Dominion Undeserved: Milton And The Perils Of Creation

Eric B. Song
Swarthmore College, esong1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit
Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.
After the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, John Milton found himself estranged from his native country. During these evil days, Milton was briefly imprisoned and in some danger of execution for having passionately defended the beheading of the restored king’s father. Milton’s dire situation occasions a dour etymological joke in his last surviving piece of correspondence, dated August 15, 1666. Milton’s friend Peter Heimbach had praised him in writing for his personal and civic virtues. Milton responds by objecting, “One of those Virtues has not so pleasantly repaid to me the charity of hospitality, however, for the one you call Policy (and which I would prefer you call Patriotism), after having allured me by her lovely name, has almost expatriated me, as it were.” Milton goes on to remark soberly, “One’s Patria is wherever it is well with him.” Heimbach had addressed his letter to “a most noble and celebrated man, John Milton, Englishman,” echoing the signature that Milton had himself used often throughout his career. Milton’s response, however, is tersely signed,
“London, August 15, 1666” (CPW 8:2–4). Proud national identification gives way to mere facts of time and place. These difficult lessons anticipate key questions in the great epic that would be published for the first time a year later. In the first book of Paradise Lost, Satan grapples with the trauma of exile from his heavenly home:

Farewell happy fields
    Where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail
    Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell
    Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
    A mind not to be changed by place or time.
    The mind is its own place, and in itself
    Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.
    What matter where, if I be still the same.

(1.249–56)

In an effort to cheer his fallen troops (and, most likely, himself as well), Satan gives voice to the author’s sense of expatriation and its potentially salutary consequences. This optimistic position quickly proves untenable. In book 2 the devils reject the option of reigning contentedly in Hell, and Satan assumes the role of explorer. Once Satan alights upon the newly created world, he discovers that the answer to his rhetorical question “What matter where?” remains the same only because he carries Hell within him wherever he goes. Milton’s reader would note this just punishment with satisfaction but for the fact that Satan’s voyage of unhappy self-discovery precipitates the loss of Eden.

Milton’s late writings apply intense intellectual and artistic force to pursue a set of basic questions. What underlying causes lead to the loss of a seemingly happy homeland? What can be done to recuperate or to found a better home, literal or metaphorical? In this book I argue that these investigations confront a fundamental impasse, whereby all forms of creativity are rendered internally divided in Milton’s writings. Any coherent entity—a nation, a poem, or even a new world—must be carved out of and guarded against an original unruliness. Despite being sanctioned by God, this agonistic mode of creativity proves ineffective because it continues to manifest internal rifts rather than overcoming them. To explore the question of original causes, Milton traces the problems that beset creativity to
divine creation itself. His answers become necessarily divided. On the one hand, a pervasive sense of unruly origins serves as motivation to reform the self, the nation, language, and eventually the entire world. On the other hand, the atavistic knowledge that no force has ever fully succeeded in suppressing chaotic beginnings casts doubt on these forward-looking projects. Such ambivalence bears consequences for the practical question of what should be done. Milton consistently prescribes political and religious reform. Yet Milton’s later writings give voice to a sobering awareness that reform assumes the preexistence of a form—nationhood, epic poetry, or a divine kingdom—that proves unstable because of its origins.

Rather than being stymied, Milton’s writings derive artistic and political urgency by operating within and testing the limits of this impasse. Milton thus emerges as a great poet of multiple perspectives, of the either/or/or rather than of the either/or. His writings exhibit what Gordon Teskey has described as a rarefied form of delirium. Milton’s delirium, according to Teskey, results from an oscillation between divine creation (and its concomitant, human creatureliness) and human creativity, between a past that has been conferred on us and a future that we might be able to shape. 

