

# The Grassy-Green Sea

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Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

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1. I would like to consider just a single question here, but it is a big one. Bigness, in fact, is its subject and mode. Is it possible to represent the complexity of social life under global capitalism? It has often been argued that the classic realist novel, as practiced, say, by Balzac, offered something like a spontaneous lesson in social history. On the face of it, the realist novel often had the form of biography -- it seemed to tell the story of a single life, of David Copperfield or Felix Holt -- but its secret achievement was to situate that one life within the changing history of social relationships. Such novels, in other words, demonstrated that individual lives could not be understood without also understanding the complex social networks of which they were a part. It is noteworthy, then, that the realist novel, as a genre, only emerged in western Europe under conditions of unprecedented social complexity, organized around the new phenomena of finance, global trade, the bureaucratic state, the public sphere, the advanced division of labor. The realist novel offered its readers one way of imagining their collective condition amidst such complexity, and the faltering of realism over the twentieth century -- its waning in favor of non-realist narrative forms -- must be understood as the faltering of that project. It has meant that contemporary narrative can no longer represent the social world in this one crucially important way. Under conditions of political and economic globalization, which entangle individuals in social networks of ever more extended intricacy, established narrative techniques break down or come to seem patently false.

2. If that point seems unclear, you might call to mind the geographical horizon of classic European novels, which tend to unfold within the confines either of the city (*Berlin*

*Alexanderplatz, Ulysses, Our Mutual Friend*) or of the nation (*La Comédie Humaine, Waverley, Tom Jones*). The question, in these terms, is: Can there be properly *global* stories, beyond city limits and the nation's borders? It is often remarked that one of the curious features of a global economy is its diffusion of power, which is less than ever concentrated in any one place. Can there be stories, then, that are similarly diffuse, stories that do not in the conventional sense have "settings," stable locations in which their plots take root? The critic's task, in this light, should be clear: If we look beyond the realist novel, can we identify narrative forms that might help us represent the complex and dispersed practices of global capitalism? In this question lies one good reason to go back to those old, half-read books, the epics, which are distinguished precisely by their narrative arrogance, their immoderate ambition to represent the totality—the Christian cosmos or the known world or at least the empire.

3. This is an awkward claim to make. Intuitively, the strategy must strike some as hopelessly retrograde. My hunch differs sharply from established directions in narrative theory. Scholars addressing this question -- Is it possible to tell stories about the globe? -- have tended, reasonably enough, to turn their attention to the *newest* genres and narrative technologies: science fiction, the postmodern and postcolonial novel, film, video, cyber-narrative. My counterintuitive notion is that we would do well to look, not at the newest forms of storytelling, but precisely at some of the oldest. Equally, of course, my hunch breaks with conventional studies of the epic, which tend to be antiquarian in their ambitions. There are shelves of meticulous scholarship on the epic aimed at establishing the genre's centrality to the literary past. Nothing is more common, indeed, than the view that the canonical epics are the "founding documents of European literature" or whatnot, and the effect of such a claim is to consign the epic to the long-ago. The epic is then regarded as a genre that no-one has really taken seriously since Milton, some four hundred years back. My sense, by contrast, is that the epic is better regarded as a document of the literary present, perhaps even of our collective and global future. Is it possible to read the epics as though they really mattered, as though, once liberated from the classicist museum, they could still *do something*?

4. It is time, I think, to set aside our old undergraduate impatience with the epics. These are surprising books; there are astonishments in the epics at pretty much every turn. If you start with the right questions and then head back to the epics, strange and intriguing things will emerge. This should already become clear if you take the trouble to work out what is generally meant by the term "epic." There are, broadly speaking, two ways of defining what an epic is, and each sends an entirely different set of conceptual signals. If you speak of "the epic," you might have in mind, first of all, the Mediterranean epics and their offshoots or imitators: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Tasso, and so on. Alternately, you could have in mind any long poem on the cusp of oral storytelling, a language's first extended literary document. The point is that this is ultimately a political choice. These competing definitions invite us to imagine the epic as socially symbolic acts of utterly different kinds.

5. We might think of the issue this way: The concept of the epic has always been wrapped up with nation-building. In the face of Homer and Virgil and their hyperbolic canonicity, the epic is how a culture makes its literary claim to nationhood. There have generally been two opposing strategies here: First, a culture can compose epics for itself on the Mediterranean model. That is, it can belatedly supply the national language with the great narrative poems that it would

otherwise lack. Alternately, however, a culture can set off in search of indigenous "epics," on the theory that every region must have produced its own spontaneous Homer. The term "epic," in this second sense, has some curious work to do: It is a more or less *modern* rubric under which old texts can get regrouped. It is a name with which certain historical texts can be *rechristened* and then pressed into patriotic service -- so at some point England's *Beowulf* becomes an epic; Germany's *Parzival* is *made* an epic; and so on. This strategy is basically a literary version of import substitution: It takes the epic away from its Mediterranean models and recasts it as a Gothic form, the intuitive outpouring of this or that northern vernacular. The epic now becomes the emblem of a local -- which is to say, feudal or medievalist -- nationalism. This same process then gets radicalized outside of Europe, where the hunt for indigenous, anti-classicist "epics" continues apace, so that a decolonized Mali is careful to republish *Sundiata* -- and old-fashioned, comp-lit type projects with names like *The Epic in Africa* will appear from the scholarly presses.<sup>1</sup> The champions of these latter, regionalist epics typically emphasize the genre's link to oral culture -- its patterned poetic formulas, its stock phrases and improvising bards, ad-libbing like rappers at the mike -- and to conceptualize epics along these lines is fundamentally to associate them with a tribal pre-modernity. The epic, as the founding document of a national culture, is meant to body forth an utterly distinct ethnic past, though of course all epics are taken to represent their aboriginal particularity in pretty much the same way.<sup>2</sup>

6. What, then, about the classical or Mediterranean epics? The surprise of the classical epics is that they are pretty much the antithesis of everything I've just described, the antithesis of the aboriginal epics. This is clearest in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. The two poems share a structure, in which an episodic journey narrative, shorter than any casual reader ever remembers it being, gives way to a continuous, more or less linear narrative of battle or conquest, which ends when the epic hero's sovereignty is decisively established: Odysseus mows down the suitors, Aeneas conquers the Latins. This dual structure is telling: It is common, in a familiar bit of literary shorthand, to think of the epic as a version of mythological narrative, but it is in fact the project of these epics to imagine the *overcoming* of myth. The epic heroes are in each case shown stepping out of a mythological world associated with herdsmen and hunter-gatherers and other tribal societies and into a largely disenchanting world of centralized sovereignty and colonial settlement. The epic's fundamental strategy -- the effect of its frenetic island-hopping -- is to relegate myth to the historical past or the margins of the Mediterranean, at which point it becomes the narrative mark of Europe's own primitives, social orders that haven't yet freed themselves from nature's dominion, that "never plant with their own hands or plow the soil."<sup>3</sup> The *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* are hybrid narratives, to be sure, incorporating all sorts of myth into their structure, but they do so only to model myth's eventual suppression. The classical epic, far from grounding itself in the customary or tribal order, tends rather to narrate that order's subjugation. The founding narratives in the European canon are thus already documents of fundamental social change, even modernity narratives, if that term doesn't seem hopelessly anachronistic.<sup>4</sup>

7. Granted, this all sounds pretty sinister, but if you read it right, it is actually quite compelling, because it means that smack at the cold heart of the European canon there is a body of texts that take seriously the political phenomena that most demand our attention now and that we otherwise, in our privatized and novelistic lives, seem at a loss as to how to narrate: diaspora,

immigration, conquest, the imperial desecration of sacred indigenous sites, the violent shift out of archaic modes of production, revolution and the transformation of political orders.

8. It is with this hunch in mind, then, that we can return to all the quaint questions about the epic's relationship to the novel. For if you argue that the *epic* is a properly global form of narration -- and indispensable as such -- then where does that leave the novel? The great partisans of novelistic realism -- Georg Lukács or Fredric Jameson -- have tended to argue that the novel provides something close to a full and adequate narration of "national capitalism."<sup>5</sup> Scenes from provincial life offset scenes from Parisian life. But the very notion of "national capitalism" has come under sustained fire. There are many who would insist that capitalism was always, from the start, global. Historical capitalism did not radiate ever outwards from a central (English or western European) core, and it didn't just sheepdog dispossessed peasants into the factories; it restructured the planet in what was, by world-historical standards, a single stroke, uniting Barbados and Bombay and London into a single, global division of labor.<sup>6</sup> This is to say that *capitalism* and *empire* are not, ultimately, distinct concepts; they are near synonyms, two names, spoken in different accents, for the same international networks of exploitation. There has never existed, in any strong sense, a capitalist *nation*, and if you give up on that concept, then you have to give up, too, on a certain Lukacsian account of the novel. Lukács was just *wrong*: The classic realist novel was already inadequate to the task of representing totality. Lukács only took it to be adequate because he did not reckon with the global sweep of early capitalism; he called for narrative representations of totality, but then didn't heed his own summons. The novel may have pushed its readers to imagine the nation-as-complex-space, but then this nation was always a certain kind of fiction or reification. There were, in the moment of the novel's flourishing, already global networks worth narrating, but the novel constituted national stories instead by suppressing or only faintly registering its imperial entanglements: Sugar planters arrive in full fig at some Somerset estate, their sources of wealth unseen.<sup>7</sup> The problem with the novel is that it only ever pawns us off with a teasing glimpse of the complex totality, and the canonical novels of which this is least true -- the classic novels of the sea, say, *Moby Dick* or *Lord Jim*; novels, in other words, that send their characters off on more and more sweeping circulations, novels that extend their narrated networks to ever more sublime, oceanic lengths -- these narratives generally seem to be bucking up against the realist novel's most basic conventions, seem ready to mutate into some other narrative form altogether, back into romance or epic or into something as yet unnamed. Let it be said: Saltwater makes novels strange. Now none of this means that we have to abandon Lukács or the novel. On the contrary, we can keep faith with Lukacsian realism by radicalizing it, on the notion that the novel never really much did what it seemed to promise.

