MILTON, EARLY MODERN CULTURE, AND THE POETICS OF MESSIANIC TIME

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent scholarship, critics have yet to offer a sustained, interdisciplinary interpretation of John Milton's engagement with millennial ideas that takes into equal account the historical context of seventeenth-century religious and political controversy, the ways in which the pending apocalypse transformed how people imagined and experienced time, and how we see evidence of this cultural shift in Milton's poetry. This dissertation opens new possibilities of understanding Milton's relation to apocalyptic belief in the Revolutionary and Restoration era through an investigation of how millennial thinking cut across a variety of discourses including theology, politics, and science. At its most basic level, my dissertation argues the seventeenth-century anticipation of the apocalypse fundamentally altered the way people imagined time; this new way of conceptualizing temporality changed early modern religious beliefs, conceptions of history, the scientific imagination, and practices of reading philosophy, politics, and literature. My project proposes that the poetry of Milton helps us better understand these extensive cultural transformations. I explore this new understanding of time that is both reflective of discursive changes in the seventeenth century as well as characteristic of Milton's aesthetics, by offering an understanding of Milton's relationship with millennial ideas and their constitutive temporal structure.

I argue that, in response to the inevitable and immanent "end of time" suggested by seventeenth-century apocalyptic temporality, Milton's poetry creates an alternative temporality, opening up an experience of time that is not necessarily unidirectional, closed, and speeding towards its end. I suggest that this different experience of time can best be understood through the framework of a temporality explored by contemporary

philosophers Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben—messianic time. Put in its most basic terms, messianic time is a way of thinking about temporality differently, of calling into question our narratives of how time and history function. The messianic invites us to interrogate the notions of closure, certainty, and inevitability that are implicit in our linear, apocalyptic notion of time. Milton's texts continually constitute the possibility of a messianic temporality that can be read as a response to changing conceptions of time in the seventeenth century, millennial anticipation, and the belief that the apocalypse was close at hand. Entering a recent critical conversation regarding Milton's engagement with millennial and apocalyptic thinking, I suggest that we can understand this involvement through the alternative temporality his poetry creates.

Each chapter of this dissertation fuses a formalist close reading of the temporality and uncertainties opened up by generic revisions, literary allusions, and rhetorical devices in Milton's poetry with a reading of how ideologically-conflicting interpretations of millennial time are articulated in the text and are reflective of contemporary discourse. I demonstrate how messianic time functions in each text and I prove the importance of this experience as it relates to historical and ideological questions about the millennium. This dissertation contributes to an ongoing conversation regarding how political, religious, scientific, and aesthetic texts are interconnected, and explores the plurality of Milton's ideological positions as they emerge out of the ambivalence and tension in the language of his poetry. In my reading, Milton's texts articulate a way of being in the world—both structural (created through language) and historical (tied to seventeenth-century millennial thinking)—that suggests uncertainty is the condition of knowledge and truth.

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of

Kelly Bracken Eitelman.

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CHAPTER 1

MILTON, EARLY MODERN CULTURE, AND THE POETICS OF MESSIANIC TIME

"There is no work on Milton and contemporary millenarianism."
    -Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, 1977

When Christopher Hill made this claim over three decades ago, the issue of

Milton's millenarianism had actually been on the critical radar, but primarily only in

regard to when Milton adopted— and then later abandoned— millennial hope for

political and religious reform.[1] For example, in 1942 Arthur Barker claimed that Milton's

belief in the imminence of Christ's Second Coming expired with the hopes of the radicals

at the end of the Civil War.[2] This sentiment was echoed by Michael Fixler in his *Milton*

and the Kingdoms of God in 1964, and then a decade later in Austin C. Dobbins' *Milton*

and the Book of Revelation: The Heavenly Cycle.[3] According to Dobbins, "Milton no

longer anticipated an imminent, earthly *regnum Christi*" after 1660, and the poet

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[1] Hill's statement comes during a time of great scholarly interest in seventeenth-century millenarianism (the 1970s), but which saw little or no attention paid to Milton's apocalypticism. For a foundational and comprehensive study of millenarian and apocalyptic thought in the seventeenth century see Katherine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530-1645* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979). Other helpful texts on this subject include Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Harper, 1949); Peter Toon, *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600-1660* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1970); Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971); Bernard S. Capp, *Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Millenarianism* (London: Faber, 1972); Bryan Ball, A *Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975); Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth-Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism, and the English Reformation* (Oxford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978); C.A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich eds., *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984). See Patrides' Chapter 8 for a reading of apocalyptic influence and allusion in Milton. More recent texts on the issue of seventeenth-century millenarianism include Jeffery K. Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth: Joseph Mede (1586-1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism* (Netherlands: Springer , 2006), and Achsah Guibbory "Rethinking Millenarianism, Messianism, and Deliverance in *Paradise Regained,"* Milton Studies* 48 (2008): 135-159.

[2] *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma 1641-1660* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 195.

[3] Fixler , *Milton and the Kingdoms of God* (London: Faber, 1964). Dobbins, *Milton and the Book of Revelation: the Heavenly Cycle* (University of Alabama Press, 1975).

"rejected the millennial position" after the failure of the Good Old Cause. [4] In sum, the traditional critical position is that Milton abandoned his belief in an imminent apocalypse and his faith in millennial reform in the years leading up to the Restoration. Hill's call for greater scholarly investigation can be seen as a demand for more nuanced readings of Milton's apocalyptic engagement, which move beyond the conventional view that Milton abandoned millenarianism in his later career.

At the start of the 21st millennium, Hill's appeal for greater research into Milton's relation to seventeenth-century millennial beliefs was answered by the collection of essays *Milton and the Ends of Time* in 2003.[5] These essays reevaluate critical readings of Milton's eschatology by suggesting that the poet expressed radical millenarian views after the Restoration and they establish the prevalence of eschatological ideas in his writings. Several of the contributions provide interdisciplinary readings of Milton's apocalypticism that connect the poet's millennial beliefs with seventeenth-century theology, politics, art, and science. In this way, the collection seeks to broaden our understanding of Milton's eschatological thought and its place in early modern culture more generally. However, even with these gestures towards the complex relationship between apocalyptic thinking and other seventeenth-century cultural discourses, the main focus of this renewed interest in Milton's millenarianism seems to be the issue of whether or not Milton retained his apocalyptic expectation after 1660. For example, Barbara Lewalski asserts that the millennium profoundly influenced Milton's writing, and she concludes that Milton deployed "the idea of the millennium to urge personal,

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[4] See Dobbins, 70.

[5] The essays that make up this book grew out of the "Milton and Millennium" panel at the Sixth International Milton Symposium, held in July 1999.

ecclesiastical, social and political reformation" throughout his career (15). Similarly, Sarah Hutton and Stella Revard argue that it is likely Milton upheld his belief in an imminent apocalypse and his faith in millenarian reform throughout his later work.[6] On the other side of the debate, Malabika Sarkar argues the astrological imagery in *Paradise Lost* demonstrates Milton's profound skepticism regarding millennial hope later in his career: "The failure of the Puritan Cause signaled also the failure of the millennial aspirations, and *Paradise Lost* represents a passionate questioning of the reasons for this failure" (88). William Hunter likewise concludes that Milton's late epic poetry does not convey millennial ideas because "actual political developments seem to have forced Milton, like many other of his contemporaries, to abandon belief in the immediate…realization of these millenarian hopes" (99). In short, while *Milton and the Ends of Time* does expand our understanding of Milton's relationship to seventeenth-century millennial belief to include the intersection of millenarianism and other early modern discourses, many of the essays collected here seem to reprise the traditional question of when Milton adopted and abandoned eschatological beliefs.[7]

While my own analysis certainly builds upon this recent critical work, I am less interested in *when* Milton developed or rejected millenarian convictions, but *how* this thinking inflects Milton's poetry. Despite recent scholarship, critics have yet to offer a sustained, interdisciplinary interpretation of Milton's engagement with millennial ideas that takes into equal account the historical context of seventeenth-century religious and

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[6] See Hutton, "Mede, Milton, and More: Christ's College Millenarians", 29-41; Revard "Milton and Millenarianism: from the Nativity Ode to *Paradise Regained*," 42-81.

[7] As Cummings notes in her introduction, all six essays in the first part of this collection aim to reassess the traditional debate about when, and if, Milton abandoned his millenarianism; see page 3. Part II of the collection investigates Milton's conception of apocalypse in relation to topics such as visual art, Milton's monism, materiality, and contemporary theology.

political controversy, the ways in which the pending apocalypse transformed how people imagined and experienced time, and how we see evidence of this cultural shift in Milton's poetry.[8] In his afterward to *Milton and the Ends of Time*, David Lowenstein hints at the complexity of Milton's apocalyptic engagement: "Milton's great poems offer multiple, divergent, and indeed sometimes conflicting versions of the apocalypse and millennium" (241). That is, there is a certain level of ambiguity in regard to Milton's millennial beliefs that does not get resolved in his poetry. Lowenstein suggests this uncertainty is tied to ideological ambiguities in Milton's England, and he claims, "the multiple versions of the millennium express the radical religious poet's conflicted and divergent responses to the religious politics of Restoration England" (241). By expanding upon the ambiguity that Lowenstein points out here, this dissertation opens new possibilities of understanding the relationship between temporal and ideological ambiguities in Milton's aesthetics via the influence of seventeenth-century millennial beliefs. My entry point for exploring the ways in which Milton's poetry is influenced by apocalyptic anticipation is *time*.

At its most basic level, my dissertation argues the seventeenth-century anticipation of the apocalypse fundamentally altered the way people imagined time; this new way of conceptualizing temporality changed early modern religious beliefs, conceptions of history, the scientific imagination, and practices of reading philosophy, politics, and literature. In a recent work on the influence of the apocalypse in pre-modernity, Arthur H. Williamson has noted that "before anything else, the apocalypse and its attendant complex of ideas comprise mechanisms for imagining time…the advent

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[8] Blair Hoxby traces a preoccupation with time throughout Milton's writings and briefly connects this fascination with temporality to Milton's belief in an imminent apocalypse. See "Milton's Steps in Time," *SEL 38* (1998): 150-72, esp. page 151.

of time itself"(2). He contends that, in the early modern imagination, the apocalypse was part of a comprehensive cultural transformation: "we need to see the apocalypse as part of a broader cultural shift, the temporalization of Western thought" (65).[9] I explore this new understanding of time that is both reflective of discursive changes in the seventeenth century, as well as characteristic of Milton's aesthetics, by offering an understanding of Milton's relationship with millennial ideas and their constitutive temporal structure. Thus, my own work follows and extends the current interest in Milton's sustained political and millennial involvement by considering how apocalyptic thinking changed seventeenth-century conceptions of the way that time functions, and how this complex experience of temporality is articulated in Milton's poetry.

Apocalypse and the Closure of Time in the Seventeenth Century

Before we explore the ways in which the 17th-century belief in an imminent apocalypse changed conceptions of how time functions for Milton's contemporaries, it is helpful to briefly note how Judeo-Christian thinking first began to shape the way people imagined time.[10] Scholars of early modern history, philosophy, and science have concluded that the spread of Christianity at the close of the Middle Ages marked an epistemological shift in man's thinking about temporality. In his study on Renaissance historiography and its effect on English literature, *The Race of Time,* Herschel Baker describes how the Christian view of history replaced the cyclical temporality of the Middle Ages and "converted history from a string of endless cycles or a random sequence

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[9] See also Stephen D. O'Leary's *Arguing the Apocalypse*: "apocalyptic thought played a central role in the development of chronological skills among the early Christian communities" (47).

[10] For recent sources on the development and cultural significance of temporality in the early modern era see David Houston, *Time, Narrative, and Emotion in Early Modern England* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009) which examines changes in science, especially space and time, and their effect on the poetic imagination; and Angus Fletcher, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007) which looks at subjective temporality via the intersections of psychoanalysis and narratology.

of events whose cause and purpose are unknown, into a linear process with a beginning and an end…it [Christianity] gave time dimensions, and chance a moral purpose that men could comprehend."[11] This is also the position of Karl Löwith in his *Meaning in History,* where he argues that while the temporality of the Greeks was cyclical, repetitive, and was not progressing toward a future goal, the imminent *escahton* of Christianity made time oriented to the future and made the promise of future salvation a temporality of "suspense" and uncertainty.[12] John R. Hall agrees that neither the time of the Greeks nor medieval temporality were yet "historically-oriented" but both imagined time as cyclical and repetitive. Hall locates a major shift in the conception of how time functions in the sixteenth century: "Reformation ideology required a new historical consciousness that broke with earlier models of history" (88). In short, Christianity made time linear.[13]

Furthermore, the Judeo-Christian notion of apocalypse highlighted that there was a definite and inevitable end to this forward-moving line of time. Not only was time linear, it was finite and thus scarce. Reinhart Koselleck posits that a "new quality" of historical time was gained in the years between 1500-1800, because "in these centuries there occurs a temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*) of history, at the end of which is a peculiar form of acceleration" (5). According to Koselleck, "well into the sixteenth century, the history of Christianity is the history of expectations, or more exactly, the

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[11] *The Race of Time: Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography* (University of Toronto Press , 1967), 54.

[12] "According to the Greek view of life and the world, everything moves in reoccurrences, like the eternal reoccurrences of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of generation and corruption" (4). In contrast, the "eschatological future," that is the culmination of Judeo-Christian history, is a temporality of "suspense in the face of its theoretical incalculability" (9).

[13] See also Mircea Eliade, "Eschatology and Cosmology" in *Myth and Reality* (NY: Harcourt & Brace,1963). Eliade argues that Jewish and Christian eschatology abandons the "circular time of the Eternal Return" and replaces it with "linear and irreversible time" (65).

constant anticipation of the End of World" (6). Apocalyptic thinking, then, highlights the

finite nature of time as something with a definite end, and this significantly affects the

way temporality is conceptualized. In her contribution to *The Apocalypse in English*

Renaissance Thought and Literature, Marjorie Reeves similarly notes

> thinking about the time-process in apocalyptic terms at once places it on a
> different plane of understanding…The moving moments of time are no longer felt
> to be succeeding each other in an endless cycle of birth, maturity and death, but as
> fulfilling a divine purpose proceeding towards a fore-ordained conclusion… Thus
> Judeo-Christian apocalyptic thought…created the concept of history… [and] set a
> new value on historical events.[14]

Therefore, belief in the apocalypse marks an epistemological shift in which time is not

only unidirectional, but perhaps even more importantly, *limited*.

In the seventeenth century, a pervasive belief that the apocalypse was imminent

led to a widespread concern regarding the finitude and scarcity of time. For Milton's

contemporaries, time was speeding towards its conclusion as the Second Coming drew

nearer each day. In a recent work, Andrea Brady and Emily Butterworth emphasize the

early modern "fascination with apocalypse" and the widespread belief that "the future

was finite, and the end of time was imminent."[15] Robert Applebaum suggests that

cultural events of the 1620s and 1630s produced a "high concern with the idea of time

and the pressures of temporality" (46). He claims the imminence of the apocalypse had a

pronounced effect on the early modern imagination: "In the seventeenth century a major

transformation was being experienced in what was felt to be knowable about the end of

the world and what it meant to live in a world which was heading toward a temporal

conclusion" (29). Contemporary events such as English colonial expansion in North

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[14] *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, 51.

[15] *The Uses of the Future in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 9.

America, the effects of the Thirty Years' War, political and religious dissent in the English homeland, and the spread of the use of clocks throughout the kingdom caused Milton and his contemporaries to "believe that history was on a sort of threshold" (Applebaum 46).[16]

It is important to note that it was not only radical reformers who interpreted the events of the Civil War years as signaling the dawn of the apocalypse; conservatives too expected the end of time. According to Crawford Gribben, "both the regicide in 1649 and those events surrounding the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 were interpreted as returns to a better age, though by different people and for different reasons" (153). That is, royalists promoted Stuart rule by claiming Charles' divine right regime would bring about Christ's return, while regicides saw the king's execution as "a clearing of the way for the second coming of Christ, England's rightful king" (Gribben 234). According to a London bookseller who maintained a list of contemporary religious tracts, almost 70% of all pamphlets published between 1640 and 1653 were millenarian in nature, and over half of these tracts were written by authors considered to be political and religious moderates.[17]

Finally, the looming apocalypse of the seventeenth century signaled the closure of history, because time was finite and the end was inevitable. Millennial thinking, with its notion of limited time moving towards its certain end, made the closure of time inescapable because the apocalypse was part of God's providential plan. As Gribben

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[16] For other sources on how conceptions of time change as a result of industrialization during the early modern period more generally, see E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work, Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38, (1967): 56-85, David Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) and Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972).

[17] Bernard C. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study of Seventeenth-Century Millennialism* (London: Faber, 1972): 38-39.

notes, "the discussion of closure and eschatological certainty came to characterize a substantial body of seventeenth-century literature" (232). Yet as the century progressed, Milton's contemporaries began to question the inevitability of the end of the world and the closed nature of time: "The closure underpinning Calvinist theology—of the elect and reprobate, of material and spiritual, of this world and the next—had been problematized by puritan literary engagement" (Gribben 231). It is precisely this "problematized" closure which I claim illustrates Milton's response to seventeenth-century millennial thought.

I argue that, within apocalyptic thinking of the seventeenth century, Milton's poetry creates an alternative temporality, opening up an experience of time that is not necessarily unidirectional, closed, and speeding towards its end. As I will explain below, "messianic time" is the term I apply to Milton's alternate response to the inevitable and immanent "end of time" suggested by apocalyptic temporality. Milton's texts continually constitute the possibility of a messianic temporality that can be read as a response to changing conceptions of time in the seventeenth century, millennial anticipation, and the belief that the apocalypse was close at hand. Entering a recent critical conversation regarding Milton's engagement with millennial and apocalyptic thinking, I suggest that we can understand this involvement through the alternative temporality his poetry creates.[18] Milton resists the closed, linear system suggested by apocalyptic time, and his

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[18] It is helpful to clarify terminology such as "millennial" and "apocalyptic." The essays that comprise *Milton and the Ends of Time* treat the issue of Milton's "millenarian" thinking inclusively, to "provide new insights into Milton's lifelong preoccupation with the ends of time—the Second Coming, the millennium, Judgment Day, the new heaven and earth, and the eternity which follows" (1). I too use the term "millennium" in this inclusive manner, to describe the anticipation of the apocalypse and the end of time for Milton and his contemporaries. That is, I employ the terms "apocalypse," "eschaton," "Second Coming," "millennium," and the like in order to refer to the same expectation of the world's end in the seventeenth century. However, there is of course good reason to distinguish between terms in reference to Milton's apocalyptic anticipation. For example, the term "millennium" itself—which refers to the belief

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poetry opens up other possibilities— ways of understanding apocalyptically-inflected

ideological questions with which Milton's texts, and seventeenth-century culture,

grapple. In regard to the long-standing debate about when Milton adopted and/or

abandoned his millennial thinking, I argue that an interest in the apocalypse and

millennium via the experience of time is consistent throughout Milton's career and across

various genres in which he writes. If we see Milton as responding to a particular

conception of how time functions that is created by early modern belief in an imminent

apocalypse, then my reading of the temporality of Milton's poetry shows that his

rethinking of temporal closure is a constant throughout his career.

Messianic Time

Apocalyptic temporality, characteristic of Milton's age and our own, makes time

a unidirectional, forward-progressing closed system, in which history is finite and is

inevitably nearing its end. I argue that Milton's poetry creates an alternative temporality,

and I suggest that this different experience of time can best be understood through the

framework of a temporality explored by contemporary philosophers—messianic time. Put

in its most basic terms, messianic time is a way of thinking about time differently, of

calling into question our narratives of how time and history function. The messianic

invites us to interrogate the notions of closure, certainty, and inevitability that are implicit

in our linear, apocalyptic notion of time. When we conceptualize time as a straight line,

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that Christ will reign on earth for one thousand years before the end of time—is not a monolithic one. In
the seventeenth century there were amillennialists who did not believe in a future millennium and who
usually read Revelation as an allegory; premillennialists who read Revelation literally and thought that
Christ would return at the beginning of the millennium and rule for one thousand years, ushering in the end
of time; and post millennialists who believed that Christ would return to earth at the end of the millennium,
and they could read Revelation either literally or figuratively. According to Gribben, "there was a great
deal of latitude both between and within each apocalyptic discourse" (29), so that even in its contemporary
usage the term "millennium" could mean different things to different people. Further, as John Shawcross
points out in his contribution to *Milton and the Ends of Time*, the millennium is "just one element" of the
Bible's apocalyptic vision (110).

in which "progress" is synonymous with forward motion, historical time risks the danger of engendering determinism because of the closure and inevitability it implies. Things become elided in this view of history: in the past, we see progress as inevitable and not the result of contingencies, ruptures, and periods of decline, and in the future, we fail to see that there is further truth and the possibility of change still to come. Walter Benjamin termed this "empty time," or an uncritical view of history that sees time as unquestionably progressive. In contrast, messianic time throws our assumptions of progress and causality into question. As a result, we can revise our view of history and renew our sense of what is possible in the future.

The difficulty in explaining messianic time as a concept is that it is a model for understanding time that has no one conclusive definition. In the texts that describe the temporality of the messianic referenced here—those from the Jewish and Pauline traditions, the dense and elliptical texts of Benjamin, and the sometimes nebulous writings of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida—messianic time is gestured towards and described, but rarely ever defined in a clear-cut or fixed way. It is a concept that originates in the Jewish and Christian biblical traditions and that was later revisited and repurposed by theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to respond to their own specific circumstances and varying theoretical agendas.[19] Although the influence of Jewish thought on Benjamin and the impact of the writings of his contemporary Gershom Scholem will be discussed in Chapter 5, and though the messianic thinking of Scholem's pupil Jacob Taubes will be central to my fourth chapter, my discussion of messianic time

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[19] See John Caputo's gloss on the influence of Jewish thought on the modern concept of the messianic: "Jewish messianic thought gives us a way to think about time, about events, about the way they eventuate precisely inasmuch as they do not occur" (79).

will be most centrally inflected by the work of contemporary theorists Walter Benjamin

(1892-1940), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and Giorgio Agamben (1942-).[20]

It is of course necessary to differentiate between these three approaches to

messianic time, even as I bring them together to help us understand the temporality of

Milton's poetry. Following his encounters with the horrors of WWI and Nazism,

Benjamin draws on his knowledge of the Jewish faith and his interest in Marxist views of

history to adapt an understanding of messianic temporality and to propose a new reading

of history. At the end of the twentieth century, Derrida picks up on and expands upon

Benjamin's reading of the messianic, and he is at times in dialogue with Benjamin's texts

as he critiques and repurposes Benjamin's conception of the messianic to speak to his

own concerns—specifically the possibility of justice implicit in the reading practices of

deconstructive criticism.[21] Agamben engages with Derrida's version of messianism—as

well as his predecessors Benjamin and Taubes—in his reading of the messianic time of

St. Paul. In *The Time That Remains*, Agamben demonstrates the likeness of the messianic

in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and the Pauline Epistles, and thus

provides a helpful reconsideration of the relationship between Jewish and Christian

messianisms, and their more secular manifestations in contemporary philosophy. Though

each writes in a different historical context and in the service of a particular intellectual

agenda, Benjamin, Derrida, and Agamben share a common rethinking of temporality that

rejects the notion of closure, emphasizes choice rather than inevitability, and provides a

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[20] Additionally, the Pauline influence on messianic time will be discussed through the readings of Agamben throughout this dissertation, though an extended reading of Paul's texts are beyond the scope of this project.

[21] See, for example, Derrida's piece "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" which is a direct response to Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," and which I discuss in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

productive way of approaching what is uncertain or not yet known. Reading these

theorists in tandem provides us with a better sense of what possibilities are opened up by

a particular way of thinking about time and interpreting the world around us.

Thus messianic time is different way of thinking about how time functions, *from within* our accepted notions of chronological time. As Agamben explains:

> This means that historical time cannot simply be cancelled and that messianic time, moreover, cannot be perfectly homogenous with history: the two times must indeed accompany each other according to modalities that cannot be reduced to a dual logic…not the compromise between two irreconcilable impulses but an attempt to bring light to the hidden structure of historical time itself. [22]

From within our conception of time as a linear progression of distinct past, present, and

future states, messianic time questions a mode of history based on "presence," by

debunking the logic underpinning our notion of temporality. That is, messianic time

highlights a mutually-constitutive relationship between past, present, and future. This

concept demonstrates the "otherness" of time—that our notion of "present" as opposed to

past and future states is a fractured concept because every present moment is inflected

with the memory of the past and the promise of the future. In other words, these three

temporal states are defined by, and only make sense in relation to, their supposed

oppositions, so that the present is always contaminated by the memory of the past and the

promise of the future.

Importantly, works of art can create experiences of messianic time when they

refuse the logic of linear time which serves as the basis for apocalyptic expectation.

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[22] *Potentialities,* 168. Žižek's discussion of the ways in which the Jewish and Pauline concept of messianism is like contemporary revolutionary moments demonstrates a similar way of understanding the messianic: "things can take a messianic turn, time can become 'dense' at any point…the time of the Event is not another time beyond and above the 'normal' historical time, but a kind of inner loop within this time" (134).

Through art, and specifically through poetry, messianic time disrupts our expectation that time is a sequential progression, and instead shows the simultaneity of past, present, and future. Poetry can create a non-linear, non-mimetic experience of time that opens alternatives to the "end of time" suggested by apocalyptically-oriented temporality. In this way, rather than an end to time, poetry allows us to rethink what is possible from within chronological, historical temporality.

Additionally, messianic time represents a way of approaching knowledge that is still to come. The rupture of the messianic within our ordinary way of seeing things does not found new truth, but it dislodges our certainties so that we can revise how we interpret the world around us. Uncertainty is not the opposite, but instead *the condition of,* knowledge, since ambiguity causes us to question our beliefs and to make choices bringing us to a greater understanding of truth. Susan Handelman's definition of messianic time is helpful here; she describes messianism as "the pulling of thought toward its other, toward some interruptive force that can break through the violence and cruelty of immanent history—a search for some way of being otherwise" (338). In other words, messianic time demonstrates the importance of revising our notions of causality in the past and remaining open to the possibilities that may come in the future. I argue that through their temporal dislocation, Milton's texts demonstrate a similar way of navigating uncertainty and remaining open to the revelation of greater truth to come.

In sum, as an interpretative framework, messianic time provides us a way of living within linear, eschatological time that disrupts notions of inevitability and calls us to question our assumptions about history, time, and truth. I argue that Milton's texts perform a similar function, providing an alternative temporality to the finite and closed

time of seventeenth-century apocalyptic expectation. Therefore the theoretical framework of messianic time allows me to discuss the structure and logic of the temporality of Milton's poetry and its connection to early modern ideological uncertainties.

Milton's Apocalyptic Prose Paradox: *Areopagitica* and the Messianic

Milton's 1644 prose tract against pre-publication licensing is a work that has long been discussed in terms of the text's logical paradox, theological uncertainty, and ideological contradiction. Extending this critical focus on the contradictory nature of the tract, I now turn to *Areopagitica* as a kind of case study on the possible advantages of juxtaposing Milton's work with the particular theoretical construct of messianic time. My brief reading will demonstrate how the critical lens of messianic time helps to illuminate and understand historically-specific questions that this text raises, and will also provide a framework for approaching ideological and textual uncertainties more generally. As a tertiary effect of this juxtaposition, Milton's text will illustrate the interpretive possibilities of employing messianic temporality as a way of reading, providing a concrete example of how this theoretical concept offers a productive method of navigating uncertainty in the pursuit of ever-evolving truth. From within Milton's understanding of truth—his eschatological view that truth will remain incomplete until the Second Coming—the poet urges a way of approaching this incompleteness that welcomes the proliferation of possible truths; rejects servile acceptance of dogma; insists that knowledge and meaning come from continuous reading and interpretation; and calls for one to make decisions in the present moment that will lead to greater understanding, even while acknowledging that perfect truth with not be present until the end of time.

This way of approaching incompleteness is the method of interpretation that occurs in

messianic time.

In the following chapter, I will address the temporality of this pursuit of truth,

arguing that the messianic is a different kind of temporality, in which non-linear and non-

mimetic experiences of time open up alternatives to the "end of time" suggested by

apocalyptic temporality. I will link the temporal mechanism of messianic thinking with

changing conceptions of time in the seventeenth century and the non-sequential

temporality of Milton's poetry. Bracketing an explicit exploration of temporality for a

moment, I would like to focus on the ways in which the theory of reading and

understanding of truth implied in *Areopagitica* anticipates the method of engaging

uncertainty urged specifically by Derrida and Agamben in their exploration of the

messianic. [23]

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[23]Both Derrida and Agamben are drawing upon earlier theorists of the messianic, especially Benjamin and Jacob Taubes, who will become more central in discussing the temporality of the messianic in Chapter 4 to follow. It is worthwhile to note that the conception of the messianic as a time of decision making is also implicit in Benjamin's and Taubes' thought. In Benjamin's messianic, the space opened up the messianic eruption—though incalculable—is a time of urgent possibility in which decision is necessary. Benjamin points out that even though the Jewish tradition forbids knowledge of the future through "magic" or "soothsayers", this did not make the incalculable future meaningless for the Jews. Rather this unexpectedness had the opposite effect—it endowed every present moment with possibility and hope. Benjamin implies that messianic time, a break from linear history that makes revolution possible, affects decisions in the present moment: "This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter" (*Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, Appendix B).

   Similarly, Taubes' messianic time in *Occidental Eschatology* highlights the potential for political action and ethical decisions even when an event is incalculable or yet to come. The decisive action of the messianic is not about the presence of an event, or an event that is predictable or identifiable on linear chronology; it is about the failure of the event to occur:

> disappointment is central to the life of Jesus…If the whole history of Christendom is founded upon the *delayed* Second Coming [*Verzögerung der Paruise*] then the first date in Christian history can be taken to be the *nonfulfllment* of the prophesy of Jesus. This *nonoccurring event* [*nicht ereignende Ereigns*] marks the decisive, otherwise inexplicable turn of events in the work of Jesus. (56) [emphasis mine]

Taubes demonstrates how "decisive action" and a historical "turning point" are possible despite delay or nonoccurrence. This is because messianic time is a moment of transition between the disappearance of one order and the coming into being of another. Importantly, this is a "situation of constant expectation [*steten Harrens*] (69), and this state of expectation causes decisions to be made *in the present moment:* "Apocalypticism is revolutionary because it beholds the turning point not in some indeterminate future but

Stanley Fish provides an influential and provocative close reading of the paradoxical logic of *Areopagitica*, and so his interpretation serves as a helpful entry point in exploring the text's uncertainties. In his contribution to the 1987 collection *Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*, Fish weighs in on the position of Milton in modern critical debate, specifically in regard to conventional readings of Milton as a champion of free speech and toleration. Fish seeks to dismantle misreadings of Milton as a modern civil libertarian when he posits that in *Areopagitica* Milton is "not against licensing, and that he has almost no interest at all in the 'freedom of the press' as an abstract or absolute good (and, indeed, does not unambiguously value freedom at all)" (235). Countering traditional understandings of the text as advocating the integrity of the written word and as demanding freedom of speech for all people, Fish interrogates Milton's rhetorical contradictions in this text, and shows that Milton constantly undermines his own argument:

> In short, the argument against licensing, which has always been read as an argument for books, is really an argument that renders books beside the point; books are no more going to save you than they are going to corrupt you; by denying their potency in one direction, Milton necessarily denies their potency in the other and undercuts the extravagant claims he himself makes…whatever books are, they cannot be what he says they are in those ringing sentences, the preservers of truth, the life-blood of a master spirit, the image of God. (238)

For Fish, the text's undermining of its argument serves a specific purpose and is, in fact, Milton's "strategy" in this tract. The text becomes a sort of object lesson in which the reader first makes a false conclusion, then through the labor of reevaluation and deliberation, corrects that belief, and increases her virtue. Thus, books are not inherently virtuous because righteousness resides in them (as it seems Milton argues in the

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entirely proximate. Apocalyptic prophecy thus focuses on the future yet it is fully set in the present" (10). This recalls Benjamin's messianism and is the temporality that Agamben later picks up on in his articulation of messianic time as the "the time that remains between time and its end."

beginning of the tract), but are valuable because the reader uses the contradictory statements in them to make choices.[24] Fish terms the experience of reading for Milton a "self-cancelling sequence," and a "pattern of seeking and not finding," in which *Areopagitica* teaches the reader "we can never stop" our pursuit of a more complete understanding of truth (244). It is this conception of a never fully-present, always to-come experience of truth that my reading of *Areopagitica* through the lens of messianic time shares. For Fish, *Areopagitica* teaches the reader that truth is "always and already lost…ever deferred" until Christ's Second Coming (246-7).

While my reading of the text's affinity with the theoretical construct of messianic time takes up a very similar position in regard to continuous reading and the reevaluation of a truth that must remain always to-come, and while I will also argue that Milton uses "aporia—a place of undecidability"(Fish, "Driving From the Letter" 249) as a generative strategy rather than as an indeterminate free play of contradictions, my point of departure from Fish is in his insistence that Milton deploys contradiction and paradox to serve one single and consistent purpose. For Fish, Milton forbids the reader from becoming "idolatrous" and fixating on the written text, and thus Milton implements this strategy to enforce *obedience to God* through the reader's response. This is consistent with Fish's central reading of Milton: as he claims in *How Milton Works*, Milton "never wavers in his conviction that obedience to God is the prime and trumping value in every situation" (5). According to Fish, "it is wrong to regard his [Milton's] poetry as the site of conflicting loyalties and impulses" (12), because there is only one way of understanding Miltonic

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[24] For Fish's earlier articulation of this strategy in Milton's texts see *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in* Paradise Lost. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

contradiction: "there are not two landscapes but only one in Milton's poetry, and not two values but only one in his thought" (13).

Fish claims that there is no polysemy or paradoxical questioning that serves any function other than to prove God's omnipotence and authority, because in Milton's theology there is only one choice the reader is called to make—to be or obedient to God or not. Fish contends that historical happenings are merely external events that can only serve as a means to an internal end—the inner conviction of obedience to God—and that this call to submission is "outside or above history even when its expression is in history" (*How Milton Works* 570). It is precisely this notion of a monolithic Milton, whose values and import stand outside the material contexts of historical time, that I wish to put pressure on throughout this dissertation. I seek to redress this narrow focus and instead propose that contradictions within Milton's texts can be understood through a reading of *both* the poet's specific theological beliefs *and* particular ideological uncertainties in seventeenth-century England.

