomes its Spirit-led spokesperson.⁴ The poet's view of history is millenarian and apocalyptic; and, more than give witness to the Providential aspect of his times, Milton sought to speak on God's behalf, furthering His fore-ordained plan for His chosen people. Moreover, it is not Milton-the-man, but the Spirit or Augustinian "inner Teacher," that speaks through his prophetic declarations.

As a term of classical rhetoric, *ethos* describes the verbal *representation* or construction of character; in this restricted sense, *ethos* belongs to texts *per se*, and not to authorial biography. With that said, the incarnationist claims of Miltonic *ethos* continuously identify the living poet with/in his words: as Milton writes in *Apology Against a Pamphlet* (1642), "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, *ought him selfe to be a true Poem*, that is a composition, and patterne of the best

⁴ In *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), Sharon Achinstein writes: "Israel was not just a model for England, as Rome or Greece might be," but England was itself "a recapitulation of Israel" (p. 17). Thoroughly orthodox among English Puritans, this aspect of Renaissance thought remains current in some religious circles today. The millenarian strain of much Bible preaching—tied to a typological reading of the Old and New Testaments, wherein modern individuals' lives and actions recapitulate Scriptural events—allows preachers to name the U.S.A. as "God's chosen." For the logic of Biblical typology is such, that the same effects hold for nations (whether seventeenth-century England or twenty-first-century America) as for individuals: one must look to Scriptural archetypes for one's meaning, place, and role within Providential History.

and honourablest things” (CE 3: 303; emphasis added). In declaring his own blamelessness, Milton enhances his claims to Spirit-guidance, grounding his *ethos* in the typology of the Hebraic prophet.

Such is the first stage of my thesis. While I am not the first to explore the poet’s prophetic “authority,” I’m content to make this present lecture the boldest formulation of it to date.⁵ Of course, such a thesis flies in the teeth of “mainstream” Milton scholarship, which has tended to stress the poet’s classicism.⁶ In anticipating other critics’ criticism, I would point to the preponderance of textual evidence from the poetry as well as prose, asking one simple question: *Shall we take Milton at his word?*

The second stage of my thesis follows from the first, though it raises further controversies. Here it’s not the scholar’s classicized image that I am questioning, but rather the popular image of Milton-the-Puritan—an image/reputation that held sway through the mid-nineteenth century and abides to this day. The term “Puritan” holds in an important technical sense: Milton saw the English Church *in need of purifying*, speaking “even [of] the reforming of reformation itself” (CE 4: 340). But the terms of Milton’s personal, indeed private theology diverge radically from Calvinism. I’ve just referred to the *privacy* of Milton’s beliefs, since *De Doctrina Christiana*—his Latin treatise on systematic theology—remained unpublished in his lifetime, known only to a handful of friends and family members. Rediscovered in 1823 and translated in 1825, the work scandalized by taking England’s epic poet and liberty’s champion out of the ranks of Puritan/Calvinist orthodoxy and placing him among the age’s rag-tag assembly of “swelling enthusiasts”—

⁵ As John Guillory notes, “Milton’s habitual stance, both in his poetry and in his prose, is to present himself as he is, or believes himself to be” (p. 104). The “I” of his poetry “always refers to John Milton, and this identity of self and representation (again, we do not decide the possibility of this identity) is bound to Milton’s conception of his authority as a poet” (p. 104). I would add that this “authority as a poet” rests not upon classical models, but upon Milton’s typological identification with the Hebrew “Prophets of old” (CE 3: 314). I quote from John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

⁶ It’s true that classical tradition (which Milton invokes throughout his poetry) projects the ancient poet as *vates* or “seer.” Claims of prophecy can thus be “explained” (though inadequately, I would argue) as a classicizing trope. For a survey of this tradition, see William Kerri-gan, *The Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1974).

such as the “Fifth Monarchist,” Anna Trapnel, the “Ranter,” Ebiezer Coppe, and (most especially) the “Quaker,” John Foxe—people who dared claim private revelations from God and dared proclaim those revelations in the streets, in pulpits, in print.