9. I can put this point another way. It has always been possible to argue, against Lukács's Marxism, that the novel not only remains bound to the nation -- it actually backs away from public narrative altogether. In the eighteenth century, one might suggest, there emerged two new forms of storytelling that gerrymandered the social sphere between them. There was one new type of storytelling -- the novel -- that dedicated itself to anatomizing private persons and private places. And there was a second new type of storytelling -- what used to be called political economy -- that pledged itself to public matters, public life, the common good of the commonwealth. The novel, in other words, gets constituted in a rift; it comes into being by relinquishing its claims to represent the public or the political. And this means that whatever

totalizing tendencies the novel retains are effectively muted by its privatizing and psychologizing tendencies.<sup>8</sup> And if we follow this account, then the epic continues to set a certain standard; it models for us what it would mean to tell stories that eluded this deadly division of narrative labor. What would it mean now to hold our narratives to the novel's failed promise? This is one arena where early modern writing forms a vital archive. It has epics aplenty, and epics raise the bar.

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10. How do we make good on the novel's failed promise? We can begin to answer that question, in a roundabout way, by looking at a few passages from *Paradise Lost* -- passages that ask us to solve the classic puzzle of biblical geography, the problem of paradise's zip code. Where, in short, was the Garden of Eden? In the history of Christianity, hypotheses abound. Mesopotamia has always been the likely spot, though the Mormons will tell you that Eden is actually in western Missouri. But what about Milton? Does *Paradise Lost* give any indication as to the garden's whereabouts? Or rather: When the poem describes Eden, is it also, by association, describing some identifiable, earthly site? We can start by looking at the passages where Milton plays the meteorologist. What's the weather like in paradise? We are told that "spring and autumn here / Danced hand in hand," that the garden enjoys a fine, constant climate, an "eternal spring." (4.268) This is enough to locate Adam and Eve in the tropics, but then the question becomes: Which tropics? The tropical band extends all the way round the world. And here the poem sends mixed signals. Eden is sometimes aligned, figuratively, with the East: The garden is gem-encrusted, gold-flecked, perfumed with cinnamon.<sup>9</sup> But more often, it is associated with the West: The Earth, fresh from God's Creation, is repeatedly referred to as the "New World."<sup>10</sup> Eden, in fact, is at the very center at that New World. It is, in some not quite literal way, the Americas. Columbus himself thought he'd found Eden in Venezuela.

11. This realization now raises the question not of biblical but of *epic* geography -- and more particularly the question of the genre's oceans. The classical epics are all narratives of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean basin. But perhaps the key world-historical shift of the early modern centuries was the rise of the Atlantic economy at the expense of the Mediterranean. So the question has got to be: Can there be epics of the Atlantic? And you may want to say: Of course there can -- you just have to make all the necessary linguistic substitutions: Wherever Homer has "wine-dark sea," you write "grassy green sea" (if you're talking about the Caribbean) and "stony-gray sea" (if you're talking about St. George's Banks). But of course it's not that simple.

12. Why not? The move from a Mediterranean Europe to an Atlantic Europe was not a simple geographical shift or *translatio imperii*; it wasn't just a case of an unchanging social formation or political system migrating westward. The two seas have ended up organizing human life in very different ways. A few compressed observations are necessary here: The Mediterranean system, across the many centuries of its dominance, was a loosely organized network. The sea lay at the middle of three great tributary societies -- sub-Saharan Africa, northern Europe, the further reaches of Asia -- and was, across many centuries, home to a small merchant sector that generated wealth for itself by coordinating long-distance *luxury* trade between these basically feudal (and land-lubbing) orders.<sup>11</sup>

13. Now what would it look like if one of the great Mediterranean powers tried to transplant the Mediterranean system into the Atlantic? Happily, for the purposes of historical comparison, one of them actually gave it a shot. The Spanish really did attempt to translate empire westward. Specialists now like to distinguish between two phases in the European invasion of the Americas. The first was the Spanish phase, and the point often made here is that the early Spanish conquistadors are best understood as feudal, warrior noblemen, for whom trade had no special priority. The Spanish conquest of the Americas was still a late medieval story of militant knights and Catholic priests: There is an important sense in which the Conquest was the last crusade of the Spanish warrior class. And this is to say that the Spanish invasion had fairly little to do with the rise of the world-system. Such, at least, was not how it understood itself. Spain saw itself as redirecting the energy of the *reconquista* away from the East and towards the West; and it saw itself, as well, as bringing the New World into the global Catholic Reformation, the triumphant renewal of Catholicism in the face of the Protestant challenge.<sup>12</sup>

14. The English, by contrast, thoroughly commercialized the Atlantic; around it they built the first modern consumer economy. Trade in the English Atlantic was not confined to luxuries, as most long-distance trade around the Mediterranean had been; in fact, what we find in the seventeenth century is the appearance of pretty much the first mass consumer commodities in the history of global trade: tobacco, coffee, sugar. The Atlantic economy was built on the mass demand for tropical goods.<sup>13</sup> And this new trade, for what it's worth, was not coordinated by the crown: The Atlantic economy was constructed out of alliances between merchants and planters, joined together to satisfy skyrocketing consumer demand.<sup>14</sup> This shift to the Atlantic had at least two key consequences: It required the massive and dreadful reorganization of social relations around the Atlantic basin; the representative features of the new Atlantic economy were dispossession and enslaved labor, whether African, Native American or European.<sup>15</sup> And this reorganization resulted, for the first time, in a properly global division of labor, in which no one region -- no one colony or island or European nation -- would function any longer as a self-sufficient economic unit. This is the point that we need to hang onto, I think: The Mediterranean never gave rise to a global division of labor, and the Atlantic did -- which means that the latter, unlike the former, can *only* be understood as a whole; the social order of any one place within the Atlantic only becomes intelligible as part of the larger system.

15. So why might any of this matter to a reader of poetry? This is the moment to look back again at the ancient, Mediterranean epic. What stories do they have to tell? The classical epics -- this bears repeating -- recount the armed victory of some local and centralized sovereignty, fixed on some one place: Ithaca, Rome. And the English (or British) Atlantic just wasn't a *place* in that sense, wasn't a polity or sovereign center. It wasn't even a territorial empire exactly, though it came to resemble one over time. The Atlantic was a market, to be crude about it -- one big market, awash in blood and brine -- and that is something else again. So you have to wonder: Can there be epics of the Atlantic? -- which is actually to ask: Can there be epics of the market?

16. So here's the first, amazing point: It turns out, as a matter of the empirical record, that there are Atlantic epics. There is even a tradition here, however stunted -- a fledging *genre* of Atlantic epics: the key examples in English are Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* (1807) and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990). And everything depends, I think, on our learning to see *Paradise Lost* (1667), not as the last of the classical epics, which is how it's usually read, but as the first of

these long poems about the waters to the west, a poem, that is, about the invasion of the New World, in which people living without commerce, state, or law -- naked and indigenous, "in native honor clad" -- are discovered, tricked, and driven from their land, like Indians past the Alleghenies or Scottish peasants to the sea.

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17. At this point, the question becomes: How, in these poems, does the epic form adapt itself to the Atlantic? Do Milton and Barlow and Walcott simply narrate the Atlantic on the model of the Mediterranean? Or will a trading epic develop distinctive formal features of its own? Here's a first indication: There *is* a canonical epic of commerce, though not of the Atlantic, and that's the Portuguese national epic, Camões's *Lusiads* (1572), which tells the story of Vasco da Gama, sailing round the Cape of Good Hope and then on to Calicut. For present purposes, what's most telling about *The Lusiads* is that the story retains the military register of the classical epic even when describing the mostly peaceful, diplomatic establishment of trade routes. The poem's project, in other words, is to assimilate Portugal's great commercial voyages to a pre-modern ethos of martial valor, to cast them as essentially feudal, to describe global trade as Iberia's most cunning crusade against the infidels. *The Lusiads'* sailors are all maritime knights, *caballeros* of the waves, embarked to "win undying fame," to undertake "immortal deeds" "from motives of pride and honor." "Nobility," we read, is "the mark of the Portuguese," "an invincible people," whose fate it is "to subjugate / All India's foaming coastline" -- or, more glorious still, to "bring ruin on the degenerate / Lands of Africa and Asia."<sup>16</sup> There are a few different ways of evaluating this bluster, and each depends on how you imagine the relationship between capitalism and customary political elites. If you choose to emphasize everything that is most innovative about capitalist societies, their fundamental rupture with the various form of pre-commercial social life, then *The Lusiads* will be notable mostly because it is hilariously, swaggeringly imperialist in a manner that is out of all proportion to the facts of the historical case. The poem, lacking a specifically capitalist ideology that could justify the new forms of Iberian enterprise, completely *plays up* Portuguese imperialism, and this embellishment could hardly be more different from a later, Anglo-Saxon party line, which is so determined to insist on the pacifically commercial character of English expansion that the conquered peoples only ever vanish into thin air, like mirages. But then you might choose instead to emphasize the *continuities* between feudalism and early forms of capitalist endeavor. Some historians have argued, for instance, that the history of *British* capitalism has been unique, because in Britain, capital and nobility came to terms with one another early on. The grand historical showdown between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy that old-fashioned Marxist history-writing leads us to expect simply never happened there. On the contrary, the British nobility proved to be remarkably adaptable, retaining its historical lock on high political office and then adding to it a near monopoly on certain sectors of the capitalist economy, those least befouled by the foundry's artisanal reek: commercial agriculture, global trade, finance. What's more, these gentlemanly capitalists were in large part responsible for the British Empire -- they were something like its steering committee -- which, for a start, does much to account for that empire's otherwise baffling culture of clipped-vowel gentility.<sup>17</sup> What's more, other scholars have argued that there is nothing distinctively British about this historical path, that the British case actually holds for early capitalism quite broadly. On this account, the biggest challenge facing late medieval merchants across western Europe was how to make long-distance trade safe and regular enough

to bring reliable profits; and the solution was for the best-placed merchants to forge world-historical alliances with the region's traditional political and military elites, as evidenced above all by the sixteenth-century compact between the Spanish crown and Genoese finance. What we call capitalism, then, isn't just exchange, which has always existed, and isn't even just trade systematically pursued for profit, which was well developed in medieval European cities and elsewhere on the globe; capitalism names historically novel ways of combining commerce and political power, in which case we have to conclude that most really existing forms of capitalism have been crossbred social orders combining bourgeois and aristocratic elements both.<sup>18</sup> *The Lusíads*, then, could be read as one of the great literary testaments to this amphibious social form -- and the simple choice of genre already does the hard work here. It vouches -- overemphatically, in a manner that barely renders Portugal's mercantile innovations perceptible at all -- for continuity. It supplies the ready-made literary conventions by which an inherited aristocratic ideology will seek to make intelligible the commercial present.<sup>19</sup>