Several critics have likewise rejected the suggestion of an ahistorical reading of *Areopagitica* in which all paradox, contradiction, and ideological questions are collapsed into a lesson in obedience to God. These readings demonstrate that the tract's contradictions can be read as participating in seventeenth-century ideological debates, such as changing conceptions of history, issues surrounding authorship and censorship in the print market place, and radical reformation policies of the Civil War years.[25] These

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[25] See, respectively, David Loewenstein, *Drama*, 35; Abbe Blum, "The Author's Authority: *Areopagitica* and the Labor of Licensing," Chapter 4 in *Re-membering Milton*, 74-96; and Nigel Smith, "*Areopagitica*: Voicing Contexts, 1643-5," *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose,* 103-22. In another close reading of the text, Loewenstein highlights the "presence of contrary and disproportionate elements" in the tract, and he argues these contradictions and paradoxes demonstrate Milton's understanding of how history functions: "Visually and linguistically, through the use of double negatives, Milton is saying something about the process of historical renovation," See "*Areopagitica* and the Dynamics of History," *SEL* 28

readings demonstrate the connection between internal contradiction in *Areopagitica* and external ideological uncertainties, and thus suggest that multiple truths may coexist in the text.

Important to my analysis of Milton's response to early modern eschatological expectation, *Areopagitica* reflects and inflects ideological questions specifically related to seventeenth-century anticipation of the apocalypse. At the time that the Licensing Order was being drafted, the Scots were attempting to impose firm Presbyterian customs in England, the rhetoric of which was steeped in eschatological and apocalyptic imagery. Because Milton thought that this type of censorship would impede reformation and the revelation of truth promised at the Second Coming, in *Areopagitica* he countered the claims of the Westminster Divines (and the Geneva Bible theology which underpinned their appeals) with a tract that turned the Scots Presbyterians' eschatological logic against itself. By situating Milton's tract in the context of contemporary religious and political debate, Crawford Gribben demonstrates that Milton's belief in "progressive revelation," which underlies the basic logic of the text, is part of the poet's larger "eschatological epistemology." For Gribben, the contradictions of *Areopagitica* are best understood in the context of this apocalyptically-inflected theological and political debate:

> Milton constructed an elaborate defense against the eschatological claims of the Westminster Divines. Milton's obsession with progressive revelation developed into an eschatological epistemology which emphasized the progression of revelation, the continual out breaking of new light. His eschatological epistemology emphasized that truth is continually being clarified. (156)

(1988): 89-90. For other readings of *Areopagitica* that locate the text's contradictions in the context of seventeenth-century ideological conflict see Christopher Kendrick, "Ethics and the Orator in *Areopagitica*," *ELH 50.4* (Winter 1983):655-691; Thomas Fulton, "*Areopagitica* and the Roots of Liberal Epistemology," *English Literary Renaissance* 34.1 (2004): 42-82; and Feisal G. Mohamed, *Milton and the Post-Secular Present*, "*Areopagitica* and the Ethics of Reading," 43-65.

In Milton's eschatologically-based argument against pre-publication licensing,

contradiction can be explained by this belief in progressive revelation, because we see

Milton counter and correct the text's logic as the reader progresses and gains more

insight: "*Areopagitica*'s exploration of progressive revelation enacts Milton's

prescription for the further reformation of puritanism" (162). This is like Fish's position

that contradictions in the text serve as a means of education for the reader. However, I

argue that these textual ambiguities are also a function of historically-specific ideological

debates—specifically, the reader is called to evaluate and then reevaluate conflicting

apocalyptic discourses. This strategy changes "the millenarian landscape of the

Interregnum" because the text's "attack is as much upon textual authority and the utility

of publishing as it is upon the eschatological foundations of contemporary puritan

thought" (Gribben 171).

I would like to take up and extend Gribben's description of Milton's

"eschatological epistemology," by suggesting that Milton's eschatologically-charged

notion of progressive revelation functions remarkably similarly to the theoretical

construct of messianic time. Not only does the juxtaposition of progressive revelation and

messianic time help us conceptualize Milton's position in relation to the seventeenth-

century's imminent apocalypse, but it can illuminate human experience in a broader

sense—the implicit understanding of the pursuit of truth and the apprehension of time

within Milton's eschatology are applicable to ideological questions more generally. Thus,

my reading of the text's eschatological epistemology in conjunction with messianic time

serves a three-fold purpose. This juxtaposition provides insight into recent questions

about Milton's relationship to millennial thinking and the belief of an imminent

apocalypse in the seventeenth century. The similarity of Milton's historically-situated

belief in progressive revelation and the theoretical construct of messianic time also

provides a justification for my reading of Milton's texts through the lens of a postmodern

theory. That is, by demonstrating that the method of interpretation and the pursuit of truth

advocated by Milton and theorists of messianic time share a common way of approaching

knowledge that is still to come, it becomes clear that my decision to align Milton's texts

with messianic time is not an arbitrary superimposition of a poststructualist way of

reading on a set of early modern texts. Finally, my reading demonstrates the possible

efficacy of employing the construct of messianic time as a way of approaching

uncertainties in a text and dealing with the experience of incompleteness. In other words,

for Milton—and in messianic time—the appearance of paradox or ambiguity is certainly

not an endless "free play" of indeterminacy, while at the same time, one also

acknowledges that truth cannot be totalized or complete.

Both Milton's eschatology and messianic time give us a similar way of

approaching knowledge that is still to come, or yet to be perfected. Importantly, this "to

come" is not a celebration of indifference or despair, but rather should be seen as

generative, because this incompleteness is the condition of working toward a more

perfect truth, while acknowledging that we will need to continually revise our accepted

beliefs. In other words, perfect knowledge or complete truth do not need to be present in

order for us to make decisions or take action in the present moment, since each choice

from within this uncertainty becomes a stepping stone to greater understanding. From

within an apocalyptic understanding of truth—in which truth is always imperfect because

it can never be fully present or complete until the end of human existence—we see a

messianic time that is actually a diligent working towards more complete knowledge in spite, and because, of the realization that our understanding of truth must be continually revised until the end of time.

The eschatological core of Milton's progressive revelation is his claim that truth can only be perfected at the apocalypse, the end of time. While initially Truth "came into the world with her divine master, and was a perfect shape," when the risen Christ returned to Heaven, the human race "took the virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces and scattered them to the four winds," like the myth of Osiris (741-2).[26] Since this time, the pious have searched for the different pieces of Truth and attempted to reassemble her back to her perfect and unified form, but all of these attempts are necessarily imperfect:

> We have not found them all [the limbs of Truth] Lords and Commons, nor ever shall do, till her Master's second coming. He shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mold them into an immortal figure of loveliness and perfection. Suffer not these licensing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity, forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to obey obsequies to the torn body of our martyred saint. (742)

In this eschatological metaphor, Truth is figured as a "martyred saint," and though the quest for unified, complete, and fully-present Truth cannot be realized until the Second Coming, it is necessary to continue to do what work we can in this moment to bring us closer to a fully- realized Truth. Using the knowledge we have gained thus far, Milton demands we must "discover onward things more remote from our knowledge," and the pre-publication censoring of the Licensing Order will inhibit the English from these new discoveries, which are stepping stones to greater revelation from God (742). Importantly, as Milton calls for the proliferation of possible truths, it is the process of interpretation—

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[26] All citations of *Areopagitica* are from the *Complete Prose Works of John Milton, Vol VI.*

the act of reading itself—that enables us to come closer to the full revelation of Truth at the apocalypse. Censorship is "the first and greatest discouragement and affront that can be offered to learning and to learned men," and to prevent possible truths from being weighed and judged by man is "the greatest displeasure and indignity to a free and knowing spirit that can be put upon him" (735). The terms of the Licensing Order are also an affront to God, who gave Adam the ability to interpret and make decisions in the world, and the "freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing" (733).Thus to censor reading is "to affect a rigor contrary to the manner of God and of nature, by abridging or scanting those means which books freely permitted are, birth to the trial of virtue and the exercise of truth" (733).

The centrality of reading to Milton's progressive revelation hinges on the notion that truth is realized through the process of debate and decision making. In his famous "temple-building" metaphor deployed towards the end of the tract, Milton emphasizes the need for a variety of beliefs and opinions to be weighed in the juxtaposition of many stones, which are representative of a variety of possible truths. But the stones are not uniform: "there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and the timber, ere the house of God can be built" (744). The stones of truth, when assembled together, "cannot be united into a continuity" and "the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes …arises the goodly and the graceful symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure" (744). Fragmented, incomplete, and even contradictory aspects of truth are the condition of greater revelation and a movement closer to a more complete knowledge through interpretation and decision making.

A key reason why "brotherly dissimilitudes" must be permitted in the pursuit of truth is that, for Milton, truth is polyvalent: "she may have more shapes than one" (747). In fact, the text is an object lesson on the polyvalent nature of truth, because it demonstrates—through the progression of the tract's argument itself— that the coexistence of multiple truths is the prerequisite of greater understanding. For example, when describing truth in this section, Milton maps several allusions and metaphors on top of each other, demonstrating that truth's "more shapes than one" are the condition for making the decision to repeal the censorship law. Following the extended metaphor that truth is like a temple, truth is then imagined as a "city" that is "besieged and blocked out" (744); as a "body" (745); as a "noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking his invisible locks," which is an allusion to the Biblical tale of Samson (745); then truth becomes an eagle, before being compared to the "temple of Janus with his two controversial faces" (746); and finally, "the old Proteus" (747). This section of the tract concludes with the assertion that truth may "have more shapes than one," and the text itself exhibits that multiple manifestations can— and must— coexist as stepping stones to greater revelation.

It is better to allow contradictory conceptions of truth to be disseminated and debated than to unquestioningly defer to accepted beliefs, because "all opinions, yea, errors, known, read, and collated, are of main service and assistance toward the speedy development of what is truest" (727). God has given man "the gift of reason to be his own chooser" (727), and so God does not desire for his faithful to uncritically or unconsciously follow dogma. In Milton's eschatological progressive revelation, it is accepting the polyvalent and contradictory nature of knowledge and making decisions in

the face of uncertainty that brings one closer to a more complete understanding of truth.

As Milton warns, "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary…that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary" (728). This "trial by what is contrary" is analogous to the theory of reading and understanding of truth implied in messianic time. I argue that Milton anticipates the method of engaging uncertainty urged by Derrida and Agamben in their explorations of the messianic.

Though Milton's apocalyptic understanding of truth is firmly linked to Protestant theology, and Derrida's "messianism without a messiah" is not a religious or transcendental ideal, what Milton and this theorist share is a unique relationship with what is other in the here and now *because of* the necessary incompleteness of truth. [27] While Derrida disavows any religious affiliation, he wants to show that the "other"—for instance God or, by extension, any experience that is not yet known— cannot fit into a conceptual scheme and is therefore incalculable. What is incalculable—whether it is divine presence or the future to come—is not to be understood as negative, but rather it signals that we must adjust our accepted ways of thinking to accommodate this otherness in our established thought. But what is important here is our relationship to the unknown: what is incalculable is actually the condition for making decisions, or the possibility of responsibility and action. Derrida challenges us to think outside of established dogma and

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[27] Martin Hägglund's claim that Derrida can be seen to "invert the logic of religious eschatology" is helpful, for as Hägglund points out, "instead of promoting the end of time, Derrida emphasizes that the coming of time exceeds any given end" (*Radical Atheism* 134).And as Arthur Bradley explains, Derrida's messianic time is "synonymous with the affirmation within present time as an openness to a messianic future that can never become present" (34)—see "Derrida's God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn," *Paragraph* 29.3 (2006): 21-42. See also Caputo: messianic time "turns on a certain structural openness…which sees to it that, in contrast to the way things transpire in ordinary time, things are never finished, that the last word is never spoken" (78).

the precepts of religion in order to see the generative possibilities in a future that is not

known. Similarly to the way in which Milton's *Areopagitica* calls for a constant

reinterpretation of our understanding in the face of truth's incompleteness, Derrida's

messianism challenges us to acknowledge the unpredictability of what truths may come,

and to remain open to the possibilities inherent in that uncertainty.

Importantly for Derrida, remaining open to the uncertainty of the future does not

refer to maintaining a state of constant waiting for something that won't come, or a state

of interminable stasis. As he explains in *Specters of Marx*:

> Now if there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is
> not only the critical idea of a questioning stance…It is even more a certain
> emancatory and *messianic* affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that
> one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-
> religious determination, from any *messianism*…The critique belongs to the
> movement of an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is
> to say, a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, or desert-like experience (111-2)
> [emphasis in original]

In other words, "messianism without a messiah" amounts to a constant, vigilant, and

radical critique of our ways of thinking that is never static because it is always in the

process of its own questioning. Like Milton's method of reading in *Areopagitica*, this

messianism is never merely a replication of established dogma. Countering charges that

his idea of "messianicity" is merely an abstract ideal or is synonymous with utopianism,

as posited by various interlocutors in *Ghostly Demarcations,* Derrida insists on the

immediacy of responsibility implied in the call to action of his conception of the

messianic.[28] Derrida points out that his messianicity is a "universal structure of

experience," which "refers, in every here-and-now, to the coming of an eminently real,

concrete event, that is, to the most irreducibly heterogeneous otherness" ("Marx and

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[28] *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx, Intro. Michael Sprinker
(New York: Verso, 2008).

Sons" 248). Later in the essay he stresses the urgency of action implied in his idea of

messianism and demonstrates its concrete consequences:

> Even if messianicity as I describe it here can seem abstract…we have to do here
> with the most concrete urgency and the most revolutionary as well. Anything but
> Utopian, messianicity mandates that we interrupt the ordinary course of things,
> time and history here-now; it is inseparable from an affirmation of otherness and
> justice. As this unconditional messianicity must therefore negotiate its conditions
> in one or another singular, particular situation, we have to do here with the locus
> of analysis and evaluation, and, therefore, of a responsibility. (249)

Derrida's messianism is an alternate way of approaching the necessarily unknown of the

future through constant "analysis," "evaluation," and "responsibility," in the same way

that Milton urges "trial by what is contrary" in continuous reading, debate, and decision

making. Both recognize that truth is polyvalent and sometimes contrary, and they stress

the need for action in the here and now. Just as Milton's progressive revelation is

mobilized by decision making in the face of uncertainty, Derrida's messianism insists

that no unified or perfect truth is possible, but that we must do what work we can in the

present moment to bring us closer to greater understanding. For both, reading and

reinterpretation constitute this process; reinterpretation of our ways of thinking causes us

to make decisions in the present moment that serve as a means to greater knowledge and

truth.

While Agamben highlights the differences between his and Derrida's messianism,

the former's reading of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians in *The Time That Remains* shares

with Derrida and Milton a similar approach to uncertainty from within an

eschatologically-inflected understanding of truth.[29] In Agamben's reading of Paul,

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[29] For Agamben's response to Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence and his non-concepts of
supplement and trace see *TTR,* 102-104. Though he acknowledges the similarities between Derrida's
thought and messianic time, Agamben ultimately finds deconstructive reading to produce a "thwarted
messianism, a suspension of the messianic" (103). This judgment, though, is based deconstruction's

messianic time is a moment of suspension from within chronological, end-stopped

temporality that opens a space for potentiality. It is a "radical abbreviation of time…the

time *that remains*" (5) [emphasis in original]. In 1Corinthians 7:29, Paul names this

"remaining" time, and Agamben contends that this contraction "represents the messianic

situation par excellence, the only real time" (6). Recognizing there is a "remaining"

time—that truth will not be complete until the Second Coming, but that there is a time

that remains *now* in which we have to make decisions that will bring us closer to a more

perfect understanding of truth—is a way of approaching the possibilities inherent in

uncertainty. Importantly, this messianism is like Milton's method of reading in

Areopagitica and Derrida's "messianism without a messiah" because it represents the

opportunity to make decisions from within linear, apocalyptic time: "the messianic is not

the end of time, but the time of the end…not the instant in which time ends, but the time

that contracts itself and begins to end [*ho kairos synestalmenos*; ICor. 7:29] or if you

prefer, the time that remains between time and its end" (62). Like Milton's call for debate

and decision making in the present moment, Paul's messianism "concerns a present

experience that defines the messianic 'now'" (55). It is "neither chronological time nor

the apocalyptic *eschaton*" but a contraction of time from within apocalyptically-

understood or eschatologically-inflected time, in which we make decisions (62).[30]

supposed tendency to "only focus on the foundation and origin—or lack thereof," promoting "infinite
deferment" (104). However the Derridean texts on temporality and messianicity which I explore throughout
this dissertation would seem to counter this charge.

[30] Lowell Gallagher defines Paul's messianic *kairos* as "the time it takes to grasp the occasion or
opportunity to accomplish one's evolving sense of what needs to be done, in the wake of an encounter that
has radically changed one's view of what it means to be situated in time" (6). See "Faustus' Blood and the
(Messianic) Question of Ethics," *ELH* 73.1 (Spring 2006): 1-29. Or as John Caputo explains the Pauline
notion of *kairos* and its implication for messianic thinking in the present moment, messianic time "exposes
the contingency and deconstructabiltiy of the present…it breaks the spell of present constructions"(272),
and it "commands us…to bring about justice today, to change our lives today" (286). See Caputo, "The

In both Milton's *Areopagitica* and in messianic time, the pursuit of truth is necessarily always incomplete because truth and knowledge will continually be revised until the end of human existence. For Milton, truth's incompleteness is a function of his eschatologically-inflected, Protestant understanding of progressive revelation, in which even though unified and complete truth is synonymous with the Divine and will only return with Christ's Second Coming, human beings have a responsibility in the present moment to continually read, debate, and decide upon possible truths. In contrast, the messianic time of Derrida and Agamben describes experience more generally, and is not necessarily a product of a specific theological belief. Instead, for these theorists, truth is always imperfect because there will always be more knowledge to be gained, and so our ideas and beliefs must always be interrogated and reinterpreted until the end of time. Though truth must always be fragmented in both cases, Milton and the theorists of messianic time urge constant reinterpretation and revision of accepted truths as a means for greater, progressive knowledge.

Milton and the Poetics of Messianic Time

From within an apocalyptic understanding of time—as linear and end-stopped—and of truth—as only perfected at the end of time—Milton's understanding of truth and the theoretical construct of messianic time demonstrate a similar way of approaching knowledge that is still to come. This shared messianic approach shows how the "to come" of truth can be generative, in that making choices in the face of uncertainty allows

us to revise our currently-held beliefs and to work towards a progressive understanding of truth. As will be highlighted in the chapters to follow, there is a distinctly temporal mechanism that mobilizes this method of interpretation in Milton and in the theorists whom I bring in constellation with his texts: messianic time. Though their intellectual goals and methodologies differ, Benjamin, Derrida, and Agamben all stress the non-contemporaneity of time with itself, demonstrating the differential constitution of time and the possibilities that emerge when we cease to think of temporality as unilinear and unidirectional. Opposing the ideology of progress of the modern age—and its attendant understanding of time as forward-moving and finite—these thinkers highlight the disjointedness and non-synchronicity of temporal experience. For Milton and his contemporaries, anticipation of an imminent apocalypse in the seventeenth century caused time to be imagined as closed and nearing its end. Yet from within this apocalyptic understanding of time, the messianic time created by Milton's poetry creates generative ways of approaching what is unknown. As demonstrated in the above reading of *Areopagitica*, though the time of the messianic is incalculable, this very uncertainty is the condition of knowledge and action. Thus, we recognize the importance of remaining open to the unpredictability of the future. Rather than "free play" or infinite deferral, this openness amounts to a fundamental critique of our accepted ways of thinking that causes a rupture in the ordinary course of things. When read through the critical lens of messianic time, Milton's poetry is a vehicle for causing this rupture, shaking us out of our imprisonment in homogenous linear time and transfiguring temporality, like a messianic transformation.

In the close readings of Milton's poetry to follow, I demonstrate that Milton's works create experiences of messianic temporality and I argue that messianic time represents the same logic that illustrates the poet's engagement with material history. I am not interested in making the claim that we should read Milton as a type of deconstructionist *avant la lettre*; rather, the terms supplied by certain poststructuralist thinkers allow us to talk about the multivalences in Milton's poetry in more generative ways. As David Quint argues, "Renaissance texts indeed appear, with greater and lesser consciousness on the part of their writers, to share and even dramatize many of the same concerns poststructuralism raises about tropological and linguistic structures."[31] Gribben echoes this sentiment by highlighting how the theological tenets of puritanism align its practices with poststructuralist methods of reading: "Puritans refused to close the infinite God within a finite text. As a consequence, the exploitation of poststructuralist concerns in the puritan apocalyptic tradition would appear to be a dramatization of their theology" (15). That is, in both puritan thought and poststructuralist readings, attention is called to the insufficiency of language, and these texts dramatize a progressive understanding of truth in the face of this uncertainty.[32]

Following an emerging and vital trend in Milton scholarship that investigates the aporias and uncertainties of the Miltonic text, I argue that the ambiguities opened up

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[31] Patricia Parker and David Quint, eds. *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986): 11. Herman Rappaport also justifies the use of a deconstructive way of reading as a way of approaching Milton's texts: "Milton's perspective on metaphysics is compatible…with that of poststructuralists, particularly with that of Derrida" in *Milton and the Postmodern (*Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 19. In a more recent piece, Jeffery Shoulson implies that there is room for further analysis of Milton's texts in conjunction with deconstructive reading practices: "there have, in fact, been very few efforts to enlist the insights of Derrida, et al., in the service of an analysis of Milton's writings, most notably two book-length studies published in the 1980s" ("Dennis Surat, and the Old New Milton Criticism," *The New Milton Criticism,* 204).

[32] Gribben goes as far as to refer to Calvinist iconoclastic belief as evidence of "puritan proto-deconstruction" (15).

through the verse's messianic time place demands on the reader which are consistent with Milton's theory of reading as well as the method of interpretation encouraged by the theoretical construct of the messianic. As J. Martin Evans has recently asserted, "Milton's works are now beginning to be seen as sites of contention and conflict rather than unified verbal and intellectual structures or syntheses of heterogeneous ideas and values."[33] My dissertation picks up on these "sites of contention and conflict," and my analysis contributes to what has been termed "the New Milton Criticism." This way of reading explores "how analyses of Milton's irresolvable complexities can enrich our understanding of his writings," and it "encourages criticism that does not solve the problems that Milton himself resists solving."[34] I engage with this conversation by suggesting that in a variety of genres, and across the oeuvre of his poetry, Milton's texts articulate the possibility of a nonlinear temporal experience that— through the reader's experience—demonstrates the coexistence of multiple truths and provides a productive way of approaching textual and ideological uncertainty.

In my reading, the text does not become a literary artifact deployed in order to illuminate a historical, political, or religious truth; nor does my analysis celebrate linguistic indeterminacy as its goal. Rather reading becomes an interpretative event that happens in history, tied to discursive and ideological conflicts, but through an experience

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[33] "Critical Responses: Recent," in *Milton in Context*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 110.

[34] See Peter Herman and Elizabeth Sauer's introduction to *The New Milton Criticism,* pages 1 and 3. Herman and Sauer note: "The New Milton Criticism follows in the wake of the deconstructionist concern to explore textual moments of contradiction and ambivalence. The central difference is that the New Milton Criticism tends not to take its inspiration from French theory or philosophy, but from close readings of Milton's texts and from critical and theoretical evaluations of the interpretive histories of those texts" (10). Where my approach differs, then, is that in addition to an emphasis on Milton's own cultural context, critical histories of his texts, and close readings of his work, I add a reevaluation of the significance of understanding Milton alongside poststructuralist methods of reading.

of time and language that does not preemptively resolve those conflicts. Following Peter

Herman's concept that Milton's aesthetics enact a poetics of "incertitutde," I contend that

Milton keeps contradictory possibilities in play for the reader.[35] The event of reading

Milton's verse is indeterminate because there is no pre-determined and unified meaning

waiting to be discovered in the text, yet determinate because these contradictions function

within specific generic structures and are in dialogue with particular historical and

ideological forces. Joseph Wittreich's summary of what several recent readings of Milton

seek to achieve is useful in helping to orient the goals of my project:

> One hopes for a criticism of new opportunities because it will possess a wider
> circumference, expanded and remapped borders… [and]will keep modifying the
> past and how the present perceives it… The New Milton Criticism means to blaze
> the way for a criticism alert to fault lines…refitting Milton to a twenty-first
> century mind that is finally less taken with certainties, or uncertainties, then with
> the productive jostling of both—their potentiality for enlarging the mind by
> confounding its expectations and for advancing learning.[36]

In the chapters that follow, I aim to demonstrate how a "productive jostling" of

ideological and textual ambiguities in Milton's texts provides us greater insight into the

complexity of early modern apocalyptic belief, and demonstrates how Milton's poetry

creates messianic alternatives to closed and finite temporality.

Each chapter of this dissertation fuses a formalist close reading of the temporality

and uncertainties opened up by generic revisions, literary allusions, and rhetorical devices

in Milton's poetry with a reading of how ideologically-conflicting interpretations of

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[35] See Herman, *Destabilizing Milton:* Paradise Lost *and the Poetics of Incertitude.* For recent readings of
uncertainty in Milton see David Ainsworth, *Milton and the Spiritual Reader: Reading Religion in
Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6; Andrew Mattison, *Milton's Uncertain
Eden: Understanding Place in "Paradise Lost"* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Joanna Picciotto,
Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), 545.

[36] *The New Milton Criticism,* 244-5.

millennial time are articulated in the text and are reflective of contemporary discourse.[37] I

demonstrate how messianic time functions in each text and I prove the importance of this

experience as it relates to historical and ideological questions about the millennium. My

selection of primary texts includes highly-canonical works that have received much

critical attention traditionally and in the last few decades (*Paradise Lost* and *Samson*

Agonistes respectively), as well as earlier poems that have in many cases slipped under

the critical radar of either (and sometimes both) historicist and/or poststructuralist

scholars. In my inclusion of early and late Miltonic poetry and both the more and less

canonical Milton, I am not concerned with positing a monolithic Milton, but rather the

variety of ways Miltonic texts consistently constitute the possibility of knowledge and

action through an experience of non-linear messianic temporality.

     This dissertation contributes to an ongoing conversation regarding how political,

religious, scientific, and aesthetic texts are interconnected, and explores the plurality of

Milton's ideological positions as they emerge out of the ambivalence and tension in the

language of his poetry. In my reading, Milton's texts articulate a way of being in the

world—both structural (created through language) and historical (tied to seventeenth-

century millennial thinking)—that suggests uncertainty is the condition of knowledge and

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[37] For valuable examples of recent, renewed interest in formalist criticism in regard to Milton, early modern literature, and literature more generally (respectively), see Stanley Fish, "Why Milton Matters; or, Against Historicism," *Milton Studies* 44 (2004) 1-12; Mark Rasmussen, ed. *Renaissance Literature and It's Formal Engagements* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Susan Wolfson, ed. *Reading for Form* (Seattle: University of Washington   Press, 2007). In a statement that supports my focus on a close reading of Milton's texts, Gribben hints at the necessity of understanding Milton's apocalypticism via the formal properties of his poetry: "in the absence of any other evidence, Milton's evolving eschatological understanding must be deduced in each case from the internal evidence of individual texts" (150).

truth. In other words, though the experience of messianic time created in Milton's poetry, language mediates the determinate contradictions of seventeenth-century life, specifically the relationship between temporal experience and the millennium.

CHAPTER 2

"THIS MUST NOT YET BE SO": MESSIANIC TEMPORALITY AND MILTON'S OCCASIONAL POEMS "ON THE DEATH OF A FAIR INFANT" AND "ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY"

As a genre, occasional poetry has received little critical attention that seeks to understand its internal structures and themes in relation to larger cultural and historical contexts; still less has been written about seventeenth-century occasional poetry that does not fall into the pattern of the elegiac mode. In her exploration of Stéphane Mallarmé's occasional poetry, Marian Zwerling Sugano asserts, "occasional literature per se is practically non-existent as a topic in current literary criticism…contemporary critics and theorists have not yet directly confronted the problematic of the occasional" (4). In questioning the relationship between the event and the text, Sugano claims "a workable critical approach to occasional poetry has yet to be elaborated" (12), and she posits "the phrase 'occasioned by' is perhaps more complex and more interesting than occasional verse has been credited for" (13).[38] That is, while critics have been quick to define the occasional poem as a textual representation of a particular event, they have not sufficiently questioned the nature of the relationship between event and text. Does the poetry merely report or supplement the chronological unfolding of an event in history, or does the poem's language constitute its own occasion, because it creates its own temporality from within linear time? Moreover, how does this genre respond to and inform the material conditions of seventeenth-century life? Can we articulate a critical discourse about seventeenth-century occasional poetry that moves beyond the mere observation that the verse represents a particular event?

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[38] See also Dolan: "Occasional poetics as a factor in the evolution of the modern English lyric has been relatively little studied" (1).

In this chapter I argue that Milton's occasional poems do not merely report on the occasion of a particular happening in time, but that each poem creates an alternative temporality.[39] In Milton's two early poems "On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough" (1625) and "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629), the occasional genre—despite its ostensible goal—moves beyond a representation of event to portray a non-linear sequentiality that occurs alongside chronological temporality.[40] Belief in the imminence of the Second Coming during the seventeenth century fundamentally altered the way people conceptualized time, and I argue that the non-linear messianic temporality of Milton's two occasional poems can be understood as a response to that larger epistemological shift. First, I will demonstrate how Milton's "Fair Infant" constitutes its own temporality, which exemplifies the theoretical construct of messianic time. Then I will suggest how this alternative temporality can be seen as a response to competing understandings of how history functions in the seventeenth century. From here I will refine this broad historical focus to examine how the temporality of Milton's Nativity Ode responds to the ways in which apocalyptic anxieties of the early modern era changed the way time was conceptualized. Because of the prominence of occasional poetry for Milton and his contemporaries, it is especially important to reevaluate its form and function in early modern culture. According to O.B. Hardison Jr.:

> "during the Renaissance…occasional literature was highly valued….They [occasional poems] were particularly suited to arousing patriotism, stimulating interest in specific institutions or events, teaching admiration for a particular ruler,

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[39] I use the term "event" in its conventional usage, to refer to an occurrence, or something that happens in particular time in place, and not in the way recently taken up by critical theorists, as in Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* (trans. by Oliver Feltham; New York: Continuum, 2005).

[40] The dating of "Fair Infant" is uncertain. See my note 45 below for a summary of critical positions in regard to the composition of this text.

or demonstrating the existence of virtue in the society in which the reader actually lived." (108)[41]

Because occasional poetry served a primarily didactic function in the seventeenth century, seeking to "contribute to the edification of society" and inculcating the "prevailing moral and ethical considerations" of the early modern world, accurate mimesis of an actual historical event was paramount if the poetry was to have moral and ethical effects on its readers (Sugano 6). Poetic conventions that categorized the majority of seventeenth-century occasional texts included a preoccupation with education; a display of knowledge of literary tradition and a demonstration of skill in classical rhetoric; incorporation of Ovidian imagery; and inquiry into the nature and effects of death.

There is also an explicitly *temporal* dimension to occasional verse. Jonathan Z. Kamholtz defines the genre by noting that early modern occasional poetry, "narrates a sequence of events…The occasional poem also traditionally anchors the deeds it depicts in time. It fixes what Jonson in *Part of the Kings Entertainment* calls 'this point in time,' transforming the moment into time's endless monument." [42] Important in Kamholtz's description is his emphasis on the poem's role in fixing an event on an identifiable chronological timeline. Implied in this definition is an understanding of temporality as unidirectional and sequential. Similarly, In *Poetic Occasion from Milton to Wordsworth,* John Dolan defines the genre by emphasizing that "occasional poetry is poetry that relies

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[41] *The Enduing Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962). Hardison gives a broad description of the questions opened up by occasional poetry, see pages 107-22. For another general exploration of occasional verse, see Ernst M. Oppenheimer, *Goethe's Poetry for Occasions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,1974).

[42] See Kamholtz, "Ben Jonson's *Epigrammes* and Poetic Occasions." *SEL* 23 (1985): 77-94, 79.

on a verifiable event as its genesis…[the poems are] what Aristotle called 'epideictic'

rhetoric, ostensibly produced by community-approved speakers who celebrate

community values." [43] In Dolan's rubric for occasional poetry, it is necessary that the

poem is mimetic of an actual event that can be located in history: "the key element of

occasional poetry is that the reader must believe it to originate with an actual event in

order to accept the pathos-claims of the text" (3). Thus, each of these definitions of

occasional verse, emphasizes mimetic representation of an event fixed on a chronological

and linear temporal axis. By anchoring this event in time, the poet can expand the ethical

and moral sensibilities of the reader.

When Milton's occasional verse is situated within this literary tradition, the scholarly

consensus is that these poems generally reflect and conform to generic conventions of the

early modern occasional text. Cedric C. Brown notes the popularity of the occasional

poem in Milton's era, claiming that by the time Milton's *Poems Upon Several Occasions*

(1673) was published, occasional verse "had become a cliché." In "Fair Infant," Brown

sees Milton's Ovidian echoes, the poem's length, and its "series of dramatizing questions

from the singer" as drawing rather directly from the generic expectations of occasional

verse.[44] Even today, Hugh Maclean's 1957 assessment of "Fair Infant" remains one of

the few sustained readings of the poem which moves beyond concern with the dating of

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[43] Dolan, *Poetic Occasion from Milton to Wordsworth* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 2. Though Dolan's text is one of very view studies that examines Milton's poetry in relation to the genre of occasional poetry, his investigation is limited in several ways. His text is essentially a narrative of poetic influence, from the early seventeenth- to the late eighteenth-century, that probes the changes in the occasional mode between "Lycidas" and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet, Dolan is quick to conflate the notion of "occasional poetry" solely with the elegiac mode, and he only discusses Milton's "Lycidas" (see his Chapter 2).

[44] Brown, Cedric C. "Mending and Bending the Occasional Text: Collegiate Elegies and the Case of 'Lycidas.'" *Texts and Cultural Change in Early Modern England*. Ed. Cedric C. Brown and Arthur F. Marotti (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997, 179-199), 179, 187.

the poem or its artistic value. For Maclean, the poem can be located rather uniformly

within the conventions of the occasional, and from the outset, the title of the poem

emphasizes Milton's place within the occasional genre. Moreover Maclean notes, "it is

clear that in a literal sense, the 'Fair Infant' is primarily an occasional poem, celebrating,

in accordance with the convention of a tradition, a relatively unimportant event in terms

designed to enhance and magnify the significance of that occasion" (297).

Though Brown and Maclean are correct in their claim that Milton calls attention to

the occasional nature of "Fair Infant" through the verse's title, and while the Ovidian

imagery and preoccupation with death of the poem aligns it with the traditional formula

of occasional poetics, I would like to complicate the notion that Milton merely adheres to

the conventions of the occasional form. The intended goal of this genre of poems— to

identify, describe, and immortalize an event in time— collides with the temporal

instability of this early Miltonic text. That is, the language of the text demonstrates its

own inability to "present" the chosen event and instead exemplifies messianic time.

"Fair Infant"—Milton's poem commemorating the death of his sister Anne's

child– is a made up of eleven stanzas of eight lines, following an *ababbcc* rhyme scheme.