For the orthodox viewpoint, we can look to William Perkins, arguably the most influential English Calvinist of his age. As Perkins writes in his *Art of Prophesying* (1606), “if it be demanded which is the most excellent gift of all, doubtless the praise must be given to prophesying” (p. 331). True, and yet the work’s full title—*The Art of Prophesying: Or a Treatise Concerning the Sacred and Only True Manner and Method of Preaching*—identifies his subject as methodical preaching, *not* Spirit-guided prophecy. In his *Calling of the Ministry* (1605), Perkins refuses to make “any allowance for the claims people make that they have received ‘revelations’” (p. 90). For “these have no substance,” Perkins declares: “they are either dreams of their own, or illusions of the devil” (*Calling*, p. 90). Those who make such claims “despise both human learning and the study of the Scriptures, and trust exclusively in ‘revelations of the Spirit.’ But God’s Spirit does not work except on the foundation of the Word” (*Calling* 90). Jean Calvin himself openly derided “those swelling enthusiasts, in whose idea the only true illumination consists in carelessly laying aside, and bidding adieu to the Word of God, while . . . they fasten upon any dreaming notion which may have casually sprung into their minds” (*Institutes* 1.4.3). As to the Scriptural prophets “who excelled by special revelation; *none such now exist*, or they are less manifest” (*Institutes* 4.3.4; emphasis added).⁷ On these points of doctrine, Milton disagreed. In the preface to *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton grounds his personal “rule of faith” upon private revelation, making it the sole (or solely *reliable*) criterion over matters of faith:

If indeed those with whom I have to contend were able to produce direct attestation from heaven to the truth of the doctrine which they espouse [*qui voce ipsa divina explicatam sibi coelitus*], it would be nothing less than

⁷ I am quoting *The Art of Prophesying* from *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. Ian Breward (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1970), pp. 325-49. See also *The Calling of the Ministry*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson (Carlisle, PA: Banner, 1996) and *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

impiety to venture to raise, I do not say a clamor, but so much as a murmur against it. (*CE* 14: 179)⁸

Among Milton's contemporaries, moderate Anglicans would have deplored the very notion of a "direct attestation from heaven," as would most Puritans; only the more radical Sectarians and Nonconformists would sympathize.

Whereas Perkins refers to Paul's enumeration of "gifts" (*Art*, p. 331), the capacity for "discerning of spirits" (1 Cor. 12: 10) has neither relevance nor direct application in a world where prophecy had shrunk to "mere" preaching. For Perkins as for Calvin, there is no shareable, reliable public test of private revelation. For Milton, contrarily, the Spirit seeks out persons of "discern[ment]," gifted with the power "of winnowing and sifting every doctrine" (*CE* 14: 11); and it is upon this charismatic gift that Milton grounds his "rule of faith." Within this Spirit-led, inner-Word theology, Milton was emboldened to declare "a twofold Scripture; one external, which is the written word, and the other internal, which is the Holy Spirit, written in the hearts of believers" (*CE* 16: 273). I shall return to this passage from *De Doctrina Christiana*, as it supports the second stage of my thesis—which is that John Milton ought to be deemed the greatest, and likely the first, English poet to embrace a distinctively Pentecostal theology. For now, suffice it to say that the Spiritualist terms of Milton's theology proved anathema to the age's Calvinists.