Dominion Undeserved offers a new account of the conflicted impulses that give rise to Milton’s writings. The argument traces Milton’s artistic, theological, and political energies to a single, shared dilemma. My approach thus responds to readings of Milton that achieve clarity by subordinating political concerns to religious ones. In How Milton Works, Stanley Fish accumulates decades of scholarship to present a comprehensive view of Milton’s writings. For Fish, Milton’s poetry and prose constitute a unified effort to negotiate between perfect and fallen visions of the truth, and thereby to spur the reader to creaturely obedience before the Creator. More recently, David Ainsworth has described Milton’s writings as training the reader in a discipline of godly hermeneutics. Although Fish’s and Ainsworth’s readings register the occasional purposes of Milton’s writings, exigent and historically situated concerns become subordinated to a general religious pattern. According to Ainsworth, for example, Milton’s reader learns to prioritize “spiritual concerns and sacred truths over worldly philosophy and politics.” In this book I locate the unified logic of Milton’s major writings and aim to show that spiritual and worldly concerns come into sharper focus through their connections. In the chapters that follow, I discuss various manifestations of Milton’s divided view
of creativity: allusions to the barbarism of the so-called Eastern Tartars; Milton’s engagements with country house poetry and accounts of the New World; Milton’s half-articulated thoughts about Anglo-Irish affairs after the Restoration; questions about how the Son of God seeks to overcome the politics of undeserved dominion. Together, however, these discussions present a totalizing—although by no means exhaustive—view of how Milton works in response to a systemic problem that besets not only sinful humanity but also an entire cosmos governed by an all-powerful deity.7

Tracing Milton’s convictions to a basic impasse allows us to avoid inaccuracies that hinder our understanding of his writings. It has been possible to describe Milton as simply representing or even harmonizing conflicting possibilities.8 Milton is the great poet of multiple perspectives, but co-existing perspectives are not mere equivalents.9 I describe how the force of Milton’s artistry lies in turning genuine contradictions into the grounds of focused commentary and critique. At the same time, attending to the basic dilemma that structures Milton’s writings makes it unnecessary to reduce Milton’s positions in an effort to elucidate them.10 By making strategic use of theological problems that remain genuinely intractable, Milton’s writings avoid both indeterminacy and simplistic one-sidedness.11 Milton reveals the shortcomings of all projects that seek to tame chaotic forces while, at the same time, describing such power as sanctioned and exemplified by God.

Say First What Cause

Paradise Lost explores the loss and recuperation of homelands at the cosmic level of divine creation. The end of history proves clear enough: what God wants is to be “all in all.” This future consummation promises a universe that cannot regress or lapse, one in which the fullness of the Father will serve as an eternal home for his perfected creatures. God suggests the implications of his projected wholeness when he declares to the Son, “Then thou thy regal sceptre shalt lay by, / For regal sceptre then no more shall need, / God shall be all in all” (PL 3.339–41). Divine plenitude will obviate the need for any dominion. Yet in a poem that investigates beginnings, questions emerge about why God must want and wait to be all in all. The unending border conflict between chaos and God serves as an etiological myth of the forces that unsettle both political stability and the integrity of
the self. Through Milton’s monism—a belief in “one first matter all” that nonetheless allows for fraught divisions—questions about the individual, the nation, and language become interconnected rather than analogous.