The poem has historically been read by critics as an early example of the poet's clumsy,

nascent literary skill, in which the young Milton practices the techniques that would

dominate his later career. For example, William B. Hunter finds Milton's attempt

"embarrassingly bad," and while other critics have weighed the poem's success a bit

more favorably, a bulk of the criticism surrounding this early text seeks to judge the value

of the poem as it relates to Milton's larger oeuvre —whether in noting the poet's

inelegant early technique or, conversely, in using the poem to show the continuity of

Milton's poetic development.[45] A number of critics have examined historical documents

to debate whether the poem—not published until 1673—was written in 1625-6 or later in

1628.[46] Occasionally, a few scholars have broadened these assumptions to explore the

structure and imagery of Milton's poem, notably in terms of the text's relation to the

conventions of classical oration and the poet's manipulation of pagan and Christian

imagery.[47] With the exception of John T. Shawcross' 1965 article, "The Poetical and

Liturgical Subtext of Milton's 'On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough,'" which

explores the political implications of the text in relation to the Petition of Right and

"Milton's early opposition to monarchic hegemony," critics have yet to offer a reading of

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[45] William B. Hunter, "John Milton: Autobiographer," *Milton Quarterly* 8 (1974): 100-4. David Daiches, *Milton* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1957), 21-5 similarly finds the text lacking in the qualities that categorize Milton's great, mature poetry. Cleanth Brooks and John Edward Hardy see the poem as filled with many "empty conceits'" in *Poems of Mr. John Milton: the 1645 Edition, with Essays and Analysis* (New York: Gordan, 1968), 242; Don Cameron Allen's *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry.* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1954) , 47-52 views the poem favorably as an example demonstrating an indication of Milton's later technique. Donald Friedman's "Harmony and the Poet's Voice in Some of Milton's Early Poems" in *Modern Language Quarterly 30* (1969): 523-534 argues "Fair Infant" is an illustration of the "unparalleled consistency of purpose" found in "every poetic act that lead to the composition of *Paradise Lost*" (523). James Holly Hanford's assessment of the poem seems to vacillate between these two views by claiming the poem is not as successful as Milton's later works, but that it still has poetic value : "despite its quaintly awkward title and the presence in it of strained images in the poetical fashion of the day, it is a sincere and beautiful though not a particularly Miltonic composition, springing from a mood of tender grief and rising in one stanza, where the poet touches the theme of immortality, to a genuine poetic fervor." *A Milton Handbook* (New York: Crofts,1933), 125.

[46] See for example James Holly Hanford "Milton's Poem 'On the Death of a Fair Infant,'" *Review of English Studies* 35.9 (July 1933): 312-315; and more recently Burton Raffel, "'On the Death of a Fair Infant': Date and Subject," *Milton Quarterly 34.3* (Oct 2000): 93-97. Flannagan's *Riverside Milton* dates the poem as 1628.

[47] For Milton's appropriation of oratory conventions see Gayle Edward Wilson, "Milton's Praise of 'A Fair Infant'" *Milton Quarterly 22* (1988): 307 and Stella P. Revard's *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair: The Making of the 1645 Poems* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977). For comparisons between the ways in which Milton blends Christian and pagan imagery in his early and late poetry see Hugh N. Maclean's "Milton's Fair Infant," *ELH* 24.4 (Dec 1957): 296-305; Clay Daniel's "Milton's Early Poems on Death," *Milton Studies* 26 (1990): 25-57; and Lewalski: " this early poem ["Fair Infant"] already displays Milton's characteristic use of classical motifs and myths to carry Christian meaning, and his habit of moving from a particular scene or event to cosmic perspectives and significances" *(Life* 27). Jackson I. Cope explores the poem's patterns of ascent and decent, linking this structure to Milton's understanding of the fortune fall; see "Fortunate Falls as Form in Milton's "Fair Infant," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 64.4 (Oct 1964): 660-674.

this poem that seeks to understand the text's internal structures in relation to larger

cultural and historical contexts.[48]

In order to redress this critical blind spot, I suggest "Fair Infant" creates an

experience of messianic time categorized firstly by a tension between time-bound and

timeless experience; secondly by an abjuration of the past; and thirdly by an awareness of

time's otherness with itself. Not only does this messianic temporality complicate

traditional conventions of the occasional genre, but I argue that the non-linear temporal

event created by the poem also helps us understand Milton's response to competing

modes of history in the seventeenth-century. Thus, the apocalyptic imagery of the poem's

last line concludes the text with a flash of messianic hope, while simultaneously, the

temporality of the poem as a whole mirrors this messianic openness to a future yet to

come.

Milton's poem opens with a paradoxical image that exemplifies the central

temporal tension that permeates "Fair Infant":

> O fairest flower no sooner blown but blasted,
> Soft silken primrose *fading timelessly*,
> Summer's chief honour if thou hadst outlasted
> Bleak winter's force that made thy blossom dry;
> For he being amourous on that lovely dye
>
>
> That did thy cheek envermeil, thought to kiss
>   But killed alas, and then bewailed his fatal bliss.[49] [emphasis mine]

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[48] Shawcross, "The Political and Liturgical Subtext of Milton's 'On The Death of a Fair Infant Dying of A Cough.'" *American Notes and Queries* 7 (1994): 18-21, 20.

[49] All citations of "Fair Infant" are from *Milton: The Complete Shorter Poems, Second Ed*. ed. John Cary (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007), 14-18.

Milton's metaphor likens Anne's child to a fair flower, whom he imagines "fading

timelessly." According to the *OED*, this is the first recorded occurrence of the adverb

"timelessly," and its initial definition highlights the untimely nature of the child's death:

"At a time which is not proper, rightful, or appropriate; *esp.* prematurely."[50] Yet,

paradoxically, "timelessly" can also refer to *transcendence of time*, as the second

definition of the adverb is "without reference to time; independently of the passage of

time…. in a manner unaffected by the passage of time or changes in fashion." That is, in

the first sense Milton highlights the sequential nature of time and its linearity, because

"timelessly" emphasizes the prematurity of the event in the past from the vantage point of

the present moment. Simultaneously though, "timelessly" makes the infant's death not an

experience of the limitations of linear time, but an incident of an eternal temporality that

transcends the passing of chronological time. Therefore the paradox of "fading

timelessly" juxtaposes sequential, chronological time with an eternal and transcendent

temporality, and this collision of temporal possibilities makes it difficult to assign the

infant's death to a specific instance in time. Moreover, the paradox is an experience writ

small of the fundamental conflict of the poem—the opposition between time-bound and

timeless temporality.

    Milton's multiple literary allusions in the poem compellingly illustrate this

tension between linear time and time unaffected by chronology, because these references

function by juxtaposing sequential time with the apparent timelessness of classical

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[50] Third edition, March 2012; online version June 2012.
<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.temple.edu/view/Entry/202113>; accessed 15 August 2012. An entry for
this word was first included in *New English Dictionary*, 1912. This is the connotation of the term noted in
Carey's gloss in his edition of the poem, and I have yet to find a critic or editor who notes any possibility of
ambiguity in Milton's use of this word.

literary persona and themes. To understand the infant's death, the poem likens the child to a series of past literary figures who belong to the past, yet possess an eternal quality. Since the poem demonstrates that the allusions cannot match up to the present, the text suggests the past must be superseded.

For example, the second stanza begins a lengthy attempted comparison of the dead child to classical figures with the introduction of Aquilo (or Boreas) taken from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. After Aquilo's "boisterous rape" of an "Athenian damsel" (9), the following stanza imagines that Aquilo catches sight of the fair infant and accidentally kills the child: "But unawares with his cold-kind embrace/ Unhoused thy virgin soul from her fair biding-place" (20-21). The jarring eroticism is followed in stanza IV by a response as awkward and ambiguous as the allusion itself. The speaker states "Yet thou are not inglorious in thy fate" (22). The litotes "not inglorious" is an obscuring and indirect praise of the infant that seems to mirror the awkward references to the classical past, and it directly precedes the speaker's second invocation of a classical myth in the recollection of Apollo and Hyacinthus.

Apollo accidentally kills his lover (the boy Hyacinthus), and just like in the former allusion to Aquilo and his lady, this reference invokes an eroticism in the text that seems peculiar as a comparison to the poem's object—a recently-deceased child. The final two lines of stanza IV explicitly lament that the classical references cannot hold and that these allusions to the past are insufficient, because the infant cannot be made undying in the same way that Apollo immortalized his lover as a flower: "But then transformed him into a purple flower/ Alack that so to change thee winter had no power" (27-28). That is, Milton's use of allusions confronts the question of the nature of time—

specifically the possibility of time's transcendence— and the appropriateness of the literary past in understanding present struggles. These first two references to Ovid's classical myths imply that the energies of the past must be exceeded in order to progress in the present. And indeed the focus shifts in stanzas V and VI from the classical past to the present physicality of the infant's death and mortality.

The classical does return though in stanza VII, as the poem asks if the child now dwells in the "Elysian fields (if such there were)" (40), or if the infant fell from "Olympus" (44) before being taken back to the gods by Jove. This proliferation of classical allusions speeds up in this stanza as the speaker seems to be frenetically proposing possible explanations drawn from the past to explain death of the fair infant:

> Or wert thou that just maid who once before
> Forsook the hated earth, O tell me sooth
> And cam'st again to visit us once more?
> Or were't thou that sweet smiling youth?
> Or that crowned matron sage white-robed Truth?
> Or any other of that heavenly brood
> Let down in cloudy throne to do the world some good?

In the space of these few short lines, the child is imagined as the "just maid" Astraea, goddess of justice; an uncertain "sweet smiling youth," believed to be either Mercy, Ganymede, Peace, Virtue ,or Venus; or any other figure from classical mythology who was lent briefly to the earth by the Greek gods.[51]

Yet this pile up of references to figures from the literary past is insufficient; in the poem's urgent desire to understand the child's death through classical myth, these very

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[51] Because line 53 lacks two syllables in an otherwise metrically tight poem, critics assume there is a word missing from the manuscript, though there are a multitude of arguments about the referent: J.A. Himes suggests Ganymede [*MLN* 35 (1920) 414-419]; Hugh Maclean argues that the youth is "Peace" in "Milton's Fair Infant;" Don Cameron Allen proposes "Virtue" in his *The Harmonious Vision* (51); R.J.C Watt suggests "Venus" [*N&Q* 36 (1989) 30-1].

different suggestions collide with one another. While the purpose of allusion is to connect a particular referent with an identifiable semblance of that referent in the past, here the multitude of comparisons instead makes the connection inoperable. Instead of providing greater meaning through the context of the alluded- to work, these references highlight the temporal and thematic *distance* between the infant and figures from the past. The incompatibility of the speaker's allusions to the classical demonstrates the opposition between the time-bound and the timeless exemplified in the earlier paradox "fading timelessly."

Reference to the past is exhausted in the final three stanzas of the poem, as comparisons to classical myth drop out and are replaced by religious imagery. Stanza IX imagines the infant as a part of God's angels, the "golden-winged host" (57), who merely visited earth briefly to act as an example to mortal men. God's angels perform the same function as the classical gods imagined in the previous two stanzas, but the speaker has mapped Protestant theological belief on top of its secular counterpart, thus superseding the past once again. Stanza X continues this conceit, questioning why the angel could not stay and help mankind through the "swift-rushing black perdition" (67) and "slaughtering pestilence" (68) of the present day.[52] Then the final stanza addresses the infant's mother directly in the present moment, urging her to

> …curb thy sorrows wild;
> Think what a present thou to God has sent,
> And render him with patience what he lent;
> This if thou do he will an offspring give,
> That till the world's end shall make thy name to live.

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[52] "Slaughtering pestilence" is thought by most scholars to be a topical reference to the contemporary London plague of 1625; see Cary's note, page 15.

The poem's images of a pagan past give way to religious belief and theological reflections of the present-day seventeenth century, and the messianic hope of a better future to come. Thus, the text does not present a representation of an occasion fixed or anchored in time. Rather, it demonstrates the interplay of the literary past, present social and religious concerns, and the messianic future heralded in the image of "the world's last end" that concludes the poem.

Milton's negation of allusions from the literary past can be better understood—both internally in terms of the poem's structure, and externally by way of the text's relation to its specific historical context—by conceptualizing this break with the past as the rupture of messianic time. Messianic time causes us to rethink temporality in order to dislocate our accepted modes of thinking and to reject the complacent and uncritical thought of the present times. The rupture of the messianic entails a refusal of nostalgia that makes present action powerless, and similarly, in "Fair Infant," Milton's classical allusions demonstrate that progress necessitates that the past must be exceeded.

We can understand Milton's departure from the literary past here as enacting one facet of Walter Benjamin's proposed way of conceptualizing history as messianic time. In his reflections on his own culture, Benjamin finds that contemporary Marxists and historicists blindly adhere to an abstract concept of "progress," which causes a lack of critical engagement with actual conflicts as well as the deferral of real political action. He contends that we have inherited a concept of history based on homogeneity and linearity: history is understood as a unidirectional, forward-propelled progression, constituted by causally-linked events that move further and further toward progress. When we view history as the continuous march of progress, we distort the relationship between past and

present struggles. Benjamin proposes instead a transformation in our way of conceptualizing history that would interrupt this homogenous march of progress—a "messianic" revolution in which the unidirectionality of history clashes with multi-directional temporality, producing a way of understanding time that rethinks the relationship of past, present, and future.

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), Benjamin opposes the idealizing tendencies of early twentieth-century historicism, which distort the past and anesthetize the present. Benjamin rejects the narrative of current historicism that views time as an uninterrupted progression—a "chain of events" (Thesis IX) propelling us toward progress— and instead maintains that we must "blast open the continuum of history" (Thesis XVI) to establish a 'time of the now' [*Jetztzeit*] which is shot through with chips of messianic time" (Appendix A). Real revolutionary action must begin with the death of the idea that history is linearity. When we instead see history as fragmented, as a reoccurring spiral of decline and progression, we can reject the view of history as "homogenous, empty time," and we have a "revolutionary chance" to " blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history" (Thesis XVII) .

Benjamin's application of his philosophy of history and alternate understanding of temporality is demonstrated—in the realm of aesthetic criticism—in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of his dense treatise *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925). In this text, Benjamin accuses literary critics of misreading the baroque *Trauerspiel* (German bourgeois tragedy or "mourning play") through the faulty categorization of this genre as a bastardized imitation of classical tragedy. The tradition of German Romantic criticism, with its emphasis on the transcendental work of artistic genius, has refused

Trauerspiel a "resonance in history" (48). In other words, the abstract concepts of

"humanism" and "genius" have caused the actual material conditions which produced

these works to be ignored, causing criticism to be complacent taking an "uncritical"

stance on this genre and finding the plays to be merely "caricature of classical tragedy"

(50). Benjamin's investigation of the true origin [*Ursprung*] of this type of drama

complicates the notion of "origin", insisting it is a place of struggle. This leads Benjamin

to propose a theory of culture in which periods of decline can be understood as

reoccurring and productive. The *Ursprung* of *Trauerspiel* actually simultaneously

signifies a period of origin and "decline," but the important point is that Benjamin notes

the generative possibilities inherent in a non-forward-moving progression: "it may be a

decline of fruitful and preparatory kind" (56).This rethinking of temporality—a

reevaluation of the relation between past and present—is a messianic rupture because it

disrupts the logic of unidirectionality (progress as only forward-moving) that

characterizes our conventional way of thinking. This alternative temporality does not use

the present to produce a distorted view of the past—as Benjamin's contemporary literary

critics do—and it proves that history is not a linear march of progress, but a dialectic

movement that contains messianic eruptions and generative periods of decline. [53]

Benjamin's reading demonstrates that art—specifically literature—has the potential to

disrupt the notions of linear causality and inevitable progress implicit in chronological

time.

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[53] The final chapter of Agamben's *The Time that Remains* provides a sustained reading of the messianic as Benjamin describes it in "Theses," and thus Agamben's explication can be useful in helping to understand Benjamin's messianic temporality. Messianic time for Benjamin occurs when "an instant of the past and an instant of the present are united in a constellation where the present is able to recognize the meaning of the past and the past therein finds its meaning and fulfillment" (*TTR* 142). Benjamin's notion of messianic time as a "constellation" is discussed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

This different relation between the past, the present, and the possibilities of the future demonstrates the necessary differentiation in temporal experience—and rejects the notion of historical continuity. In "Fair Infant," Milton's negation of past literary allusions and the non-chronological time enacted by the text provide an example and deployment of this alternative temporality, described by Benjamin three centuries later. In both Benjamin's reading and Milton's poem, a break in the continuity of history is messianic time: its temporality is messianic because it is a rupture, a fissure within accepted ways of thinking. This temporality comes about when we recognize that time is constituted by generative contrasts between past and present. Instead of continuity and forward progression, Milton's text demonstrates that time is a clashing of past and present, which ultimately proves the interconnectedness of temporal states which constitutes every experience. [54]

Not only does "Fair Infant" demonstrate a contradiction between time-bound and interminable temporality, and exhibit a break with past modes of thinking, but the poem exemplifies messianic time because the narrative action of the text shows the otherness of time from itself. In other words, while noted above that the genre of occasional poetry

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[54] Like Benjamin, Jacob Taubes highlights that history is a movement of development, but not merely a unilinear forward- moving progression. Similar to Benjamin's polemical goal in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Taubes seeks to highlight the possibility of freedom that is possible once we break through the empty cycle of a homogeneous modern understanding of temporality and the endless repetition of cause and effect implied by such cycles. In opposition to the Enlightenment's ideology of history as following a straight, unidirectional line, Taubes demonstrates that the movement of time entails a "permanent negation of the social order, " so that progression is actually "a dialectic movement of negation and progression, not a linear, forward-only motion" (*Occidental Eschatology* 98). Thus there is a similarity in Taubes' contention that history progresses through "a constant negation of any system that currently exists" (166) and Milton's negation of past literary allusions. Milton's pagan, classical allusions are negated by concerns of the present: seventeenth-century religious belief and messianic anticipation. In both messianic time and Milton's poem, time is a collision of past and present in a continuous spiral of decline and rebirth. Similarly, Loewenstein (*Drama*) reads Milton's apocalyptic imagery and subtext as a strategy for moving beyond these same mutually exclusive views of history: "The apocalyptic passages articulate Milton's powerful impulse to transcend, break through, and obliterate the historical process as a vicious pattern of decline or cycles" (115).

seeks to represent a particular historical event, and the mimesis of this occasion "anchors the deeds in time," here the present event of the infant's death is elided, replaced instead by failed comparisons to a classical past and the yet-to-come promise of the savior's birth.[55] The genre's goal of fixing an occasion on a linear timeline is frustrated by the temporal instability of the poem, and thus the text's messianic temporality complicates the conventions of the occasional form. The "event" described in Milton's "Fair Infant" is actually a moment of suspension within chronological time where we see how the present is inflected by the past and future.

Milton's text anticipates a rethinking of an event as implicitly based on presence which later becomes central to Derrida's conception of messianic temporality. According to Derrida, in the tradition of western metaphysics, time has always been thought on the basis of the present. That is, the measurement of time proceeds from a logic of identity where the past is defined as what was once present, and the future as what will be present. Yet Derrida's idea of messianic temporality throws this logic into question, and what emerges is a paradox in which time is always and already not "present". In "Différance," Derrida demonstrates the way in which the present moment is always divided within itself:

> [T]he movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element…is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element…constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not…An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself. (13)

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[55] The echoes to Virgil's Fourth "Messianic" Eclogue here have been documented well enough to be a commonplace assumption. See for example, Lewalski: "With Virgil's Fourth 'Messianic' Eclogue as a reference point, the expected child is made to figure Christ who brings redemption and immortal life to faithful Christians" (*Life* 28).

What Derrida says here is that an experience of the present only makes sense because of, and in relation to, its "opposites," the past and future. What seems like a unified concept turns out instead to be an experience produced by the interweaving of differences. Derrida does not claim that time is meaningless but rather exposes how this concept actually works. He is not proposing some transcendental notion of temporal reality but rather only highlighting that our traditionally- held notion of time as a linear succession is a fractured concept. What is thought to be present is actually only a relation between no-longer and not- yet, and therefore time is never in "itself." There is never a "present" or a "presence" we can point to that is not necessarily contaminated by past and future. This is precisely the kind of temporality that Milton's "Fair Infant" demonstrates.

In Derrida's messianic temporality and in Milton's poem, we see there is an "otherness" in our concept of time and so we must be open to that which may undermine our firmly-held assumptions. Instead of an understanding of time that assumes a linear, unified chronological progression forward, Derrida's notion of temporality and Milton's text demonstrate that difference is constitutive of temporal experience, since every present is dependent upon the past and future. As an extension of this rethinking of how time works, this messianism is not a religious or transcendental condition, but rather an alternate way of approaching the future and what is unknown to come.

This conceptualization of how time functions—understood via the theoretical construct of messianic time—can also help us appreciate Milton's response to a historically-specific understanding of history as it was experienced in the seventeenth century. According to Achsah Guibbory in *The Map of Time: Seventeenth-Century English Literature and Ideas of Pattern in History,* there were three patterns of temporal

reality that categorized early modern understandings of how historical time functioned

and which influenced how people interpreted every-day phenomena: "the idea of decay;

the cyclical view of history; and the idea of progress" (5). The theory of decay idealizes

the past because the present is corrupt; the cyclical view implied that "history is a series

of repetitive cycles," so therefore "the same patterns were repeated throughout history"

(8); and finally the notion of progress signified that change was a positive event, moving

mankind forward and closer towards perfection. Guibbory notes that these three models

of temporality often converged, and it was not uncommon to find an author juxtaposing

two or more of these models. His exploration of Milton's model of history implies that

Milton incorporated all three in his poetry.[56] Milton

> accepts the Christian view that history follows a linear course from Creation to
> the Apocalypse, but he believes that within this linear, teleological framework
> history has taken a cyclical course…periods of virtue and purity are succeeded by
> corruption and decline…thus religious history has exhibited a cyclical progress of
> refinement, decay, renewal, and yet another decay. (170)

Though Milton's view of history is essentially cyclical, he demonstrates that man's

agency—guided by the providential will of God—can be changed in order to "break with

the cyclical pattern of the past and begin a path of continual progress" (172). Similar to

Benjamin's suggestion that art can "blast open the continuum of history," Milton views

poetry as a vehicle through which people can abandon the cyclical decay of the past for a

progressive advancement over old ways of thinking.

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[56] In a similar vein, Loewenstein (*Drama*) finds that Milton demonstrates conflicting conceptions of
history, which include "degenerative, cyclical, apocalyptic, typological," and these competing historical
configurations "represent a series of imaginative and conflicting responses to Milton's revolutionary years
and writings" (93). For Loewenstein, Milton "never quite resolves the conflict between envisioning history
degeneratively and cyclically and envisioning it apocalyptically and progressively" (120).

Using Guibbory's model of how early modern people imagined historical time as an entry point, I argue that Milton's "Fair Infant" enacts the interplay of these three modes of history, the juxtaposition of which demonstrates a non-linear temporality akin to the time of the messianic. That is, the poem alternates between all three aspects of Guibbory's paradigm —time as a process of decay, as cyclical, and as forward-moving progress—and in this way, the text ruptures the notion of linear temporality. From within our experience of chronological time, the poem disrupts sequentiality, and so provides an alternative to the immanent "end of time" suggested by unidirectional apocalyptic temporality.

Stanza I begins the poem by invoking various images of decay as the infant is rather explicitly likened to a decaying flower: the baby is "blasted" by the might of winter (1); the primrose is "fading timelessly" as noted above; and winter's harshness makes the infant's "blossom dry" (4). Next in Stanzas II through IV, there is a shift to a cyclical understanding of time, since allusions to the classical past are invoked to imply that history repeats and echoes itself in different historical contexts. Images of decomposition and corroding return hauntingly in stanza V, as the speaker is obsessed with the physical decay of the infant's dead body: "Or that thy corse corrupts the earth's dark womb,/Or that thy beauties lie in wormy bed,/Hid from the world in a low-delved tomb" (30-2). However, cyclical time returns in stanzas VI through IX in the references to the "Elysian fields," "Olympus," Astrea, and "Truth" which I cited above, because Milton again attempts to use these patterns of the past to comment upon the present. Milton's conception of time swerves back to one of decay in the poem's penultimate stanza, where the speaker laments that the fair infant did not remain on earth to "slake his

wrath whom sin had made our foe/to turn swift-rushing black perdition hence/Or drive away the slaughtering pestilence" (66-8). The messianic conclusion of the poem, which promises the birth of a savior and eternal fame for the infant's mother at the apocalypse, moves the temporality of the poem out of regressive decay or cyclical repetition to future possibilities. This is contemporaneous with a non-linear messianic temporality that characterizes the poem as a whole and which likewise represents an experience that is open to an unknowable event to come. Thus, the temporality of Milton's text and its messianic conclusion demonstrate a rethinking of how time functions as well as an openness to the unknown future to come. Like Derrida's "messianism," the poem's final apocalyptic image of "the world's last end" is one of messianic hope and openness to unknown future possibilities.

I now turn to a Miltonic text that has garnered considerably more scholarly consideration than "Fair Infant," in order to more fully explore the effects of messianic temporality on the generic workings of seventeenth-century occasional verse and to move closer to a theory regarding how Milton's poetry constitutes its own temporality in response to early modern anticipation of the apocalypse.[57] In contrast to the subject of "Fair Infant"—the death of a mortal child—the subject of Milton's Nativity Ode is the birth of an infant whose later death with alter the nature of time by suggesting the possibility of immortality. The temporal ambiguity of "On the Morning of Christ's

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[57] For a selection of influential commentary on the poem more generally see Arthur Barker, "The Pattern of Milton's *Nativity Ode*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 10.2 (1941): 167-181; J.B. Broadbent, "The Nativity Ode," in *The Living Milton*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul,1960), 12-31; Rosemond Tuve, "The Hymn 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity,'" in *Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957): 37-72; Stella Revard, *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,1997), 64-90; Don Cameron Allen, *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1970), 24-40; David Quint, "Expectation and Prematurity in Milton's Nativity Ode," *Modern Philology* 97.2 (1999): 195-219.

Nativity" has already been well-rehearsed in the critical dialogue.[58] A small number of scholars have noted the resonance of millennial expectation and rhetoric in the poem.[59] What has yet to be explored, however, is the interplay of these two—how the text's temporal instability and complexity are related to the apocalyptic subtext of the poem. I argue that the temporality of the text can be understood as a literary response to seventeenth-century millennial anxieties, and this disruption of linear temporality—read through the lens of messianic time—creates a disjunction between what the occasional genre is expected to do and what it actually does. [60] In other words, the occasional genre—despite its ostensible goal—moves beyond the representation of an event to constitute its own non-sequential temporality. My reading below demonstrates that

[58] George William Smith Jr. notes the confusion of tenses and finds structural continuity through the pattern of mistake and correction in the poem, see "Milton's Method of Mistakes in the Nativity Ode, *SEL* 18.1 (1978): 107-23; Schullenbeger also notes the "conflation of tenses" in the poem, "Christ as Metaphor: Figural Instruction in Milton's Nativity Ode," *Notre Dame English Journal* 14.1 (1981): 43; J. Martin Evans finds that a "fusing of tenses" creates a lack of presence in the text so as to "transcend chronology" in "A Poem of Absences," *MQ* 27:31-35; Lewalski finds the temporality of the poem shifting in a "cinematographic fashion" so that its subject is made to "encompass all time and space" (*Life* 47); Stanley Fish also notes the non-linearity of time in the text and finds that action is continually deferred (see *How Milton Works* 307-325), because Truth "does not need the temporal dimension to emerge…and it remains fully present in every moment" (229). In other words, for Fish Milton supersedes linear temporality as we know it because Truth is always already constituted. In a recent work, Christina Fawcett contends that, like the Virgilian Orphic singer from whom Milton draws inspiration, the speaker of this poem desires to stop the progression of nature and to transcend time through a "poetics of stasis" in "The Orphic Singer of Milton's Nativity Ode," *SEL* 49.1 (2009): 105-120, 119.

[59] For example, George William Smith notes the "apocalyptic expectation" that pervades the poem (110). Lewalski contends that "the poem revises Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, which celebrated (probably) the birth of the Roman counsel Pollio's son as the beginning of a new Golden Age. Milton celebrates the birth of the Messiah who will restore the true Golden Age at the Millennium" (*Life* 46). The similarities between this text and Virgil's Messianic Eclogue are also investigated by Donald Swanson and John Mulryan in *Milton Quarterly* 23 (1989) 59-66.

[60] While the poem is often discussed in relation to the generic conventions of ode or hymn, I have chosen to consider the poem in terms of its relation to the occasional form. Primarily, this is justified because generic categories are not mutually exclusive, and critics have noted a variety of genres operating in this poem. For example, Carey's headnote highlights the relation of the text to a tradition of nativity poems in Latin and Italian (101); Phillip Rollinson views the poem as a hymn, see "Milton's Nativity Poem and the Decorum of Genre," *Milton Studies* 7 1975, 165-88; Paul H. Fry reads the poem as vacillating between the traditions of the hymn and the ode, *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 37-49. The phrasing of Milton's title and the fact that the introductory stanzas (I-IV) use the verse form of "Fair Infant" (rhyming *ababbcc* decasyllables, with a final alexandrine) lends credence to the decision to consider the verse in relation to the conventions of occasional poetry.

Milton's references to the apocalyptic in this text do not represent the presence of any

event but rather the interconnectedness of past and future experiences. Therefore we can

read Milton's Nativity Ode as a response to seventeenth-century anxiety concerning the

pending apocalypse and the imminence of the end of time, because the messianic

temporality of the text suggests an alternative reaction to the finite, unidirectional, and

closed time of apocalyptic thinking.

In the previous chapter, I highlighted the ways in which conceptions of time were

changing in the early modern imagination: Christianity made time linear, the anticipation

of the apocalypse made time finite and scarce, and the seventeenth-century belief that the

Second Coming was imminent intensified the notion that temporality itself would soon

end. It is important to highlight that Milton and his contemporaries considered

themselves on the brink of a new historical threshold, an impending period of great

upheaval preceding the apocalypse:

> Milton's culture expected rampant wickedness and apostasy, the four horseman of
> the apocalypse—war, pestilence, famine, and death—wreaking universal havoc,
> fearsome battles between the Saints and the Antichrist leading to Armageddon,
> and Christ coming in terrible majesty to judge the world. But for the saints the
> millennium would constitute a new Golden Age with nature restored and the
> social and political order perfected. (Lewalski "Milton and the Millennium" 13).

Milton's contemporaries viewed the events unfolding in their age as signs that the

apocalypse was looming, and there is reason to believe that Milton was among those who

interpreted contemporary happenings as an indication that the Second Coming was fast

approaching. [61] For instance, according to Catherine Gimelli Martin, "like the early

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[61] "At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, many religious thinkers,
especially in Protestant countries began to suspect that the events taking place before their very eyes were
the actual ones leading the beginning of the millennium, the return of Jesus as a political messiah, and the
commencement of his thousand-year reign on earth…various countries saw themselves as the New Israel
where decisive Providential events would occur; see "Seventeenth-Century Millenarianism" in *Apocalypse*

English Revolutionaries in general and his fellow Independents in particular, Milton

regarded contemporary events as a gradual, uncertain, but also historically inevitable

'unfolding of the New Jerusalem'" (*Milton and the Ends of Time* 149). Moreover,

Malabika Sarkar points out the "certainty, if not the imminence, of the millennium" in

Milton's early poetry and she contends that because these early poems juxtapose anxiety

about time ending with faith in a coming redemption, "his [Milton's] poems of the 1620s

and 1630s are essentially, in a broad sense, aligned to millennial ideas because the

millennium is both an end and a new beginning" (81).[62]

    As my reading of Nativity Ode demonstrates, Milton's occasional poetry

constitutes a different kind of temporality, an alternative time to that of apocalyptic

closure. Through the text's conflation of verb tenses which elide the present occasion; its

self-referential emphasis on its own inability to represent the event of Christ's birth; and

the apocalyptic subtext of the poem which shows the interdependence of past and future,

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Theory, 112. According to Richard Popkin, what distinguished seventeenth-century millenarianism was that "it was rooted in a new way of deciphering the symbols and prophesies in Scripture, especially in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, by relating them to historical persons and institutions, and that it saw crucial social and political events of the time as intimately linked to penultimate steps that would occur before the onset of the millennium" (112-3).

[62] *Milton and the Ends of Time*. It is important to note that the debate regarding when Milton adopted millennial ideas and when (and if) he abandoned them is not settled, as the various positions taken by the authors of the collection *Milton and the Ends of Time* demonstrate. Stella Revard contends that Milton's early work does not exhibit the same radical political and religious visions of the apocalypse as does his later writing. She posits that although Milton was most likely aware of the various millennial tracts circulating throughout London, "the early poetry does not speak unequivocally of Christ's coming to rule on earth. It apparently took the events of the 1640s to awaken Milton's millenarian expectations fully," "Milton and Millarianism: from "Nativity Ode to *Paradise Regained*" in *Milton and the Ends of Time*, 56. In this same collection, William B. Hunter remarks, "it is questionable" whether or not the Nativity Ode can be read as millenarian (97).   See also Lewalski, "Milton and the Millennium" in *Milton and the Ends of Time*, for brief reading of this text's connection to contemporary millennial tracts: " In 1629, two years after Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* predicted a millennium shortly to come, Milton's Nativity Ode critiques that mindset" (16). For Lewalski, this poem exemplifies Milton's early belief that the millennium will arrive only after a long and challenging time of purgation and "only when idols old and new have been cast out" (16).

Milton's Nativity Ode exemplifies messianic time and the poem demonstrates an openness to the unknown future the Second Coming will bring.

The four introductory stanzas that precede the actual "Hymn" of the poem proper announce the prominence of time in the text and enact the conflation of verb tenses and non-linear temporality that will categorize the poem as a whole.[63] The first stanza starts with a temporal marker, "This is the month," announcing the present moment of the poem's composition and the birth of Christ. Yet the present tense is quickly displaced as the narrative moves to the past tense in lines 4-5, and then to the future in lines 6-7:

> This is the month, and this the happy morn
> Wherein the Son of Heav'ns eternal King,
> Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
> Our great redemption from above did bring;
> For so the holy sages once did sing,
>   That he our deadly forfeit should release,
> And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.[64]

Here the occasion of Christ's birth on this present "morn" is almost immediately replaced by the recollection of "holy sages" in a distant past who prophesize and anticipate salvation in the yet-to-come future. Rather than a mimetic representation of Christ's birth, the narrative substitutes this occasion with a prophesy of its occurrence made in the past and the expectation of redemption in the future.

After the opening stanzas, the Hymn likewise begins with a temporal cue, "It was the winter wild." But there is a contradiction between the temporality announced in the first stanza ("This is the month"), because this second temporal marker moves the

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[63] Many critics have noted the shifting verb tenses of this poem. For just a few examples see Frank S. Kastor, "Miltonic Narration: 'Christ's Nativity,'" *Anglia* 86 (1968): 348; and David B. Morris, "Drama and Stasis in Milton's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity,'" *Studies in Philology* 68.2 (1971): 207-22.

[64] All citations of the Nativity Ode are from *Milton: The Complete Shorter Poems, Second Ed.* ed. John Cary, 101-116.

narrative into the past. Within the first 3 lines of the Hymn's opening stanza, the poem's verb tenses shift once more: "It *was* the winter wild,/While the heaven-born-child/All meanly wrapped in the rude manger *lies*;" (1-3)[emphasis mine]. The conflation of tenses continues throughout the text creating a non-linear and non-sequential temporality which has the effect of eliding the present occasion of Christ's nativity.