In "Lycidas," a fellow poet's untimely death throws the speaker into a personal crisis. Pursuing worldly fame, the speaker has sacrificed all for art, learning to "scorn delights, and live laborious days" (72); despite such sacrifice, Atropos—Greek goddess of fate—"slits the thin-spun life" (76), dashing one's aspirations. Yet an inner voice interrupts his complaint, offering spiritual correction: "But not the praise," / *Phoebus* repli'd,

⁸ The Yale edition (trans. John Carey) is perhaps more precise: "If my opponents could show that the doctrine they defend *was revealed to them by a voice from heaven*, he would be an impious wretch who dared to raise so much as a murmur against it, let alone a sustained protest" (*YP* 6: 204; emphasis added). See *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., ed. Don Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-82).

and touch'd" the pastoral poet's "trembling ears" (76-77).⁹ A higher fame, this voice declares, "lives and spreads aloft by . . . the perfect witness of all-judging *Jove*" (81-82). Following classical tradition, Milton's speaker names the intruding voice *Phoebus*, Greek god of inspiration. The paganism should not mislead us: as George Williamson writes, "obviously Phoebus . . . has been baptized."¹⁰



Figure 1. Georgette de Montenay, *Sed ex me*.

Courtesy of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In a pastoral that takes the artist's calling as a central theme, Milton offers readers his first "major" poetic rendering of the Holy Spirit's *sermo innatus* or "inward speech" (*De*

⁹ A popular Renaissance genre, the emblem book—like Georgette de Montenay's *Monumentum Emblematum Christianorum* (Frankfort: 1619)—gave visual depiction to spiritual events. In Montenay's *Sed ex me*, God touches man's inward ear, which remains otherwise "deaf to divine warnings" (*Divinos tota ad monitus onsurduit auris*). (See Figure 1). Montenay returns to this theme in *Multi Sunt vocati*: those deaf to God's calling (figured by the tolling bell) "bring evil upon themselves" (*surdum / Quisquis agit, propria dat sibi fraude malum*). (See Figure 2.)

¹⁰ *Seventeenth Century Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 246.

Trinitate (9.12).¹¹ As Augustine writes in a homily on 1 John, “the sound of our words strikes the ears, but the Teacher is within” (3.13).¹² In similar manner, “Lycidas” records the “inward speech” of Augustine’s *interior Magister*—that is, the Spirit as “inner Teacher,” whose inspiration lends the poet’s words a higher, prophetic authority.



Figure 2. Georgette de Montenay, *Multi sunt vocati*.

Courtesy of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

“Lycidas” is not the first of his poems to pursue this theme. “At a Vacation Exercise” and “Il Penseroso” both declare the younger Milton’s poetic-prophetic aspirations. In the former, the poet imagines his “deep transported mind . . . soar[ing] / Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav’n’s door . . . Listening to what unshorn *Apollo* sings” (33-37). In the latter, he looks to “attain / To something like Prophetic strain” (173-74). In either

¹¹ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991).

¹² In his annotations to *De Magistro* (p. 238), Joseph M. Colleran translates this passage from Augustine’s *In Joannis Epistulam ad Parthos Tractatus*. See *St. Augustine: The Greatness of the Soul. The Teacher*, trans. Joseph M. Colleran (New York: Newman, 1950).

case, his vocabulary remains thoroughly neoclassical: it is a Neoplatonic *extasis* that “bring[s] all Heav’n before [his] eyes” (“Il Penseroso” 167).

After “Lycidas,” however, the poet will invoke his “heav’nly muse” (*PL* 1.6) directly, depicting specific moments of interruption and sudden insight, of inspiration and correction. In Sonnet XIX, the poet (by then blind) recounts the inward speech of an allegorized “Patience” (8): “God doth not need / Either man’s work or his own gifts . . . ” (9-10). In *Paradise Lost*, similarly, Milton invokes the classical muse of astronomy: “Descend from Heaven, *Urania*, by that name / If rightly thou art called” (*PL* 7.1-2). Yet it is “the meaning, not the name” (*PL* 7.5) that the poet calls. His inspiration comes not from the Greek muse but from the Holy Spirit, Whom he addresses directly: “For thou art heavenly, she [*Urania*] an empty dream” (*PL* 7.39). The simplest, most direct depiction of sudden inspiration occurs in *Samson Agonistes*, when the Israelite champion “feel[s] / Some rousing motions” (*SA* 1381-82) within. Only in his last poems would Milton drop the classical tropes entirely, presenting inspiration as a real (if ineffable) event and moment-in-time.