The force of chaos reverberates throughout Milton’s systems of thought, connecting the intimately personal with the mythic and the political. When Milton describes chaos as the womb and the tomb of creation, he participates in a long-standing alignment of matter as feminine and form as masculine. The gendered challenge that chaos poses for Milton’s theodicy has been a familiar source of debate. Against readings of Milton’s chaos as a morally neutral realm, Regina M. Schwartz argues that the opening description in Genesis of the Spirit moving upon the deep (tehom) both suppresses and preserves the Babylonian narrative of the god Marduk using the dismembered body of the goddess Tiamat to create the world. The Hebrew Bible’s assertion of a single, masculine Creator works to forget the pagan, maternal body that existed before the beginning. According to Schwartz, Paradise Lost transforms tehom into a realm that proves far more hostile and threatening to God than does Satan. Schwartz opts not to carry out her insights to their logical end, choosing instead to maintain the integrity of Milton’s theodicy by turning to a felix culpa argument. The problem of chaos becomes the grounds for God’s display of benevolent creation. Yet the felix culpa is a paradox precisely because it cannot answer in logical fashion why Milton’s cosmos should be divided in the first place. John P. Rumrich notes that a primordial matter inclined toward destruction would render Milton’s theodicy “absurd.” He thus interprets chaos as an essential aspect of God’s creative being, the feminine and maternal aspect of deity. Such an argument leads Rumrich to deny that Milton’s concern for limits, purity, and transgressions applies to the prelapsarian world; otherwise a chaos internal to God would render him impure. Divine creation begins, however, with establishing precise boundaries between chaos and God’s kingdom. Edenic life, too, manifests the sacredness of boundaries, as Adam and Eve’s bower is a place that “beast, bird, insect, or worm durst enter none; / Such was their awe of man” (4.704–5). Only after the Fall does Michael deny the sacredness of place (11.334–54).

The terms of this debate should be redefined by understanding Milton’s chaos as abject in the sense that Julia Kristeva has theorized. Abjection precedes good and evil; its more elemental nature threatens basic divisions such as inside and outside that make moral distinctions possible. Kristeva
bases her theory in a mode of thought deeply compatible with Milton’s, one that links the gendered cosmology of Plato’s *Timaeus*, Hebraic notions of holiness, and the body’s role in language. Abjection, in other words, names ideas and sentiments deeply familiar to Milton; Kristeva and Milton share central concerns, including purity versus abominable mixtures, the maternal body, and prohibited food. Abjection registers the force of chaos in a monotheistic world as a threat to personal and cultural boundaries.

The abject is fundamentally that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” Although abject objects include excrement and menstrual blood, abjection is primarily an oral phenomenon. Revulsion in the presence of unclean objects—especially food—harkens back to the infantile process of weaning from the maternal body and thereby gaining a discrete identity as a linguistic subject. Abjection maintains not only an individual body but also the boundaries of a holy nation. By following dietary prohibitions, Israel separates itself from neighboring fertility cults and prepares itself for the divine Law. Even for a reader skeptical of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic thought, her reading illuminates the ordering of codes in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth books of Leviticus, which rapidly transition from dietary prohibitions to laws of purity regulating childbirth to methods of dealing with unclean lesions. After establishing the boundaries of the self at the mouth and from the womb, prescriptions against abjection define the contours of the healthy body within a holy nation.

The oral nature of abjection is not limited to diet but also manifests itself in language. Abjection calls into question the closure of the process that leads to a discrete, unified subject. The nonsignifying elements of speech—the rhythmic, the guttural, the euphonic—bear witness to the corporeal remainders within language. For Kristeva, the transition from Judaism to Christianity marks a drastic change in the relationship between the self and the abject. Abjection is no longer excluded from but rather located within the subject. Christ declares that food cannot defile because it merely enters and exits the belly; it is rather that “which cometh out of the man, that defileth” (Mark 7:20). Sin, writes Kristeva, is “subjectified abjection.” Christianity thus integrates abjection more fully within speech. Repeated acts of confession give voice to sin but transform it into the possibility of grace, and this new mode of speech—replete with bodily impulses—accommodates the beauty of Christian poetry.
Abjection conditions Milton’s central problem: pointing back to the original confrontation between chaos and divine order, abjection locates mythic and cultural meaning in the quotidian experiences of food, language, and sex. Abjection thereby locates gender as an elemental fault line. Responding to the limitations of psychoanalytic readings, Rumrich has attempted to redirect our attention to Milton’s relationship with his mother. Responding to the limitations of psychoanalytic readings, Rumrich has attempted to redirect our attention to Milton’s relationship with his mother. This is a necessary corrective, yet biographical evidence of Milton’s attachment to his mother remains scant. Attending to the abject logic of Milton’s writings allows us to register the more diffuse force of maternity. While abjection tests the limits even of divine creativity, the injunction to be holy as God is holy compels the Christian poet and his nation to separate themselves from chaos.