Not only does the poem announce the importance of time through its initial temporal cues and enact a non-linear temporality throughout, but the narrative voice actually self-reflexively calls attention to the poem's inability to make "present" the occasion of the Nativity. This occurs in the third stanza of the introductory verses: "Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein/Afford a present to the Infant God? /Hast thou no verse, no hymn, no solemn strain, /To welcome him to his new abode" (15-18). While the ostensible meaning of "present" in line 16 may certainly refer to the hymn itself as a gift offered to the infant, I would like to put pressure on this reading and suggest that "present" also refers to the *temporal*. That is, the narrative voice self-referentially questions the text's capacity to represent or *make present the occasion* of the Nativity. In other words, "Will your song, Muse, give presence to the infant, make this event present to us?" By noting the polysemy of the word "present" here, I read these lines as self-reflexively questioning the mimetic role of the poem to represent the occasion of Christ's birth as an event happening in time, and as highlighting that the poem will instead create its own event through an alternate temporality. While the objective of occasional poetry is to represent an event and to fix that occurrence's position in chronological time, here Milton's text calls attention to its inability to do so, complicating the relation between text and event assumed in this genre of poetry.

There is a connection between this non-linear and non-mimetic temporality created by the text—akin to the theoretical construct of messianic time—and the seventeenth-century apocalyptic anticipation described above. The eschatological imagery that pervades the poem complicates a representation of the text's occasion (the birth of Christ) because these apocalyptic allusions refuse chronological, sequential temporality and demonstrate instead the interconnectedness of the past and the future.

The text's first eschatological reference comes in stanza VII, and it conflates the birth of Christ with the future dissolution of Nature at the Second Coming in such a way that the poem's occasion is elided. The first movement of the poem in these opening stanzas is focused on the concept that Nature and all its manifestations must obey the Lord and become stripped of their autonomy at the birth of a greater force, Christ. For instance, in stanza VI, the stars " Stand fix'd in steadfast gaze" (71) on the eve of the infant's birth until God dismisses them. In the next stanza, the sun is replaced with the "Son" of Christ in an allusion to Revelation 21, where the sun is no longer needed in the post-apocalyptic New Jerusalem:[65]

> And though the shady gloom
> Had given day her room,
> The Sun himself with-held his wonted speed,
> And hid his head for shame,
> At his inferior flame,
> The new-enlightened world should need;
> He saw a greater Sun appear
> Then his bright Throne, or burning axletree could bear. (76-83)

Rather than a representation of the Nativity, here the text presents an apocalyptic future conflated with a personified Nature of past, pagan times. That is, in the diegetic action of

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[65] See Flanagan's gloss on this stanza, note 24, page 41: "When God shows John a vision of 'the holy city, new Jerusalem' (Revelation 21.2), 'the city had no need of sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof' (Revelation 21.3).'"

the poem, the text demonstrates the mutual dependence of past action and future temporality to come. Enacting Derrida's claim that the present is always contaminated by its others, here Milton's text demonstrates the event of the Savior's birth as "keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element…constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not" ("Différance" 13).

In the stanzas to follow, the poem continues to describe the ways in which Nature is stripped of its power and cedes to the will of God, obeying his commands and joining with the heavenly angels in an angelic hymn to the infant Christ. This holy symphony then brings about a golden age of peace and harmony that is—simultaneously—*both* a return to the classical past and a yet-to-come time of prosperity that will be inaugurated with the Second Coming of Christ:

> For if such holy Song
> Enwrap our fancy long,
> Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,
> And speckl'd vanity
> Will sicken soon and die,
> And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould,
> And Hell itself shall pass away,
> And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day. (133-40)

Here, an allusion to the classical Golden Age in line 134 is mapped on top of a reference to Judgment Day in lines 138-140.[66] Thus, what the text describes is a time when the world will be perfected which is *at the same time* a return to past virtue and an anticipation of future glory at the apocalypse. Rather than the representation of an occasion, the apocalyptic verse elides a present, replacing it instead with a messianic hope that conflates of past and future temporality.

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[66] Flanagan's note on line 138 links it to popular images of the apocalypse (note 43, page 43), and Carey's gloss notes the connection here to Virgil's Fourth Messianic Eclogue (note 135, page 110).

In this way, Milton's apocalyptic allusions enact what Derrida later calls "spectral moments," or experiences of temporality which cannot be "ordered according to the linear succession of a before or an after, between a present-past, a present-present, or a present-future" (*Specters* 48). In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida employs the concept of "spectrality"— the temporality of a specter or ghost—as a way of articulating how the messianic calls into question a notion of time based on continuity, linearity, and homogeneity. In a reading that brings into constellation the texts of Marx, Shakespeare, and Hegel, Derrida provides an analysis of the line "The time is out of joint" from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to demonstrate that a specter cannot be considered a manifestation of presence. That is, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, "the specter appears to present itself…but it is not present, itself, in flesh and blood" (126). Instead, the specter is an example of "non-presence," or the relation between "the persistence of a present past, the return of the dead," and the future possibility of a "presence to come" (126). Milton's text demonstrates a similar non-presence, replacing the representation of the poem's occasion with a simultaneous return to the past and anticipation of the future. Moments of spectrality, like Milton's apocalyptic verse here, cannot be pinned down on a linear continuum, because this kind of temporality "no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present" (xix). To borrow Derrida's words, Milton's eschatological references in the Nativity Ode demonstrates this same "disjointure in the very presence of the present," and performs the "non-contemporaneity of present time with itself" (29) which characterizes the time of the messianic.

Stanza XV continues this description of a post-apocalyptic Golden Age, where "Truth and Justice then,/Will down return to men" (141-142), and the gates of heaven "open wide" (148). Yet in the same way that the poem self-referentially calls attention to its inability to make "present" the birth of Christ in the third prefatory stanza above, stanza XVI highlights that this messianic time of peace cannot exist in the present: "But wisest fate says no,/This must not yet be so,/The babe lies yet in smiling Infancy" (148-150). Momentarily, the narrator reminds the reader of the occasion of the hymn—the birth of the infant Christ—bringing the diegetic action of the poem out of the non-chronological temporality of past and future messianic peace of the previous stanzas, and back to the present event of the child's birth and the poem's composition. Yet this focus on the present occasion of the poem does not sustain itself beyond these three lines, as the text quickly shifts in the very next line to a vision of an apocalyptic future: "That on the bitter cross/Must redeem our loss;/so both himself and us to glorify:/Yet first to those ychained in sleep,/The wakefull trump of doom must thunder through the deep" (151-6). The "wakefull trump of doom" refers to the trumpet that will sound from the four corners of the earth on Judgment Day, according to Matthew 23.31 and 1 Corinthians 15.52.

This "wakefull trump" and its "horrid clang" (158) begin the following stanza, where the poem's eschatological vision intensifies and becomes more sinister. Like the time of the messianic, the temporality of this apocalyptic image is a temporality that conflates past and future:

> With such a horrid clang
> As on Mount Sinai rang
> While the red fire, and smould'ring clouds out brake:
> The aged earth aghast
> With terror of that blast,
> Shall from the surface to the centre shake;

> When at the world's last session,
> The dreadful judge in middle air shall spread his throne. (158-164)

While in the previous stanza the narrative voice attempted to return the focus of the poem to the present moment and the occasion of the Nativity, what the text *actually does* is create a non-chronological and non-linear temporality through its apocalyptic imagery. That is, the image of the baby in the manger quickly shifts to the adult Christ nailed to the cross, then to a vision of the Second Coming that has simultaneously already happened (the invocation of Exodus 19 and the presentation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai) and is yet to come (the New Testament description of Judgment Day that will occur in the future).[67]

While the belief in an approaching Second Coming during the seventeenth century triggered the notion of temporal scarcity and the fear of an impending end to all time, the messianic temporality created by Milton's poem–especially in the text's apocalyptic imagery– provides an alternative reaction to this unknown future. Milton's "Nativity Ode" can be seen as a literary response to early modern millennial anxieties because the non-sequential temporality of the text's eschatological references refuse the logic of linear time that serves as the basis for apocalyptic anticipation in Milton's England. As an extension of the unidirectional temporality produced by the shift from the Middle Ages to the Judeo-Christian world view, the seventeenth-century anticipation of the apocalypse made time a forward-moving and closed system that was speeding towards its end. Yet Milton's poem rethinks temporality and thus expresses the

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[67] Carey glosses lines 163-4 as demonstrating that Milton's idea of the Last Judgment is drawn from Matthew 24:30 (note 163-4, page 111), and Flanagan finds an allusion to Judgment Day in 3 Peter 3.12: "The heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat" (note 55, page 44).

possibility of an alternative future to come. The non-mimetic messianic time of the text

conflates past and future, eliding the present occasion of Christ's Nativity, and instead,

self-referentially highlighting the text's inability to represent an event. Read through the

theoretical lens of messianic time, this disjointed temporality presents an alternative to

apocalyptic time as it creates messianic hope—an openness to an unknown future to

come—rather than the closure implied by the imminent end of the world.[68] Like

Derrida's formulation of messianic time as accepting the approach of "the most

irreducibly heterogeneous otherness," Milton's Nativity Ode refuses the chronological

logic of the looming apocalypse and demonstrates openness to the indeterminate event of

Christ's Second Coming. Rather than anticipating an imminent end to all time, Milton's

text causes the reader to rethink temporality, and thus to rethink the narratives of closure

and inevitability implicit in eschatological thinking.

     With my readings of "Fair Infant" and Nativity Ode as a basis, we can now move

toward a more critical and nuanced discourse about the function of occasional poetry in

the seventeenth century. According to the conventions of occasional verse, the genre

"narrates a sequence of events" and it "anchors the deeds it depicts in time" (Kamholtz

79). The purpose of the occasional form is to render a mimetic representation of an event

and to fix that occasion at a definite point in the chronological unfolding of time. Yet my

readings of these two poems demonstrate that Milton does not always adhere to the

expectations of the occasional genre. Rather, these poems—one about the mundane event

of an infant's death and the other about the monumental birth of a child whose death

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[68] Catherine Gimelli Martin reads Milton's temporality as one of possibility as well: "Milton regards incompletion and open-endedness as intrinsic ingredients of perfection… [Milton] does not regard time as the traditional enemy but rather as an ultimately benign ingredient of eternity" (*Milton and the Ends of Time* 148).

makes time immortal—throw into question the assumed relation between text and event. Instead of the representation of occasions fixed in time, "Fair Infant" and the Nativity Ode enact the temporality of the messianic by demonstrating the interplay of past, present, and future temporal states. This alternative temporality moves the texts beyond the mere representation of an event and thus beyond the ostensible function of early modern occasional poetry. From within the chronological time that governs our every-day way of thinking about experience, these poems depict an alternative temporality which displaces the conception of history as a linear progression and the logic that time is based on the presence of some event. This first function of occasional verse that I suggest exemplifies the kind of rethinking of historical time as a collision of past, present, and future states that becomes central to Benjamin's conception of the messianic in response to events of the 1930s and 40s; the latter function prefigures the dislocation of time as based on the notion of "presence" that underpins Derrida's method of deconstructive reading and his conception of messianic time at the end of the twentieth century.

Therefore, by repurposing the conventions of a popular seventeenth-century genre, Milton also provides an alternate way of imagining time and of approaching the unknown future to come. In these two texts which directly engage with eschatological imagery, the messianic temporality of both poems displaces the logic of certainty and closure that underpins the notion of time implied by the apocalypse. By calling into question the conception of temporality as unidirectional and forward-progressing, the messianic time of these occasional poems suggests openness to the future, rather than the

closure of time inherent in seventeenth-century eschatological thinking. Milton

interrogates the conventions and functions of this early modern genre—and

simultaneously— the messianic temporality enacted by these two apocalyptically-

inflected texts demonstrates the poet's response to the closure implicit in seventeenth-

century millennial expectation.

CHAPTER 3

APOCALYPSE, TOLERATION, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SONNET IN "ON THE LATE MASSACRE IN PIEDMONT"

In recent generations, Milton has been celebrated as an early modern advocate of

toleration, with scholars emphasizing the poet's radical interpretation of certain religious

views, social stances, and political programs. For example, Nigel Smith argues for the

relevance of Milton in contemporary America as an admirable example of liberty, free

will, and toleration. He asserts that through the preservation of Milton's texts "the forces

of tyranny and empire, of censorship, manipulation, and exploitation, are to be

challenged, overcome even, with the teachings of free will."[69] There is certainly

evidence in Milton's own writing that demonstrates the author's call for toleration: the

divorce tracts written between 1643-1645 suggest heterodox theological views and they

complicate traditional understandings of inter-personal relations; *Areopagitica* (1644)

famously mandates freedom of speech and expression in its vehement denunciation of

pre-publication licensing; in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) Milton

justifies the lawful regicide of an unjust tyrant via the argument that all men are created

free and equal; the preface of *De Doctrine Christina* (1650?) calls for the toleration of

various sectarian Christian positions; Barbra Lewalski calls *A Treatise of Civil Power*

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[69] *Is Milton Better than Shakespeare?* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008:166). It is true that Smith's contribution to Achinstein and Sauer's *Milton and Toleration* (Chapter 2) presents a more nuanced view of Milton's toleration than this version of the poet as an uncomplicated defender of toleration. In his review of Smith's book, Feisal G. Mohamed suggests this is a function of Smith's intention to reach a wide, non-scholarly audience (60). See Mohamed's review, *Milton Quarterly 44* (2010): 58-61. So while Smith might not always advance this take on Milton's toleration without equivocation, I have chosen this quote as representative of a trend in reading Milton as a staunch guardian of toleration. See also recent work by Joseph Wittreich, *Why Milton Matters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and David Hawkes, *John Milton: A Hero of our Time* (Berkeley: Continuum, 2009) for further examples of the ways in which Milton's more tolerant political and social stances are heralded as necessary correctives to contemporary global terrorism.

(1659) " a calm, closely reasoned discourse on religious toleration;"[70] and finally,

individual freedom and liberty of conscience are themes explored by the protagonists of

his major poems *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), *Paradise Regained* (1671) and *Samson*

Agonistes (1671).

Yet, as Sharon Achinstein and Elizabeth Sauer highlight in the introduction of the

recent collection *Milton and Toleration* (2007), "there was also an intolerant Milton" (2).

While Milton often endorses liberty of conscience and the toleration of unorthodox

Christian sects, he extends these tolerant gestures only to fellow Protestants. In fact, in

some of Milton's prose attacks on religious "others"—such as his campaigns against Irish

Roman Catholics in *Observations* (1649)—the term "intolerant" hardly seems to capture

the intensity of Milton's opposition to non-Protestants.[71] Thus two bifurcated "Miltons"

emerge in scholarly interpretation of the poet's commitment to toleration: Milton as a

seventeenth-century prophet heralding the birth of republican tolerance and the modern

liberal state, versus a more narrow-minded, exclusionary Milton, who remains intolerant

of religious others. As Feisal G. Mohamed summarizes in *Milton and the Post-Secular*

Present (2011), "when deployed to read current concerns, Milton tends to take one of two

shapes: an uncomplicated champion of liberty summoned to arraign unjust authority, or a

demonized anti-monarchist…The first of these tends to glide past those aspects of his

thought not entirely humane and democratic"(13). In this chapter, I address the

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[70] Lewalski, "Milton: Political Beliefs and Polemical Method 1659-60," *PMLA 74* (1959): 191-202.

[71] As Dom M. Wolfe explains, "the limits of Milton's toleration, then, are clearly defined in his undeviating hostility toward freedom of Catholic conscience; and his failure to speak for the Jews can only be interpreted… as reluctance to permit them freedom of worship. See "Limits of Miltonic Toleration," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 60 (1961): 834-46, 846.

juxtaposition of tolerance and intolerance in Milton's writing which contemporary

criticism often "glides past."

My argument takes up a recently-begun conversation about the polyvalent nature

of Milton's toleration, an interpretation which highlights the notion that Milton's

liberalism and radical reformation polices cannot neatly fit into the oppositional

categories of tolerant or intolerant. Rather, my reading enlarges an understanding of the

complex and often contradictory nature of Milton's toleration in an area not yet explored

by scholars—in the relationship between toleration and empire.[72] While studies aligning

Miltonic texts with the concerns of postcolonial discourse + have recently raised

important questions about Milton's stance on imperialism, as Achinstein and Sauer

correctly point out, "none of the scholarship on the subject [of Milton and empire] ,

however, centers on and treats the question of toleration in a robust, through going

manner" (16).[73]

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[72] Cf. *Milton and Toleration*, 16: "Tolerance is also a relatively neglected subject of studies on Milton's relationship to empire or anti-imperialism."

[73] Other notable and recent texts which engage the questions of colonial expansion and imperialism in Milton's work are Eric B. Song's "Nation, Empire and the Strange Fire of Tartars in Milton's Poetry and Prose," *Milton Studies 47* (2008), 118-144; Paul Stevens' "Paradise Lost and the Colonial Imperative," *Milton Studies 34* (1996), 3-21; J. Martin Evan's reading of the influence of New World imperialism on *Paradise Lost* in *Milton's Imperial Epic: Paradise Lost and the Discourse of Imperialism* (Ithaca: Cornel UP, 1996); and David Quint's exploration of the relationship between the genre of epic and imperialism in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* in *Epic and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). For an older reading that emphasizes only the anti-imperialist strain of Milton's work see Christopher Hill's *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

Milton's contradictory attitude toward colonialism has been well argued recently by Balachandra Rajan and Elizabeth Sauer, in their introduction to *Milton and the Imperial Vision*, where they summarize, "the deployment of the languages of election, orientalism, nationalism, civility, economics, geography, and so on in his works of poetry and prose makes Milton complicit in acts of imperialism (and colonization), as well as in the critique thereof" (5). For Rajan and Sauer, Milton provides an "ambivalent response to imperialism on both sides of the colonial divide" (6), and while my reading certainly expands upon this polyvalence in Milton's treatment of imperialism, my goal is to move beyond an understanding of Milton's attitude toward British colonialism as "ambivalent." See *Milton and the Imperial Vision* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999).

To explore the connection between Milton's views on toleration and colonialism,

I consider a poem that sutures together the issues of religious toleration, political

imperialism, and seventeenth-century apocalyptic anticipation—Milton's 1655 Sonnet

XVIII, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont." This text is acknowledged as piece of

political and religious propaganda, and is universally recognized as steeped in the

language of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic fervor.[74] However, what has not been

examined is how these two are related: how the poem's biblical language relates to the

seventeenth-century project of British imperial conquest. That is, eschatological rhetoric

was used by Milton's contemporaries to both create *and* critique empire, which I see as

linked to an inherent contradictory strain in this text. In this work of propaganda, Milton

uses the atrocities of religious persecution to build an English nationalism, which would

in turn support his own country's religious persecution of Irish Catholics. This chapter

explores the specific ways in which Milton's poem internalizes and refracts this

conflicting double-move by reading the sonnet in constellation with the theoretical

construct of messianic time. As my close reading below reveals, Milton's shifting verb

tenses and multivalent Biblical allusions create a non-linear temporality and the poem

enacts the time of the messianic. The reader experiences indeterminacy in this

multitemporal space, and she must entertain multiple metaphorical comparisons at once.

This indeterminate and expectant temporality that occurs in the experience of reading the

poem is also experience of time implied by the movement of the sonnet from octave to

sestet, as Milton concludes the poem with the messianic expectation of spiritual

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[74] C.A Partides notes the apocalyptic nature of Milton's Piedmont sonnet: "the sonnet is a stunning explosion of scorching indignation that reflects the numinous wrath expected to be unsealed during the Second Advent… its language always draws to an even more striking degree on the denunciation of evil by the great prophets as well as on terms commonly deployed by Protestant expositors of the Apocalypse" (*The Apocalypse in English Thought and Literature*, 211)

regeneration. I argue that Milton transforms the generic conventions of both the English and Petrarchan sonnet in what becomes a hybrid Anglo-Italian sonnet—what I am calling a "regenerated Italian sonnet"—that throws the overt nationalism of the text into question. Moreover, the temporality of a messianic rupture—in which we are called to rethink the logic of linearity—calls us to question the logic of binary oppositions which serves as the basis for our notion of the distinction between self and other. In this chapter, I suggest that the messianic temporality of Milton's sonnet highlights the ideological contradictions caused by the multivalent apocalyptic rhetoric in seventeenth-century English nationalism and colonial imperialism. My reading also demonstrates that the temporal and ideological ambiguity of Milton's sonnet can be understood as generative because this uncertainty complicates our notions of Milton's imperialist position, and thus causes us to rethink our own definition of "tolerance".

In my opening chapter, I positioned messianic time as an alternative to the closure and inevitability implied in linear, apocalyptic thinking. My reading of *Areopagitica* through this theoretical lens highlighted how such a rethinking of temporality provides us with a way of approaching uncertainty. Then, in the second chapter, I emphasized the temporal mechanism of the messianic rupture, demonstrating that this notion of temporality underscores time's otherness from itself—that time cannot be based on a logic of presence, since the present is always contaminated by the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future. Here, I focus on Giorgio Agamben's reading of messianic time to suggest that Milton's poetry creates a non-chronological temporality from within our accepted notion of sequential time, which presents an alternative to the "end of time" suggested by seventeenth-century apocalyptic anticipation. In this way, Milton's poetry

allows us to rethink the logic that mobilizes our conception of time, and his sonnet contains the potential to shake us out of our familiar narratives about temporality and identity.

In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben provides a "small-scale model of the structure of messianic time" in his explication of the repetition of rhyming words in the sestina (78). The sestina is a 39-line poem in which the lines that end the first stanza are used to end the lines of the following 5 stanzas, in a set pattern. That is, the word that ends line 6 of the first stanza, becomes the end of line 1 in the next stanza, and this shifting continues through each of the text's 6 stanzas. Another name for this movement is *retrogradatio cruciate*, which can be translated as "backward crossing."[75] The poem ends with a *tornada*, a 3-line stanza that repeats and recapitulates all of the six line-ending words of the earlier stanzas in a new arrangement.

According to Agamben, the temporal mechanism of this type of poem is not "homologous with linear chronological time" (82). What this means is that the temporality of the sestina does not conform to our expected notion of time, because of "the play of alternating and repeating end words," wherein each one "uses and recalls the one in the preceding stanzas (or it recalls itself as other)" (82). Instead of a forward progression, the text's repetition and recapitulation complicate the notions of past and future, since the poem is propelled by a "backward crossing," in which a rhyming word prefigures its own repetition and bears within it the recollection of its previous usage when it is repeated. In other words, the rhyming words signify both the promise of a future repetition and the remembrance of a past occurrence. This kind of anticipation and repetition problematizes representation, because "the repetition and recycling of elusive

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[75] Marilyn Krysl, "Sacred and Profane: Sestina as Rite," *The American Poetry Review* 33.2 (2007): 7-12, 9.

patterns" in the sestina "cannot be held in the mind all at once."[76] Agamben claims that this mental process transfigures our conventional notions of temporality: "through this complicated to-and-fro directed both forward and backward, the chronological sequence of linear homogenous time is completely transformed into rhythmic constellations themselves in movement" (82). According to Agamben, "the sestina—and, in this sense, every poem—is a soteriological device, which…transforms chronological time into messianic time" (82).

Thus every poem has the potential to rework our notions of time: the messianic time created by the sestina applies to "the temporal structure of lyric poetry in general," including the sonnet (79). Agamben broadens out his reading of the sestina's messianic temporality to include all poems because "the poem therefore is an organism or a temporal machine, that from the very start, strains towards its end. A kind of eschatology occurs within the poem itself… [the poem] has a specific and unmistakable temporality, it has its own *time* (79) [emphasis in original]. That is, like apocalyptic thinking and the logic of linearity which underpins it, the poem has an inevitable end: "a poem is something that will necessarily finish at a given point: it will end after fourteen lines in the sonnet" (79). However, from within this chronological understanding of time, in which closure is implied, the poem creates an alternative experience of temporality, and causes us to question our accepted narratives of how time functions. Poetry creates a "time within time," in which the disruption of linearity shows us that we do not coincide with our representations of time. Or in other words, our representations of time are just that—representations—and not the only possible way of understanding temporality. The messianic time created by the text allows for the realization that there are other ways of

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[76] Stephen Fry, *The Ode Less Traveled* (London: Arrow Press, 2007: 238).

experiencing temporality and this invites us to rethink our representations of time as unidirectional and closed. In this way, poetry can rupture the empty, uncritical flow of homogenous time, as a vehicle through which messianic potential erupts in our accepted ways of interpreting the world around us.

Not only has this messianic potential of Milton's sonnet not been suggested, but interpretation of the text generally also forecloses an understanding of the poem as impacting seventeenth-century social and ideological issues.[77] Traditional readings of this text have utilized this sonnet to make comparative gestures towards Milton's other work,[78] to point out and explicate Milton's biblical references,[79] and to show intertextuality with contemporary accounts of the Waldensian massacre.[80] Engaging instead with the collusion of biblical, political, and temporal ambiguities juxtaposed in the text, I use the concept of messianic time to demonstrate the poem's place in

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[77] Elizabeth Sauer does provide readings of the poem's ideological and political complexities. See her "Milton's Of True Religion, Protestant Nationhood, and the Negotiation of Liberty," *Milton Quarterly* 40.1 (2006): 1-19. For an earlier and related reading of Cromwell's nationalism and its influence on Milton's work see Sauer, " Religious Toleration and Imperial Intolerance," in *Milton and the Imperial Vision*, 214-230. Sauer gives "an analysis of the imperial discourses used in construing the other" to provide context for "studying how toleration and exclusion operate side by side in the intersecting identities of the Hebrews and Philistines in John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*" (214). My reading is an important extension of Sauer's, because I demonstrate the intersection of imperial rhetoric, apocalyptic anticipation, and messianic temporality in the poem in a way that has not yet been suggested.

[78] See, for example, Lawrence W. Hyman, " On the Late Massacre at Piedmont," *ELN 3* (1966) 26-29 for a reading of the poem as a later redaction of "Lycidas"; for comparison to the end of *Samson Agonistes* see J.S. Lawry, "Milton's Sonnet 18: 'A Holocaust'," *Milton Quarterly 17* (1983) 11-14.

[79] See Kathryn Gail Brock, " Milton's Sonnet XVIII and the Language of Controversy," *Milton Quarterly 16* (1982): 3-6; John R. Knott, "The Biblical Matrix of Milton's On the Late Massacre at Piedmont," *Philological Quarterly 62* (1983): 259-63; John K. Hale, "Milton's Sonnet 18 and Psalm 137," *Milton Quarterly 29.3* (1995): 91; M.J. Edwards, " A Rebirth of Images: Milton on the Massacre at Piedmont," *Notes and Queries* 48 (2001): 391-392.

[80] See John T. Shawcross, " A Note on the Piedmont Massacre," *Milton Quarterly 6.1* (1972): 36; Anna K. Nardo, *Milton's Sonnets and the Ideal Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979): 132-133; Bruce Thomas Boehrer, "Providence as Punishment in the Works of Milton: Sonnet 18 and the Waldensian State Papers*," South Atlantic Review 54.1* (1989): 27-40; and Joad Raymond, " The Daily Muse; or Seventeenth-century Poets Read the News," *The Seventeenth Century 10.2* (1995): 189-218.

seventeenth-century discourses of nationalism, toleration, and eschatological anticipation.

Here is Milton's sonnet:[81]

> Avenge O Lord, thy slaughter'd Saints, whose bones
>> Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,
>> Ev'n them who kept the truth so pure of old
>> When all our Fathers worship't stocks and Stones,
> Forget not: in thy book record their groanes
>> Who were thy Sheep and in their antient Fold
>> Slayn by the bloody Piemontese that roll'd
>> Mother with Infant down the rocks. Their moans
> The Vales redoubl'd to the Hills, and they
>> To Heav'n. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow
>> O're all th' Italian fields where still doth sway
> The triple Tyrant: that from these may grow
>> A hunder'd-fold, who having learnt thy way
>> Early may fly the Babylonian wo.

The poem welds together past, present and future temporal experience in such a

way that this simultaneity of time disrupts our notions of chronological progression.[82]

The text shifts from a focus on the *present-day* massacre of the Protestant martyrs at

Piedmont; to a juxtaposition with the *past* via the "antient Fold" (6) of the Waldensians

as a primitive, and untainted Protestant sect who "kept thy truth so pure of old" (3) and

"worship't Stocks and Stones" (4); and then to the apocalyptic allusions to *future*

vengeance and regeneration (10-14). Moreover, linear temporality is dislodged by the

constant shift in verb tenses throughout the progression of the sonnet. Each quatrain and

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[81] *The Riverside Milton,* 255. Flannagan reproduces the text as it appeared in Milton's 1673 manuscript.

[82] Annabel Patterson reads Milton's sonnets, as a sequence, and as initiating a "poetics, not of the timeless, but of sequentiality itself: of what it means, philosophically, to be time bound" (170). Patterson contends that Milton's sonnets manipulate the experience of time within the texts to "render the occasion indistinct, the chronology harder to reconstruct, or even the referent mysterious" (171). Although Patterson does not provide a reading of Milton's Sonnet XVIII, her suggestion that Milton's sonnets are preoccupied with time, and specifically a polyvalent or obscure register of temporality, can certainly be demonstrated in "On the Late Massacre at Piedmont." See Patterson, "That Old Man Eloquent." Evans, J. Martin, ed. *John Milton: Twentieth-Century Perspectives*, Volume 2: The Early Poems (New York: Routledge, 2003), 166-88.

the closing sestet juxtapose past, present, and future verb tenses. For example, the first

line of the poem begins with a call for God to bring vengeance in the future, shifts almost

immediately after the opening clause to the present occasion of the poem ("whose

bones/lie scattered"), and then the final two lines of this quatrain recall an earlier past,

"When all our fathers worship't Stocks and Stones." The second quatrain also begins

with a biblical formulation which demands a continual or future action ("Forget not"),

which is juxtaposed with a present tense call to "record thy groanes," before once again

gesturing backwards toward a recounting of past events—the Waldensians are "Slayn,"

and their corpses are "roll'd" down the Alpine precipices.

This multilayered temporality is highlighted by enjambment in the text, especially

as it frustrates the sonnet's traditional shift from octave to sestet, at the volta at line 9.

Coupled with the convoluted syntax of the sentence that spans lines 9-11, and the medial

caesura in line 11 that launches the tense of the poem back into the present tense ("sow"),

the text creates temporal confusion as it rejects a chronological unfolding of time.

Additionally, I suggest that enjambment has its own *temporal dimension*, because it

makes the reader look both forwards and backwards at the same time.[83] That is, the

reader must hold in her mind two different organizing structures—the iambic pentameter

metrical scheme and the poetic line, requiring a vacillation at the space between lines,

moving backwards and then forwards to make meaning. According to T.V. F. Brogan, the

confusion of syntax and meter caused by enjambment produces "mixed messages" for the

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[83] Gribben notes Milton's eschatology was simultaneously backward-and forward-looking, in a way that is similar to the non-linear temporality created by his poetry as I suggest here: "Paradoxically, Milton's growing expectation of the millennium was determined by his look to the past…Because his scheme of providential history moved …from one Eden to another, Milton and his fellow puritans could look to the experience of their first parents to anticipate their own destiny" (*The Puritan Millennium*, 153).

reader: "the closure of the metrical pattern at line-end implies a stop (pause)…while the obvious incompletion of the syntactic period says, *go on*…These conflicting signals [heighten] readerly tension."[84] Building on this definition, I argue that the "mixed messages" and "readerly tension" caused by enjambment are related to the messianic time of the poem. While sometimes explicitly mimetic, as in the enjambed "roll'd" (10) which rolls the reader headlong into the next line, we can also understand enjambed lines as rehearsing the temporal confusion of the poem. A poignant example of this comes in the last two lines of the sonnet, where the slaughtered saints "who having learnt thy way/ Early may fly the Babylonian woe." In the space between "way" and "Early" is ambiguity, because of the possibilities in syntax opened up by the enjambment: the arrangement of the sentence in this way makes it possible to mean that the martyrs learned God's way early (referring to their primitive indoctrination to the Church which occurred in the past), or that as a result of learning God's law, the saints "Early may fly" the destruction of the Second Coming in the future. Not only is the ambiguity opened up by enjambment a question of chronology, which importantly hinges on the temporal cue "early," but the readerly experience of making meaning out of these lines—in a backwards and forwards mental movement—mimics the non-linear temporal progression of the poem.

From its opening call for revenge—"Avenge O Lord"—Milton's sonnet is steeped in apocalyptic imagery which further disrupts linear continuity.[85] Following the non-volta

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[84] T.V. F. Brogan. *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993). Accessed online. http://gateway.proquest.com.libproxy.temple.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion-us&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:ref:R00793573:0

[85] The phrase "Avenge O Lord," is almost universally recognized as an allusion to Revelation 6.9-10. For example, John Knott contends the formulation rephrases the cry of the martyrs of Revelation 6 "slain for the word of God" (Rev. 6:9). Knott urges the recognition that other biblical texts—the Prophetic books of

at lines 9-10 that propels the reader into the sonnet's sestet, the eschatological promise of the poem's conclusion is another textual collision of past, present, and future temporalities. The sestet begins in the present tense ("blood and ashes sow"), aligns this moment with a past event ("still doth sway/ The triple Tyrant"), then gestures toward a future promise of spiritual regeneration, because from the blood of the saints "these may grow/ A hunder'd- fold."[86] In the poem's last sentence that begins after the caesura at "Tyrant" and spans lines 12-14, the concurrence of temporal experiences that characterizes the sonnet as a whole becomes even more concentrated, moving quickly from the presence of the saint's ashes, to the conditional "may grow," to the memory of past events in "having learnt thy way," to back to the promise of future redemption in "may fly." Thus the sestet offers a multitemporal experience of spiritual regeneration, in a sonnet sandwiched between eschatological echoes of the Book of Revelation.

Milton also establishes a non-chronological, simultaneous experience of temporality through the layering of literary allusions throughout the sonnet.[87] Milton's

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Ezekiel and Jeremiah—"form a substratum" of allusions, creating a more nuanced "biblical matrix" found in the sonnet's references to the apocalyptic. See John Knott, "The Biblical Matrix of Milton's 'On the Late Massacre in Piemont." *Philological Quarterly 62.2* (Spring 1983): 259-263.The "Babylonian woe" of the sonnet's final line echoes Revelation 8:13, as pointed out by Sauer ("Toleration" 214) among others. While most editors and scholars agree that the "Babylonian woe" line refers to the whore of Babylon of Revelation, Jay Rudd argues that this "eschatological allusion" should also be understood as coming from another Old Testament source, the Psalms (80). See Jay Rudd, "Milton's Sonnet 18 and Psalm 137." *Milton Quarterly 26.*3 (1992): 80-81.