Following Milton’s “rule of faith” (as outlined above), only a person of “discern[ment]” (*CE* 14: 11) could judge such claims; certainly I make no judgment thereof. The salient point is that Milton’s poet *presents himself* as Spirit-led, and that he expects the assent of readers similarly guided. (Spirit-guidance, indeed, becomes an enabling premise and authorially-imposed “rule” of Milton’s hermeneutic.) Granted, it’s the writer’s *ethos* that I’m pursuing, not biography *per se*; still, the interpretive history surrounding Milton’s charismatic beliefs brings biography to the fore, and I would be remiss in not mentioning his affinities with one particular seventeenth-century sect: Quakerism.

Since its recovery in 1823, readers have puzzled over Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana* and its heterodoxies, beginning with its declaration of “a twofold Scripture” (*CE* 16: 273).¹³ To the Right Reverend Charles Richard Sumner—first editor and translator of

¹³ In his own age, Milton was known disparagingly as “the Divorcer,” given his treatises that sought Scriptural support for dissolving an unhappy marriage. (These were not well received back then, nor are they read much now.) Milton pursues this same heterodoxy in *De Doctrina Christiana*, to which he adds the downright heresies of mortalism (or “soul sleeping”), Arminianism (or the doctrine of “sufficient grace,” which ran counter to Calvinist notions of lim-

Milton's Latin treatise—such a passage stood out: “it is singular,” writes the Anglican bishop, “that Milton should have fallen into this error, which is that of the Quakers.”¹⁴ Though himself a student of English Dissenters, Christopher Hill lets slip a similar touch of surprise: “The curve of Milton's career,” writes Hill, “quite surprisingly follows that of the Quakers: his support for Cromwell in 1649 and 1653, his growing disillusion under the Protectorate, his rejection of all organized churches, the traumatic effect on him of the Restoration, leading to apparent political quietism and withdrawal from politics whilst still hoping for ultimate divine revenge.”¹⁵

While admitting that the English poet “shares with the Quakers an affirmation of universal grace and free will” as well as an “hostility toward Calvinist predestination,” Stephen M. Fallon stops short of acknowledging a Spiritualist, charismatic Milton:

For all his claims that he is one of the “selected heralds of peace . . . ,” Milton never sounds like an enthusiast claiming a personal and ecstatic vision of God. One cannot imagine his sharing Coppe's putative experience with angels of vengeance He is not given to visions like Trapnel's. It is the experimental knowledge of God . . . that seems lacking in Milton.¹⁶

Granted, the prose polemicist never rants or quakes. John R. Knott, Jr. argues similarly: Milton “did not fall into a trance and hear voices, like Winstanley, nor did he identify with Jeremiah to the extent of feeling the word of God as a fire in his bones. Milton in-

ited atonement and “double election”), and Arianism (or denial of the divinity of Christ). Had Milton's treatise fallen into the wrong hands, an Inquisitorial court would have ordered him burned—at least four times. There's no doubt that Milton would not have, nor could he have, published such a work in his lifetime.

¹⁴ Quoted in Alden Sampson, *Studies in Milton and an Essay on Poetry* (New York: Moffat, 1913), p. 182).

¹⁵ *John Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 112.

¹⁶ *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Representation and Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 35, 38.

voked Jeremiah by way of analogy, chiefly to justify the vehemence of his writing.”¹⁷ Interpreted thus, Milton’s Hebraic *ethos* becomes a pose or ruse—a rhetorical artifice at best, intended “chiefly to justify” the polemicist’s vituperative style.¹⁸

We cannot know whether Milton enjoyed “experimental knowledge of God,” as Fallon puts it.¹⁹ We do know that Milton wanted his readership to believe in (and approve) this “knowledge,” and that he used this same “experimental knowledge” as a means “of winnowing” his readers, proving their worth. Fallon makes one point that I would qualify, which is that Milton’s “self-representations as virtuous prophet are inflected through a secular, classical prism.”²⁰ Unsettled by the image of a “swelling enthusiast,” scholars have draped a classicizing mantle over Milton’s Hebraic-prophetic shoulders, however ill-fitting: this classicizing tendency belongs not to one or several of Milton’s students, but to Milton studies generally.²¹

¹⁷ *The Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Responses to the Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 106.