18. You might suspect that all of the Atlantic epics must more or less follow Camões's lead. To choose to write an epic is, implicitly, to allow the Mediterranean as a historical standard or model, which means that to write an epic of the western seas would be to describe the Atlantic *as though* it were the *mare internum*. I need to point out straight away, then, that at least some of the Atlantic poems do insist on the commercial novelty of their ocean, though this insistence, however flatly stated, can't help but have curious formal consequences for an epic. To wrench the epic from the Mediterranean is to knowingly disfigure it, on the notion that its established conventions are no longer adequate to the moment. It is at this point that we need to take a close look at Barlow's *Columbiad*. Barlow was part of a group of poets writing in the late eighteenth century who called themselves the Connecticut Wits, southern New England boys all, Yale-educated, whose claim to fame among literary historians has always been that they imported to the colonies the major trends of eighteenth-century English poetry -- Augustan poetry, basically, still rooted in the Country ideology, this angry and backward-looking civic humanism, which held that England's old agrarian order had once made virtue possible, until the countryside and the upright farmers who inhabited it were destroyed by trade and luxury and the corruption bred by the bureaucratic state. The distinctive note struck by this body of writing, at least in its better known British variety, is an almost apocalyptic fury, a frantic sense that the verse itself is offering England its last chance, that agrarian virtue is just barely recoverable, but only if the nation reverses course altogether, gives up its new entanglements in finance, debt, and global trade. Augustan poetry's major achievements thus belong to two poetic genres: satire, which calls commercial Britain out on its iniquities, and the georgic, which means to provide a poetic record of elapsed rural honesty, though we will have understood very little about the period, if we fail to note that the georgic tended to mutate over time into a species of political *elegy*, a funereal poetry grieving helplessly for a vanished agrarian order. Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* is the standard reference here, the acknowledged masterwork of a country poetry that will exist henceforth only to record its own asphyxiation.

19. Now the important point about the Connecticut Wits is that in the 1780s and '90s, late in the century's day, they found a way to adapt these Augustan trends to revolutionary purposes. Or rather they didn't just adapt Augustan poetry; they revived it well after its English heyday. They resumed the Augustans' old satirical campaign against the corrupt British state, imagining the American minutemen as so many musket-toting Alexander Popes. And more important, they

revived the georgic in something other than an elegiac mood. They wrote a buoyant, bucolic poetry of the American colonies -- a rustic literature of New England's rolling hills -- and the historical polemic that lay behind this turn was the sense that the old England really did survive after all, just not in England. If you want to find a landscape of moral and political rejuvenation - such was the boast of this poetry to its first readers -- if you want to find a social topography that will serve as a model for the entire Anglo-Saxon world, you will have to look to Connecticut. The business of the revolution should be to transform every other colony into Connecticut, to make of the republic a nation of Connecticut.[20](#)

20. What separates Barlow out from his fellow Wits, then, is that he wrote an epic at all, which is generically about as far from the georgic as you can get. This formal shift changes everything about the project of a Connecticut poetry. Connecticut, in fact, doesn't much feature in *The Columbiad*, whose ten books of heroic couplets recount the entire history of the Americas from its first settling, through the Incan empire, on past Spanish and English settlement, and culminating in the Seven Years War, the American Revolution, and the founding of the republic. The poem is dogged by a basic (and really quite intriguing) contradiction. Barlow uses an overtly republican language throughout, and nowhere is this register more pronounced than in the poem's preface, where the poet gives his own political history of the epic, denouncing Homer and Virgil as imperialist thugs, deploring *The Iliad*, above all, as *ancien regime* trash, the lyrically debased celebration of military glory, conquest, and plunder.[21](#) But then Barlow goes off and writes an aggressively Virgilian, unabashedly imperialist poem, rehashing one scene from the *Aeneid* after another, as when the spirit of the Americas, like the river Tiber to the conquering Aeneas, begs the Europeans to invade so that they might subjugate the wretched natives.[22](#)

21. So what's going on? What is Barlow up to? In order to answer that question, we need to understand what it means to switch from the georgic to the epic. The Augustan georgic tends to be framed by a Machiavellian theory of history, a cyclical history -- played out in shires and dales -- of greatness, decay, and, perhaps (hope against hope) regeneration. The epic, by contrast, operates with a prophetic and linear theory of history, which Barlow, for one, brings into line with the conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment, what's often called stagist or stadial history: The poem relates the progress of the Americas through various historical phases, from sheer, sublime wilderness to tribal savagery to settled agriculture to empire (and then, in its final books, it tells this entire story all over again for the globe as a whole). But what's really remarkable here is that this progression, in *The Columbiad*, is apparent not only thematically, in the stuff of the story -- it is evident formally, as well. Barlow, in other words, chooses a different genre to narrate each stage of this history, so that the poem proceeds as a virtuoso parade of poetic forms. The epic is made to absorb into itself all the various modes of lyric poetry, which it will then arrange hierarchically: the American wilderness is described in topographic verse; tribal society is described in pastoral verse; white-settler agrarianism in georgic verse, and so on.

22. But there's more: Once you start reading the *Columbiad* for its generic cues, you'll notice something else of interest. Barlow's is an epic written on either side of 1800, and that dating has at least one conspicuous effect. A new set of narrative conventions have become available, conventions that you won't find in any of the canonical epics, and Barlow seizes on them: namely, the Gothic. This is clearly cued in the book's opening pages, which describe Christopher

Columbus languishing in chains in a Spanish dungeon.<sup>23</sup> But having started with an unmistakable Gothic setpiece of this kind, the poem then retains a Gothic register right through. The Gothic, in fact, attaches itself to each of the poem's many genres, like some kind of literary virus, spreading, commandeering the machinery of its multiple hosts. *The Columbiad*, in other words, doesn't merely incorporate into itself a series of different lyrical genres. It gives each of these a Gothic inflection, so that it ends up producing a topographical Gothic, a pastoral Gothic, and so on.

23. But then why do this? An example should suggest an answer. The oddest hybrid to appear in *The Columbiad* is surely the *pastoral* Gothic. Long sections of the poem depict an Arcadia populated by monsters -- or, worse, an Arcadia that has *turned* its shepherds into monsters.<sup>24</sup> The poem is full of brutish Indians, wandering an idyllic American landscape, drinking blood from the necks of their victims. In order to make sense of this, we need to recall the familiar distinction between the pastoral and the georgic. If the georgic is essentially a species of yeoman's poetry -- a poetry of plowing and beekeeping and such -- then the pastoral is the georgic without the redemptive force of rural *labor*. It is the poetry of agricultural *bounty*. To hear Barlow tell it, indigenous America is like one of those estates in seventeenth-century English pastoral poetry where fruit flings itself from the trees and the deer clamor to be shot and the fish heave themselves from the water into your waiting nets. America may be a genuine Arcadia, but then Arcadia itself turns out to be a dystopia, a landscape that deals damage to its inhabitants. In a notable historical inversion, natural abundance is shown to have the corrosive force of commercial luxury. A pastoral society will share with commerce its worst feature, which is wealth without labor, hence corruption or outright degeneration. And this all means that if you don't find the right way to inhabit America, it will turn you into a homicidal maniac. The georgic, then, as the poetry of agricultural work, retains pride of place for Barlow, even in an epic that seems determined decisively to transcend the genre's hay-ride miniaturism; the white-settler georgic is the one lyric mode that is immune to the poem's Gothic graftings. To work the land -- to clear the rocks and stumps from thin Yankee soils -- is the only way *not* to become a monster: Of farms I sing. . . . This, then, should explain why the Gothic is nearly omnipresent in *The Columbiad*: The creepily outmoded is the Gothic's very subject. It is the one literary mode whose chief purpose is to discredit earlier historical periods, to render the past as frightening: the crumbling castle, the nobleman with murder in his heart, the ungreased hinge.

24. But there's still a small surprise: Because it turns out that this chain of hybrid genres -- Gothic topography, Gothic pastoral -- includes the Gothic *epic*. Such, in fact, is the poem's basic generic instability, because the Gothic and the epic by definition have a lot in common: Together, the two genres make up most of what passes for the literature of violence, of epic warfare and Gothic malice or brutality. But then they offer two very different ways of evaluating narrative violence, and in *The Columbiad*, these competing generic judgments will persist alongside one another. Barlow, in short, packs his poem with epic battles, but tends to narrate all warfare as Gothic, as at the beginning of Book 6, set in the opening months of the American Revolution, when the poet delivers an ironic invocation to the muse of Cruelty, who then takes the shape of an allegorical Gorgon and enters the narrative scene itself, landing on a British prison ship, feeding off the cries and tears of the captive patriots and eventually purpling the green ocean with their gore. (6-178) The cumulative effect of this turn is to consign the epic as traditionally understood -- the epic as the poetry of war -- to the status of the Gothic, or, more

precisely, to reassign one set of the epic's classical conventions (its bloodshed, its military preoccupations) to the Gothic so that its other conventions (its totalizing geographical and historical frame) can do a new kind of work, narrating a world empire *without* warfare, a properly *commercial* empire, purged of violence and presided over, in perpetuity, by the new United States. -- when "the wasting sword shall cease / And commerce lead to universal peace." (7.101-108) And so Barlow's epic is in this special sense not Virgilian after all. This, in fact, is how you get a properly *Atlantic* epic, an epic of the commercial world-by draining off into the bloody gutters of the Gothic Virgil and other such epic martinets.