[86] Julia Bolton Holloway notes that the figure of Babylon, as an analog for idolatrous Rome, is an allusion that can be traced from the Revelation of John, to Tasso's poetry, to English poetry via Spenser, which gets appropriated by Milton. See "Not Bahilon or Great Alcairo," in *Milton Quarterly 15.3* (2007): 92-94.

[87] Amy Boesky's reading of the complication of chronology in Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* is helpful here, because she demonstrates that Milton frequently disrupts a non-linear temporality through his deployment of allusions in his texts: "allusions in *Paradise Lost* do not adhere to temporal unity. Instead, they layer or compress time. To allude in literature is often to refer back to a previous idea or image, but Milton's allusions make history and narrative multivaleneced and multitemporal." She suggests that Milton's allusions in Paradise Lost render "a special 'now' in which classical, biblical, and early modern events slide backwards and forwards, enriching and estranging each other…there is no fixed chronological time in which the artifice of history…is understood to move in a linear, one-directional fashion." I argue a similar

references to the past, present, and future are mapped on top of each other. The

juxtaposition of allusions in this sonnet—the simultaneous references to past, present,

and future events—create a multi-temporal space in which there is no one referent or

"truth," and the reader must entertain various comparisons at once. Our ordinary sense of

chronology is disrupted and the reader must navigate the temporal and ideological

possibilities opened up by the text. Time is compressed—events are forced together or

condensed into one time—as well as simultaneously expanded to include past, present,

and future all at once.

Scholars have pointed out the degree to which allusions in Milton's "Piedmont"

sonnet juxtapose multiple literary and biblical comparisons. Here, I expand these

observations with my suggestion that this juxtaposition of references enacts the

theoretical concept of messianic time, which provides a way to better understand the

interaction between the text's form and ideological content.[88] For example, there is a

collision of Old and New Testament citation and themes in the multi-layered reference to

the "Italian fields" of line 11. Superimposed on the meaning of the 'Italian fields' is a

biblically inflected typological reading of a transition from the Valley of Dry Bones

(Ezekiel 31) and the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23) to the fields ripe for

harvest (Matthew 9: 37-8) and the field where the kernel of wheat is planted and then dies

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"special now" emerging out of the collision of past, present and future events occurs in Milton's Sonnet
XVIII. See "Paradise Lost and the Multiplicity of Time." *A Companion to Milton*. Ed. Thomas N. Corns
(Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 380-392.

[88] For a reading that demonstrates larger political valences of Milton's biblical allusions in the sonnet, in a
way I will not explore here, see Kathryn Gail Brock: "the specific Biblical allusions that Milton chooses are
those whose meanings were hotly contested by Catholic and Protestant polemicists…underlying the entire
sonnet are the controversies between Catholics and Protestants over the meaning of the word "Saints" and
the proper attitude towards the martyrs" (3). "Milton's Sonnet XVIII and the Language of Controversy."
Milton Quarterly 16.1 (1982): 3-6.

to produce new life (John 12:24).[89] Therefore, this juxtaposition invokes death and

regeneration, violence and rebirth, and past events and future promises simultaneously.

The compression of these events simultaneously highlights both their specific historicity

as well as their supertemporal register: the "Italian fields" signify a precise contemporary

time and place, as well as the memory of Old Testament vengeance and the promise of

New Testament spiritual regeneration.

Another three-pronged reference comes from the image of "sowing" in the

sonnet's sestet, as pointed out by R.F. Hall:

> The image of sowing compacts three allusions: first, the blood of the martyrs is
> the seed of the Church…second, the 'hunderdredfold' arising from the sowing
> will increase the kingdom of God, as in Christ's parable of the sower (e.g. Matt.
> 13); and third, in the myth of Cadmus, the sowing of the dragon's teeth made a
> host of armed warriors spring up out of the earth, and by implication such a
> consequence will likewise follow this event.[90]

Here, a comparison to the classical past is mapped on top of a reference to the

contemporary Waldensain martyrs, which is then layered onto the promise of the growth

of the Church and the coming of Christ's kingdom—demonstrating the degree to which

past, present, and future are in dialectic within the sonnet.

The sonnet's shifting verb tenses and superimposed allusions enact the

transformation of chronological time that Agamben claims is the function of poetry.

Moreover, the temporality produced by Milton's references exemplifies Agamben's

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[89] Sauer, 220. Similarly, Michael Price investigates these same biblical allusions and the coincidence of Old
and New Testament themes as they are related to the structure of the sonnet. He concludes that in the
juxtaposition of the Old Testament theme of vengeance and the New Testament's call for regeneration,
"theme overrides form to produce tension and irresolution" (71). See "Milton's 'Sonnet 18: On the Late
Massacre in Piedmont,'" *Explicator 52.2* (1994): 70-72.

[90] Hall, R. F. "Milton's Sonnets and his Contemporaries." *Cambridge Companion to John Milton* Ed.
Dennis Danielson. Cambridge UP, 1999. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press.: 98-
112, 104.

claims about the difficulty of representing time: "In every representation of time and every discourse by means of which we define and represent time, another time is implied that is not entirely consumed by representation" (*The Time That Remains* 67). Milton's multi-temporal references, which compress different temporal states, enact this "another time" that contaminates all of our representations of time. That is, there exists an "additional time," which is not " a supplementary time added on from outside of chronological time," but is rather a "time within time…which only measures my disconnection with regard to it, my being out of synch and in noncoincidence with regard to my representation of time" (*The Time That Remains* 67).[91] Messianic time is not chronology, and not the negation of chronology, but rather a superimposition of temporal realities from within the structure of chronological time. Every representation of time shows not the mutually exclusivity of temporalities (like past, present, and future), but rather their interconnectivity. Milton's allusions in Sonnet XVIII exemplify this "out of sync" experience of time, demonstrating past, present, and future temporality coexist. Because the poem demonstrates the simultaneity of different temporal experiences, the text can be seen as an alternative to the unidirectional and closed temporality of linear thinking. Agamben describes messianic time as a part within our common notions of time "in which time undergoes an entirely transformative contraction" (64), and Milton's

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[91] Agamben explains how the messianic opens the possibility for a different function of time from within our current way of thinking about time through the example of Saturday in the Jewish faith. Saturday is described in Genesis as the seventh day, on which God both completed his creation and rested. Agamben highlights the "paradoxical coincidence of fulfillment and interruption" implied by this day and finds it a fitting example of the messianic: "Saturday—messianic time—is not another day, homogenous to others; rather, it is that innermost disjointedness within time through which one may—by a hairsbreadth—grasp time and accomplish it" (71-72). Just as Saturday is not another kind of time, which is supplementary and unlike the other days of the week, but is a different and paradoxical experience of time from with the logic of chronological time, so too is messianic time a "disjointedness" within linear time as we know it (72).

allusions are an embodiment of this contraction in their compression of past, present, and future temporalities.

I argue there is another multitemporal allusion—not yet explored fully by Milton scholars—which combines classical, Christian, and contemporary references, and is a literary manifestation of messianic time. In his footnotes to the sonnet, John Carey briefly comments that the "Alpine mountains cold" of Milton's line 3 is "A phrase from Fairfax's Tasso (xiii, 60)."[92] In 1600, Edward Fairfax—half-brother of the subject of Milton's Sonnet XV, Sir Thomas Fairfax—translated Torquato Tasso's *La Gerusalemme Liberate (Jerusalem Delivered)* of 1581. Tasso's poem is a historically-based Renaissance epic written in *octava rima,* which blends the classical epic tradition with a Christian thematic and the nationalism inherent in the romance mode. Its twenty cantos detail the setbacks and eventual victory of Catholic knights who battle Muslim forces and successfully siege Jerusalem in the First Crusade, and the text was widely popular in late sixteenth-century Italy. This historical event had topical resonances in Tasso's age, because the Ottoman Empire—an imperialist state advancing a program of conquest and colonial expansion—was making its way through Eastern Europe and North Africa at the time of the epic's composition. As David Quint has suggested, Tasso uses the association between the First Crusades and contemporary events to venerate the Counter-Reformation and the Catholic reuniting of the Church. Qunit deems Tasso "a sixteenth-century Italian poet aiming to revive the imperialist rhetoric of Virgilian epic."[93] I

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[92] See *Milton: the Complete Shorter Poems, Second Ed.* (New York: Pearson-Longman, 1997).

[93] David Quint, "Political Allegory in the *Gerusalmme Liberata*." *Renaissance Quarterly* 43.1 (1990): 1-29, page 23.

suggest Milton's allusion to Fairfax's translation of Tasso's epic bears within it this celebration of Italian nationalism and its attendant discourse of imperialism.

While Milton lost likely would have read Tasso's poem in its original Italian, the reference to the "Alpine mountains cold" directly quotes Fairfax's immensely popular English translation of 1600.[94] Importantly, Fairfax's translation "Englished" its source text's Catholicism and Italian nationalism, replacing them with strict Protestant moralism and English patriotism. In a recent explication of Fairfax's text via contemporary translation theory, Guilia Totò asserts that Fairfax's act of translation not only makes aesthetic changes to appease English tastes, but that Fairfax replaces the cultural values implicit in Tasso's poem with an ideology that serves the nationalist Protestant agenda of his seventeenth-century England. Totò argues that, given the palpable political valences of Tasso's epic for Fairfax's contemporaries, Fairfax is "not only perfectly aware of the ideological weight of his occupation, but he also makes his political purpose clearly evident from the beginning of his work."[95] Because of these ideologically-motivated changes to the original epic and the evacuation of the source text's original historical and cultural context, it is clear that Fairfax repurposed his Italian source text in order to promote English nationalism.

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[94] Lewalski suggests that it is probable that Milton purchased the pirated 1580 version of *Gerusalem Liberata* while in Venice in May of 1639 (see *Life* page 106 and note 80 on page 577). For critics who point out the influence of Tasso on Milton generally, with reference to *Paradise Lost,* see F. T. Prince, "The Influence of Tasso and Della Casa on Milton's Diction," *The Review of English Studies 25.99* (1949): 222-236; Theodore M. Anderson, "Claudian, Tasso, and the Topography of Milton's Paradise," *MLN 91.6* (1976): 1569-1571; and Judith A. Kates, *Tasso and Milton: The Problem of the Christian Epic* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983).

[95] Totò, Guilia. " Fairfax's Godfrey and the Building of National Literary Identity." *Italianist* 28 (2008): 5-23, page 12.

Milton's citation of Fairfax's translation in this sonnet therefore invokes a contemporary patriotic poem which celebrates English national pride and Protestant nationhood. Yet, like a palimpsest, Tasso's pro-Catholic, anti-Protestant work of Italian nationalist propaganda is also embedded in that same reference. Therefore, not only does Milton's reference imply conflicting national political agendas, but this nationalism is intimately intertwined with questions of empire-building. Tasso's poem about the attempt of Catholic crusaders to resist the conquest of the Ottoman Empire gets re-filtered into the imperialist program of sixteenth-century Italy; later Fairfax evacuates the poem's Catholicism and Italian patriotism, redirecting its force to advance the British colonial ideology of his generation. What this suggests is that Milton's citation of Fairfax's translation of Tasso invokes a constellation of ideological references and questions of nationalism and imperialism. Thus this overlooked reference replicates in miniature the kind of ideological ambiguities in regard to toleration that categorize the sonnet as a whole.

In the generic transformations Milton makes in this text, I argue that Milton crafts a regenerated Italian sonnet because he recalls an earlier political program embedded in the sonnets of Petrarch, while simultaneously appropriating the mode to specific English nationalist concerns. In the same way that messianic time decenters the logic of linear temporality, the collusion of past and present generic conventions complicates the opposition between the two sonnet traditions and their ideological underpinnings.

Over the course of his career, Milton wrote 24 sonnets, though he radically departs from his literary predecessors in his structure, theme, and style. Milton retains the basic rhyme scheme of the Italian octave (*abba abba*), while varying the scheme of each

sestet. In fundamental structure then, Milton rejects the quatrains of the English sonnet

and its closing couplet rhyme, opting instead for the older, non-English Petrarchan

structure. Milton also repudiates the Italian tradition's emphasis on courtly love and

amatory longing to instead use this genre to lament authorial belatedness, to offer social

critique, and to espouse his political and religious convictions. The first seven of Milton's

sonnets, published in his *Poems* of 1645, demonstrate the degree to which Milton

envisions his poems as situated within the Petrarchan tradition. Sonnets II through VI,

written in Italian, are love poems addressed to an unattainable beloved and are

predominately derivative of the standard tropes and imagery of the Petrarchan mode.[96]

However, I would push this notion even further to suggest that with these first sonnets we

can begin to see an indication of the ways in which Milton will simultaneously

appropriate aspects of both the English and Italian traditions, selectively borrowing from

the conventions of each to create a hybrid form which will fit his religious and polemic

needs. Sonnet VII, "How Soon Hath Time," is a compelling example, because here the

"lack" that sparks the longing of the sonnet is not the traditional Italian desire for an

idealized Lady, but rather the speaker laments his artistic belatedness and lack of "inner

ripeness" (line 7).Description of the physical beauty of the beloved, expressions of

paradoxical longing, and the erotic desire that characterize the Petrarchan tradition are

replaced by celebrations of authorial ambition and poetic production. Milton uses the

structural scaffolding of the Petrarchan form, yet evacuates its amatory, sensuous, and

non-Puritan content, while simultaneously employing simple diction and his own English

vernacular. The result is a juxtaposition of Italian structure and Protestant themes that

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[96] As Roy Flannagan puts it, "by proceeding immediately from an English sonnet, no.1 , into an Italian sonnet, no. 2, in the 1645 *Poems*, Milton is declaring that the two languages are equally the language of the sonnet (*Riverside Milton* 77).

complicates the distinction between the two traditions. The sonnets published in 1673

move even further away from the eroticism and courtly love of the Italian and English

tradition, and more towards social critique and political commentary. As in Sonnet XI,

"A Book Was Writ," which gently satirizes contemporary detractors of Milton's

Tetrachordon, and Sonnet XII, "I Did But Prompt the Age," which offers a more scathing

political polemic, Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," replaces the

transcendent with the topical.

In this sonnet, Milton "Englishes" the Italian mode in a number ways.[97] Milton's

use of iambic pentameter aligns him with the English sonneteers of the sixteenth and

seventeenth century. His frequent use of monosyllables, as in line 3 (composed of ten

monosyllabic words), makes the diction simple and colloquial. His use of proverbial

phrases like "Stocks and Stones" (4) and the Protestant imagery of "slaughter'd Saints"

(1) makes the sonnet not only a plea to God, but also to fellow Englishmen. Finally,

Petrarchan structure is rejected by Milton's replacement of the traditional volta at line 9

with the enjambed "moans" of Protestant martyrs at line 8, as many critics have noted.[98]

In other words, it seems as though Milton leaves the basic skeleton of Petrarchan

structure in tact while evacuating its traditional erotic or courtly content. At the same

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[97] Sauer contends that Milton "Englished" the Petrarchan form in this sonnet, replacing the eroticism of the Italian tradition with "native English diction and Protestant imagery" (221). Roy Flannagan draws similar conclusions in regard to Milton's disavowal of Italian convention in his introduction to the poem: "in form the sonnet is Petrarchan, but the mode, of course, is that of invective (it is accusatory) rather than erotic" (254).

[98] See Sauer: "the otherwise conventional turn from octave to sestet is generated by an emotional onrush rather than being allotted a formal space" (205); "The octave's end rhymes reinforce the elegiac nature of the verses…sonically then, the poem is dominated by the 'o' sound which both begets and sustains its avalanche. For the most part, the sonnet is only Petrarchan by virtue of its rhyme scheme" (214). Also Lewalski, *Life*: "In the sonnet…Milton uses run-on lines and strong syntactic breaks within the lines to set the rhetorical and emotional structure against the formal units of octave and sestet and end rhyme. That effect is enhanced by the long "o" sounds that resound throughout" (354).

time, however, Milton's reappropriation of generic conventions cannot be read simply as a replacement of Italian themes for more "English" concerns.[99]

While what Milton is doing with Petrarchan conventions can be read as a kind of disavowal of Italian themes and imagery, his utilization of the sonnet tradition actually recalls and reimagines a political dimension of the genre inherent in the sonnets of Petrarch, though ignored by English sonneteers. Therefore Milton is simultaneously "Englishing" and rejecting the English sonnet tradition by harkening back to Petrarch's political sonnets over the erotic and courtly subject matter of his English predecessors.[100] There is an ideological connection between the Italian sonnet tradition and discourses of nationalism and imperialism and—importantly—this empire-building rhetoric is couched in apocalyptic language. Not only do Petrarch's sonnets reveal that he supported Italy's imperial conquest of other lands, but there is evidence that demonstrates the poet was influenced by the imagery of the Last Judgment, and because of this, his sonnets demonstrate a secularized concept of eschatological regeneration in their vision of Rome's rebirth. Petrarch wrote letters to Charles IV imploring him to revive Roman civil virtue and he called for "the regeneration of Italy, Rome, and the *imperium* in language specifically coded in apocalyptic terms—the emperor is often imagined as a "new

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[99] For a recent, though very different, reading of the influence of Petrarch on Milton see Christopher Warren's *The Augustinian Epic, Petrarch to Milton* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). Warren traces the development of the Augustinian epic (defined as a spiritual journey that justifies the poetic vocation, as based in Augustine's *Confessions*) through a variety of Christian epics to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (see Chapter 6).

[100] Janel Muller discusses Milton's "adaptation of the entire form of a sonnet to constructive political and poetic designs" (501) and she claims, "if Milton were to turn the English sonnet to political ends, he would do so as a latter-day Petrarch, as poet-prophet of divine vengeance" (478). In fact, there is reason to believe that Milton imagined himself as following in the footsteps of Petrarch in the latter's sonnets attacking Roman Catholicism. While Muller's analysis is a helpful starting point, she does not address the "Piedmont" sonnet and her interest is the ways in which Milton's sonnets become politicized through his appropriation of Aristotelian and Ciceronian principles of "decorum," which is not the focus of my reading here.

messiah" initiating this revival. [101] William J. Kennedy argues that Petrarch's poems and the commentary surrounding them demonstrate a keen awareness of the poet's identity as bound up in the national character of Italy. Petrarch's poetry thus " dramatizes interrelated ideas about friendship, sex, marriage, family, community, social class, gendered bodies, ruling hierarchies, and emerging state bureaucracies," which therefore "made Petrarchism a powerful vehicle for expressing national sentiment in early modern Europe."[102] Because Petrarch's sonnets and their commentary influenced English nationalism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Milton's repurposing of the Petrarchan mode involves a constellation of ideological interests. In this way, his appropriation of the Petrarchan tradition makes Sonnet XVIII a vehicle for political commentary.

Importantly, though, this political register of the sonnet and the genre's association with empire were not typical themes of the English sonnet tradition. While English sonnets certainly demonstrated nuanced adaptations of the Petrarchan themes of lust, love, and longing, it does not appear as though English sonneteers before Milton

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[101] C.C. Bayley, "Petrarch, Charles IV, and the 'Renovatio Imperii.'" *Speculum* 17.3 (1942) 323-341, page 326. It is important to note that not all scholars agree that Petrarch's sonnets reveal a consistent political program or a definite ideological commitment to imperialism. For example, in *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) Guisepe Manzzotta argues that the *Canzoniere*'s "political" poems, Song 28, Song 53, and Song 128, demonstrate "no clear political vision" and no "coherent ideology" (129). Roland Greene contends that the language of amatory love mobilized in the sonnets and notions of empire "share a discursive stream" (131). Though Greene's focus is the impact of Petrarchism on colonial discourse in the Americas, he contends that early modern Petrarchism was " political, or to be more specific, imperialist because of its engagement with such political issues as distribution of power among agents, assimilation of difference, and organization of individual desires into common structures" (131). See Greene, "Petrarchism Among the Discourses of Imperialism." *In America in European Consciousness 1493-1700*. Ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 133-166.

[102] Kennedy, *The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France and England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2003), 262. Kennedy's analysis focuses on the work of Philip Sidney, Robert Sidney, and Mary Wroth, and he does not include Milton in his study of the influence of Petrarch on early modern English authors.

used the form as a vehicle for political commentary in the explicit way that Milton's sonnets do.[103] What this means is that Milton rejects the English sonnet tradition—not only in his refusal of the quatrain-couplet configuration—but in its content as well. His evacuation of the amatory for the political harkens back to an aspect of Petrarchanism that was not imitated by sixteenth-century poets. In one sense, then, Milton chooses the form and content of the Italian mode. Yet as I have demonstrated, his appropriation of the form cannot be divorced from its inherent and explicit Englishness—it is, after all, written in vernacular English, employing monosyllabic English diction and distinctly Protestant imagery in order to advance distinctly English proto-nationalist propaganda.

I argue that Milton's transformation of this genre parallels the renewal promised in the sestet of the poem: the older Petrarchan mode is renewed, but in such a way that its conventions are transformed by contemporary concerns and forward-looking spiritual regeneration. This "regenerated Italian sonnet" shows how the formal and ideological ambiguities of the text can be generative because this hybrid Anglo-Italian sonnet form throws the poem's content—explicit English nationalism—into question through its non-sequential temporality. In this way, Milton's poem engages with contemporary ideological questions regarding religious toleration and colonial imperialism.

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[103] According to John R. Hall, while topical and political concerns were valid themes for sonneteers in sixteenth-century Italy, these types of sonnets were " most unusual for mid-seventeenth-century England…for English readers, the sonnet was concerned with human love, and sometimes, as in Donne, and Herbert and one or two memorable occasions in Spenser, with divine love" (98). It would be a misrepresentation to suggest that sonnets circulating in sixteenth- and seventeenth- century England were of a monolith, and it is important to note the wide variety of religious sonnets—in addition to those about courtly love—composed during this time. Helen Wilcox ("Sacred Desire, Forms of Belief: the Religious Sonnet in Early Modern Britain," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*) argues for the pervasive prevalence and influence of religious sonnets in England, noting the prominence of sequences by Anne Lok, Henry Constable, Henry Lok, and William Alabaster. Some replaced the Petrarchan mistress with the figure of God, and some longed—instead of love—for spiritual comfort. While Milton may be seen as appropriating some of the religious focus of these English sonnets, none of these displayed a collusion of religious, apocalyptic, and political imagery like I am suggesting is the case in Milton's Sonnet XVIII.

There is also a connection between the apocalyptic imagery of the poem and the sonnet's political resonance as I have sketched it here. The imperialistic—and by extension nationalistic—undertones implicit in Milton's source text, Revelation, and the ways in which this text was appropriated in the seventeenth century, provide a rich political context that has yet to be explored in relation to this sonnet. Although deployed by pro-colonialist Englishmen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an overwhelming majority of biblical scholars agree that, for Revelation's original audience, the text served as a work of anti-empire propaganda.[104] Jean-Pierre Ruiz highlights the importance of acknowledging that John wrote Revelation as a text speaking out in resistance to Roman imperialism. Ruiz claims "the Apocalypse remaps the relationship between the Roman metropolis and the Asian provincial periphery," because Revelation 13 "mounts a shill counter offensive" to the hegemonic imperial view (130). According to David A. diSilva, far from being a religious text meant to appease and comfort his persecuted Christian audience, John crafts Revelation as a work of "apocalyptic propaganda" designed to "decenter" ideological beliefs, specifically the empire-building rhetoric of the Roman Empire. [105] While the Roman imperial cult venerated the creation of empire and a program of imperial conquest, John uses

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[104] Stephen J. Friesen claims, "Commentators are nearly unanimous that Revelation 13 deals with Roman imperial power and with the worship of Roman emperors" (303). Also see Friesen's note 62 on page 303 for a comprehensive list of scholars who demonstrate the ways in which Revelation should be read in the context of its relationship to imperial Rome. See "Myth and Symbolic Resistance in Revelation 13." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123.2 (2004): 281-313.

[105] See "The Revelation to John: A Case Study in Apocalyptic Propaganda and the Maintenance of Sectarian Identity." *Sociological Analysis* 53.4 (1992): 375-395.See also note 5, page 172 of Greg Carey's "Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation," in *The Reality of Apocalypse*, Ed. David L. Barr (Boston: Brill, 2006) for a comprehensive catalogue of scholars who read Revelation as resistance literature.

apocalyptic religious rhetoric to decentralize this ideology.[106] However, it is important to

note that this original anti-imperialist intention of the text was later appropriated to

support the reverse position: "during the colonial era, the very same book became the

charter for colonizers who read in its pages the mandate to build a new Jerusalem" (Ruiz

134).

The generation of authors and poets preceding Milton frequently performed a

reversal of eschatological rhetoric and manipulated apocalyptic exegesis to advocate

colonial expansion.[107] Apocalyptic rhetoric and imperial conquest were aligned because

England's empire building was interpreted as the fulfillment of God's providential plan.

The Reformation was viewed as the godly's triumph over the Antichrist, which prepared

the way for the Second Coming, and biblical apocalyptic prophesy was often used to

explain contemporary events.

This already-fickle nationalistic rhetoric based in Revelation became more

slippery during the tumultuous social upheaval of the Revolution. That is, apocalyptic

discourse in England carried with it long-standing nationalistic and theological valences,

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[106] For an interesting example of one specific way in which imperial authority is undermined by imagery in Revelation—through John's reappropriation of dragon myth—see Jan Willem van Henten, "Dragon Myth and Imperial Ideology in Revelation 12-12," in *The Reality of Apocalypse*, 181-203.

[107] John R. Hall examines Reformation-era apocalypticism and the apocalyptic rhetoric of European colonization, and he concludes, "in different ways, colonization both before and after the Reformation bore markings of the apocalyptic"(90). For Hall, alignment of the apocalyptic and English nation-building begins with the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries: "Although the Crusades were not based in a colonialist economic ideology, they spawned material practices and forms of social organization that undergirded subsequent European colonial expansion" (91). Arthur H. Williamson notes the centrality of eschatological thinking in the ideology of English empire-building, claiming that starting in the sixteenth century " the principle preoccupation, especially at the outset was a sacred empire rather than classical empire; therefore the eschatological remained a matter of deep concern" (227). Similarly, though her focus is a reading of John Derricke's *Image of Ireland, With a Discovery of Woodkarne* (1581), Maryclaire Moroney also demonstrates the relationship between apocalyptic religious rhetoric and English colonization in the late sixteenth century. She highlights similar strategies in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) and Book V of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596). According to Maroney, these texts show a "confluence of ethnographic, theological, and nationalist assumptions" (359). See "Apocalypse, Ethnography, and Empire in John Derricke's *Image of Ireland* (1581) and Spenser's *View of the Present State of* Ireland (1596)." *English Literary Renaissance* 29.3 (1999): 355-374.

the political nature of which were fluid before and after Milton began his career as statesman and poet. Early English reformers, such as William Tyndale and Thomas Cramner, used apocalyptic rhetoric to solidify nascent English Protestantism, and the appropriation of eschatological imagery continued beyond the Revolution, through the time of the Restoration of Charles II in 1660: "The revival of monarchical government was not only greeted by radical elements still seeking millennial achievement through the overthrow of the restored regime, but also by Royalist and Anglican supporters who heralded the restoration of the king as an event of great prophetical import."[108] In other words, at the close of the Civil War, eschatological rhetoric was deployed by opposing political camps to support competing ideological agendas.[109]

This use of apocalyptic rhetoric to support contradictory political positions was especially true in terms of seventeenth-century debates about empire. As John R. Hall demonstrates, for over a century, eschatological ideas and the program of English nation-building were juxtaposed in popular discourse:

> With the Reformation, the relation of the apocalypse to migration and colonization shifted radically. Protestant theological debates raised the question of whether the Americas might be the sight of the New Jerusalem…Over the years, English elite and state-centered tendencies to identify colonization with the cause of Protestant Christian world hegemony would resurface on numerous other fronts—in Oliver Cromwell's colonizing agenda toward Ireland during the Puritan commonwealth…" (93)

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[108] Warren Johnston, "Revelation and the Revolution of 1688-1689." *The Historical Journal* 48.2 (2005):351-389, 354.

[109] "On the royalist side, Charles' cause was underpinned by *Dei Gratis* doctrines implying the messianic resonances of kingship, doctrines which harnessed the mythologies of the Millennium and the Second Coming. On the parliamentarian side, the Civil war represented a holy crusade, the 'reformation of the nation' by the eradication of the 'popish' king, ministers, and prelates. The anticlericism which, since the days of the Lollards, had been a salient factor in resistance to the Catholic Church had retained its force in the virulent anticatholicism of debates to 1640; but, equally, it had fomented anticlerical resistance to the Laudian dispensation and its Arminian 'heresy' and characterized Laudian high Anglicanism as a form of 'popery' perpetrated by the Episcopal agents of the Antichrist." Margarita Stocker, *Apocalyptic Marvell: The Second Coming in Seventeenth-Century* Poetry (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1986), 2.

Apocalyptic discourse legitimized decisions to colonize new lands, while at the same time, the results of these explorations were used to confirm England's already-formed identity as an elect nation, on the path to fulfilling providential eschatology.

In order to locate the eschatologically-inflected discourse of imperialism in Milton's sonnet, it is helpful to briefly sketch a narrative of the slaughter of the Protestant Waldensians at Piedmont and note the political implications this event had for Milton and his contemporaries, especially as the massacre relates to the rhetoric surrounding the ideology of nation-building in Milton's England.

The Waldensians, or the Vaudis, were a small Protestant sect living in the Piedmont section of Italy, in alpine villages that bordered France. Originally followers of Pierre Valdes, a French merchant who rebelled against the Catholic Church around 1197, the Waldensians were formally excommunicated from the Church in 1215. Though officially stripped of all property and legal rights, the sect was afforded some toleration and was given the right to reside in areas delimited by Catholic authorities. For generations, many Waldensians continued to live in the off-limits territories of Torre Pellice and San Giovani, until abruptly on April 24, 1655 Carlo Immanuel I, Duke of Savoy sent an army of local militia and Irish Catholics to expel the sect from the prohibited regions. Incentive for the Irish to join in the massacre of Protestant Waldensians can be understood as an act of political subversion and retaliation, because these Catholic troops were mostly made up of men who had been persecuted under Cromwell's rule. This motley army of French mercenaries and Irish insurgents pursued thousands of fleeing Waldensians, savagely slaughtering those who had not already frozen during the evacuation. An estimated 1, 712 Waldensians were murdered in the

massacre, and the horrifying details of the event flooded contemporary newspapers, igniting an intense propaganda campaign by the Cromwellian government.[110]

The incendiary reports of atrocities committed against the Waldensians provided an advantageous public relations opportunity for Oliver Cromwell: lauding the small Protestant sect as martyrs sacrificed for the true religion—while simultaneously vilifying the Catholic perpetrators of the massacre—allowed Cromwell to solidify English national identity as the Providential elect nation against the barbarous Catholic heretics, and he thus bolstered his own political position. Cromwell officially issued a protest against the Duke of Savoy, donated money from his personal fortune to aid the Waldensian refugees, and commissioned his Secretary to the Counsel of State, John Milton, to write several letters detailing the horrors of the massacre and demanding retribution for the defenseless Protestant sect. Milton wrote at least six letters on behalf of Cromwell, most likely including the aggressive letter delivered to the Duke of Savoy by Cromwell's ambassador to Savoy, Samuel Morland. This appeal, along with letters to Louis XIV of France, Cardinal Mazarin, Sweeden's Charles Gustavus, and to Fredrick III, King of Denmark all share the rhetorical strategy of strengthening Cromwell's position and buttressing his call for justice by demanding toleration. For example, in the letter to the Duke of Savoy, not only does Cromwell (most likely via the pen of Milton) demand that the Duke restore the Waldensian's legal rights, property, and freedom of religion, but he does so in language

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[110] Lewalski, citing *A Letter of Several Papers…Concerning the Bloody and Barbarous Massacres*, a piece of propaganda published and widely read in 1655, provides valuable description of the types of images circulating in Milton's England: "Letters and documents recorded in graphic detail the fighting, burning, pillaging, and savage butchery: women ripped open or impaled on spikes; men nailed upside down to trees; many hacked, tortured and roasted alive; children ripped apart and their brains eaten; fugitives huddled high in the mountains freezing and starving; men, women and children flung from precipices; some 'tyed Neck and Heels together, and rowled down some Precipices'; 'fearful schrieching, made yet more pitiful by the multitude of those Eccho's, which are in those Mountains and Rocks'; scattered bones, 'here a Head, and there a Body; here a Leg and there an Arm.'" (*Life* 330)

that urges religious toleration, declaring "that the inviolable right and power of conscience are in His [God's] possession alone." Thus Cromwell built his public image—and national English identity—upon a professed program of universal religious toleration.

Yet English nationalism in the 1650s was paradoxically erected upon an explicitly intolerant and exclusionary agenda—in Catholic Ireland. Ireland was a key factor in fashioning England's identity as an imperial state. William Maley suggests "Ireland has long occupied an ambiguous position in English culture, as a convenient colonial pretext for further expansion abroad, as a vexed site of imperial interest in itself, and…as a testing ground for theories of British identity" (157). Sauer also offers support to this view, claiming, "Ireland had long been a thorn in England's side. For Milton and his contemporaries, Ireland obstructed the establishment of a Protestant, anglocentric British nation" (211). The brand of English national identity Cromwell was building upon the rhetoric of religious toleration and Protestant providential design collided with a long-standing English animosity directed towards the popery and Catholic barbarism of Ireland. David Armitage demonstrates that, "with his belief in divine superintendence and the favor of providence," Cromwell was presented as an "eschatological agent" in popular propaganda that encouraged Western Design and the imperial expansion of the British Empire.[111] That is, the national character of England hinged on the exclusion and vilification of the Irish, demonstrating that the rhetoric of toleration was tainted by intolerant imperial desires and was often coded in apocalyptic terms.

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[111] Armitage, David. "The Cromwellian Protectorate and the Languages of Empire." *The Historical Journal* 35.3 (1992):531-555, 537.

In March of 1649, 40-year old Milton was called upon to serve as Secretary of Foreign Languages under Cromwell, at a time when the Council of State attempted to navigate through a variety of challenges at home and abroad—including the problem of Ireland. In 1641, Catholics in Ireland began to revolt against maltreatment from the British, yet Charles I was able to appease the Irish and urge them to join his troops in combating rebelling English factions. Several years later, in 1649, the Royalist James Butler, Earl of Ormond signed a peace treaty with the Irish Confederacy, guaranteeing the latter religious toleration in exchange for their military support of Charles I. This alliance did not last long, however. Allegedly to avenge the 1641 Irish uprising, in which many Protestants were executed by Irish militia, Cromwell rescinded the peace treaty, and often used apocalyptic rhetoric to support the slaughter of Irish citizens. For instance, Cromwell attacked the Irish priests through images drawn from the Book of Revelation: "Cromwell accused the Irish clergy of having ignited the early revolt: 'You are part of the Antichrist, whose Kingdom the Scripture so expressly speaks should be laid in blood; yea in the blood of that Saints'" (Sauer 210). During the span of the nine-month military invasion of Ireland, Cromwell's New Model Army met the Catholic Confederates in intense battles and sieges in cities like Drogheda and Wexford, where Cromwell's men butchered thousands of Irish men, women, children, and clergy.