¹⁸ Granted, Milton takes especial care over his writerly self-image. In *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642), he answers critics by invoking a “rhetoric of zeal”:

But when God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in mans will what he shall say or what he shall conceal. If he shall think to be silent, as *Jeremiah* did, . . . he would be forc’t to confesse as he confest, *his word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, I was weary with forbearing, and could not stay.* Which might teach these times not suddenly to condemn all things that are sharply spoken, or vehemently written (*CE* 3: 231)

¹⁹ *Milton’s Peculiar Grace*, p. 38.

²⁰ *Milton’s Peculiar Grace*, p. 39. Fallon begins by outlining the Ciceronian-humanist basis of Miltonic *ethos* (pp. 21-44); and yet the Hebraic prophet, not the classical orator, dominates his subsequent discussions of Milton’s mature self-image (see pp. 92-99, 140-41, 157-59, 160-63, 217-21, 259-60). The qualification that I would make can be stated succinctly. In his prose exordia, Milton’s polemicist invokes a Ciceronian or Isocratean *ethos*; at strategic moments, however, the speaker turns inevitably to Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel. Miltonic *ethos* thus inscribes a movement from classical to Judeo-Christian archetypes—in effect, “from shadowy types to truth.”

²¹ I should mention that some scholars—though a minority voice among students of Milton—have questioned its authorship. See, for example, William F. Hunter’s *Visitation Unimplor’d: Milton and the Authorship of De Doctrina Christiana* (1998). Writing in summation of recent arguments, John P. Rumrich declares that “Milton may be confidently identified as the author of *De Doctrina Christiana*” (p. 232). See his “Provenance of *De Doctrina Christiana*: A View

In *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642)—written but a few years after “Lycidas”—Milton once again links his poetic and prophetic ambitions. “Covenant[ing]” with his “knowing reader,” the “payment” that he promises is an epic poem in English:

Neither do I think it shame to covenant with any knowing reader, that for some few years yet I may go on trust with him toward the payment of what I am now indebted, as being a work not to be rays’d from the heat of youth, or the vapours of wine, . . . nor to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her Siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternall Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his Seraphim with the hallow’d fire of his Altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases (*CE* 3: 340-41)

The allusion to Isaiah 6: 6-7 makes for an explicit typological identification between the aspiring poet and the Biblical prophet. The “few years” that Milton here requests turned into decades, as the first edition of *Paradise Lost* appeared in 1667, long after the English Revolution’s collapse. Still, the prose polemicist boldly declares the source of the poet’s later inspiration: neither wine nor the muses, but the “eternall Spirit,” to Whom he offers “devout prayer.”

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said: Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6: 8). So speaks the prophet. Just as Isaiah was “touch[ed] and purif[ied]” (*CE* 3: 341), so Milton prayerfully anticipates his own poetic-prophetic calling. For the third and final stage of my thesis, I shall turn to Milton’s late prose and give further elaboration upon his prophetic *ethos*; specifically, I wish to show how Milton uses Providential History and Biblical typology to explain the ultimate *failure* of the English Revolution. Like the Old Testament prophets, the Milton-

of the Present State of the Controversy,” in *Milton and the Grounds of Contention*, ed. Mark R. Keeley, Michael Lieb, and John T. Shawcross (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003), pp. 214-233.

Once one accepts *De Doctrina* as Milton’s own, the meanings of his poems necessarily change. An Arminian, Arian, Pentecostal Milton cannot be kept corralled within the classical-Calvinist binary of traditional scholarship.

ic polemicist cannot expect his teachings to convert the stubborn masses to whom God has sent him; his words prove a witness, rather, and a rebuke to the English people—as *The Ready and Easy Way* (1659) illustrates.