25. So *The Columbiad* is a puzzling book. Its most conspicuous feature is a jaw-dropping combination of republican and imperial commonplaces. The United States -- this is the effect of Barlow's peculiar recasting of the epic tradition -- will be republican and imperialist *in equal proportion*, "Freedom's first empire" or "the infant empire of liberty." (1.477) But then if you look more broadly at early writing on the British empire, it turns out that Barlow is baffling in a manner wholly representative of English imperial ideology. Here's the easiest way to make sense of the matter: The most common strategy pursued by early imperialist writers to justify Britain's new holdings in the Atlantic was to demonize the Spanish Empire and to insist on the comparative benevolence of Antigua or the Carolinas. Here, too, Barlow is typical: His account of Gothic American history includes long descriptions of the hideous Spanish, "the dark sons of slaughter," those "crowds of tyrants" who "fix their murderous reign" on America -- and the important point here is that these lines require no special exegesis. (2.365 & 1.120) They were, at the time of writing, wholly commonplace, rooted in the widely accepted notion that British expansion was maritime, not territorial; that it was secured by the minimal intervention of navies patrolling the coasts, not armies occupying the land; and, most important, that it was dedicated to trade and the peaceful settlement of empty lands, not to plunder and the conquest of settled peoples.<sup>25</sup> British expansion, in sum, understood itself in opposition to the Spanish Empire and sought ultimately to cancel *both* the latter's terms. The claim that British colonialism was anti-*Spanish* could easily slide into the claim, never quite articulated as such, that British expansion was anti-*imperial*, to boot. Anti-imperialism has always been the distinctively Anglo-Saxon ideology of empire.

26. This is worth lingering over. Students of seventeenth-century Britain who are drawn to the period's political radicalism or to the utopian social experiments of the Protestant sects have always encountered distinctive forms of intellectual unease. They find again and again that their pet subjects -- republican, puritanism, revolution -- were entangled beyond extrication with the period's characteristic forms of atrocity: that the Atlantic economy bankrolled the English Revolution and was in turn consolidated by it; that New England's unprecedented new collectivities had as their historical precondition land theft and race war and the praying towns; that the Spenser whose poetic accents became the identifiable mark of an entire generation of oppositional, anti-court poets was the same Spenser who called for Ireland to be cleared *en masse* of the Irish. What should be clear here is that there is a version of this scholarly nausea peculiar to the history of political thought: British colonial discourse is a remarkably efficient ideological machine, crafted to put any anti-imperial argument to imperialist uses.

27. We can tell this story through a single rhyme. If you read widely in Barlow's *Columbiad*, you will notice that there is one rhyme, one jingling couplet, that comes up over and over again,

and that is the pairing of *toil* with *soil*. *Toil/soil* is the characteristic rhyme of Barlow's verse, as, indeed, of the Connecticut georgic more generally, in much the way that English republican poetry, in the 1640s and '50s, had sought to humble the king by rhyming him ever and always with *thing*. Indeed, when *The Columbiad* shifts into the georgic mode, Barlow sometimes seems stuck for a second rhyme, as though the poem were locking for good on this lone, droning crambo: AAAAAAA. The English, Barlow writes, came to America "To wake to fruitful life your slumbering soil / And rear an empire with the hand of toil." (4.279-280) Virginia is the place "Where Pohatan spreads deep her sylvan soil, / And grassy lawns allure the steps of toil." (4.501-502) The continent's very rivers work to "Create the shore, consolidate the soil / And hither lead the enlightened steps of toil" -- until one day "Freedom's unconquered race with healthy toil / Shall lop the grove and warm the furrowed soil." (4.375-376) A scratched record, to be sure, but Barlow's preoccupation with this rhyme is intelligible all the same. *Toil/soil* is the poetic condensation of English imperial ideology's most important plank -- obsessive repetition is the symptom of its importance -- and that is the doctrine of empty lands or *terra nullius*, which held that North America, before the British arrived, had been a wilderness, an unpeopled expanse of unimproved land, in which case Massachusetts and Virginia were not the products of conquest. The British colonists were simply doing on a larger scale what they had always done in demographic boom times: They were expanding into wastelands. It is hard to paint, in a few swift strokes, the vile paradox of this doctrine. Spanish writers, when called upon to justify their American empire, had often invoked the bald right of conquest; and what's important about this notion is that at least it granted that there had been inhabitants on the land before the Europeans arrived, and it was able, too, to imagine some continued role, however subservient, for those inhabitants once conquered. The doctrine of empty lands, by contrast, meant to depict England's American holdings as a benignly commercial, peace-bringing non-empire, but in order to sustain this notion, the English had to wish the Indians away, had, in fact, to *make the lands empty*, through forced removal and annihilation. In other words, the claim that the British empire was uniquely commercial and thus non-violent could only be sustained through staggering amounts of violence. If the Portuguese saw even their trade envoys as *conquistadores*, the English saw even their conquerors as merchants and farmers.[26](#)

28. Here, then, is one way to make sense of Barlow's *Columbiad*: It is not just an epic of the market. It is an epic fantasy about the market. A fully Atlantic epic -- one determined to disassociate itself from the Mediterranean's clanging swords -- turns out to be a sting, ten thousand lines of poetic flimflam, shilling for empire. Early in *The Columbiad*, Columbus has a vision of the Americas; the body of the poem, in fact, is nothing but this vision, which will conclude with the prophecy of American world rule. As is common in epics, this dreamscape is presided over by a kind of spirit guide, like Dante's Virgil or the archangel in the final books of *Paradise Lost*. In Columbus's case, the guide is the "guardian Power" (1.145) of the Americas, named as Hesper, and if you look up Hesper -- or rather *Hesperus* -- you will find that, in Greek mythology, he was the evening star and thus something like the god of the west. Hesperus was often described as the father of the Hesperides, mythological sisters who lived in a garden at the world's westernmost point and who were sometimes called "the maidens of the west" or the "sisters of the sunset." But that's not all: The name Hesperides also designated a set of mythological islands, otherwise known as the Western or Fortunate Isles, reputed to be somewhere off in the uncharted Atlantic and sometimes associated with Britain and Ireland. By installing Hesperus as the genius of his poem, then, Barlow is engaged in an act of revolutionary

nationalism. He is polemically stealing from the British their claim to the title Hesperides. The true Western Isles, the truly fortunate lands of the sunset, are the Americas. This claim has some notable effects on *The Columbiad*: There is nothing the least bit unusual in Barlow's describing the Americas as a paradise, but by making them an emphatically *western* paradise, Europe can now be reclassified as the *east* and then absorbed into the epic's constitutive Orientalism. In other words, once Europe has become an appendage of Asia, the American Revolution will appear as just another war against the barbarians -- of West against East, Greeks against Persians, Romans against Egyptians, Christians against Musselmen.<sup>27</sup> This is the one sense in which Barlow fully affirms his Mediterranean models. But for present purposes, the point that needs making about Hesperus is one that Barlow never much pauses to consider: The ancient Greeks eventually realized that the evening star and the morning star were not separate bodies in the sky, that Hesperus and his opposite number, Phosphorus, were actually one and the same. And in Latin, Phosphorus was known as Lucifer, the light-bringer. Such is the sense of intellectual unease I've been trying to spell out, unwittingly encapsulated: Hesperus -- the genius of the West, the guardian of the American rebels, who swoops in from California to thaw General Washington's boats from the frozen Delaware -- is Lucifer. A fully commercial epic is Satan's poem.

4

29. So what, then, of that other putatively Satanic epic? Where is Milton's place in all this? By this point, a number of different questions have piled up: How does it adjust our perception of Milton to call him a poet of the Atlantic or of the Americas? How do his late poems ask us to think about empire? And does *Paradise Lost*, as an epic, possess narrative techniques for representing the totality that prose fiction ordinarily lacks? Let's start with that last question, because answering it will lead us back to the others. How does Milton manage to cram the globe into his pentameter? We need to think first about allegory, and for present purposes the textbook definition will do: Allegory is a story in which the literal plot -- the discrete actions of individual characters in particularized settings -- turns out to be a vehicle for abstract or general meanings (often understood as "philosophical" or "moral"). Allegory, in short, names any story whose payoff depends on our actively decoding it. The novel, then, with its detail-crazy commitment to the specificity of persons and places (as well as its forthright emotional satisfactions), is generally thought to have put the kibosh on allegory, so that the form survives now only on the disreputable fringes of genre fiction, mostly in sci-fi or fantasy. You might think here about steampunk, that recent subgenre of science fiction whose novels are set in alternate, quasi-Victorian universes in which something like twenty-first century technology was achieved using nineteenth-century science: clockwork computers and steam-powered cellphones and such. To judge by the feelers that steampunk has sent out into Hollywood -- Disney's *Treasure Planet* (2002), or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) -- the genre seems designed to do nothing less than to jumpstart pop culture's love affair with empire, to make imperialist Victoriana palatable again by lightly disguising it, as though empire were wholly tolerable as long as you're only colonizing *space* Hottentots. But a key steampunk novel like China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) already turns out to be much more compelling than all that.<sup>28</sup> The first thing to be noted about the book is that it is a gumbo of all the different types of genre fiction, or at least of boy fiction: It gleefully jumbles together the various conventions of science fiction and fantasy and horror, carefully describing the many different creatures -- the various humanoid species -- crowded together in the divided city of New Crubazon, itself clearly