Milton was directed to comment upon four documents pertaining to the precarious situation in Ireland, one of which was the Royalist peace treaty with the Irish. Milton's twenty-page *Observations Upon the Articles of Peace with the Irish Rebels, on the Letter of Ormond to Col. Jones, and the Representation of the Presbytery at Belfast* appeared around March 15 or 16, and served as a biting polemic denouncing the Irish for the 1641

slaughter of English citizens residing in Ireland during the rebellion, as well as their savage and idolatrous national character.[112] In general, Milton does support English imperialism in Ireland:

> On many issues Milton was able to think his way beyond received opinion and prejudice, but not so in regard to England's colonization of Ireland…He sees no parallel between the Irish struggle for independence and religious liberty and his own commitment to political and religious liberty in England" (Lewalski, *Life* 241).

However there are hints of ambiguity in Milton's attitude toward Ireland, specifically in regard to the question of English colonial expansion. According to Maley, Milton was both "seduced by and estranged from the simplistic anti-Irish hysteria of his contemporaries… Milton's' anger is targeted not at the Irish, per se, but at the twin threats of Catholicism and Presbyterianism."[113] That is, unlike many of his fellow English polemicists, Milton did not simply rehearse stereotypes about the deplorable innate depravity of the Irish race, but used the complicated situation to expound on what he saw as more menacing threats—Presbyterianism, Catholicism, and Scottish political influence. At the same time, though, Milton supports the imperial conquest of Ireland, an unmistakable gesture of intolerance that seems to jar against his call for religious and political toleration in other tracts. Maley rightly points out that, "Milton's view of Ireland was far more complex than any simple binary model would suggest" (168). I want to push this concept further in thinking about how Milton's concept of toleration frustrates an either/or categorization.

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[112] Lewalski concedes that the tract is one filled with anti-Irish, anti-Catholic jeremiad, but she argues for the need to see recognize that Milton "tailors this quasi-official treatise to his own concerns, which are less with the barbarous Irish than with Scottish influence on English politics," and she claims that Milton's tract serves to "redirect much of the English rage from the Irish toward King Charles and Ormond (*Life* 241).

[113] "Milton," 158.

His tacit support of the Irish massacres performed by Cromwell's arm , massacres

that parallel those of the Waldensians in Piedmont in terms of the atrocity committed—

about which he would write a poem denouncing—demonstrate an unmistakable

contradiction in Milton's stance toward English colonialism. For Milton and his

contemporaries, the massacre at Piedmont and the Irish question were linked—not only

because the propagandized massacre of Protestants in each was perpetrated (in whole or

part) by Irish citizens—but because vilifying the "other" in each case allowed the English

to build their national identity. Against the barbarous non-Protestants, Englishmen

justified imperial conquest of other lands. The impetus to colonize was fortified by a

professed denunciation of the intolerant acts of butchery and brutality English Protestants

faced, yet it was their own religious intolerance that justified British colonialism. The

writers of daily news books and other propagandists serving the Cromwellian

government likened the massacre of the Waldensians to the murder of English Protestants

by the Irish Catholic Confederacy in 1641, which conveniently elided the intolerance-

fueled slaughter of thousands of Irish at the hand of the New Model Army, and thus any

culpability on the part of the English.[114] The connection between the events was not

merely theoretical though, because Cromwell publically juxtaposed the two as part of his

campaign to unite all English Protestants in the precarious years following the Civil War:

"The 'Complication of interest' in Ireland was translated in the case of the Piedmontese

massacre into what Cromwell called 'one common Interest' in which the cause of all

Protestants was at stake" (Sauer 212). That is to say, both contemporary debates about the

colonization of Ireland and the massacres of Protestant Waldensians at Piedmont

rehearsed the same rhetoric of national imperial identity. Just as apocalyptic rhetoric and

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[114] See Sauer, page 207.

allusions to the anti-imperialist Biblical text of Revelation could be reappropriated by English colonizers, contemporary events could also be manipulated to conceal programs of religious intolerance and justify imperial conquest. Thus, English national identity—its claim as the elect nation justified in its imperial invasion of non-Protestant states—is built upon the rhetoric of two fissured discourses. Apocalyptic references used to support empire-building conceal the anti-imperialist agenda inherent in the Book of Revelation; denouncing the intolerant slaughter of Protestants to justify colonialism elides the English's own prejudice, and demonstrates British imperial nationalism is built upon contradictory rhetoric.

I suggest that this matrix of ideological ambiguity—the collision of conflicting claims about religious toleration, imperialism, and apocalyptic imagery—is internalized in the language of Milton's sonnet. The polysemic language of Milton's biblical allusions and the indeterminate temporality they produce in "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" refracts and contributes to these early modern political confrontations.

With this historical context in place, I return to Agamben's notion of messianic time to bridge the temporality enacted by Milton's sonnet and these larger ideological questions with which the text engages. Agamben's claims about how poetry enacts messianic temporality can do more than illuminate ways of understanding the formal properties of Milton's poem: the time of the messianic affects notions of identity and questions of universalism and toleration in the letters of Paul, Agamben's source text for explicating messianic time. Throughout *The Time that Remains*, Agamben consistently demonstrates the doubleness of terms, showing that what first appears as one unified idea is actually revealed to be two distinct concepts. Dismantling such binary categorizations

has ethical and political implications. That is, messianic time "forces us to think about the question of the universal and particular in a completely new way, not only in logic, but also in ontology and politics" (51).[115] For example, Agamben argues that in Romans II, 1-26, Paul takes the "fundamental division of the law"—that which separates people as Jew or non-Jew—and "cuts this division in two with a new division, that of flesh/breath"—those who live by the old laws and covenant, and those who dwell in the time of messianic (49). The primary separation that underpins Jewish law is that of Jews (*Ioudaioi*), with whom God has chosen to form his covenant, and non-Jews (*ethnē),* all other non-circumcised, non-chosen people. By dividing the primary binary categorization of people itself in his new division of "flesh/breath," Paul destabilizes the idea that people can be classified into these oppositional groups: "the partition of the law (Jew/not-Jew), is no longer clear or exhaustive…this means that the messianic division introduces remnant [*resto*] into the law's overall division of the people" (50). Now there is a "remnant" caused by "cutting the polarized Jew/non-Jew partition," which creates a new logic and "admits a third term which then takes on the form of double negation: non non-A" (50-51).[116] Following this explanation, Agamben takes aim at the popular conception of Paul as a harbinger of universalism, arguing that Paul is not interested in the kind of "toleration" which leads to universalism: "For Paul, it is not a matter of 'tolerating' or getting past differences in order to pinpoint a sameness or a universal lurking beyond"

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[115] "More specifically, it allows for a new perspective that dislodges our antiquated notions of a people and a democracy, however impossible it may be to completely renounce them. The people is neither the all nor the part, neither the majority nor the minority" (*TTTR* 57).

[116] For an explanation of the Biblical exegesis that leads Paul to create these new categories, and a helpful schematic laying out how the category of "non non-Jew" is derived, see Agamben's chart on page 51.

(52). [117] Rather Paul's division of the law's division of peoples renders such oppositions "inoperable": "the universal is not a transcendental principle through which differences can be perceived… [the messianic] involves an operation that divides the divisions of the laws themselves and renders them inoperative" (52). What this means is that, in the time of the messianic, the fracture Paul makes in the division of the law makes the oppositional identities of "self and "other" useless. In effect, Paul disrupts the binary logic which underlies the distinction between Jew and non-Jew, between inside and outside, between God and men, eradicating all categorizations that separate people, and making the law and our notion of "universalism" inoperative. Importantly, this dissolution of self-other distinction happens in messianic time: "'so that, in the time of the now [*en tō nyn kairō*, Paul's expression for messianic time] a remnant is produced, chosen by grace' (Rom. II: 5)" (53). [118] The remnant "only concerns messianic time and only exists therein" (56). In other words, the coming of the messiah—or any rupture in which we rethink our narratives of how time functions—also dislodges our narratives of identity and of the distinction between self and other. To call into question the logic of linear time based on oppositions of past, present, and future by seeing the mutual interdependence and simultaneity of temporal experience is to also to interrogate the same binary logic that underpins our notion of identity as defined by its opposition to other identities.

Thus the experience of messianic time dismantles the opposition of terms— categories of identity and temporal states—and demonstrates their relation to and

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[117] See, especially, Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), with which Agamben's treatise is in explicit dialogue.

[118] See also Agamben's quotation of Paul on page 55: "'in the time of the now a remnant is produced [*gegonen*].'"

dependence on each other. The effect of messianic time is to disrupt logic based on linearity and oppositions; the multi-temporal space of the messianic event holds open possibilities which demand a way of thinking that cannot be either/or. This is the same type of dislocation that happens in Milton's poem, because the binary categories of Protestant and Catholic, and Italian and English, cannot hold. Concepts like "nationalism," imperialism," and "toleration," are revealed as fractured, and the seeming unity of our commonly-held definitions of these terms is revealed to be multiple. By putting the theoretical construct of messianic time into orbit with Milton's sonnet, it becomes evident that the ideologically-conflicting claims embedded in the sonnet are actually already fissured from within. In this way, messianic time describes the structure of temporal experience that happens in Milton's poetry, and also represents the same logic as the poet's engagement with material history.

Therefore Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" raises questions concerning a triad of conflicting ideological positions in regard to religious toleration, imperialist empire building, and seventeenth-century apocalyptic rhetoric. What my reading has highlighted is the eschatological nature of imperialist rhetoric in the age of Milton, revealing that the discourses of toleration and empire-building were multivalent and shifting. When read through the lens of messianic time, this conflict is dramatized in Milton's poem recalling the contemporary massacre of Protestants at Piedmont. Through shifting verb tenses and multilayered allusions, the polytemporal space of Milton's sonnet invokes an indeterminacy that moves beyond mere ambivalence; this ambiguity is productive because it complicates simple notions of "tolerance." The poem, with the ideological discourses it invokes, highlights the opposition between Catholic and

Protestant, between Irish and English, and between Italian and English literary traditions, and then throws those same binaries into question. At the same time, Milton produces a new hybrid sonnet form that complicates its own overt ethical and political content. Thus my reading has deconstructed the either/or categorization of Milton as "tolerant" or "intolerant" by demonstrating the contradictory nature of Milton's toleration in the seventeenth century.

One of the ways to think about why such a reading has relevance today can be found in Mohamed's *Milton and the Post-Secular Present*, which I referred to in my opening remarks in this chapter:

> If Milton holds special importance in current political discussion, it is precisely because he frustrates the kind of narrativization of Christian and Western thought… through such challenges we interrogate the coding of Christianity and Western culture as fundamentally non-violent, and turn a skeptical eye to any argument for the purity of a religious or cultural tradition. (106)

Extending Mohamed's claim, my reading suggests that Milton is relevant in literary studies today *because* of his polyvalent views on toleration, not in spite of them. And this particular investigation of the Piedmont sonnet demonstrates that the study of Milton's poetry and its paradoxical place in early modern culture can speak to the concerns of literary critics in our own time: uncovering the ideological ambiguities inherent in the work of Milton forces us to interrogate our own definitions, ideals, and narratives. Moving beyond a mere demonstration of ambivalence in Milton's ideological engagements, such a reading compels us to confront the narratives that underlie our own contemporary understandings of toleration.

CHAPTER 4

"SOUNDING ALCHYMIE": MILTON'S ALCHEMICAL VERSE, TEMPORALITY, AND POLITICS IN *PARADISE LOST*

In a multitude of prose tracts circulating in the seventeenth century and in Milton's

Paradise Lost, the apocalypse and Second Coming are imagined in alchemical terms.

However, Milton's manipulation of alchemical language is ambiguous, and the political

and spiritual importance of this uncertainty has yet to be examined. Two types of

alchemical transmutation in coexist in Milton's poem—true alchemy that has the power

to transform, and perverted alchemy which only *seems* to produce change. The latter is

universally acknowledged as associated with the unlawful, ambitious, and hasty pursuits

of Satan. Primarily, critics have gestured toward the satanic nature of Milton's alchemical

language, with Svendsen and Lieb pointing out the connection between Satan's alchemy

and Milton's condemnation of an unlawful emulation of God's natural creation. [119] In an

effort to connect this correlation with larger material concerns of the poet, scholars

following Christopher Hill have highlighted the association of alchemical rhetoric with

radical Civil War discourses of both political and religious natures. However, more recent

investigations of the wealth of prose tracts circulating during the revolution have

suggested that the same rhetoric could be transformed by conservatives and used on *both*

sides of the revolutionary debate, suggesting one way in which the attempt to fit Milton's

alchemy into binary categories of "good" and "bad" is too simplistic. In this chapter, I

argue that the mere division of these two types of alchemy into oppositional camps tells

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[119] Kester Svendsen, *Milton and Science* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956)*:* "The failure of the philosophers to create the elixir is like Satan's failure…The sin of the alchemists is the emulation of the sun; they try to short-cut the natural process through which God works, they are self-deceived and, like Satan's, theirs is a sin of pride" (126-127). See also Michael Lieb, *The Dialectics of Creation: Patterns of Birth and Regeneration in* Paradise Lost (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970).

us little about the very nuanced and complex relation of alchemical thinking to other

seventeenth-century discourses, especially as these paradigms collide in Milton's poetry.

Over four decades ago, Michael Lieb alluded to the magnitude of Milton's engagement

with alchemy and called for "additional research into an area of Miltonic scholarship

hitherto almost wholly unexplored"— a request that remains largely unfulfilled.[120]

Several years later in 1996, Stanton J. Linden likewise pointed out that "there are

relatively few modern scholarly investigations of Milton's alchemy, the topic often

having been subsumed under the larger subjects of his science or philosophy." [121] In this

chapter, I propose some possible responses to the appeals of Lieb and Linden.

I argue that the inconsistencies, contradictions, and proliferation of such words as

"perhaps" and "or" in reference to alchemical allusions in the poem create an experience

for the reader which necessitates the navigation of multiple levels of uncertainty. Because

alchemical language was associated with political rhetoric on both sides of the Civil War

debate, and figured prominently in contemporary rhetoric about spiritual and ecclesiastic

reform, I demonstrate that the ambiguity of Milton's alchemical allusions forces readers

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[120] Lieb, 231.

[121] *Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996): 246 .Critical perspectives on Milton and alchemy include Lyndy Abraham, "Milton's *Paradise Lost* and 'the sounding alchymie,'" *Renaissance Studies 12.2 (*1998): 261-276. Abraham points out Milton's use of alchemical images and links them to contemporary alchemical tracts, but the article does not explore the political, temporal, or apocalyptic resonances of such imagery, which interest me here. Sandy Feinstein shows the alchemical influence on Milton's use of the term "sublime," but only highlights Milton's negative attitude toward alchemy in "Milton's Develish Sublime," *Ben Jonson Journal* 5 (1998): 149-166; Juliet Cummings, in "Matter and Apocalyptic Transformation in Paradise Lost," *Milton and the Ends of Time,*169-83, only briefly highlights a few terms in the epic associated with early modern alchemy. Most recently, Glenn Sucich urges a "more affirmative and constructive relation between the discourse of alchemy and Milton's thought" (44). Sucich demonstrates the influence of alchemical processes on the rhetoric of *Areopagitica*, aligning the purifying aim of the former with Milton's goal of refining the moral character of his readers. While this assessment is helpful, Sucich concludes that Milton is "ambivalent" about alchemy, and I wish instead to interrogate what such "ambivalence" in Milton's work might mean, especially politically. See "'Not Without Dust and Heat': Alchemy and *Areopagitica*," in *Uncircumscribed Mind: Reading Milton Deeply,* ed. Charles W. Durham and Kristin A. Pruitt (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 2008): 44-66.

to work through uncertainties, thus demanding vigilant and attentive reading. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton thwarts the kind of "short cut" sought by contemporary alchemists and by the Interregnum political program. In this way, Milton's poetry remains engaged in—and in fact integral to— cultural and ideological debates about alchemical possibility and political practice in the early modern era.

My entry point for considering the connection between alchemy, apocalyptic anticipation, and Milton's poetry is *time*. While eschatological expectation makes time a linear and closed system, the experience of alchemical transmutation and the alchemical references of Milton's verse inhabit a temporality that disrupts an interpretation of time as a straight line. That is, the temporal mechanism of both alchemy and the messianic time of Milton's poetry establish that progress is not necessarily linear; change does not only occur along a forward-moving chronology.

H.J. Sheppard has demonstrated that seventeenth-century alchemists sought to make "alterations of duration in some linear time scale": they could "lengthen" time through the creation of life-saving elixirs, or "shorten" time by creating metals very quickly.[122] In other words, early modern alchemists saw themselves as interfering with the unfolding of chronological time. The process of alchemical transmutation rejects the unidirectionality of time because transformation involves a dialectical process of unity, separation, a reunification—a repeated cycle of regression and transformation. Though the stages vary in different alchemical texts, the basic process of alchemical transmutation involved placing base metals into egg-shaped furnaces, where—in a progression of different stages of heating and color change— metals would be reduced to

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[122] See "European Alchemy in the Context of a Universal Definition," in *Die Alchimie in der europäischen Kultur-und Wissenshaftsgeschichte,* ed. Christoph Meinel, Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, vol. 32 (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 16.

ash or powder, joined with other chemicals like sulfur and mercury, then "reborn" as incorruptible gold. The process of decay, renewal, and purification entailed a movement backward in time to a *prima materia* before going forward; a return which was "against the thrust of nature" and linear chronology.[123] Essentially, through its manipulation of chronological time, alchemy makes happen very quickly what God intends to occur gradually, and it calls into question the belief that experience is only linear and unidirectional.

In terms of temporal experience, alchemical transmutation is concerned with a return to what was (original pure matter) in order to create what will be (a future perfected substance), mirroring the temporality of messianic time. Whereas apocalyptic thinking makes time linear and replaces the cyclical understanding of temporality practiced during the middle ages, the mechanism of alchemical time complicates this dichotomous choice of time schemes, as time as not quite linear and not quite cyclical. I argue we can better understand the temporality of alchemical transmutation by linking it to the time of the messianic: a temporal experience which sees progress as a negation that points to new concepts, opening up possibilities for transformation. In the same way that messianic time describes the rupture of unidirectional temporality necessary for advancement, so too does the process of alchemical transmutation demonstrate that moments of decline or regression can be the catalyst for transformation. Alchemist's metals—quite literally—embody the past and the possibility of future transformation,

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[123] Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*. (Aldershot and Brookfield: Scolar Press, 1990), 64. Abraham gives an interesting reading of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" which focuses on the temporality of the poem as it relates to the text's alchemical overtones, and he discusses how the work of alchemy seeks to work "against the natural process of time" (311).

which manifest the simultaneity of past, present, and future temporality highlighted by messianic time.

Jacob Taubes, a political philosopher writing towards the end twentieth century, shares a similar interrogation of temporality to that of Benjamin and Agamben, so much so that Agamben dedicated his *Time That Remains* to Taubes.[124] His work provides a valuable demonstration of how our conventional representations of temporality differ from the time of the messianic. In *Occidental Eschatology* (1947), Taubes provides a comprehensive study of the effect of apocalypticism in Western culture, and simultaneously presents a way of rethinking our notions of time. Taubes points out the linearity and closure implied by apocalyptic conceptions of time:

> The nature of time is summed up by its irreversible unidirectionality [*Einsinnigkeit*]. From a geometrical point of view, time runs in a straight line in one direction [*Einsinnig*]…This unidirectionality is common to both life and time…The direction is always toward an end…The end is essentially Eschaton." (3-4)

Because the apocalypse marks the end point of time, temporality is represented as moving forward, in one direction, towards that end. According to Taubes, apocalyptic thinking is "always directed toward the end," and this causes our representation of time to assume a certain inevitability: "Time appears as a stream, springing from the eternity of creation; after descending various gradients, it pours into the sea of eternity and redemption" (33-34). This way of thinking about time is potentially dangerous because unidirectionality implies closure and inevitability, which can cause passivity and determinism: "The science of apocalypticism presupposes a passive attitude toward the

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[124] According to Paul Dussel, "As a student of Scholem, Taubes has a special relationship with Benjamin (whom he nevertheless criticizes)" (38). See Dussel pages 37-42 for a useful discussion of Taubes' thought, especially as it relates to his reading of Benjamin and conceptions of messianism. Agamben dedicated *TTTR* to Taubes (3), and engages with Taubes' messianism explicitly in several places: see 33-37, 55, 104, 140.

happenings of history. There is an absence of action. The fate of world history is predetermined and there is no sense trying to resist it" (34). In other words, similar to Benjamin's "homogenous empty time," the "irreversible unidirectionality" of our conception of time fosters an uncritical and inactive stance toward events happening in the world around us.

The representation of time as a straight line creates what Taubes calls "an unreal boundary" separating "the 'no longer' of the past, and the 'not yet' of the future" (8). However, messianic time, the time of the *kairos*, opposes this chronological and sequential time, and creates the "turning point, when the structure of this world prison will burst apart" (9). Though normally time is conceptualized as fragmented into past, present, and future states, Taubes notes that this distinction cannot hold because, "Like specters, the separate parts rise up and devour each other" (8). That is to say, the time of the messianic rupture, in which we interrogate our accepted representations of time, demonstrates the embeddedness of the past and future in every present experience.

Though apocalyptic thinking makes time a closed, linear system in which it appears the past and future are opposed to the present, every experience has the potential to dislocate this view of time:

> An event always allows the once-was [*das Einst*] of creation to shine through: an axiological relationship. Because that once-was of creation [*Einst*] is glimpsed in the event, it also points forward to the one-day [*Einst*] of redemption: a teleological relationship. Therefore history is in the middle between creation and redemption. History only reveals its essence as eschatology. (13)

If time's unidirectionality is called into question through the interconnectivity of the past, present, and future, then we can understand progress and the unfolding of history differently.

The process of alchemical transformation performs this temporality, because it demonstrates that the past (*prima materia)* and the future (gold made through the transformation of metal) are embedded in our notions of what is "present." Furthermore, the temporal ambiguity of Milton's alchemical verse likewise disrupts our accepted notion of time as unidirectional. Like the rethinking of time occurring in a messianic rupture and in alchemical transformation, Milton's verse rejects linear chronology and insists on a logic that assumes decay and movements backward can lead to progress. By extension, in challenging our way of thinking about time and in creating a distinction between two types of alchemy in *Paradise Lost*, Milton makes an explicit political intervention by training critical and judicious readers.

Though its reputation as a respectable science became increasingly suspect as the early modern period progressed, alchemical language and imagery had been part of a long tradition in English literary history, and such allusions became even more significant in Milton's age.[125] In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, alchemical imagery was employed as a target of satire, and interest in alchemy was primarily concerned with the chicanery utilized by false alchemists who used their art to gull unsuspecting victims. In literary texts, these images became "a symptom of the corruption present in the world at large."[126] For the Elizabethans, alchemical references swerved from such satirical and biting diatribes and moved toward more ironic and humorous treatments of alchemy. The

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[125] For recent work on the cultural role of alchemy in the early modern period in general see Peggy A. Knapp, "The Work of Alchemy" in *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30.3 (Sept. 2000): 375-399; Dider Kahn, "Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis, Part II- Synthesis," *Ambix* 58.1 (March 2011): 62-77. Stanton J. Linden emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of alchemical belief in the Renaissance in the essays gathered in his *Mystical Metals of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2007).

[126] Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks,* 295.

late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a change in alchemical images in

literature which was contemporaneous with an outpouring of new alchemical texts.

Alchemy was not abandoned in favor of the emerging, new scientific systems, but rather

alchemical treatises multiplied and their number increased dramatically in the years

surrounding the Civil War. It is estimated that, "between the years of 1650 and 1675 or

1680, more alchemical books appeared in English than in all the time before or after

those dates," and with this increase of alchemical texts came a literary response to these

tracts which moved away from the satirical tradition and towards an "employment of

alchemy to suggest spiritual growth, purification, regeneration, and millenarian ideas". [127]

The poetry of George Herbert, John Donne, and Henry Vaughn marks a turning point in

literary representations of alchemy, because for these authors, alchemical references

became much more religiously and philosophically based.[128] Rather than an opposition

between evolving scientific practice and religious belief, the seventeenth century saw a

combination of the two in a new emphasis on the spiritual implications of alchemical

transformation. For instance, there emerged a widespread analogy between the

transformative power of both Christ and the philosopher's stone. [129] What is most

important to recognize, especially in relation to my examination of alchemical references

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[127]John Ferguson, "Some Alchemical Books," *Journal of the Alchemical Society 2* (1913): 5.

[128] For a thorough—though dated—discussion of how Donne employs alchemical imagery in his poetry see Edgar Hill Duncan's "Donne's Alchemical Figures," *ELH 9.4* (1942): 257-285. As far as I have seen, Duncan is one of the few scholars who have investigated alchemical imagery in poetry in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and his analysis presents a good example of how the resonance of alchemical language was operating at this historical moment.

[129] Harinder Marjara makes a similar assertion: "The point to keep in mind is that the spiritual or Christian-moral emphasis in scientific images was inseparable from the hard and concrete scientific facts even for the scientists" (12). However, Marjara does not include alchemy in her discussion of the intersections of science and literature. See *The Contemplation of Created Things: Science in* Paradise Lost (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 12.

in *Paradise Lost*, is the *seriousness* with which alchemical language begins to resonate—both philosophically and theologically— for Milton and his contemporaries.[130]

There is another link that demonstrates the significance of alchemical thinking for Milton's contemporaries: in the seventeenth century alchemical imagery permeated apocalyptic literature, while at the same time, eschatological belief inflected the writings of alchemists. This juxtaposition surfaces in the poetry of Milton. Linden demonstrates the significant connection between alchemically-inflected eschatological beliefs and religious poetry in early modern England. According to Linden, "Milton's conception of Christ and the last judgment was commonplace in alchemical books of the time."[131] Similarly, Leah DeVun demonstrates a bi-directional influence between eschatological thought and alchemical images in the seventeenth century. She notes that a variety of early modern authors "channeled history and theology together into a new genre of alchemy, one that was thoroughly Christian and thoroughly apocalyptic."[132] Thomas Tymme's translation of Quercetanus' alchemical text *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermetical Physicke* (1605)*,* is an example of an author combining Christian imagery with alchemical doctrine to describe Judgment Day:

> Moreover, as the omnipotent God, hath in the beginning, by his divine wisesdom, created things of the heavens & earth…so in the fullnesse & last period of time

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[130] For recent work on the complexity of opinions on alchemy in the early modern period see Tara Numendal's *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). While Numendal's focus is not on the role of alchemy in literature, and is instead the political implications of alchemical texts and the role that print culture played in disseminating alchemical ideas throughout Europe, she does sketch a brief chronological overview of how alchemy was imagined in fictional texts of the sixteenth century on pages 49-54.

[131] Linden, "Mystical Alchemy, Eschatology, and Seventeenth-Century Religious Poetry." Pacific Coast Philology 19.1-2 (1984): 79-88, 83. Linden returns to, and expands upon, the interaction of alchemical imagery, eschatological belief, and seventeenth-century poetry in Chapter VII of his *Darke Hierogliphicks*, pages 193-223.

[132] Leah DeVunn, *Prophesy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 99.

(which approacheth fast on) the 4. Elements (whereof al creatures consist) having in every of them 2. other Elements, the one putrifying and combustible, the other eternal and incombustible, as the heaven, shall by Gods Halchymie be metamorphosed and changed. For the combustible having in them a corrupt stinking feces, or drossie matter…shall in that great & generall refining day be purged through fire: And then God will make new Heavens and a new Earth, and bring all things to christalline cleernes, & wil also make the 4. Elements perfect, simple, & fixed in themselves, that al things may be reduced to a Quintessence of Eternitie.[133]

In Tymme's "great & refining day" of the eschaton, it is interesting that not only does alchemy bring about the Second Coming, but transversely, the apocalypse also perfects the process of alchemical transmutation at the end of this passage. Similarly, in Martin Luther's *Table Talk* (published in England in 1646), there is further evidence of how theologians could borrow from the rhetoric of alchemy when describing the Second Coming:

> The science of alchymy I like very well…I like it not only for the profits it brings in melting metals…I like it also for the allegory and secret signification, which is exceedingly fine, touching the resurrection of the dead on the last day. For, as in a furnace the fire extracts and separates from a substance other portions, and carries upward the spirit, the life, the sap, the strength, while the unclean matter, the dregs, remain at the bottom, like a dead and worthless carcass; even so God, at the day of judgment, will separate all things through fire, the righteous and the ungodly…the wicked and the ungodly, as the dross and filth, shall remain in hell, and there be damned.[134]

Luther imports the alchemical process of the separation of metals in a furnace to remove "dross and filth" as an "allegory" for Christ's Second Coming.

In a final example, Paracelsus' eschatological scene at the conclusion of Book 8 of his *Of the Nature of Things* (published in England around 1570) is a mixture of New Testament sources and alchemical doctrine:

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[133] Qtd. in Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 202.

[134] *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt. (London: G. Bell, 1902), 326.

> And lastly in the end of all things shall bee the last separation, in the third generation, the great day when the son of God shall come in majesty and glory…He comes not accompanied with troops of Horse and beating of Drums, but foure Trumpets shall bee sounded by the Angells towards the foure parts of the world, killing all that are then alive with their horrible noise, in one moment, and then presently raising these again, together with them that are dead and buried…In that place the holy Angels shall separate the bad from the good, the cursed from the blessed, the goat from the sheep…all Elementary things will returne to the first matter of the Elements and bee tormented to eternity and never bee consumed, &c. and on the contrary, al holy things shall return to the first matter of Sacraments: i.e. shall be purified, and in enternall joy glorifie God their Creator and worship him from age to age, from eternity to eternity.[135]

Paracelsus juxtaposes alchemical separation and purification with an allusion to the apocalypse of Revelation. Yet what is most fascinating here is Paracelsus' reference to the "foure Trumpets" sounded by "the Angells towards the foure parts of the world, killing all that are then alive with their horrible noise." The allusion appears to combine an echo Revelation 7:1 (where angels standing at the four corners of the earth hold back destructive winds), and the sounding of seven trumpets by seven angels in Revelation 8:2-11:18. The angels of the former allusion respond to a trumpet call, while the seven angels of the latter allusion sound their trumpets to announce the horrid plagues preceding the rapture. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton creates an extremely similar scene to Paracelsus' when in Book II "Toward the four winds, four speedy Cherubim/Put to their mouths the sounding Alchymie" (II. 515-516). It seems as though Milton juxtaposes the two biblical references as Paracelsus did in his earlier tract. I am not interested in making the argument that Paracelsus serves as Milton's direct source here, nor do I assume that the conflation of these two allusions from Revelation was unheard of outside these two

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[135] *A New Light of Alchymie…Written by Micheel Sandivogius [sic]…Also Nine Book of the Nature of Things, written by Paracelsus…Translated by J.F. M. D.* (London: Richard Cotes, 1650).

early modern texts. Rather what I wish to highlight is the degree to which seventeenth-century anticipation of the apocalypse was infused with the rhetoric and imagery of alchemical possibility in such a way that the divisions separating science, theological belief, biblical exegesis, and literature dissolve. That Milton's poetry demonstrates an early modern connection between apocalypse and alchemy is crucial in understanding the curious role alchemy plays in his great epic.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's alchemical references create ambiguity because Milton does not simply support or condemn alchemy, and the allusions produce uncertainty in their disruption of linear temporality.[136] The epic's alchemical imagery exemplifies how the past and future are embedded in every present moment, as does the actual process of alchemical transformation and the way of rethinking temporality in messianic time. Yet in the experience of this textual confusion or ambiguity, the messianic temporality of the poem calls for a reevaluation of ideas, calling into question our accepted notions of how time functions and the "irreversible unidirectionality" that Taubes claims triggers passivity and determinism. The uncertainty created by Milton's messianic time is the condition of action and decision, because Milton implores the reader to distinguish between two types of alchemical change. Thus, the poem makes an explicit political statement by training vigilant and active readers who will be better able to decide to reject the short cuts offered by both false alchemists and the Interregnum leadership.

The first alchemical reference in Milton's epic occurs in Book II, at the Stygian council, when it is decided that Satan will make the solitary voyage to Earth. Milton

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[136] For a list of the various gestures towards the apocalyptic in Paradise Lost see C.A. Patrides' "'Something like Prophetick strain': Apocalyptic Configurations in Milton", page 227 in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Imagination.*

associates the fallen angels' response to this decision with the transformative power of alchemy, but a closer investigation of these lines reveals that while the verse *proclaims* transformation, it actually *demonstrates* confusion and stasis. At the end of the council, the fallen angels:

> "With Trumpets regal sound the great result:
> Toward the four winds four speedy Cherubim
> Put to their mouths the sounding Alchymie
> By Haralds voice explain'd: the hollow Abyss
> Heard farr and wide, and all the host of Hell
> With deafning shout, return'd them loud acclaim" (515-520).

Though the epic narrator claims that this "sounding alchyme" has a pronounced effect on the fallen angles, Milton's verse actually undercuts this apparent transformation and likewise resists allowing the reader to be affected by this perverted alchemy. Following the "deafning shout" resounded by the legions of fallen angels, their activity is marked by static confusion: "By false presumptuous hope, the ranged powers/Disband and *wandering*, each his several way/Pursues, as inclination or sad choice/Leads him *perplext*" (II. 522-525) [emphasis mine]. Just following these lines, Milton describes the angels' wondering:

> Part on the Plain, *or* in the Air sublime
> Upon the wing *or* in swift Race contend,
> As at the Olympian Games, *or* Pythian fields;
> Part curb thir fierie Steeds, *or* shun the Goal
> With rapid wheels, *or* fronted Brigads form (II. 528-532) [emphasis mine]

Here the verse ostensibly presents a catalogue of the angels' active movements after being transformed by the alchemical music; however Milton's constant repetition of "or" actually creates a sense of stasis and uncertainty, presenting a list of all the possible

places the angels are roaming, while the reality of their movement is constantly undercut by the ambiguous "or."[137]

This ambiguity is amplified as the passage continues and Milton creates a pile up of allusions in which multiple references to events in the classical past collide. This juxtaposition of different similes disrupts linear temporality, demonstrating how a variety of past experiences inflect every present moment, while simultaneously emphasizing the stasis of the fallen angels. For example, at line 533, Milton begins an epic simile to describe the actions of the angels which juxtaposes various past comparisons, recalling them only to condemn the heroism each wrongly values. He begins with an apparent reference to prophetic visions of war found in Josephus and Virgil, before alluding to the "Aerie Knights" (536) of Renaissance romantic epics, and "Typhoean" (538) and "Alcides" (542) of classical Greek myth. [138] Milton's line endings here highlight the violence implied by these allusions to the heroes of the past, as in "rush"(534), "burns"(538), "rage more fell"(539), "uproar" (541), "tore"(543), "threw" (535). Yet while the brutal warriors are invoked in this mutitemporal simile that alludes to Jewish, Roman, Greek, and Renaissance predecessors, their heroism is deflated and the angels are ineffectual. Moreover, the "perplext" state of the fallen angels is paralleled in the experience of the reader: she must negotiate the disparate allusions and references to different time periods, and at the end of the passage, the fallen angels—and by extension the poem's readers—are "in wandering mazes lost" (II. 561).