Reading Milton’s cosmology as abject acknowledges his suspicion of unbridled feminized matter. Chaos menaces as the eternally suffocating maternal realm endangering the integrity of the self. Satan describes chaos as an “abortive gulf” that threatens anyone who enters with “utter loss of being” (PL 2.440–41). Kristeva provides an apt gloss on Satan’s description when she calls abjection the place where “the vacillating, fascinating, threatening, and dangerous object is silhouetted as non-being—as the abjection into which the speaking being is permanently engulfed.” Later Satan will encounter Chaos, who allegorizes abjection’s threat to the speaking subject: the anarch responds to Satan “with faltering speech and visage incomposed” (2.989). At the same time, reading chaos as abject shows how rigorously Milton calls into question the efficacy and fairness of the very patriarchal logic he sets forth. The Miltonic dilemma ensures that no simple prescriptions about gender obtain. Taming the indistinguished space of the chaotic womb remains the fundamental mode of creation, but Milton literally gives Chaos a voice to ask how this should be so.

Chaos persists to challenge the stability not just of creation but even of divine being. What ultimately needs to be justified is not God’s goodness or his ways to man but his primacy as a divine Father. According to the angel Raphael, when God first commissions the Son to create, he blurs the distinction between inside and outside, the divine and the chaotic:

ride forth, and bid the deep
Within appointed bounds be heaven and earth,
Boundless the deep, because I am who fill
God’s logic in this passage is famously slippery. He seems to explain that the boundlessness of the deep derives from (is “because” of) his own infinite spatial extension. God renders the scope of *tehom* dependent on him, and he exercises his freedom to absent his goodness from it. As Raphael explains, matter proceeds toward divine perfection only if it is “not depraved from good” (5.471). Yet this volitional withdrawal is apparently not sufficient to hold the deep of chaos at bay. A more troubling possibility thus emerges: perhaps the Son must set bounds because *tehom* is coextensive with God’s boundlessness even though he retracts his goodness from it. God must actively prove that no competing maternal realm compromises his complete and eternal autonomy.²³ God finds the ideal agent for this work in a Son who is begotten as the perfect reflection of his sole parent and serves as the Father’s word, wisdom, and “effectual might” (3.170).

Yet abject dregs unsettle the grounds of creation. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton argues that primordial matter was merely disordered rather than hostile to God, and that it “could only have been derived from the source of all substance” (*CPW* 6.308). Read against *Paradise Lost*, such a declaration proves more of a defensive mandate than a stable truth. According to Raphael, even after the Son uses golden compasses to demarcate the boundaries between creation and chaos, God’s Spirit must downward purge “black tartareous cold infernal dregs / Adverse to life” (7.238–39). Defecation serves at once as an infantile fantasy of giving birth and as a begrudging acknowledgment of the abject traces of a maternal body.²⁴ Purging the dregs of chaos allows God’s Spirit to assume an unrivaled agency in creation; the Spirit seeks to arrogate to itself both female and male roles by “brooding” and infusing “vital virtue” (7.235–36). God’s abjection of chaos is thus an act of pre-creation, the all-important clearing of his throat that allows him to speak the newest outpost of creation into existence with his omnific word.
God actively invites Adam—and, by extension, the fallen reader—to investigate the integrity of his divine being. In book 8 of *Paradise Lost*, Adam recounts to Raphael his earliest exchange with God. When Adam requests a mate, God asks,

What thinks thou then of me, and this my state,  
Seem I to thee sufficiently possessed  
Of happiness, or not? Who am alone  
From all eternity, for none I know  
Second to me or like, equal much less.