modeled on nineteenth-century London, as though it were describing Tolkien's Middle Earth a thousand years down the line, as though Endor had continued along on its long-duree history, through its own capitalist, industrial, bureaucratic, and imperial revolutions, so that the elves had become barristers and the orcs had become navvies and so on. Ultimately, it is via this nineteenth-century frame that the novel does its hardest work: *Perdido Street Station* is written like a Dickens novel, as an ongoing exercise in literary sociology, an endlessly curious examination of neighborhoods and classes and social types. Mieville has accordingly mastered some of the most meticulous techniques of orthodox, novelistic realism; there is no scene, however action-packed, that does not at the same time serve the novel's sociology. One of the most important ingredients in the book's generic stew turns out, improbably, to be the realist novel, which is thereby made to take up its place alongside cyberpunk or the ghost story as another species of genre fiction. And yet *Perdido Street Station* is, at the same time, fully an allegory; in fact, there isn't much in contemporary fiction that is as forthrightly, delectably allegorical. This is one way of gauging Mieville's achievement: He gives us a way of imagining how the nineteenth-century novel might have developed if it had never evicted full-blown, fancy-dress allegory from its pages. In *Perdido Street Station*, there is a band of heroes who are fighting a swarm of gigantic, killer moths, and out of this B-movie scenario, Mieville crafts an allegory of almost Spenserian intricacy and extravagance. The allegorical clues accumulate: The moths transfix their victims by making them watch the gorgeous, shifting images on their screen-like wings and then kill anyone thus transfixed by siphoning off his or her dreams. Or rather, they don't kill their prey so much as lobotomize them: The moths leave people brain-dead by stealing their fantasies, which they then transform into a royal jelly to feed their young. This jelly, meanwhile, is sometimes harvested by drug-dealers for sale to addicts on the street, which means that in New Crubazon, you can get hooked on the synthesized goo of other people's dreams. The point that is no doubt immediately apparent from this summary dawns but slowly on the novel's reader: The moths are the Culture Industry, and if the novel deserves to be called an allegory, it is because, in that equation -- *moths equal Culture Industry* -- the literal referent is, in fact, entirely absent from the novel. It enters into the narrative only via its codings. *Perdido Street Station* is a novel about TV sets and movie screens that does not feature a single TV set or movie screen.

30. But there are still different ways we can make sense of allegory as a narrative form. It is possible to see allegory as a profoundly esoteric form of writing, one that takes pains to disguise its meanings, so that ordinary readers will be distracted by the whiz-bang inanities of its surface story -- giant moths! -- while initiates savor its hidden accomplishments, its trove of dangerous claims or secret truths. Mieville was a graduate student when he wrote *Perdido Street Station* and has since gone on to publish a Marxist critique of international law, and one is permitted to wonder whether readers who haven't just brushed up on their Horkheimer and Adorno will ever really tip to the moths. The function of allegory, on this reading, is to form and foster an intellectual elite or marginal philosophical subculture -- the keepers of the allegorical code -- in which case the genre is to be strictly distinguished from other (populist and perspicuous) modes of writing.<sup>29</sup>

31. Alternately, you can say that allegory builds off an intrinsic feature of language, perhaps even that all language is, in some non-trivial sense, allegorical. And if that's the case, then you're not going to have much luck distinguishing allegory from other literary forms. The point here

would be that language is simply incapable of absolute concretion. A degree of abstraction is the permanent fate of any word, so that language, while seeming to name singular objects, is actually always referring those objects back to general states and conditions. This means, among many other things, that the realist novel never really stops functioning as allegory, because sooner or later, it will refer to Sir Walter Elliot as a "baronet" or "gentleman," at which point, however drolly enumerated Sir Walter's individual qualities, he will be transmuted into a social type. All literary characters are followed around by abstract, allegorical shadows of themselves. Overt forms of literary allegory -- what we might call allegories proper -- are simply those stories that exploit language's intrinsic abstraction most systematically, and as such, they hold a continued appeal for anyone interested in the possibility of global storytelling. It is the business of overt allegory to construct especially efficient relays between the general and the particular, in a manner that short-circuits the realist novel's endless, hamster-wheel chain of mediations (or that downplays the novel's sham particularity).<sup>30</sup> *Perdido Street Station* is again clarifying: What's most ingenious about Mieville's writing is the way it uses the techniques of allegory to shrink the scale of the narrated cosmos -- to reduce the world-system back to a manageable size -- so that its Dickensian conventions can continue to describe the nineteenth-century city with which they are most comfortable even as that city begins to function as a stand-in for larger social networks.

32. So allegory is the most familiar device by which stories come to exceed themselves, to overflow their banks, to render events we might be able to call global. What, then, is the status of allegory in *Paradise Lost*? This remains a surprisingly hard question to answer. The difficulties here are twofold. Allegory is a literary device that translates concrete objects and characters into abstractions, particularities into generalities, and *Paradise Lost* would, in these terms, seem at once too resolutely particular and too loftily general. For how can a poem that depicts some unique episode in history, on some unique patch of ground -- humanity's inauguration -- how can such a poem speak of later and collective histories? And how can a poem that is manifestly talking about the cosmos, about the all-present God -- how can a poem that is already trading in the universal be read as describing anything particular at all? Can allegory, in other words, work both ways? At the moment in which the revolution is betrayed, Milton titles his epic *Paradise Lost* in a manner that will alert any still-republican reader to its program. The poem will be an elegy of sorts, radical Puritanism's last insurgent reckoning with tyranny and its restoration. But then the poem itself, stunningly, proceeds by systematically reversing the revolutionary readers' expectations -- their expectations, namely, that God will be a roundhead and Satan a royalist. God is a king and Satan, in the poem's most conspicuous passages, a rebel. So how are we to make sense of these transposed allegorical identifications? Can allegory even work backwards? For to the extent that we wish to read *Paradise Lost* as an allegory, we are forced to reverse the latter's usual sense-making procedures, taking a Christian story *so identified* and discovering in it a record of merely earthly events.

33. Everything about *Paradise Lost* is riding on these questions. If, for instance, we take the poem's allegorical identifications at face value -- if we accept, for a start, that God is kinglike and heaven a court -- then the poem takes on a strongly authoritarian cast. In recent commentaries, in fact, there has been no image of Milton more popular than that of the poet-as-tyrant, though the image, of course, is not a new one. The word "Puritanism" was long ago yoked to the adjective "dour" and shows no sign of shaking that designation. The one follows the other as surely as "Aeneas" ever followed "brave," and there is no reason to expect that Milton should escape the

epithet's compass. But where the Puritan Milton once seemed little worse than severe and schoolmarmish, the Milton of the last century has come to seem positively threatening. This authoritarian Milton goes back at least as far as Robert Graves, who -- at the height of World War II, while his fellow modernists were busy denouncing in Milton the precursor of a doctrinaire leftism -- discovered in the poet an "undisguised Fascism."<sup>31</sup> The war over, Milton goosestepped his way into peacetime, thanks in large part to critics such as Kingsley Widmer, who, in the teeth of the mid-century's Milton revival, continued to decry Milton the "absolutist," the pugnacious dogmatist who disregarded "the texture of reality and plentiful human actuality."<sup>32</sup> But it is with the rise of a politically energized post-structuralism that the critique of King Milton, this John-in-Jackboots, has really prospered.

34. Consider, in this regard, Catherine Belsey, whose *John Milton* is as efficient a post-structuralist hatchet job as any we are likely to find. Belsey, following a customary kind of philosophical double-whammy, contends, first, that Milton's poetry conspires in "the installation of liberal humanism," and, second, that Milton is a totalitarian -- not despite his seeming liberalism, but precisely because of it.<sup>33</sup> Milton, this is to say, helps inaugurate a modern subjectivity whose claims to autonomy merely hand the subject over to the new institutions and discourses that would discipline it. His writing remains "anchored in a metaphysical tyranny," which is to say that, like the more frankly authoritarian discourses that he only superficially repudiates, Milton retains an allegiance to foundational truth and its punishing drive to sameness or self-identity.<sup>34</sup> If there's one thing nearly everyone in Milton studies seems able to agree upon, it is that the man had metaphysics to spare. He is complicit with the systematic "elimination of difference."<sup>35</sup>

35. This outrage at the "elimination of difference" is the political pith of the post-structuralist reading of Milton, though the reading comes in many different inflections. There is a Marxist version of the argument, in which Milton becomes the literary point-man for England's bourgeois revolution.<sup>36</sup> There is an anti-imperialist version, in which Milton murmurs sinister visions of England's godly expansion into the Americas. And there is a feminist version, which finds in Milton the architect of patriarchal domesticity. It's not that any of these readings actually ignore Milton's avowedly revolutionary politics. It's just that they delight in unmasking them as a mock radicalism. Milton's republican revolutionary intransigence, in this scheme, is shown to be -- if not quite a ruse -- than a narrowly instrumental critique of an archaic absolutism, a selective and strategic engagement in the service of a newly modern state power, which Milton served as loyal bureaucrat. The critics have made Milton into an icon of all that is rotten in the seventeenth century, finding in him a paradigmatic instance of one who would invite us to think that our freedom and autonomy lie in covert submission to the Law. They would have us think that it was Milton that Spinoza had in mind when he wrote of men who "fight for their slavery as if they were fighting for their liberation."

36. And this all goes back to the poem's God-king. It is hard to find the patience for a poem whose moral -- unmistakable as such after ten thousand lines of verse -- boils down to this: "Henceforth I learn that to obey is best." (12.561) Indeed, the poem is so saturated with the language of deference that it has become hard to believe that Milton was ever perceived as a threat to orthodoxy. *Paradise Lost* seems rather a primer in servility, a genuflector's hornbook, a kind of *Complete Toady*. It displays the subtlety of drill sergeants and so has become just so

much cannon fodder for the canon-bashers, another hair-raising episode in the history of the Great Tradition. Indeed, so crass and thundering is the Miltonic command to "obey" that we needn't really trouble ourselves to demystify it, refusing as it does to disguise its imperative as pleasure in a manner otherwise typical of ideology. If we were nonetheless to undertake the labor of critique, we would surely want to point out that what we have in Milton is a prime example of the ideological use of metonymy, in which the seemingly benign notion that we should obey God slides menacingly into the considerably more restrictive notion that we are equally bound to any godlike institutions in the world -- the king, the church, the whole ball of wax.