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[137] For a compelling and insightful reading of the function of Milton's use of "or" see Peter C. Herman's "*Paradise Lost,* the Miltonic 'Or', and the Poetics of Incertitude," *SEL* 41.3 (Winter 2003): 181-211. Herman is interested in the contradictions and unresolved tensions—especially how they relate to political ambiguity—in Milton's epic, as I am here. The primary difference in our approach to the "Miltonic 'Or'" is that Herman concludes that uncertainty in *PL* represents the poet's "turmoil of not knowing what to affirm in the wake of the Revolution's failure" (183).

[138] See Flannagan, II. 533-535, note 128.

The alchemical trumpets have not caused a true transformation, but only stasis, as number of the angels "Retreated in a silent valley" (II. 547), while others "apart sat on a Hill retir'd (II.557). Their passivity, silence, and ineffectualness is mirrored in the lines "In thoughts more elevate, and reason'd high/ Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate,/ Fixt Fate free will, foreknowledge absolute,/ And found no end, in wandering mazes lost" (II.557-561). Here, the unsuccessful or incomplete chiasmus in lines 559-60—which significantly omits "Providence"—provides a perceived sense of order or completion, though it upsets this very notion, and because of its incompleteness, it simultaneously reinforces the static nature of the angels' activity in its repetitive quality. This sense of apparent accomplishment juxtaposed with prevailing ambiguity and non-movement is characteristic of the entire transformation enacted by the "sounding Alchyme" of the rebel angels.[139]

In Book III, ineffectual and perverted alchemy is again aligned with Satan when he lands upon "a spot like which perhaps/Astronomer in the Sun's lucent Orbe/ Though his glaz'd Optic Tube yet never saw" (588-590).[140] Once more Milton introduces a scene associated with alchemical transmutation as one characterized by uncertainty, exemplified in "perhaps" and the fact that the spot is seemingly present, though illusory:

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[139] Following the descriptions of the fallen angels as false philosophers, Milton aligns their actions with the proud and ineffectual pursuits of explorers (lines 570-628), which Milton condemns because "the exploration conducted by the fallen angels is escapism and meaningless diversion, to take their minds off pain" (Flannagan, II. 576, note 143). While a detailed reading falls outside of the scope of my argument here, I would like to point out that these lines also emphasize the stasis implied in the allusion, undercutting the movement of the angels. That is, while the fallen set out "on bold adventure to discover wide/ That dismal world" (571-2), Milton checks their wondering with stasis: they find a "frozen continent" (587) and they are trapped "there to pine/ Immovable, infixt, and frozen round,/Periods of time" (601-3). Similarly to the lines I read above in connection to the effects of the "sounding alchymie," Milton invokes multiple levels of allusions to classical Greek mythology, Virgil, Dante, and biblical references, only to deflate them.

[140] For an interesting reading of these lines and their effect on the reader see Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 28.

"yet never saw." The last phrase negates the possibility of the preceding allusion and doesn't allow the reader to be enthralled by the sensuous imagery of the previous two lines. Rather, the contradiction makes the reader hyper-conscious that she is in the process of reading, and forces her to go beneath the surface of the reference to interpret the meaning of the elusive verse. Next, the physical description of Satan's landing place is depicted in alchemical terms. In an extended and shifting simile, the earth is imagined first as a part of Aaron's breastplate, and then as the philosopher's stone. But before giving this alchemical reference, Milton again upsets the reader's sense of continuity through the repetition of various ambiguous similes as he describes the spot on which Satan lands:

> Compar'd with aught on Earth, Metal *or* Stone
> Not all parts like, but all alike informed
> With radiant light, as glowing Iron with fire;
> *If* metal, part *seemd* Gold, part Silver cleer;
> *If* Stone, Carbuncle most or Chrystolite,
> Rubie *or* Topaz, to the Twelve that shon
> In Aaron's breastplate, and a stone besides
> *Imagined* rather oft then elsewhere seen (III.592-599) [emphasis mine]

As the passage continues, the simile shifts to a direct reference to alchemical transformation and the text amplifies a sense of uncertainty:

> That stone, or like to that which here below
> Philosophers *in vain* so long have sought,
> *In vain* through there powerful Art they *binde*
> Volatil Hermes, and call up unbound
> In various shapes old Proteus from the Sea,
> *Drained* through a Limbec to his Native forme. (III. 600-605) [emphasis mine]

Primarily, the repetition of the word "vain" aligns alchemical pursuits more closely with Satan, because it echoes the flight of Satan through Limbo earlier in the Book, in which the terms "vain" and "vanity" appear seven times in the characterization of Satan's

movements (lines 445-467). The repetition of the same phrase—"in vain"—within two lines increases the perception of stasis because it is not actually producing a new experience, but rather emulating a previous one, and the lines simultaneously emphasize the futility of the alchemists' attempts. Moreover, Milton's references to the alchemical figures of "Hermes" and "old Proteus," while seemingly suggesting the possibility of transformation, become deflated by the fact that Milton insists that they are constrained and ineffectual: the philosophers "binde" Hermes, and Proteus has been "Drained." The power of the verse is likewise "drained," in the experience of the reader, as the images of the philosophers, Hermes, and Proteus are proven ineffectual. The passage ends—not with a transformation—but with a recursive return to an original state in Proteus' "Native forme."

Additionally, the multitemporal experience of messianic time can be seen here in Milton's allusion to "Aarons breastplate" in line 598. The reference recalls the Old Testament book of Exodus, in which the twelve jewels of the plate represented the twelve tribes of Israel. In Exodus 25, God commands Moses to construct the breastplate and a tabernacle using gold and precious stones, and he gives more specific details about the stones in the breastplate in Exodus 28:30: "And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually." Interestingly, this imagery reappears in the Book of Revelation, as the New Jerusalem is foretold in Revelation 21. The precious stones are catalogued in the building of the new tabernacle in verses 19-27 and serve as

an allusion to, and fulfillment of, the promise God makes in Exodus.[141] Thus this

multivalent allusion packs together time; it recalls and fulfills the past while

simultaneously invoking the future to come. The way this reference demonstrates the

dialectical interplay of past and future that inflects every present event—the non-linear

experience of what was and what will be juxtaposed in this image—makes it a poetic

embodiment of messianic time.

Just following this section detailing false alchemy, the poem presents a shift from

Satanic alchemy to the alchemy of the Sun, which produces "Elixir pure" (III.607) and

rivers that flow with "Potable Gold" (III. 608). Milton describes the process as

> …when with one vertuous touch
> Th' Arch-chimic Sun so farr from us remote
> Produces with Terrestrial Humor mixt
> Here in the dark so many precious things
> Of color glorious and effect so rare (III. 609-613)

Unlike the verse describing false alchemy above, here the lines flow without punctuation,

caesuras, or repetitious words and phrases, allowing the poetry to have an "effect so rare"

that the former alchemical verse does not. The alchemy of the Sun is "vertuous" because

its process actually involves labor, as the Sun must combine and compose "here in the

dark" in order to produce "precious things," rather than the superficial change the

unnatural philosophers attempt to produce. The Sun performs true alchemy because it

delves beneath the surface, and Milton invites the reader to do the same in her experience

of distinguishing between these two types of transmutation. In other words,

differentiating between the two kinds of alchemy through careful reading rejects the

uncritical stasis of false alchemical transformation, and can create real change. This

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[141] This connection between Old and New testaments is pointed out in the marginalia of Fowler's *Paradise Lost* (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007). See Fowler's informative note on III. 594-605.

"true" transmutation, one that comes from the inside and radiates outward, is the same type of transformation Milton demands in his theological program and that he desired from the Interregnum leadership.

In Book V, Milton again presents an image of appropriate alchemical transmutation when Adam asks Raphael about the process of angelic digestion. Raphael's response will lead to a discussion insisting on gradual progression in concord with God's divine plans, and his initial description of the process of heavenly digestion is distinctly alchemical:

> And to their viands fell, nor seemingly
> The Angel, nor in midst, the common gloss
> Of Theologians, but with keen dispatch
> Of real hunger, and concoctive heat
> To transubstantiate; what redounds, transpires
> Through Spirits with ease; nor wonder; if by fire
> Of sooty coal the Empiric Alchimist
> Can turn, or holds it possible to turn
> Metals of drossiest Ore to perfect Gold
> As from the mine (V. 435-442)

Here, Milton juxtaposes an example of divinely-sanctioned alchemy with the evil and chimerical alchemical attempts of earthly alchemists. [142] Again Milton resists offering a simple endorsement of alchemy, with his skeptical, "or holds it possible to turn," opening up the possibility of alchemical transformation to the reader before inaugurating a conversation about a similar—though more theologically serious—type of transmutation, that of the possibility of man's transformation into angelic spirits. Raphael approaches the question emphasizing patience, in that all things will reach perfection, "Indu'd with various forms various degrees/Of substance, and in all thing that live, of life; / But more

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[142] See Flannagan's gloss on the term "Empiric Alchemist": "Empiric alchemists were lower-order alchemists, 'hacks' at their trade, as opposed to adept or grand alchemists." (490, n.138).

refin'd, more spirituous, and pure" (V.473 -475) and he responds that human beings will reach angelic perfection "by gradual scale sublim'd" (V. 483). In the middle of his answer to Adam's question, Raphael's warning "Wonder not then, what God for you saw good/ If I refuse not, but convert, as you, /To proper substance" (V. 491-493) is marked by an unwieldy syntax that complicates the reader's experience and forces her to work through the complexity of the verse, rather than be passively influenced by it. Raphael's summary of the process by which such transformation will occur beginning at line 491 likewise problematizes the reader's experience, by introducing a series of possibilities that remain uncertain: "the time *may* come when men/ With angels *may* participate," and "*perhaps*" human bodies "*may* at last" turn into spirits, but only after they have been "improv'd by tract of time;" then man might ascend to Heaven, "*or* may at choice/ Here *or* in Heav'nly Paradises dwell" if they are "found obedient" (V. 491-500) [emphasis mine].This passage, with its many ambiguities, primarily concerns the moral virtue of patience in accomplishing things "by gradual scale," and Milton juxtaposes theological and alchemical terms in order to force his reader to make decisions through the experience of reading.

In the epic's final Book, Book XII, alchemy is explicitly connected to the apocalypse, because at the Second Coming, the Earth will be "purg'd and refin'd" (548). Just prior to this description, Michael relates to Adam the evil that must come before this renewal, narrating that the "grievous Wolves" of the Catholic Church will sacrifice the virtues of their calling to "outward Rites" and "specious forms" (XII. 533) and that the world will continue this way "To good malignant, to bad men benign" (XII. 538). In a warning against being consumed by superficial and faulty rhetoric, Milton presents a

paradox seemingly repeated in an unfulfilled chiasmus, as the latter phrase appears to reverse the first, but linguistically the phases do not exactly mirror each other. Moreover, each paradox, with its unsettling juxtapositions, constantly reminds the reader that she is in the process of reading. This perplexity keeps her on guard, upsetting her complacency with the text as an unmediated experience. These ruptured experiences necessitate the navigation of multiple levels of uncertainty and do not allow the reader to be easily transformed through the verse.

Yet God's alchemy which follows creates "*New Heav'ns*, *new Earth*, *Ages of endless date*/ Founded in *righteousness* and *peace* and *love*/ To bring forth *fruits Joy* and *eternal Bliss*" (XII. 549-551). The parallel sequencing of the three images in these three lines, and the completion they invoke, restores a sense of order to the uncertain verse detailed above: God's alchemical transformation actually purges the "lucre," "ambition," and "superstitions" which categorized the corruption of the "grievous Wolves" (XII. 511-512). On the linguistic level, these verses refine the convoluted perversion of the paradoxes and imperfect chiasmus of line 538.

I would like to connect the non-linear time of alchemy and the apocalypse more concretely to the theoretical construct of messianic time by considering Michael's oral prophesy to Adam about what will happen to mankind from the time of the flood until the Second Coming in this same Book of the epic. The apocalypse brings an end to all linear, chronological time when the alchemically "refin'd" new world ushers in "endless" ages, "eternal bliss" (551). Adam responds to the end of Michael's prediction by higlighting the end of temporal experience: "How soon hath thy prediction, Seer blest,/ Measur'd this transient World, the Race of time,/ Till time stand fixt" (XII. 553-5). That time becomes

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"fixt" at the apocalypse invokes Revelation 10:6, in which the angel swears to John that

"there should be time no longer." Yet this part of John's vision consciously recalls and

perfects the final chapter of the Old Testament Book of Daniel. In his gloss on these lines

in Revelation, Ian Boxall points out that because of this resonance of the past text in the

angel's proclamation, the termination of earthly chronological temporality must also be

understood as a declaration that there will be no further delay: "the wider context of this

passage and its parallel in Daniel urge a somewhat different meaning: 'there is no time

left to wait!'…[the future] is about to come to pass" (155).[143] Thus Milton's allusion to

Revelation 10:6— itself an echo of Daniel 12—is a literary embodiment of messianic

time because it highlights an experience of temporality that is not chronological, but an

interplay of past and future. The reference demonstrates that past and future always occur

together, instead of in opposition to each other, as assumed in the logic of time's

"irreversible unidirectionalty." Like the process of alchemical transformation, and the

experience of messianic time, Milton's biblical allusion packs together time in such a

way that ruptures the logic of linear chronology.

I suggest that the temporality and uncertainty created by Milton's alchemical

references can be understood as attempts to prevent readers from being deceived by

satanic rhetoric. Keeping in mind that Satan and the fallen angels discover alchemy

during their revolution, there is a compelling reason to interpret Milton's alchemical

imagery as commentary on the failure of the radicals in the Civil War.[144] Not only did

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[143] Boxall points out that while "there shall be no more time" is "an interpretation found in some of Revelation's earliest commentators," we should also take into account the dual translation about the future's immanence because "the Greek here is somewhat ambiguous" (155). See also Loewenstein, *Drama,* 115 for the apocalyptic resonances of this passage.

[144] Lieb briefly points this out on the final page of his appendix in *Dialectics*, page 244. Critics have highlighted the parallels drawn between Satan and Cromwell and other Interregnum leaders, but I'd like to

alchemical language and imagery permeate the theological discourse of Milton's England, but in the realm of politics, alchemical language was deployed to advance competing ideological agendas. The multivalenced nature of alchemical rhetoric in Revolutionary- and Restoration- era England has not yet been fully explored, and still less research has investigated the political significance of Milton's alchemical language in *Paradise Lost*. Here, I seek to redress this blind spot, by arguing that the aesthetics of Milton's alchemical references make an explicit political statement. In his contradictory alchemical imagery, Milton attempts to correct the failure of the Civil War radicals by training readers to work through ambiguity and uncertainty.

Though the political resonances of alchemical imagery in the early modern world remains an area for more sustained research, a small number of scholars—most notably Christopher Hill—have highlighted ways in which radical political ideology and alchemical thought intersected in Milton's England. According to Hill, "Alchemy/ chemistry, and especially chemical medicine, had radical implications" in the turbulent years of the Revolution (*World* 233). He claims, "the radicals looked back to political traditions allegedly inherited from the free Anglo-Saxons," in "exactly the same way that Robert Fludd looked back to the *prisca theologia* and to the traditional wisdom attributed to Hermes Trismegistus" (*Continuity* 169). Radical theological reforms, like those of the Calvinists, drew upon the language of alchemy, because "what alchemy and Calvinism had in common was that salvation came from without, from the philosopher's stone or from the grace of God" (*World* 132). Scholars such as Lyndy Abraham, Keith Thomas,

emphasize that Milton resists making a simple one-to-one correlation between Satan and any particular historical figure. For evidence to support this claim, see Hill's *Revolution*, page 367; Achinstein, *Revolutionary*, page 192; and especially Loewenstein: "Despite his godly republican ideals and his likely disappointment with the Protectorate, there is not a shred of evidence that Milton came to envision Cromwell himself" as Satan (Representing 209).

and Charles Webster have likewise aligned early modern alchemical thought with radical theological and political positions in the Civil-War era.[145]

Though acknowledging the radical implications of Milton's use of alchemical images is important in determining the poet's political stance, as Lowenstein suggests, "we need not agree with Christopher Hill that Milton was always in direct dialogue with sectarian contemporaries and figure groups in order to illuminate connections between the poet's radical spiritual convictions and theirs" (*Representing* 11). Extending this claim, I argue that an investigation of Milton's deployment of alchemical references requires a more nuanced interpretation. It is true that for radicals, especially in the years after 1649, alchemy became associated with a rebellion against hegemony. The notion of reform—of refining through purging—as explored in Tymme's imagery of the Second Coming, is also in accord with the radicals' call for reorganization of Church and State. However both King Charles and his physician, Walter Charleton, took great interest in contemporary alchemical writings, and J. Andrew Mendelson claims that the King was among the first to read the works of alchemist Jacob Boehme in England.[146] Though noting the influence of Boehme on radicals like the Fifth Monarchists and the Quakers, Mendelson claims it is just as important to observe "how unradical, even anti-radical, were the intentions of those who, during the Civil War, first introduced Boehme's ideas to England."[147] Even after the Revolution, alchemical references retained some conservative connotations; thus alchemy did not interest only radicals.[148]

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[145] See Abraham's *Marvell and Alchemy*, pages 18-20; Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1971); and Webster's *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine, and Reform 1626*-1660 (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976).

[146] Mendelsohn, "Alchemy and Politics in England 1649-1665," *Past and Present 135* (May 1992): 30-78.

[147] See Mendelsohn, 34

Though this period was surely a time of skepticism and challenge to authority on scientific, religious, and political fronts, many alchemists and believers in alchemy turned to the occult science as a way to reinstate the more perfect prelapsarian state from which England fell and to inaugurate a new era of peace and national unity. In this way, the rhetoric of alchemy was conservative. Alchemical belief could not only be used to defend orthodox Christian doctrine, most notably the Trinity, but adherents of alchemical possibility "viewed alchemy as a redemptive, purifying, even revivifying process" that would solve the discord caused by radical sectarian movements of the Civil War era.[149]

Therefore, alchemical imagery, language, and philosophy could be employed by both Royalists and radicals during the Revolution, and from 1605 to 1665, the status of alchemical references was malleable and often inconsistent. This fluidity and variability was contemporaneous with a political culture that was itself continually shifting, and in which both science and political theory were always connected to the moral and spiritual. Milton's inclusion of both positive and negative alchemical images could be interpreted as evidence of the poet's ambivalence about the full acceptance or dismissal of alchemical thought. It could also be understood as a sign that the poet was no longer interested in political commentary since the failure of the Revolution which he spent his

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[148] In his investigation of early modern alchemical tracts, Mendelsohn urges a greater understanding of the "spectrum of its politics… [which] included Anglicans, Puritans and sectaries, Royalists, Parliamentarians and Levellers" (37-8). Importantly, not only were alchemy's political resonances fluid, they were constantly changing: "If the politics of alchemy were flexible, they were also contradicted practically overnight" (76).

[149] Bruce Janachek, *Alchemical Belief: Occultism in the Religious Culture of Early Modern England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2011), 102. Janachek concludes his study by succinctly describing how a more inclusive view of the religious and political culture of alchemical beliefs renders Hill's insistence on alchemy's radical implications problematic: "far from opposing the Church of England, the individuals we encountered [Thomas Tymme, Robert Fludd, Francis Bacon, Sir Kenelm Didby, and Elias Ashmole] believed that alchemy could contribute to strengthening the state and could shore up traditional institutions that had been battered for decades" (162).

life supporting. However, I suggest the opposite position. While some scholars have read

Milton's political references in his later poems as evincing a withdrawal from the public

political sphere, these assumptions are distorting because Milton's epic provides evidence

that the poet remained politically engaged throughout his career. [150] As Lowenstein

suggests, Milton reimagines the "religious, verbal, and aesthetic ambiguities of

rebellion," and thus, "the poem [*Paradise Lost*] may indeed remain politically alive at a

time when the godly cause of radical dissidents was fiercely embattled" (*Representing*

240). When we are more attuned to the incongruities, discrepancies, and spaces in

between Milton's conservative and radical references, we find that it is in these interstices

where we can locate the complexity—not the absence—of Milton's political statements.

The political commentary of Milton's epic resists a simplistic interpretation, because

along with other post-Civil War authors, Milton "registered the anxieties, doubts, and

fluctuation of hopes generated by unsettling political transformations and religious

conflicts" (Lowenstein *Representing* 14). In *Paradise Lost*, this is exemplified in the

epic's alchemical references. Milton's alchemical allusions in the epic do not become

symptomatic of the poet's growing cynicism or disengagement from the political sphere.

Rather, Milton uses these politically-charged images in order to make explicit comments

about the failure of the radicals in the Revolution.

    The collapse of the radical cause Milton had supported in the Civil War did not

trigger his retreat from the political milieu; on the contrary, it presented him with the

even larger task of justifying the grounds of the Revolution and explaining what had gone

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[150] For instance, see Worden's "Milton's Republicanism" in *Divided Empire: Milton's Political Imagery*, ed. Robert T. Fallon (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) where Worden emphasizes Milton's withdrawal from politics in the later poems.

wrong. Recently, scholars have posited that Milton never fully abandoned his

commitment to the Good Old Cause, and though he may have disagreed with the

Interregnum leadership, it seems as though the poet's later works become an attempt to

illuminate the causes of the Revolution's failure, rather than to envelop the entire episode

in darkness.[151] I argue that the contradictions embedded in Milton's alchemical

references are attempts to correct the shortcomings of the unsuccessful Revolution, and

thus they demonstrate the poet's continued political involvement in his later work.

Hill provides a useful historical context for understanding Milton's commentary

on the failure of the radicals in the Revolution:

> The radicals had tried to take *political short cuts*, had relied on individuals who
> turned out to be avaricious and ambitious hypocrites. The desire for reformation
> did not sink deeply enough into the consciences of supporters of the Revolution,
> *did not transform* their lives…The leaders had betrayed the cause…Blame for the
> failure lies not in the aims…but in the English people… [the radicals sought] the
> wrong sort of solution...and attempted a *short cut* towards godlike power, instead
> of achieving this by self-knowledge and self-discipline, which would give true
> control. (*Revolution* 350-351) [emphasis mine]

Most important to consider here is that the radicals' "short cut" during the Revolution is

the same type of endeavor decried in the criticism of seventeenth-century alchemy. For

example, in John Hester's 1633 preface to his translation of Paracelsus' *The Secrets of*

Physick, Hester evinces anxiety concerning alchemical processes because alchemy forced

things to happen very quickly, whereas God had intended them to occur in stages: "Yet I

will not affirme that it is possible to be done, for it seemeth unreasonable, that a man in

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[151] As the collapse of the radicals' political ambitions caused "a shattering blow" to Milton, "the three great
poems of his last years represent…his attempt to come to terms with this defeat: to rethink his whole
position in order to be able to 'Assert eternal Providence/ And justify the ways of God to men.'"
Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (Chicago: Bookmarks,
1994), 13.

so short a time should doe that thing which nature doth in many years."[152] Similarly,

throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton warns his readers about the dangers of attempting a

"short cut" in these same ways. For example, Adam must learn that all things reach

perfection "by gradual scale sublim'd" (V. 483), and by learning that God works through

making "Great things by small" (VI. 311), he can discover the virtue of "True Patience"

(XI. 361). We can see that Hester's condemnation of the alchemists' attempt to

accomplish "in so short a time" what naturally requires a patient reliance on God's will

mirrored in what Milton perceived to be the major flaw of the Interregnum leadership.

That Milton located the failure of the rebellion so centrally in the radicals' lack of

patience and their attempted short cut is intimately connected to what Milton perceived as

another major cause of the Parliamentarians' fall to the Royalists—that of the public's

failure to properly *read* political rhetoric. [153]

The industriousness and patience that the radical government lacked was also

deficient in the average Englishman's political participation, especially in relation to the

malleable rhetoric which deceived the English people. For Milton, who located the failure

of the Revolution not in the cause but in individuals, part of the blame lay upon the

reading public who were too easily beguiled by the polemical rhetoric of the Civil War.

As Sharon Achinstein posits, "the proliferation of ideas during the relative freedom of the

press during the English Revolution only added to the danger that readers would be taken

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[152] *The Secrets of Physick and Philosophy, Divided into Two Bookes…First Written in the German Tongue by the most learned Theophrastus Paracelsus, and now published in the English Tongue, by John Hester* (London, 1633), 107.

[153] Lieb notes how Milton's biblical understanding of the practices of holy war involved the virtue of patience as a major tenet; see *Poetics of the Holy: A Reading of Paradise Lost*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), esp. pages 298-299. Also, it is worthwhile to note the supreme importance Milton places on patience in *Paradise Regained*: see for example the Son's preference of "patience" and "temperance" to war (III.90); his admonishment, "All things are best fullfil'd in their due time" (III.185); and his assertion, "each act is rightliest done,/ Not when it must, but when it may be best" (IV.475-476).

in by propaganda," and so authors "appealed to readers as those who were free to make political choices based on a critical practice of reading and decoding" slippery and deceptive rhetoric (*Revolutionary* 23-24). Insisting that because reading is "a proto-political act," Maureen Quilligan expresses a similar idea in her contention that Milton's rhetorical strategy intended to teach his reader "how to interpret his or her interpretations, to judge the moral quality of his or her own response to reading, to feel the work as a large rhetorical appeal to the will, and to make a choice."[154] Moreover, the contradictions and ambiguities of Milton's verse become—not evidence of the author's ambivalence or withdrawal—but the spaces within which readers are most educated in methods of resisting devious rhetoric. We should not assume that Milton's ambiguities in *Paradise Lost* evince the author's lack of alchemical knowledge or a refusal to comment on the ideological questions linked to this imagery. Rather, these contradictions become attempts to reconcile beliefs and ideals in a treacherously shifting cultural moment, both for the poet in working out his uncertainty following the failure of the Revolution, and in the experience of the fit reader Milton seeks to train.

In this way, Milton's verse corrects the principal flaws of the false alchemists and the failed revolutionaries. By forcing his readers to work through the ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties of his alchemical allusions, Milton keeps his reader constantly vigilant and active. Poetically, he does not allow for the type of short cut unlawfully sought by alchemists and wrongfully pursued by the Interregnum leadership. Milton trains fit readers that will be better able to interpret the slippery, transformative rhetoric that had deceived them during the Revolution. By drawing upon a trope which

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[154] Quilligan, *Milton's Spenser: The Politics of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), 1, 41.

carried distinctive spiritual and political implications, and that was simultaneously associated with the mutable deceptiveness of rhetoric, the text becomes Milton's "philosopher's stone"—performing an alchemy based on virtue, patience, and divine sanction—and transforming the moral quality of his reader through the medium of the poem.

Instead of unidirectional, forward-moving time—which assumes the differentiation of past, present, and future states—Milton's alchemical references disrupt the inevitability and closure of linear time, while showing how the past and future are embedded in every present. Both the mechanism of actual alchemical transformation and Milton's alchemical allusions create disruptions in our conventional narratives about how time functions—what Taubes called time's "irreversible unidirectionality." This messianic temporality and the ambiguity of Milton's alchemical verse calls on readers to make the distinction between two types of alchemy, and thus the poem refuses complacent and uncritical reading. In an attempt to fill the gap of critical engagement on the topic of Milton and alchemy noted by Lieb and Linden, this reading uncovers a more nuanced and significant relation between Milton's thought and seventeenth-century alchemical discourse. More specifically, Milton's *Paradise Lost* shows the poet's navigation of various cultural and ideological issues, including apocalyptic anticipation and alchemical possibility. In a wider context, revealing the possibilities opened up by the ambiguities of Milton's alchemical references provides a more multifaceted understanding of the cultural relevance of alchemical belief in Milton's England and the interconnectedness of the discourses of science, theology, politics, and literature in the early modern period.

CHAPTER 5

THE TEMPORALITY OF TERROR: THE MESSIANIC POSSIBILITES OF *SAMSON AGONISTES*

Less possible and also less urgent for human kind, however, is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases. For only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory violence is not visible to men.
-   Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence"

God and Samson unite only in being inaccessible, objects alike of an interpretative activity that finds no corroboration in the visible world...the only wisdom to be carried away from the play is that there is no wisdom to be carried away.
-   (Fish, *How Milton Works).*

Traditionally Samson's act of mass destruction and self-slaughter had been read as an example of divinely- inspired violence, until Joseph Wittreich's seminal text *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (1986) challenged the claim that Samson's act of apocalyptic violence must be read as a scene of spiritual regeneration.[155] The question, though, remains far from settled, and the terms of the Samson debate have been well rehearsed in Milton studies.[156] Foreshadowed by Jackie DiSalvo's branding of Samson as a "terrorist," at an International Milton Seminar in 1994, and following John Carey's now-infamous 2002 article in the *Times Literary Supplement* that likened Samson to the "suicide bombers" who attacked the World Trade Center, the violent acts of religious radicals in our own day have prompted a deluge of scholarly interpretations of Milton's

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[155] Examples of traditionalist readings that see Samson as demonstrating spiritual regeneration, or as a type of Christ, include Arnold Stein, *Heroic Knowledge: An Interpretation of* Paradise Lost *and* Samson Agonistes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957); Anthony Low, *The Blaze of Noon* (New York: Columbia UP, 1974); and Mary Anne Radziowicz, *Towards* Samson Agonistes: *The Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978). In *The Experience of Defeat*, Christopher Hill maintains that Samson's "rousing motions" are inspired by God; see pages 310-19.

[156] In just one example of some more recent ways in which the text is read as regenerative, David Loewenstein claims, "the final metaphors of the play do indeed suggest that Milton is dramatizing in Samson's terrifying act a poetics of regenerative iconoclasm" (*Drama* 147) For examples of readings which disagree with Wittreich's revisionist reading see Lieb, *The Sinews of Ulysses: Form and Convention in Milton's Works* (Pittsburg: Duquesne UP 1989), 98-138; and Ashraf Rushdy, *The Empty Garden: The Subject of Late Milton* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press 1992), 281-344.

troubling text.[157] Through perhaps posed more urgently in our post-9/11 culture, this

contemporary debate is a reprisal of the question that has bifurcated Milton scholarship

for generations: does Milton present the event of Samson's destruction of the Philistine

temple as an act of political violence that is sanctioned by God as a vehicle for spiritual

regeneration, or does the event represent an excess of radical violence—an act of pure

destruction that annihilates any possibility of renewal or redemption?

I suggest an alternative to this mutually- exclusive "either/or"—regenerative or

destructive—way of understanding the apocalyptic violence of *Samson Agonistes*. To do

so, I will investigate an unrecognized eschatological influence on *Samson*—the

temporality of the biblical source text Revelation.[158] Milton himself highlighted his

indebtedness to Revelation as a generic model—along with those of Aristotle, Aeschylus,

Sophocles, and Euripides—in his headnote to the closet drama "Of that sort of Dramatic

Poem which is call'd Tragedy," when he claims, "Pareus commenting on the Revelation,

divides the whole book as a tragedy, into acts distinguished each by a chorus of heavenly

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[157]Cary, "A Work in Praise of Terrorism?: September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*." *Times Literary Supplement* 6 Sept. 2002: 15-16. For recent readings of Samson that align the protagonist's final act with displays of religious and political terrorism see Feisal Mohamed, "Reading Samson in the New American Century," *Milton Studies* 46 (2006): 149-64; Joseph Wittreich, *Why Milton Matters: A New Preface to his Writings* (New York: Palgrave, 2006),141-194; Neil Forsyth, "Suicide and Revenge ," in *Milton, Rights, and Liberty*, ed. Christopher Turnu and Neil Forsyth (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 317-332; and James Dougal Fleming, *Milton's Secrecy and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Burlington: Ashgate ,2008), 57-121. For readings emphasizing the radical politics and nonconformity of Milton's text see Loewenstein, *Representing* 269-91; Sharon Achinstein's "*Samson Agonistes* and the Drama of Dissent," in *The Miltonic Samson*, ed. Albert C. Labriola and Michael Lieb (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 133-58; Lewalski, *Life* 525-36; and Chapter 15 of Blair Worden's *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, and Marchmont Nedham* (Oxford: Oxford UP., 2009).

[158] In, *Shifting Contexts* Joseph Wittreich gestures towards the important yet complicated relationship between Milton's text and Revelation. He cautions, "If interpreting the Book of Revelation is a very delicate affair, interpreting *Samson* within the Revelation tradition is a more difficult matter still" (151). For a few key, recent commentaries on Revelation studies see Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation (New International Greek Text Commentary)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998); and Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation of John: A commentary on the Greek Text* (London: IVP Academic, 2012). For a rather dated study on the ways in which the structure of Milton's *Paradise Lost* may be based on versions of Revelation see Austin C. Dobbins, *Milton and the Book of Revelation: the Heavenly Cycle* (University of Alabama Press, 1975).

harpings and song between" (799).[159] In Revelation, time does not progress as a

chronological sequence, nor demonstrate a course of linear development. Rather

Revelation demonstrates the simultaneity of past, present, and future elements of time

through continuous temporal overlapping and recapitulation of imagery and events.

Likewise, Milton's *Samson* is not a sequential narrative of the protagonist's development,

and the text demonstrates that time is a dialectic between past and future, rather than a

one-way causal relationship between the two. More specifically, in Samson's frequent

recollection of past prophesies, not only is linear time disrupted, but the possibilities of

the past become imaginable again. In this particular way, the temporality of Revelation

and that of Milton's poem enact messianic time and give us a new way of understanding

the disconcerting act of apocalyptic violence that ends the poem.

Through the critical lens of messianic time, Samson's final act of apocalyptic

violence can be understood as a messianic rupture, an act of divine violence that calls for

a revolution in our way of seeing the world. Milton engages with the possibility that

apocalyptic violence might be a stepping stone, a destructive vehicle for constructive

growth in the future and a greater understanding of truth.[160] The destruction of the

Philistine temple does not need to be seen as *either* an act of pure destruction *or* the

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[159] All citations of *Samson Agonistes* are from *The Riverside Milton*. Flanagan points out that Milton used Revelation as a model for tragedy on more than one occasion, as in this passage of *Reason of Church and Government*: "And the Apocalyps of Saint John is the majestic image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn Scenes and Acts with a sevenfold Chorus of halleluja's and harping symphonies" (see Flanagan note 9, 799).

[160] A good deal of critical inquiry surrounding Milton's text has focused on what to make of the play's alarming violence. Loewenstein claims that Milton was "not squeamish" about violence, and he reminds us that the poet can't be considered a "twenty-first century liberal whose views of violence were conditioned by such events as Hiroshima, Vietnam, or 9/11." Loewenstein, "From Politics to Faith," in *Visionary Milton: Essays on Prophecy and Violence*, ed. Peter E. Medine, John T. Shawcross, David V. Urban (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 232. Tobias Gregory reads Samson's violence as justified, and he argues, "a work in praise of terrorism is precisely what *Samson Agonistes* is, and whether or not we agree with that final act is praiseworthy should not affect our reading." See "The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*," *SEL* 50.1 (Winter 2010): 176.

protagonist's regeneration, but can be understood as *both* destructive and regenerative. In the rupture of messianic time, no new truth is founded, but rather our certainties, laws, and interpretations are dislodged, giving us the opportunity to revise our beliefs and to see the world in a new way. Samson's final act of apocalyptic violence enacts this messianic rupture.