(8.403–7)

The enjambment at the end of line 404 leads us to believe that what is at stake is not merely God’s “happiness” but his very wholeness. Before the next line adds “of happiness,” God seems to be asking Adam, “Don’t I seem composed and put-together to you?” God’s account of his solitary condition openly contradicts other moments in the epic. In the Son, for example, God surely knows one who is both second to him and like him. The context of God’s question makes it difficult to account for such inconsistencies. God later reveals that he has merely been testing Adam; God’s claims may be more rhetorically motivated than precise. Or perhaps inconsistencies should be attributed to Adam’s memory of his colloquy rather than to God.

At stake in this interpretive problem is the way that man’s innate desire for a mate—his profound sense of “single imperfection”—conditions his interactions with and knowledge of his Creator (*PL* 8.423). The diction of God’s rhetorical question to Adam registers one consequence of a chaotic realm that can be neither repelled nor incorporated comfortably. As a state where “chance governs all,” chaos imperils the authority of a divine will that should be wholly free of contingency (2.910). David Quint points out how “Milton emphasizes the ‘hap’ in happiness: the element of fortune, chance, and contingency.” When asked about divine happiness, Adam affirms that God must be “possessed / Of happiness.” This syntactically jarring conclusion registers the contamination of divine will by chaotic chance. Thinking alongside Adam, the fallen reader acknowledges and works to deny the intolerable possibility that God is possessed by happiness as much as he is its possessor.
Paradoxically, Adam proves his godlike nature by insisting on his need for a mate, by contrasting his imperfection with his Creator’s infinite unity. In return, Adam receives his wish “exactly to [his] heart’s desire” (*PL* 8.451). The gender politics of God’s confrontation with chaos thus finds new expression in human experience. According to Rumrich, Eve’s innate nature, “constitutionally unpredictable and resistant to easy explanation,” shares with the maternal realm of chaos an inclination toward fertility that leads to excess. Adam is called to husband Eve, but he confesses to Raphael the difficulty of maintaining his sense of primacy over his other self, “manlike, but different sex” (8.471). Adam betrays his confused state in his rushed, inelegant speech: Eve seems “wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best,” as if she were the “one intended first” (8.550, 555). Adam’s lived experience suggests to him the conjugal politics of undeserved dominion. Although his position of superiority has been fully sanctioned by God, it seems precarious and even unmerited. In response, Raphael admonishes Adam not to accuse nature, for “she hath done her part” (8.561). The angel teaches that Eve’s rightful role is to be unruly; the ambiguous antecedent of “she” (which might refer either to Eve or to nature) emphasizes this message. In the context of Adam’s confession, Raphael suggests that God has bequeathed to man the challenge of maintaining primacy before a preposterous female presence that refuses to conform to a derivative status.

In *Paradise Lost*, Adam’s struggle to maintain his primacy as man leads to the loss of Eden. If a conjugal narrative helps to explain the loss of humanity’s first happy homeland, marriage also offers possible redemption. In the final books, Adam and Eve face the same crisis of banishment from home that Satan had initially encountered. The angel Michael directs Adam to “possess / A paradise within” (12.586–87). Although Adam’s resources of faith, hope, and love differ markedly from Satan’s, the latter’s failure to secure internal repose casts a shadow on Michael’s advice. One solution lies with Eve, who expresses to her husband her readiness to leave Eden: “thou to me / Art all things under heaven, all places thou” (12.617–18). Milton’s wager—on which he had already staked part of his public reputation and his private life—is that the solace of marriage grants sufficient fortitude to offset human uprootedness. What Satan could not achieve alone, Adam and Eve attempt hand in hand. Yet the poem’s conclusion attempts to redeem one aspect of satanic rhetoric: attachment to
place should prove irrelevant to well-being. When Adam and Eve unite, patria should be wherever it is well with them.