37. Indeed, metonymy of this kind -- in which our attentions or efforts are shifted without our consent to spheres adjacent to our object of immediate interest -- would seem to be the very model of ideology. And yet, with regard to Milton at least, this argument runs up against one insurmountable hurdle: Nowhere in his corpus does Milton follow a metonymic logic. Nowhere in Milton, this is to say, does allegiance to human authority stand in for, or even coincide with, allegiance to God. On the contrary, the typical Miltonic strategy is to insist upon the *exclusive* nature of our divine obligations in an effort to void any merely human obligation. Obedience to God, properly understood, thus *replaces* obedience to the state; it does not complement or ideologically pre-figure it. The heretic, Milton tells us, is *not* the man who operates in defiance of the church. The heretic is rather "he who follows the church against his conscience and persuasion grounded on the Scripture."<sup>37</sup> The effect of this definition -- in which observance of the law is reclassified as transgression -- is to empty the notion of obedience of its conventional, legalistic connotations of "compliance." Milton's theology is rooted in a single startling paradox: The only heretical belief is orthodoxy itself.

38. It is the logic of metonymy, then, that Milton's writing consistently works to undermine and that most readers just as consistently fall dupe to. The logic of metonymy is the logic of idolatry -- the substitution of the secondary for the primary -- and Milton, in this regard, is a first commandment absolutist. His, however, is a first commandment with a difference. "It is written," the Son lectures Satan in *Paradise Regained*, "The first of all commandments, thou shalt worship/The Lord thy God, and only him shalt serve." (4.175-7) Milton's elaboration is minimal -- the Decalogue reads "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" -- and to this Milton has, in some sense, merely appended the second commandment's prohibition against serving idols, which was always something of a redundancy. The effect, however, of this inconspicuous reformulation is to expand the scope of the first commandment beyond the worship of foreign deities to the point where it nearly calls into question the notion of *service* altogether. Or rather, it offers a notion of *exclusive* service and thus calls into question the idea that human obligations can be multiple. Milton thus radicalizes the notion of idolatry to include all earthly fealty, even fealty to Christian institutions and authorities. It's not that Milton simply relieves his readers, in familiar Protestant fashion, from aping allegiance to "bad authority." He demands that they renounce as well our allegiance to those authorities they happen to *agree* with; for if Christians are to know that they are indeed following *God*, then they must reassure themselves that they are not merely heeding the convenient dictates of priest or bishop or some other holy functionary.

39. Consider, by way of illustration, the moment of reconciliation in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, just after Adam and Eve have had their first quarrel. Eve has suggested to Adam that they separate for the day, the better to tend the luxuriating garden; and Adam has unkindly replied to

Eve that, in looking to go off alone, she is courting temptation. At lines 367-8, Adam is still requesting that Eve remain at his side that she might "approve" -- that is, "prove" -- "first [her] obedience." But a mere four lines later, at line 372 -- before Eve has even had a chance to protest -- Adam is already urging her to "Go; for thy stay, not free, absents thee more." The reader puzzling out these vacillations is encountering a central lesson in Milton's doctrine: namely, that obedience not freely entered into -- which is to say formal obedience, obedience to the letter -- is not obedience at all. Eve immediately decides that she had Adam's "permission" to go off alone (9.378), but strictly speaking, this is a misnomer. For what Adam has offered Eve is not leave granted. It is a paradoxical imperative, often issued in Milton -- a distinctive theory of obedience which goes something like this: "Obey -- if you really feel like it." Or as Milton has it in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*: "Submit as free men. . . . There is no power but of God."[38](#)

40. A second example should drive the point home. In the closing lines of *The Tenure*, Milton describes God as:

he who is our only King, the Root of *David*, and whose Kingdom is eternal righteousness, with all those that Warr under him, whose happiness and final hopes are laid up in that only just & rightful kingdom (which we pray uncessantly may com soon, and in so praying wish hasty ruin and destruction to all Tyrants).[39](#)

The sentence's political cues are hard to sort through. The threat at the end of these lines isn't exactly a ringing endorsement of royalism, and yet it would still seem that the most we can claim of the republican Milton is that he relies here on a conventional distinction between "good monarchy," as found in any "just and rightful kingdom," and "bad monarchy," which soon lapses into tyranny. This quick and conventional reading, however, disregards at its own risk the millenarian finality of Milton's language; for it is the *exclusive* nation of Milton's claims that most merits our attention. Jesus, we learn in *Paradise Lost*, is "of kings / The last, for of his reign shall be no end" (12.229-230) -- and the decisive impact of such a claim, Protestant commonplace though it is, is to render incoherent any *general* distinction between good and bad monarchies. The only distinction Milton ever offers us, at least in these later works, is that between the "*only* good and righteous kingdom" -- that is God's -- and *any other* kingdom we might envision. Earthly monarchy, in the Miltonic scheme, is thus *inherently* usurpation, the blasphemous arrogation of an authority reserved for God. The tyrant, Michael tells Adam in *Paradise Lost's* final book, isn't just the monarch who rules "in despite of Heav'n." The tyrant is any ruler who reigns "from Heav'n claming second sovranty," which is to say most any king at all (12.34-35). Michael's reasoning is tight: If we posit a God, then we must posit Him, by definition, as our sole authority; his is a singular sovereignty. And if something is by definition not only discrete but in fact singular, then nothing can be derived from it: It brooks no emulation. Thus we have in Milton one fairly tidy way of scuttling the conventional Christian defense of monarchy, which, of course, relies on precisely the notion that authority can be procured from God like wheat from a warehouse. Just as obedience to God necessitates for a Milton a repudiation of all earthly authority, then so too does the imagery of divine monarchy constitute a challenge to all those who would call themselves kings at God's side.

41. This is a neat little paradox, and the rhetorical mechanism that underlies it is worth elaborating. By giving God sole claim to the title "king," Milton presents us with the case of a

metaphor that operates, so to speak, in only one direction. God is like a king, though no king is like God -- the curious upshot of which is that once we have called God "king," no man merits that name. Metaphor here is potentially a form of idolatry in much the same way that metonymy was in the case of obedience -- it operates on a perilous logic of substitution. When Milton employs the word "king," then, the accompanying rhetoric of singularity -- God is the only king, Jesus the last king -- actually works to *cripple* the metaphor, to shut down its mechanism of conceptual exchange. What's more, Milton's method of paralyzing the trope is, oddly enough, to drain it of its *literal* meaning, so that the word "king" is given over to a kind of pure metaphoricity with no earthly referent. And in this procedure, we have one of Milton's most arresting strategies: again and again, he seizes upon the conventional rhetoric of Stuart monarchy and turns it merciless back upon itself, adopting and then revamping its figures to the point where those tropes are shorn of their ordinary ideological effects.

42. This may all seem rather basic. I haven't done much more than outline Milton's antinomianism, to give the thing its fancy name. But I belabor the point because it seems to me that nothing useful can be said about Milton without it, and most of what now passes for cutting-edge Milton scholarship is actually pretty shaky on this score. English Puritanism was complex and varied. Mainstream Puritans embraced a pietist theology that emphasized fastidious legalism and ascetic self-scrutiny; they were remarkably like the Puritans of historical cliché. But this fierce Calvinism generated from within its own ranks a kind of counter-Puritanism, often associated, at least in the minds of its opponents, with poor women and artisans, and dedicated to the law's demolition. This counter-Puritanism begins with the conventional image of the Passion in its still Catholic form, as gruesome and spear-torn as you'd like to make it, and out of this, it constructs a distinctive theology of grace: Jesus' death was so brutal that it can only be understood as a free gift, the sheerest largesse. To think otherwise would be to claim, obscenely, that you as a Christian could actually *merit* the torture and murder of another, that your virtue could sufficiently justify someone's else terminal agony. The underlying conceptual point is elegantly simple: For something to count as a *gift* -- a bottle of Christmas whiskey, say, or Calvary's bleeding, bloody cross -- it must lose the trappings of a bargain or commodity or reward. It cannot be deserved or reciprocated. The everyday notion of the gift, in other words, already houses a sharp critique of contract and exchange, and in antinomian hands, this critique leads to a sweeping rejection of nearly all the familiar forms of devotion, Puritan or otherwise. The greatest sin of all is to be a good Christian. You cannot bring your soul to market and demand of God a receipt.[40](#)

43. The marks of antinomianism are all over Milton's writing. We see them in the Son's maddening refusal to demonstrate his piety in *Paradise Regained*; or, indeed, in the poetry's general downgrading of action, of the human deed; or in Michael's informing Adam that the law itself was crucified alongside Christ, though unlike Jesus, it did not rise again. (12.415-417) We see them with special clarity in Sonnet 19, which is perhaps the century's great antinomian lyric, fourteen brisk lines against activist, disciplinary piety, against commercial and imperial religion -- a Calvinist religion of accounts and day labor and invested talents, a religion of the godly speeding across oceans. And we see them above all in Milton's majestic God, who claims a complete monopoly over political power and designates no human surrogates or envoys. We can think of God as radicalizing some of the basic trends of early modern history -- the centralization of the state, political philosophy's new emphasis on sovereignty, the taming of the feudal barons.