Years earlier in *Areopagitica*, Milton had declared the English nation “chos’n before any other, that out of her as of *Sion* should be proclaim’d . . . the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation” (CE 340). But while the political upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s fueled the Millenarian hope for an England freed from tyranny, the Commonwealth came at last to ruin: with much pomp, Charles II returned from exile. And Milton was arrested in turn, threatened with execution for having written in defense of regicide. More than political failure, the 1660 Restoration presented further proof that the English nation remained viciously sin-weakened, its people incapable of self-governance.

On the eve of the Restoration, “the Jeremiad” had become a popular literary genre in which an author, having assumed the prophet’s mantle, laments his nation’s waywardness and foretells its imminent downfall. Milton’s *Ready and Easy Way* invokes this same genre.²² And yet this late treatise poses a hermeneutic challenge: shall one read it as a literary exercise or as a prophecy indeed? If read as the latter (which I believe is Milton’s aim), then *author and audience alike* assume typological roles, with Milton playing the “sad Prophet” (CE 3: 230), the English people wayward Israel.

Toward the end of this treatise, the Miltonic *ethos* merges in fact with Ezekiel, exhorting readers through the words of this second prophet:

Thus much I should perhaps have said though I were sure I should have
spoken only to trees and stones; and had none to cry to, but with the

²² “Milton’s jeremiad takes on a distinctive literary aim,” writes Laura Lunger Knoppers, which is “to provide a myth of the nation, a story by which the English under the restored monarchy can interpret their tragedy” (p. 224). More, Milton “inscribes himself in that story as a prophet who is not only disregarded but in grave personal danger from ‘misguided and abus’d multitude.’ In this ‘failure’ that legitimates and authenticates his prophetic identity, Milton is once again modeling himself upon the prophet Jeremiah” (p. 224). See Laura Lunger Knoppers, “Milton’s *The Readie and Easie Way* and the English Jeremiad,” in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton’s Prose*, ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 213-25.

Prophet, *O earth, earth, earth!* . . . Nay though what I have spoke, should happen . . . to be the last words of our expiring libertie. But I trust I shall have spoken perswasion to abundance of sensible and ingenuous men; to som perhaps whom God may raise of these stones to become children of reviving libertie; and may reclaim . . . to bethink themselves a little and consider whether they are rushing; to exhort this torrent also of the people, . . . to keep their due channel [and] to stay these ruinous proceedings; justly and timely fearing to what a precipice of destruction the deluge of this epidemic madness would hurrie us (*CE* 7: 462-63)

Like Ezekiel, Milton finds himself compelled to speak, and to do so without regard to audience or consequence; he would have spoken as much to senseless “trees and stones”—hardly a flattering description of the English people and their capacities for response. Expressing “trust” in having “spoken perswasion to *abundance*” of men, yet the number shrinks immediately “to *som*,” and a “som” that must be acted upon by God, Who alone “may raise” His children out “of these stones.” It is no less than a miracle that Milton hopes for, one wherein God counteracts the reprobacy of the many, in order to call and collect this “som,” His own.

Reuben Sánchez, Jr. notes Milton’s belief “that the English, like the Israelites before them, bore the responsibility for the loss of their own liberty.”²³ In *Paradise Lost*, Abdiel’s zealous witnessing before Satan’s obdurate host—“O argument blasphemous, false and proud!” (*PL* 5.810)—failed to persuade. In his late prose, too, Milton’s admonitions *will fail* to change minds. The fact that he could anticipate, almost to a certainty, such failure would not have absolved him from speaking or writing in witness of truth. This conviction—that one must speak when called, despite the consequences—can be glimpsed as early as in “Lycidas,” though such a poem conceals its vituperation behind the shepherd-poet’s pastoral mask. “Foretell[ing] ruin,” in fine, becomes an abiding theme and typological marker of Miltonic *ethos*.

²³ Reuben Sánchez, Jr., *Persona and Decorum in Milton’s Prose* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), p. 75.