Adam and Eve’s affective bond emerges as the poem’s closing answer to the urgent question of what can secure a better homeland. Eve forsakes attachment to paradise by humbly accepting her metaphorical place as Adam’s wife. If the etiological project of looking back to primordial origins produces confusion, Adam and Eve look to a future in which they will overcome the division of gender as one flesh, one heart, one soul. Yet the conclusion of Paradise Lost needs to be preternaturally beautiful to overcompensate for the simple fact that marriage will not resolve the matters that beset Milton’s monist cosmos or the estrangement of postlapsarian life. This the reader knows full well. As Adam suspects even before the Fall, marriage originates in the sanctioned but undeserved dominion of a husband over a wife, and it can represent only a tenuous solution to a problem of creativity that inheres in the very foundations of the world.

Tyranny Must Be

Milton’s writings invite reinterpretation because of the complexity that results when his mythic and political modes of thought converge. David Quint and David Norbrook, for example, have both influentially described Milton’s republican poetics. Quint places Milton within a tradition of epic poets who follow Lucan rather than Virgil to write from the vantage point of the defeated; Norbrook shows how the skeptical attitude toward Augustan mythology displayed in The History of Britain informs the way Paradise Lost aligns itself with the republican Pharsalia. Yet Quint and Norbrook disagree about the political valence of the most basic confrontation in Milton’s cosmology. For Quint, God’s victory over the wild, chaotic uproar of primordial matter makes him the one true Caesar who can confer on the world the coherence necessary for the epic poet to narrate history. God’s imperial reign is the exceptional basis of Milton’s otherwise anti-Virgilian poetics. Norbrook, by contrast, argues for a cosmology thoroughly consistent with Milton’s republicanism. In his account, Milton’s chaos (which derives in part from Ovid’s Metamorphoses) is not evil, and its unruliness serves to affirm the link between anarchy and monarchy. Divine creativity
manifests itself not as imperial conquest but as artful and virtuous labors of reform.29 The possibility of such divergent readings arises from Milton’s depiction of God’s fraught relationship with chaos. God’s creative authority must ground all legitimacy, yet chaos generates questions about the nature, methods, and significance of divine empire building.

The title of this book is taken from an episode in Paradise Lost that crystallizes the political consequences of this contradiction. In book 12 the angel Michael describes Nimrod, the “mighty hunter” mentioned briefly in Genesis, as the first political ruler.30 Michael censures Nimrod as one who will “arrogate dominion undeserved / Over his brethren, and quite dispossess / Concord and law of nature from the earth” (12.27–29). Adam subsequently declares Nimrod an execrable son, yet the angel adds a troubling qualification: “tyranny must be, / Though to the tyrant thereby no excuse” (12.95–96). The single word “must” conveys an unhappy truth about the fallen world, in which liberty and peace necessarily succumb to conquest and usurpations of power. Michael goes on to describe tyranny as a just punishment for entire nations that “will decline so low / From virtue” (12.97–98). Such judgment falls upon Milton’s post-Restoration England. Yet far from being merely a pitfall to be avoided or even a fitting punishment for wicked nations, undeserved dominion must be because it advances history. Before Nimrod, only familial and tribal rule had been established. The very form of nationhood may trace its origins to Nimrod’s prideful actions, which culminate in the Tower of Babel, the division of languages, and the reemergence of factious violence in the postdiluvian world.