God does to the world's kings what the kings had already done to the various regional nobilities: He strips them of their customary authority by fixing all power on his person. He is the super-sovereign, a kind of emperor, if you like -- and *Paradise Lost* refers cheerfully to God's "empire," though the word hadn't yet narrowed down to its now familiar meaning. But then the centralization of power, once sufficiently radicalized, mutates into its opposite: To assign all sovereignty to God is to imagine an earth without it -- a world without authority or empire, a world where all political power has been relegated, strictly, to the ether or the beyond. It is hard to overstate the importance of this point. When Milton associates a political institution with God, he does not mean to endorse it. More nearly the opposite: anything linked to God is discredited by the association, though in a roundabout way, by being absorbed into the Godhead, which means that Milton can speak the language of royalists while systematically inverting their meanings: Obedience to God means everlasting rebellion, God's kingdom means a universal republic. God is a kind of black hole for political concepts, the missing letter in the Judaic *G-d*. Milton makes royalism unusable by endorsing it in this one astonishing way.

44. What, then, of the rebellious Satan? That's the real evergreen in Milton studies. The most important point about Satan is that the political tags attached to him, the allegorical cues that attend his poetic description, keep *shifting*. First-time readers generally walk away from the poem remembering only the anthologized passages where Satan sings his rebel yell, but before the poem is over, he will have worn many different political hats. He's a rebel, sure enough, but he is also a "Prince . . . Chief of many throned Powers," a "great Sultan," "the monarch," "hell's dread emperor." (1.128, 1.348, 2.467, 1.378) There are at least three different ways, all of them important, to make sense of these multiple identifications. First, when the poem calls Satan both "rebel" and "monarch," it is simply carrying through with the political reversals already initiated by Milton's antinomianism: If obedience to God requires that Christians rise up against established authority, then that authority is itself a form of mutiny against God. The royalists are the real rebels, traitors to divinity. Second, the image of Satan as a king who talks like a rebel -- a monarch who has mastered the rhetoric of republican insurgency -- also functions as a targeted attack, from Puritanism's antinomian fringe, on Cromwell, the Protectorate, and the dictatorial drift of the revolution after 1653. Satan is a compressed allegory of the revolution's failure, of its Cromwellian Thermidor, its hijacking by presbyterians and gentlemen and various stand-ins for royalty.<sup>41</sup> Satan, it must be noted, is the one who wants to *preserve* hierarchy, the separate sites of individual (earthly) power: At one point, he speaks of "Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers, / If these magnific titles yet remain / Not merely titular, since by decree / Another now hath to himself engrossed / All power, and us eclipsed under the name / Of King anointed." (5.772-777) Satan uses the stock rhetoric of the rebellious aristocrat -- he and his fellows have been "ordained to govern, not to serve" (5.802) -- which means he is, among other things, a figure of the Puritan nobility waging a last-ditch, neofeudal war against the crown, defending their customary privileges under the cover of piety, "falsehood under saintly show." (4.122)

45. The third possible way of making sense of the poem's Satanic rebel-king requires something of a detour. We need to think some about Milton's epic similes. The accusation sometimes leveled against these protracted similes -- broadly, not just in Milton -- is that they are gratuitous, digressive, baroque embellishments and flights of poetic fancy, matrushka-tropes that nest similes within similes to the point where they can end up straining coherence: Greek

soldiers are like hungry wolves bearing down on a big deer -- and, hey, did you know that when wolves have finished eating, they usually go drink together at a stream or brook?<sup>42</sup> But in Milton's case, at least, it isn't hard to show that the epic similes actually play a clear function. Milton's similes almost always recount some episode from history. They are, in fact, the vehicle by which a later history, officially barred from the poem's biblical frame, makes itself felt in *Paradise Lost*. It is as though the poetry were throwing the door open on postlapsarian time, flaring up into prophetic visions for eight or ten lines at a time, and then slamming the door shut again. Let's look at four examples in quick succession. Death, at the moment of the Fall, hurries out of hell . . .

. . . As when a flock  
Of ravenous fowl, though many a league remote  
Against the day of battle, to a field,  
Where armies lie encamped, come flying, lured  
With scent of living carcasses designed  
For death, the following day, in bloody fight. (10.273-278)

The Satanic legions, upon arriving in hell, congregate on a massive field:

A multitude, like which the populous North  
Poured never from her frozen loins, to pass  
Rhene or the Danaw, when her barbarous sons  
Came like a deluge on the South, and spread  
Beneath Gibraltar to the Libyan sand. (1.351-355)

A shorter one now: Satan possess a spear . . .

. . . to equal which the tallest pine  
Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast  
Of some great ammiral, were but a wand. (1.292-294)

And, finally, a really hard one: The fallen angels, before they gather on the field . . .

. . . lay entranced  
Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks  
In Vallombrosa, where th' Etrurian shades  
High overarched embow'r; or scattered sedge  
Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed  
Hath vexed the Red Sea coast, whose waves o'erthrew  
Busiris and his Memphian chivalry,  
While with perfidious hatred they pursued  
The sojourners of Goshen, who beheld  
From the safe shore their floating carcasses  
And broken chariot wheels. So thick bestrown  
Abject and lost lay these, covering the flood. (1.301-312)

These last lines should give you a pretty clear sense of why some people hate epic similes. The prostrate demons are like dead leaves scattered along the brooks of some Tuscan valley, a landscape dotted with shady nooks (and the ghosts of the local dead) -- no, wait, they are like seaweed ("sedge"), churning in the water when the weather itself turns cruel and warlike, maybe in the Red Sea -- and you know what happened in the Red Sea? That's where God killed the Egyptians who were chasing the escaped Israelites, so that the Egyptian bodies clogged the waters, like seaweed or leaves or whatever.

46. Hard to follow -- but then the twists and turns are precisely the point. Let's hone in on the second two examples (the pine spear and the seaweed-leaf demons). The extended similes you find in other epics typically take some human character or event and refer it back, at length, to some feature of the natural world: The Greeks are like wolves. A beautiful woman is like "a field of white and crimson flowers / after the dew has settled on the down" -- that last is from Tasso.<sup>43</sup> Milton begins these last two similes in a similar, naturalizing vein -- Satan's spear is like a tree; the demons are like kelp -- but then ratchets each simile so that it returns from nature back into a historical frame. The pine is the mast of a warship. The seaweed is like corpses. But then which are the historical episodes that Milton would have you see? The pattern should be clear enough. If the epic similes are the seam through which all subsequent human history seeps into the poem, then this is nearly always a history of conflict, combat, suffering, and death. Consider again the first two similes I've just quoted: The demons are like the rampaging Goths; Death is like a vulture preparing to feast on a battlefield.<sup>44</sup> The epic simile, in Milton, is the poetic mark of a Satanic history, summed up in *Paradise Lost's* final prophesy -- the preemptive history lesson that Michael gives Adam, which unfolds as a single tableau of terror, an almost Gnostic history of accumulated disaster, presided over by the devil as demiurge. In familiar classicist fashion, Milton adorns his poem with historical vignettes, but they almost only ever speak of historical *misery*, to the point where *Paradise Lost* becomes a kind of commonplace book of atrocity, the epic of a forlorn humanism.

47. So is *Paradise Lost* an allegory? The answer to this question is a complicated one and revolves around the divergent ways in which the poem invites us to read God and to read Satan. The crucial third point regarding Satan is that we can so much as identify him with a human figure at all. This is what separates him most decisively from God -- that he is susceptible of an allegorical reading, where God finally is not. This suggests that what is true about Milton's verse at the local level -- that it resists the logic of metonymy and metaphor -- is also true at a more general or generic level: that it resists the process of allegoresis. More precisely, it sets in motion habits of allegorical reading that nearly any humanist reader would deem appropriate to an epic, and then works to frustrate those readings or at least to identify the moment when they become dangerously inadequate. The poem encourages us to set up correspondences between fallen angels and fallen human history, but then insists that we relinquish such equivalences when faced with the impossible task of figuring divinity. It produces a theory of humanist reading that teaches us to view allegory as *corrupt* -- but not as *false*. It is not wrong, exactly, to read the poem in allegorical terms, but only to the extent that all merely human actions and merely historical events are equally horrific and thus in some sense interchangeable. Milton forces allegory, however, to relinquish its claim to make visible the moment of divine redemption, the godly universal, which is, of course, precisely the traditional vocation of allegory. This is something wondrous: Satan and God both disable the political concepts they are associated with,

but they do so in antithetical ways. God is a metaphor-wrecking machine, and Satan a cauldron of metaphor, the breeding ground of its indiscriminate and sinister burgeoning.

48. We are finally in a position to make sense of *Paradise Lost* as an Atlantic poem -- and with that to get a sense of why epics in general might command our continued attention. How does the poem ask its readers to think about English expansion in the Caribbean and the Americas? This is a hard question to answer.<sup>45</sup> Milton's Satan is unambiguously a colonial adventurer, sailing "abroad / Through all the coasts of dark destruction." (2.463-464), and it is tempting, on this evidence, to proclaim the poem anti-imperialist and have done with it. But there's a problem: Satan is, at least in the first instance, a *Spanish* or *Portuguese* imperialist, as is clear from the gold mines that he and the demons build in hell or from his stopping in outer space to ask for directions to earth, a parodic riff on Camões' *Lusiads*, whose Portuguese sailors first need a Muslim pilot before they can even find India. So before we proclaim *Paradise Lost* anti-imperialist, we have to consider the possibility that it is merely anti-Spanish, in a manner that would actually serve as an apology for British expansion. But then this is where the poem's distinctive continuities -- the epic similes, the allegory that proliferates around Satan -- do their most intriguing work. For Satan, of course, is not *simply* a Spanish adventurer; he is a Satanic adventurer who talks like an English republican -- or, to grant this strategy its full polemical sting, he is leader who talks like an English liberator and acts like a *conquistador*. Satan is an engine of bad continuities; his role in the poem is to reveal the secret likenesses between positions that readers would normally take to be disjunct, between royalism and an insufficiently anarchic republicanism or between Spanish conquest and English liberty. The devil, it is worth remembering, does not conquer the inhabitants of the new world; he swindles them -- promises them benefits and then leaves them landless. And the Son, in *Paradise Regained*, refuses not only the pomp and luxury of Rome; he refuses the empire of liberty, as well. If Joel Barlow tries to remove the epic from the Mediterranean altogether -- to alter its conventions in a manner that insists, speciously, on the triumphant novelty of the Atlantic world -- then Milton keeps the continuities intact and calls them Satanic. He makes felt the still-epic, still-Mediterranean qualities of Barbados and Jamestown. The seas are not, finally, separate bodies of water. The Mediterranean flows into the Atlantic. The expansion of the capitalist world-economy has always meant the pursuit of pre-modern empire by other means. *Paradise Lost* is the Straits of Gibraltar in verse unheroic.

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## Notes

1 See Isidore Okpewho's *Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979).

2 On the Gothic epics -- and for much else of interest -- see David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 343-368.

3 Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 9.121.

4 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's "Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford, 2002), pp. 35-62.

5 See Jameson's "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347-357; "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986), pp. 65-88; "Totality as Conspiracy" in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1992), pp. 9-84. Also see Lukács's *Studies in European Realism* (1948) (London: Merlin, 1972), esp. "Tolstoy and the Development of Realism."

6 This is Immanuel Wallerstein's signature argument. See, for instance, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis," in *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: New Press, 2000), pp. 71-105, esp. p. 87: "Capitalism was from the beginning an affair of the world-economy and not of nation-states. It is a misreading of the situation to claim that it is only in the twentieth century that capitalism has become 'world-wide.' . . . capital has never allowed its aspirations to be determined by national boundaries in a capitalist world economy . . . the creation of 'national' barriers -- generically, mercantilism -- has historically been a defensive mechanism of capitalists located in states which are one level below the high point of strength in the system." (87)

7 Edward Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), pp. 80-97.

8 See James Thompson. *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1996).

9 See also 4.159-165: The garden sends out an alluring scent, "As when to them who sail / Beyond the Cape of Hope, and now are past / Mozambic, off at sea northeast winds blow / Sabeian odors from the spicy shore / Of Araby the Blest, with such delay / Well pleased they slack their course, and many a league / Cheered with the graceful smell old Ocean smiles." Or 4.178: "One gate there only was, and that looked east." Or 4.287-288, which describe the river that runs through Eden, "How from that sapphire fount the crisped brooks, / Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold." (4.287-288)

[10](#) See, for instance, 1.650; 4.34; 10.441, which speaks of "foreign worlds"; and esp. 4.390-391, where Satan resolves to "enlarge his empire" by "conquering this new world."

[11](#) See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949; 2nd ed. 1966), translated by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); also Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (1973), translated by Brian Pearce (New York: Monthly Review, 1976), pp. 50-58.

[12](#) For a succinct overview of these arguments, see Carole Shammas, "The Origins of Transatlantic Colonization" in *A Companion to Colonial America*, edited by Daniel Vickers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 25-43. See also Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995); J. H. Perry, *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration, and Settlement 1450 to 1650* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974) (London: Verso, 1979), p. 61.

[13](#) See James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1997); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (1985) (New York: Penguin, 1995); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[14](#) See Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993). This is also a point repeatedly made by the essays collected in *The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (Volume 1 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*), Nicholas Canny, ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

[15](#) See Peter Linebaugh and Markus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

[16](#) Luis Vaz de Camões, *The Lusíads* (1572), translated by Landeg White (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997). Quotations at stanzas 1.1, 1.2, 1.31, 1.44, 2.75, 2.76.

[17](#) See P.J. Cain & A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914* (London: Longman, 1993).

[18](#) See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994), esp. 109-126.

[19](#) See also Richard Helgerson's comments on *The Lusíads* in his *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1992), pp. 156ff.

[20](#) My account draws on William C. Dowling's *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1990).

[21](#) *The Columbiad* has been reprinted in *The Works of Joel Barlow* (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1970), Volume 2, pp. 371-866; original edition: Washington, DC: Joseph

Milligan, 1825. Here's what Barlow has to say about Homer on p. 329: "my reflections on the history of human errors have forced upon me the opinion that his existence has really proved one of the signal misfortunes of mankind."

[22](#) See the passage at 4.589-644, which begins: "Haste then, my heroes, tempt the fearless toil / Enrich your nations with the nurturing spoil."

[23](#) A snippet: "Cold-hearted Ferdinand his pillow prest, / Nor dream'd of those his mandates robb'd of rest, / Of him who gemm'd his crown, who strecht his reign/ To realms that weigh'd the tenfold poise of Spain; / Who now beneath his tower indungeon'd fares, / Sweats the chill sod and breathes infected airs." (1.37-42)

[24](#) See, for instance, 2.111-114: "The countless clans that tread these dank abodes, / Who glean spontaneous fruits and range the woods, / Fixt here for ages in their swarthy face / Display the wild complexion of the place."

[25](#) See David Armitage's *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).

[26](#) See James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993); and for a helpful summary, Anthony Pagden, "The Struggle for Legitimacy and the Image of Empire in the Atlantic to c. 1700," in *The Origins of Empire*, pp. 34-54.

[27](#) There are at least three passages backing up this point: 1) There is one long section at 6.309ff in which the British are expressly described as Persians. These lines are simultaneously modeled on the prophetic scene in the *Aeneid*, Book 8, where Caesar triumphs over Antony and the Egyptians: Virgil emphasizes that Antony is leading a mongrel army, patched together from the various races of the motley East, which inspires Barlow to sneer at the racial impurity of the British armies: Englishmen, Brunswickians, Hessians, Hanoverians, Scots, Irish, Hurons, Mohawks, &c. 2) These last two groups have a special role to play in *The Columbiad*, because it is commonplace scenes of savage Indian violence that allows the poem to clinch its notion of redcoat Orientalism. 3) At one point, the poem has a nameless set of republicans inspect the world, and here's what they find: "round all eastern climes, with painful eye / In slavery sunk they see the kingdoms lie." (7.27-28) And in this case, "eastern climes" unambiguously includes Europe.

[28](#) China Mieville, *Perdido Street Station* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

[29](#) This is Michael Murrin's argument in *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1969).

[30](#) See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 30-60.

[31](#) See Graves's *Wife to Mr Milton*, New York: Creative Age Press, 1944. p. vii.

[32](#) Quoted in Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 272.

[33](#) See Belsey's *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988. p. 36.

[34](#) *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[35](#) *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[36](#) Christopher Kendrick, for instance, announces at the outset of his closely argued study that he "will treat Milton as the ideologist and poet of an emergent capitalism" -- *Milton: A Study in Ideology and Form* (New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 4.

[37](#) See Milton's *Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, in the *Complete Prose Works* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953-1982), vol. 7, pp. 238-272, quotation p. 248.

[38](#) See Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* in the *Complete Prose Works*, vol. 3, pp. 184-258, quotation p. 209.

[39](#) *Ibid.*, p. 256.

[40](#) Antinomianism seems, at last, to have found its historians. See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion & Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004); David Como, *Blown By the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004).

[41](#) On Milton's turn against Cromwell, see David Armitage, "John Milton: poet against empire" in *Milton and Republicanism*, edited by David Armitage, Armand Himy, Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 206-225; and, in the same volume, Blair Worden, "Milton and Marchamont Nedham," pp. 156-180.

[42](#) The wolves simile is from Book 16 of the *Iliad*; I have borrowed the example from Stephen Nimis's *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition: The Similes* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 23-24.

[43](#) See Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1573-5), translated by Anthony Esolen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), stanza 4.75.

[44](#) For a general gloss on the poem's similes, see 2.496-502: "O shame to men! Devil with devil damned / Firm concord holds, men only disagree / Of creatures rational, though under hope / Of heavenly grace; and God proclaiming peace, / Yet live in hatred, enmity, and strife / Among themselves, and levy cruel wars, / Wasting the earth, each other to destroy."

[45](#) A note to the Miltonists: Some scholars have argued, of course, that Milton is one of the great poets of empire -- or at least that he is markedly ambivalent on this score. If you tally up all the passages that pertain to empire, some of them seem bothered by it and some of them seem to like it well enough, and so you declare it a wash. See especially J. Martin Evans, *Milton's Imperial Epic: Paradise Lost and the Discourse of Colonialism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1996); and *Milton and the Imperial Vision*, edited by Balachandra Rajan and Elizabeth Sauer (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1999). Such arguments make a few different mistakes, either singly or in combination: 1) They assimilate Milton to some broadly delineated historical context -- something on the order of: Milton was a Puritan. Many Puritans were colonists. Case closed. 2) They give priority to texts Milton wrote that are unusually difficult to take as representative, such as the juvenilia of the Muscovy tract or some of the Cromwellian writings *ex officio*. 3) Most important, they disregard Milton's theology and the rhetorical strategies associated with it, so that they have no way of assessing those passages which seem to vouch for Milton's imperialism, such as the line in which God is called the "sovrän Planter" (4.691). If you understand the basic, formal features of Milton's poetry, then there is no imperial / anti-imperial on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand. You call God a planter and there go the planters. There is a broader point worth making here: I am not suggesting that we merely affirm Milton's republicanism or catalogue his republican arguments with greater precision, as many have in fact done of late. This renewed attention to Milton's politics has been instructive, and yet by focusing too narrowly on such questions as "Did Milton adhere to Polybius' doctrine of the mixed constitution?", some Miltonists are in danger of declaring his theological preoccupations to be eccentric to his political concerns. Perhaps you wish to say that Milton's theology does little more than provide ideological cover for his politics. Religion as such doesn't merit serious consideration, political or otherwise, because its truth claims are effectively hollow. The theological claim to truth, in other words, is a merely *formal* one. It takes shape somewhere beyond argument, is empty apodictic, and can thus be used to sponsor *any* politics. I can abuse my serfs or behead the baron with equal assurance if my only reasoning is that "God made me do it." But Milton's theology -- his antinomianism -- is *not* empty formal in this way, and is thus not politically indiscriminate. On the contrary, if we wish to understand Milton's revolutionary intransigence, then we will have to find it in his piety -- in his sectarian fellow-traveling -- and not in his rather underelaborated notion of an English republic.