The story of Nimrod conveys a double bind whereby the project of nationhood is declared both necessary and intrinsically flawed. In response to claims that the modern nation emerges only after the late eighteenth century, scholars have shown how multiple, often conflicting discourses in Elizabethan and Stuart England strive to generate a sense of nationhood.31 Richard Helgerson describes how England’s “sixteenth-century national self-articulation began with a sense of national barbarism, with a recognition of the self as the despised other, and then moved to repair that damaged self-image.”32 By Milton’s time, the pattern of confessing and urging the reform of national barbarism had become deeply ingrained. In The History of Britain, Milton imagines cultural and moral chaos at the origins of his country. He describes the ancient Britons as having lived without
stable polity, “mistrustfull, and oft-times warring one with the other” (CPW 5:60). Moral corruption accompanies political anarchy; the Britons are described as having led “a lew’d adulterous and incestuous life.” They are, in short, “progenitors not to be glori’d in” (CPW 5:61). The Britons cannot rescue themselves from such cultural debasement, and only external intervention can lay the groundwork for reform. Milton affirms that the Roman Empire “beate us into some civilitie” (CPW 5:61). Yet The History of Britain, as the work of a republican thinker, registers a very familiar ambivalence about Rome. Julius Caesar begins the work of beating civility into the savage Britons, yet Caesar’s successes in Britain would confer the prestige he needed to betray the republic and to return Rome to a state of imperial tyranny. Norbrook writes that in the divided viewpoint of the English republican, “Caesar’s landing brings at the very same time republican civility and the monarchical tendencies that will undermine it.”

Caesar’s dominion, like Nimrod’s, proves unjust while generating necessary forms of polity.

The implications of the Miltonic dilemma for both nationhood and expansionism should be clarified further. Theorizing the political landscape of the twentieth century, Benedict Anderson has influentially argued for the “inner incompatibility of empire and nation.” Milton, writing at a juncture in history that compels him to look back to Roman imperium and ahead to nascent colonialism, describes nation and empire as inseparable. Yet the centrifugal pull of national identity and the centripetal push of expansionism prove incompatible nonetheless. Paul Stevens has described Milton’s nationalism as Janus-faced: it anticipates an ecumenical modern subject free from feudal ties, but it nonetheless reverts to parochial bonds of soil and blood. Stevens borrows the concept of Janus-faced nationalism from Tom Nairn, who locates the origins of the modern nation in the emergence of Britain’s “developmental priority” between 1640 and 1688—which is to say, largely during Milton’s adult life. Nairn stresses that England’s internal economic and political developments “were interwoven with, and in reality dependent on, external conditions”—namely, “the history of overseas exploitation.” England’s increasingly global ambitions intensify the need for but also render difficult a coherent expression of nationhood. This tension eventually gives rise to the Janus-faced nation that retreats into insular myths in order to restrict the modern subject to national boundaries.
For Milton and his contemporaries, the English nation articulates itself against forms of barbarism at once native and foreign. This dividedness suggests a powerful series of answers to the question of why seemingly happy homelands come to be untenable. Some of the foundational texts of postcolonial criticism take as their starting point the fissures within the discursively produced nation. These works have exposed the modern nation as a polysemous construction, divided along lines that are at once ethnic and temporal, and thus susceptible to forms of contestation ranging from mimicry to violence. Such insights have informed scholarship about early modern English literature and culture, but scholars have also been cautious about the possibility of anachronism in mapping a postcolonial paradigm onto earlier periods. Barbara Fuchs’s call for an “imperium studies” for dealing with the classical through early modern periods is in many ways a sensible prescription. Select moments in this book, however, adopt and adapt postcolonial paradigms. Without ignoring the epochal differences between the seventeenth century and our own day, I aim in the following chapters to contribute to the excavation of continuities between imperium, European colonialism, and the emergent modern nation. Milton’s political commitments have struck generations of readers—including Whigs and Tories, America’s founding fathers, African American slaves, and Marxist historians—as compelling, troubled, and important. Dominion Undeserved offers a new way to conceptualize what Nigel Smith has described as a “contradictory energy” within Milton’s political thought. In particular, this book joins scholarly work that situates Milton’s Anglocentrism within an international matrix. Milton paradoxically strives to articulate a national identity for the sake of a global vision, to work through the particular in order to reach an elusive universality.

In what follows I trace the numerous contradictions that arise from Milton’s view of creativity against chaos. This book begins with divine creation and geopolitical affairs, then narrows progressively to England’s ambitions abroad and close to home in the British Isles. Chapter 1 examines allusions to the Eastern Tartars in Milton’s prose and poetry. In Paradise Lost, the repeated association of chaos with these nomadic peoples aligns divine creation with the imposition of polity on a teeming, unruly population. Milton describes these projects as necessary for civilization and yet always imperfect, thereby expressing his ambivalent and critical attitudes toward a sense of divinely sanctioned expansionism. In chapter 2 I argue
that Milton’s poetic account of Eden conjoins the insular perspective of rural verse and the expansionist ambitions of colonialist discourse. The narrative of Eden’s fall thereby advances a critique of the related patterns of dominion at home and abroad. Chapter 3 continues this political reading of *Paradise Lost* by showing the consequences of the uneasy hierarchical relationship between Adam and Eve for Milton’s evolving thoughts about Ireland. Yet the lesson that colonialist power cannot lead to gracious cooperation can only remain half-spoken because Milton would never relinquish his belief in England’s divinely sanctioned position over Ireland.

Throughout these discussions the logic of abjection reveals how the forces that fracture mythic creation and political homelands are felt at the microcosmic level, upon the body. Abjection also serves to show how such concerns enter into speech, especially in the form of poetry that carries artistic, intellectual, and corporeal energy across centuries. In a brief coda to the first chapter I argue that Milton’s necessarily imperfect efforts to banish rhyme from his epic perform at the level of linguistic creation the pattern of combating and internalizing cultural impurity. Chapter 4 completes this conceptual arc by attending to the politics of abjection versus incorporation in its most condensed form: in the lives of Milton’s Jesus and Samson. I read Milton’s 1671 poems alongside theories of the archive as mediating between bodily experience and the transmission of knowledge, between private and public discourse, and between past, present, and future. The pairing of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* highlights the fact that Jesus seeks a universal and all-encompassing realm while obeying the divine prescriptions given to an elect nation. Paradoxically, Jesus cannot enjoy the liberty that he justifies—retroactively, in the case of the pre-Christian hero Samson, and prospectively, in the case of the Christian poet. The same power of abjection that Jesus feels within his body governs how Milton’s linguistic artistry can arise out of the perpetual crisis that binds together the past, the present, and the future.

Scholars have responded to the challenge to relate Milton’s writings to freshly relevant concerns. Such critical work teaches us to be mindful of our separation from and connection to the past, as well as of the exigencies that lead us to confront history anew. My outlook is primarily historicist, and I aim to understand Milton’s writings in their own cultural moment. Such inquiry, however, is motivated by an unnerving recognition that we may still live in an outgrowth of the world that Milton envisioned with
artistic clarity and urgency over three hundred years ago. When past and present confront a shared impasse, historicist inquiry can be a form of concern for the present. Chapter 4 reorients the discussion to meditate more explicitly on how Milton’s political and theological impasse gives rise to poetic writings that address the future reader. It ends with a brief discussion pairing Milton with recent post-secular theories of messianic time and a supposedly liberated political subject. The binding of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* reveals that Milton’s archive is established in the space and time between elect nationhood and universality. Milton’s poetry leads us to confront the aporia in our own optimistic turn to the universal by making us aware that the tension between abjection and incorporation is written on our minds and bodies. This explicit turn toward present-day concerns is necessarily fleeting, but my hope is that this postscript aptly concludes the book by suggesting ways that we can continue to engage with Milton’s creative dilemma. The epilogue turns to Olaudah Equiano’s deployment of Milton’s poetry in his abolitionist autobiography. Equiano finds in *Paradise Lost* a valuable resource for his own political, religious, and artistic project; these new aims, in turn, retroactively alter our sense of the Miltonic archive and its potential significance. Equiano is among the many writers who have been compelled to grapple with Milton’s writings, which, by confronting a crisis of creativity, speak difficult lessons at once old and new.