My claim is that the destruction of the Philistine temple—an apocalyptically violent action that results in the death of the protagonist and scores of innocent bystanders within the play—is a textual representation of divine violence. I borrow the concept of divine violence from Walter Benjamin, and before I demonstrate the specific ways in which Milton's text enacts the messianic time of divine violence, it is first helpful to provide some background information about the text from which this concept is drawn.[161]

In his 1921 text "Critique of Violence," Benjamin seeks to investigate the relationship between violence and the law. He contends that all law is implicitly violent, because—tautologically—it is actually violence itself that decides when violence is justifiable. Central to this exposition of the violence inherent in any system of laws is the contrast between what Benjamin terms "mythic violence" and "divine violence." Divine violence is the opposite of the mythic violence of the Greek gods which instituted laws and affirmed their identity as law makers and keepers. Rather than law-making violence, divine violence is a force of annihilation which destroys all law. Similar to the coming of the messiah, in this violent rupture, "something rotten in the law is revealed" (286) and

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[161] In a recent piece, Victoria Kahn provides a reading of *Samson Agonistes* that also puts Milton's text in conversation with the work of Benjamin. Our projects are very different, though, as Kahn focuses on Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama* and does not mention concepts of divine violence, messianism, or temporality. See "Aesthetics as Critique: Tragedy and Trauerspiel in *Samson Agonistes*," in *Reading Renaissance Ethics*, ed. Marshall Grossman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 104-127.

current institutions and laws are overturned. The annihilating force of divine violence founds "a new historical epoch" because all former ways of interpreting the world are overturned. Important here is the possibility opened up by such a rupture: "But if the existence outside the law [divine violence or the rupture of messianic time], as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man is possible" (300). Divine violence breaks the cycle of the law's legal violence and is an alternative to tyranny and state-sanctioned violence. It is a means with no ends and no end-point, but it is a form of justice outside the law that inaugurates an alternative way to thinking about time.

Benjamin provides literary examples of both mythical and divine violence in order to demonstrate the contrast between the two. Benjamin's example of mythical violence is the tale of Niobe, a story warning against hubris found in Homer's *Iliad*. Niobe gave a prideful speech boasting about her 14 children at a public ceremony for Leto, who had only two children. As punishment for this act of pride, Leto's sons slaughtered all of Niobe's children and left their bodies unburied for nine days. Niobe, overcome with insatiable grief, fled and was turned into a stone that wept incessantly. What is significant for Benjamin is that "violence therefore bursts upon Niobe from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate" (295).In other words, Niobe is punished—ostensibly—because she defies fate, but Benjamin points out that this act of violence is actually an attempt to create and maintain the law of the gods. In truth, what the tale institutes and maintains is the gods' deadly wrath, not the inevitable rule of fate, as the text seemingly proposes. Thus the law of the gods is established through violence. While masked as the result of "fate," is actually a demonstration of power: "at this very moment

of lawmaking, it [violence] specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Law making is power making" (295). Here, Benjamin shows that the law is constituted by violence and that the result of all law-making violence is the manifestation of power. The major contrast is that this mythical violence establishes law and maintains power structures, while divine violence does not establish any law, and its end is justice: "justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking" (295).

Another significant distinction between these two types of violence is that, while both are destructive and deadly, mythical violence is not an act of sheer annihilation: in Niobe's story, the weeping mother is left as a monument of grief, an image reinforcing the boundaries between gods and men and a reminder not to transgress the law of the gods. Benjamin equates this mythical violence with the "legal violence" of the contemporary world; while mythical violence conceals its power-making function as an instrument that reinforces the power of the gods under the guise of fate, today's legal systems mask their violent and destructive core with abstract and false notions of "justice."

The story of Korah from the Hebrew Bible is Benjamin's example of divine violence and his point of contrast to the mythical, lawmaking violence of Niobe. Korah was a wealthy man and relative of Moses and Aaaron, who rebelled against them by claiming that Moses was inventing and enforcing laws without the permission of God. Korah sought vengeance for not receiving the honors he thought he deserved, so he raised an army of 250 rebels to revolt against Moses and Aaron. Moses attempted to reason with

Korah, but Korah remained obstinate, and so God warned Moses "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment" (Numbers 16:20). When all of Korah's followers had gathered at the door of the tabernacle, the earth beneath them broke open, like a huge funnel, engulfing Korah, all of his followers and everything they owned: "And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation. (16: 32-33). The next day, the Israelites complained to Moses that he had caused the death of too many in this act of violence, and when God heard this, he punished the people by sending a plague that killed 14,700 people.

For Benjamin, the crucial point is that divine violence is an act of total annihilation, which serves as both punishment and reparation at the same time. The act of divine violence against Korah "strikes them [the Levities, who are the company of Korah] without warning. Without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it also expiates" (297). It is a violence that exists outside the realm of human laws, and which shows us the possibility that a kind of revolutionary or alternative violence is possible. This revolutionary violence could overturn the legal violence that insidiously governs our daily lives. Divine violence dismantles our laws and accepted frameworks of interpretation, but through this destruction, redemption becomes possible. As Benjamin sums up the difference between the two types of violence, "If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and

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retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes"

(297).[162]

This "striking" without warning which creates uncertainty, and this "annihilation" in which many innocent perish, also occurs at the end of Milton's text, and it is what has caused generations of Milton's readers to regard the play as perplexing and ambiguous.[163] While the question of whether Samson participates in an act of political and religious terrorism continues to be asked by contemporary critics, the text makes clear that the destruction of the Philistine temple is an example of *apocalyptic* violence.[164] According to David Lowenstein in his afterward to *Milton and the Ends of*

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[162] There are several instances in which "law" is invoked throughout Milton's text: the Chorus claims that laws bind humans but that God is exempt (307-314); Samson accuses Dalila of breaking the "laws of nature" and the "law of nations" (890); and Samson seems overly preoccupied with upholding the law as he prepares to go to the Philistine temple (1320, 1365-7, 1386, 1409, 1425). A number of critics have made suggestions as to the function of law in this play. See Derek Wood, *Exiled From Light* (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 2001); Fish, *How Milton Works*, 414-7; and Phillip Donnelly, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

[163] For a few valuable readings of the doubt and ambiguity created by the text see Lewalski, "Milton's *Samson* and the 'New Acquist of True (Political) Experience'." *Milton Studies* 24 (1988): 233-251; Stanley Fish, "Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*," *Critical Inquiry 15* (1989): 556-86; Thomas N. Corns, "'Some Rousing Motions': The Plurality of Miltonic Ideology," in *Literature and the English Civil War*, ed. Thomas Healy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990):110-26; Keith N. Hull*,* "Rhyme and Disorder in *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies 30* (1993):163-81; John T. Shawcross, *The Uncertain World of* Samson Agonistes (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001); Peter Herman, *Destabilizing*, 162-176; Michael Bryson, "A Poem to the Unknown God: *Samson Agonistes* and Negative Theology, *Milton Quarterly* 41.2 (2008): 22-43; Phillip Donnelly, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning*, pages 201-227; and Elizabeth Sauer, "Discontents with the Drama of Regeneration," in *The New Milton Criticism*: 120-136. Joseph Wittreich claims, "There are finally no means of knowing the answers to the questions that the retelling of the Samson story poses," *Shifting Contexts*, xii. Gordon Teskey asserts the play "renders everything uncertain, everything that was once taken for true" in *Delirious Milton,* 180, see also 183; David Lowenstien characterizes *Samson* and *Paradise Regained* as demonstrating "calculated ambiguity" in regard to religious violence and its political implications in "Milton's Double-Edged Volume: In Religious Politics and Violence in the 1671 Poems," *Milton Quarterly* 44.4 (2010): 231-8; For an argument against reading the text as ambiguous see Tobias Gregory, "The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*," *Studies in English Literature* 50.1 (Winter 2010): 175-203.

[164] Mohamed claims Milton "emphasizes an objection to Philistine idolatry, an attunement to divine will, and an anticipation of the Apocalypse" (*Post-Secular* 115). David Loewenstein asserts "the apocalyptic and dreadful character of Samson's horrid act can be closely aligned with the fiery radical religious discourse of the revolutionary years and their aftermath" (*Representing* 270); Gordon Teskey claims Samson's final act that leaves "heaps of the dead" aligns the text with similar imagery in Revelation, see *Delirious Milton* 180-200. For apocalyptic themes in *Samson*, see also Lewalski "*Samson Agonistes* and the 'Tragedy' of the

Time, "*Samson Agonistes* is an apocalyptic drama whose representation of apocalypse is particularly terrifying" (244). This "terrifying" apocalyptic destruction is first recognizable to the reader through a serious of horrific sounds. Though the violent act of the temple's destruction and the slaughter of the Philistines takes place at a remove from the Chorus and Manoa, Milton demonstrates the brutality of the act through a series of horrid noises that " tore the Skie" (1472). Misreading the loud clamor as evidence that Samson has demonstrated his strength to the Philistines, the Chorus and Manoa's wishful imaginings are interrupted by a louder, more violent crashing sound:

> *Man.* –Oh what noise!
> Mercy of Heav'n what hideous noise was that!
> Horribly loud unlike the former shout.
> *Chor.* Noise call you it or universal groan
> As if the whole inhabitation perish'd,
> Blood, death, and deathful deeds are that noise,
> Ruin, destruction at the utmost point. (1508-1514)

In this moment of recognition, it is significant that the Chorus interprets this violence apocalyptically, likening the horrid noise to the "universal groan" of Judgment Day when all the living will be swallowed up in "blood," "death," "ruin," and "destruction at the utmost point."[165] Later in the play, the Messenger's recounting of Samson's final act emphasizes its violent and destructive force:

> Inevitable cause
> At once to destroy and be destroy'd;
> The Edifice where all were met to see him
> Upon their heads and on his own he pull'd

Apocalypse," *PMLA* 85 (1970): 1050-62; and Michael Lieb, "'Our Living Dread': The God of *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies* 33 (1996): 3-25.

[165] There are a variety of images from Revelation that highlight the violence of Christ's Second Coming. See, for example, the description of judgment in 14:17-20, in which the unrepentant are trampled like grapes so that "blood flowed from the winepress, as high as horses bridles, for a distance of one thousand six hundred stadia;" and "Then there were flashes of lightening, voices, and claps of thunder; and there was a mighty earthquake the like of which had never occurred since human beings populated the earth, so great and violent it was" (16:18).

> …
> …straining all his nerves he bow'd,
> As with the force of winds and waters pent,
> When mountains tremble, those two massie Pillars
> With horrible convulsion to and fro,
> He tugg'd, he shook, till down they came and drew
> The whole roof after them, with burst of thunder
> Upon the heads of all who sat beneath (1586-1589, 1646-1652)[166]

Finally, at the play's conclusion, as the Semichorus recounts the narrative of Samson's

murder-suicide, they too highlight the apocalyptic nature of this violence as a

"Holocaust," in which everything is destroyed by fire (1702).[167] Thus, Milton codes

Samson's act as an event of terrifying and apocalyptic annihilation.

I suggest that through the lens of divine violence, we can better understand the

textual uncertainty caused by this scene of eschatological destruction. According to

Benjamin, we can never know if acts of divine violence are sanctioned by God or not:

"Less possible and also less urgent for human kind, however, is to decide when unalloyed

violence has been realized in particular cases. For only mythical violence, not divine, will

be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the

expiatory violence is not visible to men" (300). Milton's text produces this lack of

certainty, and demonstrates the illegibility of divine violence. Not only have readers and

scholars puzzled over how to interpret Samson's act, as I have pointed out above—but

within the text itself—characters are unable to fully recognize the act of divine violence

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[166] According to Karen Edwards' "Inspiration and Melancholy in *Samson Agonistes*" in *Milton and the Ends of Time*, "In the face of the Restoration's repudiation of eschatological concerns, the unmistakable references to the apocalypse in the Messenger's description are highly polemical" (232). Edwards notes several references to the Book of Revelation in this piece and she argues "by rendering unstable our judgment of Samson's final act, the play instructs us how to wait for the Last Judgment" (225).

[167] "Complete consumption by fire, or that which is so consumed; complete destruction, esp. of a large number of persons; a great slaughter or massacre" (1c). The *OED* cites Milton as the first usage of "holocaust" in this manner ["holocaust, n.". *OED Online.* March 2013. Oxford University Press. 28 March 2013]. In her reading of these lines, Karen Edwards argues that Milton interrogates the possibility of apocalyptic phoenix-like resurrection and spiritual regeneration (*Milton and the Ends of Time*, 224-240).

that occurs offstage. For example, the Chorus' response to the Messenger's terrible and bloody recounting of the temple's destruction is one that immediately and unequivocally recognizes Samson as a hero: "O dearly-bought revenge, yet glorious!/Living or dying thou hast fullfill'd/ The work for which thou was foretold" (1660-2). Yet, to the reader, it is unclear how the account just given by the Messenger can be considered "glorious," and whether or not this act of slaughter is in accord with the "work" for which Samson was destined, which according to Judges 13, was to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. Similarly, Manoa's response seems to too readily divert attention away from the mass slaughter that has just occurred off stage:

> Come, come, no time for lamentation now,
> Nor much more cause, Samson hath quit himself
> Like Samson…
> …
> Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair
> And what may quiet us in a death so noble. (1708-10, 1721-25)

Finally, in the last words of the play, the Chorus concludes that "all is best" (1745), and asserts that witnessing this event has now brought catharsis to the audience: "With peace and consolation hath dismist, /And calm of mind all passion spent" (1756-7). In all three of these reactions to Samson's act of apocalyptic violence, characters collapse the uncertainty of what has just occurred, offering instead one-sided readings of the event which exhibit a conspicuous lack of concern about the death and destruction Samson's "glorious" revenge has just caused. Rather than confront the complexity—if not terror— of Samson's act of annihilation, the Chorus and Manoa replace an attempt to grapple with or understand this "unalloyed violence" with an uncomplicated reading of the temple's destruction. I would argue that this attempt to minimize the uncertainty of Samson's act

demonstrates the unrepresentability and unknowability of Benjamin's concept of divine violence, an "expiatory violence not visible to men." In other words, while Manoa and the Chorus present a comforting and unproblematic view of the play's conclusion, this triple effort to suppress uncertainty actually highlights the questions left open by the text's apocalyptic violence.

For Benjamin, what is revolutionary about divine violence is that the rupture of certainty created in its wake is actually the condition of change, because we are shaken out of our comfortable way of seeing things. As James Martel puts it, through the destructive act of divine violence, "another relationship with reality becomes possible (although far from certain), one that acknowledges the absence of truth" (12). This, I argue, is what Samson's act of divine violence calls us to interrogate. In other words, divine violence can't give us rules for living our lives or laws for how to interpret reality: "all it can do is de-center and disrupt the misreadings of God…at that point, human responsibility and possibility begin" (Martel 79). That is, uncertainty is generative because it is the condition of rethinking what we know as truth. For Benjamin, in the rupture of divine violence in a text, we realize our lives aren't determined by narratives of law, time, authority, or certainty. I argue that Milton's play enacts such a moment of divine violence that disrupts meaning, and thus causes us to see the world around us in a different way. Understood through this lens, we can agree with Fish that, "the only wisdom to be carried away from the play is that there is no wisdom to be carried away" (*How Milton Works* 473), and still find something generative about the lack of certainty with which the play leaves us.

In Benjamin's thought, divine violence performs the same rupture and rethinking of experience as messianic time. Both provide a way of thinking about truth that cannot be based on presence. In his understanding of both concepts, Benjamin disrupts the traditional relationship between past, present, and future to point out discontinuities over chronological time, and to reinterpret past moments that may have been appropriated by the narratives of approved tradition. Derrida's reading of Benjamin's text in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" helps to clarify the temporal aspect of this violent messianic rupture, because Derrida highlights that the revolutionary moment in which laws are overturned is a "moment of suspense," in which law is "suspended in the void or over the abyss" (36).[168] In Derrida's reading of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," the time of the messianic, the rupture of divine violence, is an "ungraspable revolutionary instant that belongs to no historical, temporal continuum" and it necessarily "blurs the distinction, pure and simple, between foundation and conservation" (41). Though this is an incalculable or unforeseen moment because it breaks with all existing norms, it is the temporality of possibility and change. The rupture and suspension of messianic time—the moment of the undecidable—creates the origin and possibility of decision: "all decidability is found on the side of the divine violence that destroys or deconstructs *le driot* [the law]"(54). In this way the undecidable, the experience of messianic time, is "the violent condition of knowledge or action" (56). In other words,

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[168] Martel provides a useful account of the differences between the versions of Messianism offered by Benjamin and Derrida in pages 78- 83. He claims it is a "matter of degree not kind" that separates these two messianic conceptions (79), and he finds Benjamin and Derrida "not so much in opposition as going for similar goals but in different ways" (81). Owen Ware also explores the differences and similarities in Benjamin and Derrida's approaches to the messianic. See his "Dialectic of the Past/ Disjuncture of the Future: Derrida and Benjamin on the Concept of the Messianic," *Journal for Culture and Religious Theory* 5.2 (April 2004): 99-114.

the divine violence of messianic time cannot be understood as an event in the present, and so we must adjust the way we think about temporality.

The plot of Milton's *Samson* disrupts a chronological "temporal continuum" in ways that exemplify the messianic time of divine violence. David Lowenstein highlights the non-linearity of the *Samson* narrative: "Milton has chosen not to present the story of Judges chronologically…he presents the extraordinary events of Samson's history as a series of painful recollections…the effect of sharply juxtaposing the past with the present is also to make the process of history itself seem deeply ruptured as discontinuous" (*Drama* 129). Or as Feisal Mohamed claims, Samson does not "develop linearly toward its conclusion in a manner that allows for assertion of causality" (*Post -Secular* 93). More than this though, it is specifically a *tension* between the past and present that mobilizes the play's plot. As Lowenstein effectively summarizes, "Recollections of the heroic past, with its associations of a special vocation, glorious deeds, and national deliverance, constantly impinge upon the impoverished present, with its associations of failure, humiliation and national crisis" (*Drama* 129). For example, the Chorus emphasizes the opposition between the glory of Samson's past exploits and his present state when they ask, "Can this be hee, /The Heroic, that Renow'd,/Irresistible Samson? Whom unarm'd/No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand" (124-127). The Chorus' catalogue of Samson's previous glories and lamentation of his fall from greatness extends for another 51 lines, as it highlights the irrepressible tension between Samson's past and his present: "By how much from the top of wondrous glory,/Strongest of mortal men,/To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art falle'n" (166-169). Similarly, Manoa emphasizes the disparity between what Samson was and what he is now, by

crying out, "Oh miserable change! Is this the man,/That invincible Samson, far

renown'd,/ …now an unequal match/To save himself against a coward arm'd/At one

spears length" (340-341, 346-348). Rather than a chronological development of

character, charting either the spiritual regrowth or downward trajectory of the fallen hero,

Milton's plot resists a linear progression and instead reads like a series of collisions

between past and present moments, in which characters emphasize that these two

temporal states are in constant tension with each other.

In this dissertation, I have argued that we can better understand the experience of

time in Milton's poetry through an examination of seventeenth-century millennial beliefs

and their effect on early modern conceptions of temporality. The anticipation of the

apocalypse, as we have seen in previous chapters, changed conceptions of temporality in

the seventeenth century by highlighting the linearity of time and the inevitability of

time's end. I have suggested that, in several of his texts, Milton's poetry creates an

alternative to this unidirectional view of time that is speeding towards its end. Extending

this claim, I now bring into conversation with Milton's *Samson* and Benjamin's thought a

text surely familiar to Milton and his contemporaries and integral to seventeenth-century

considerations of the apocalypse. Reading *Samson* alongside the Book of Revelation

provides a valuable historically-specific entry point for thinking about how the issues of

temporality and apocalypse were intertwined in the early modern imagination. As Joseph

Wittreich stresses, "the seventeenth century is the great age of commentary on the Book

of Revelation… never before or since has the book enjoyed such popularity."[169] The

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[169] *Shifting Contexts*, 65. For a comprehensive study of the popularity of apocalyptic beliefs after 1660, see
Warren Johnston, *Revelation Restored: The Apocalypse in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Rochester:
Boydell and Brewer, 2011). See especially Chapter 1, which provides an extensive overview of
Revelation's imagery and its application in the later seventeenth century. Other notable texts that engage

influence of Revelation on *Samson* extends beyond the mere generic conventions of tragedy; as an eschatological source text of Milton, Revelation also provides a pattern of temporal dislocation found in *Samson* and in the theoretical construct of messianic time. Like *Samson*, the temporality of Revelation—Milton's apocalyptic source—is not one of chronological development or linear causal progression. Rather the narrative demonstrates the *simultaneity* of time, in a series of recapitulations in which past and future are continually overlapping. As Leonard Thompson describes "past, present, and future are not separated by fixed, absolute boundaries…John sees both 'what is and what is to take place hereafter' (Rev 1:19)…there is no hard division between the present age and the age to come" (84).In other words, rather than discreet temporal experiences, the dimensions of past, present, and future become mapped on top of each other, so that events coincide with other events.

Most scholars understand the temporality of Revelation as a narrative of "recapitulation," in which events repeat each other, "providing different symbolic representations of the same events."[170]Or as R.J. McKelvey explains recapitulation:

> Revelation abounds with motifs and images that keep reappearing: the throne, conquering and preserving, the Lamb, the Beast, the holy war, angels, and numbers…the progression [of the Revelation narrative]…here does not mean temporal development. It is the progression that is used as a compositional technique which repeats the intending point with increasing forcefulness. (88)[171]

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with apocalyptic thought in the Restoration years include Paul Korshin, "Queuing and Waiting: The Apocalypse in England, 1660-1715," *in The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*; and Richard Popkin, "Skepticism, Science, and Millenarianism," in *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century* Thought (New York: Brill, 1992), 90-119.

[170] Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory in Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 71.

[171] "The Millennium and the Second Coming", in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. Steve Moyise (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 85-100.

Importantly, recapitulation invokes the past and future anticipation simultaneously. As it

will become clear later in this chapter, this recapitulation is remarkably similar to the

messianic temporality of divine violence and the experience of time in Milton's text.[172]

Ian Boxall describes recapitulation as an "overlapping," which "looks forward and

backward simultaneously" (17). That is, memory and expectation collide in the

temporality of Revelation. Boxall provides an example of recapitulation in the description

of the Seven Trumpets in Rev 8:2: "John is not describing events in neat chronological

sequence. Rather, it is as if the trumpet visions revisit the later seal visions, to describe

the final judgments from a different perspective" (130). This passage simultaneously

looks backward and forward, as the Angel mentioned 8:3 refers back to 6:9 and the

opening of the fifth seal and the souls that had been slaughtered under the altar, and it

anticipates and prepares for the seven trumpets to come in chapters 8 through 11.

Temporal recapitulation in Revelation demonstrates the simultaneity of memory

and future potential in the repetition of events in Revelation 19 and 20.[173] In Revelation

20:

> (7) When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison, (8)
> and will emerge to lead the nations astray at the four corners of the earth—Gog
> and Magog—to assemble them for battle. Their number will be as great as the
> sand of the sea. (9) They ascended into the broad plain of the earth…But fire
> descended from heaven and ate them up. (10) Then the devil who leads them

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[172] In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben describes the messianism of Paul as a process of "recapitulation" that sounds analogous to the temporality of recapitulation in Revelation which I describe here. In Paul, "the entire past, so to speak, is contained in the present…the events of the past acquire their true meanings and thus may be saved…similar to the panoramic vision that the dying supposedly have of their lives, when the whole of their existence passes before their eyes in a flash" (77). For an extensive and insightful engagement with the wealth of secondary literature on Paul see Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996).The image of past events flashing in a "panoramic vision" on one's deathbed also bears striking resemblance to Benjamin's description of the dialectical image in "From a Short Speech on Proust" discussed later in this chapter.

[173] According to McKelvey, chapters 19 and 20 represent a "synchronous parallel," because "the battles in 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 refer to the same eschatological event" (95).

astray was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the monster and the false prophet already were. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Firstly—at the linguistic level—the text demonstrates the simultaneity of past and future anticipation through its shifting of verb tenses: the tense changes from the future (7-8), to the past (9-10) and back to the future in the prophesy that ends verse 10, "they will be tormented day and night forever." But more than this, there is a moment of *temporal compression* in verse 10, as Revelation 19 is recalled and completed. In Revelation 19: 20, "the monster was captured and with the false prophet, who performed signs in his presence, by which those who received the branded mark of the monster and worshipped its statue were led astray. These two were thrown alive into the fiery lake of sulfur." Revelation 20 exemplifies the simultaneity of time in this text: rather than the "present" tense of a narrative, the text evinces an act of temporal packing together, in which future prophesy and past events coexist. I argue that Revelation's recapitulation is an act of temporal compression that finds an analog in *Samson Agonistes*, and both of these texts exemplify the messianic time associated with divine violence.

We will recall that, in his concept of history, Benjamin opposes the chronologically determined, linear, and inevitable march of progress, which makes time homogenous and empty. Benjamin rejects this view of time, and—as this section will demonstrate—he instead sees future and past in a constant dialectic, such that history is the process of seeing the past through the eyes of the future. History is the recognition of the messianic possibility contained in each past moment. As Paul Dussel explains, for Benjamin progress is not linear and forward-moving but "a kind of abrupt inversion, a

being forced forward by going backward" (162).[174] For Benjamin, a new and different

kind of memory was the path to redemption, a kind of redemption through the recovery

of what was possible in the past. In this kind of memory, "hope is turned backward,"

which is compatible with Benjamin's desire to rethink history and his "reaction against

the bourgeois notion of time as a commodity, linear, objectifiable, measurable"

(Handelman 152).[175] Memory here is progressive; not the "eternal image of the past"

proliferated by historicism and rejected by Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of*

History. And it is not synonymous with a simple nostalgia, but rather must be conceived

as "a sudden moment of recognition from an encounter with an object" (Dussel 152). In

sum, this is reading history "against the grain," because we rethink our narratives of

cause and effect as we acknowledge the alterative possibilities contained in each past

event.

 Parallel to these understandings of history and redemptive memory, Benjamin's

"dialectical image" is a concept in which the future is seen through vantage point of the

past, allowing for a return back to the past in which the future was still possible.[176]

Benjamin's notion of dialectical image is one way of conceptualizing the temporality of

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[174] Handelman points out that we can see this understanding of history in Benjamin's famous "angel of history" from the conclusion of his *Theses*, who faces the ruin of the past, but is forced 'backward" to the future. For biographical context that provides clues to the origin of Benjamin's "angel of history" see Handelman 167-8. Handelman claims the figure of the angel helps us understand the temporality of the messianic as not "linear causality" but an "apocalyptic disjunctive" transition to the messianic, which points both points backward and forward (169).

[175] "Memory, in Benjamin's unorthodox Marxism, is a way of mediating the material base and the ideological superstructure, and a different way of conceiving the dialectical progression of history" (149).

[176] A very thorough and compelling interpretation of Benjamin's dialectical image can be found in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). See also Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987).

the messianic and divine violence. We must acknowledge at the outset that within the

corpus of a thinker as elliptical and difficult as Benjamin, the concept of "dialectical

image" is a particularly challenging one. The problem here, as Max Pensky highlights, is

that Benjamin never provides a concrete theory or coherent definition of what he means

by dialectical image.[177] Even still, by examining texts in which Benjamin gestures

towards the concept of dialectical image, by looking at the sources that influenced

Benjamin's concept, and by connecting this idea to the thinker's work on divine violence

and the messianic, we can come closer to appreciating what Benjamin's dialectical image

suggests and how it can help us understand the messianic temporality of *Samson

Agonistes*.

Benjamin describes the function of the dialectical image in "From a Short Speech

on Proust Given on my Fortieth Birthday":

> We stand before ourselves just as we once stood in an originary past
> [*Urvergangenheit*] that we never saw. And precisely the most important images—
> those developed in the darkroom of the lived moment—are what we see. One
> could say that our deepest moments, like some cigarette packs, are given to us
> together with a little image, a little photo of ourselves. And the 'whole life' that is
> said to pass before a person who is dying or whose life is threatened is
> composed precisely of these little images. They present a rapid succession, like
> those precursors of cinematography, the little booklets in which, as children, we
> could admire a boxer, a swimmer, or a tennis player in action.[178]

Here we confront the counter- intuitive difficulty of understanding an image as evoking a

kind of memory that—paradoxically—remembers what did not occur: the past "that

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[177] "The problem, of course, is that the *centrality* of dialectical images for Benjamin's own understanding of the specifically new methodological foundation of the work is matched by the *obscurity* of the notion of dialectical images. Hints, clues, summations of nonexistent treatises, elliptical remarks, and a very small number of tightly packed and often hermetic doctrinal statements… do not add up to anything approaching a "theory" of the dialectical image, or certainly not one elaborated enough to serve as a perspicuous guide" (178).

[178] Qtd. In Agamben, *Potentialities* 158. See Tara Forrest, "Benjamin, Proust, and the Rejuvenating Powers of Memory," *Literature and Aesthetics* 12 (2002): 47-62 for a discussion of Benjamin's reading of Proust and some implications for Benjamin's conceptions of memory and temporality.

never was" and the images passed over in "the darkroom of the lived moment." As Peter

Szondi explains, Benjamin's dialectical image sends one "back into the past, a past,

however, which is open, not completed, and which promises the future. Benjamin's tense

is not the perfect, but the future perfect in the fullness of its paradox: being future and

past at the same time" (499). This is a backwards movement, "but backwards into a

future, which, although it has gone by in the meantime and its idea has been perverted,

still holds more promise than the current image of the future" (Szondi 502). What is key

for Benjamin is a return to the *potential* that existed in that past moment. If we inhabit the

past through memory, we can recognize the possibilities that were still available from that

vantage point, and we can see how the present and our future could have been different.

Žižek's formulation in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* is of

use here:

> What is unthinkable within this horizon of linear historical evolution, is the notion
> of a choice/act that retroactively opens up its own possibility: the idea that the
> emergence of a radically New retroactively changes the past—not the actual past,
> of course (we are not in the realms of science fiction), but of past possibilities.
> (161)

The concept of the dialectical image proposes a new notion of time which recognizes that

there are multiple possibilities that could be realized in each moment of time. In other

words, within history as we know it—a linear time of causality—there are contingencies;

there are choices.

Therefore the dialectical image is an expression of messianic possibility: "the

time of the dialectical image, understood in this way, is in fact Messianic time, the time

of the redemption of the world" (Pensky 193). The dialectical image contains messianic

possibilities because, "from the standpoint of later observation, we can discern

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alternatives in the past, possibilities of events taking a different path (Žižek 164). That is,

a future potentiality, erupting out of the past, contains the possibility for messianic

redemption. As Szondi explains, "Benjamin's new conception of history is rooted in the

dialectic of future and past, of messianic expectation and remembrance" (504). Similarly,

in his work on the influence of Pauline messianism on Benjamin's "Now-Time", Dussel

notes, "It is from this messianic time of the now, the present, that we have the capacity to

read moments in the past that had the same messianic density. It is from the danger of the

messianic compromise that we can understand and recover those moments in the past

fulfilled according to the same attitude" (145). In other words, in the messianic time of

the dialectical image, the past is transformed into its potentialities.[179]

Benjamin conceives of a dialectical image that "is an act of compression which

releases an otherwise unavailable meaning" (Handelman 149). Handelman explains the

ways in which Benjamin imports this act of "compression" from the Jewish tradition:[180]

> In Jewish historiography, similarly, the ancient rabbis used the interpretative
> technique of compression and anachronistic simultaneity to construct their own
> species of dialectical images, to give meaning to a history in which God seemed
> to abandon them…the rabbis seem to play with Time as though with an
> accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will. (149)

Jewish historical knowledge was less invested in the precise dates that events occurred

chronologically, but more concerned to align certain events in order to reveal their full

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[179] In this preface to Agamben's *Potentialites*, Daniel Heller-Roazen defines the messianic moment as "this moment that the past is saved, not in being returned to what once existed, but, instead, precisely in being transformed into something that never was: in being read…as what was never written" (1).

[180] For a helpful explanation of Benjamin's relationship to Judaism, see Dussel 141-146. Dussel demonstrates that "He [Benjamin] understood messianism but not explicitly as a believer, because he decided to remain in European intellectual circles [rather than within Zionist groups] (143). Moreover, Benjamin "does not want to deny his Jewish origin, but rather interprets his people as a culture—which is enough for him as a philosopher and an art critic—more than a religion or secularized religion, as Scholem affirmed" (144). For a reading of the influence of Judaism on Milton's *Samson,* see Shoulson "The Hebraism of *Samson Agonistes*," in *Milton and the Rabbis*, 240-261.

meaning. Here, history is neither the realm of fate and inevitability or the flow of

homogenous linear time, but more like Benjamin's conception of "constellation" in

which past and present are in dialectic:

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its
> light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a
> flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a
> standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal,
> continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not
> progression but image, suddenly emergent.[181]

According to Handelman, Benjamin's conceptions of dialectical image, constellation, and

'now-time' as the relation of past and present draws upon this facet of Jewish memory, in

which history becomes a vehicle for redemption.

In part, Benjamin is also drawing his conceptions of dialectical image and

messianic time from Gershom Scholem.[182] From 1916- 1925, he and Benjamin

corresponded on the issues of Judaism, the concept of "justice," and temporality.[183]

Scholem rejected the notion of history as understood through Hegelian synthesis, and

against the Enlightenment notion of "progress," Scholem found that this notion of history

was a distorted and secularized version of Jewish messianism that needed to be reunited

with its mystical and revolutionary roots. For Scholem, modern liberalism and rationalist

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[181]*The Arcades Project*, Ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 463.

[182] For an introduction to Scholem's thought, the historical context of his writings, and some recent questions regarding growing critical interest in his work see Michael Lowry's "Messianism in the Early Work of Gershom Scholem," trans. Michael Richardson, *New German Critique* 83 (Spring/Summer 2001): 177-191; and Daniel Weider's "Reading Gershom Scholem," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 96.2 (Spring 2006): 203-231.

[183]Handelman provides a useful description of the historical context—including the catastrophes of Nazism and World War I— that inspired Scholem and Benjamin to seek alternative was of conceiving history and progress; see *Fragments,* 158.

thinking has elided the apocalyptic and messianic undercurrent of the Jewish tradition.[184]

Instead, history for Scholem is a constant dialectic between the restorative (past) and

utopian (future) impulses that can never be reconciled.[185] Though these forces are in

tension, they always occur together, so that history is mobilized not by a linear notion of

"progress" but through the revolutions, ruptures, and radical disjunctures caused by this

dialectical messianic time: "Jewish messianism is in its origins and by its nature—this

cannot be sufficiently emphasized—a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the

revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the

messianic future" (Scholem 7). Scholem views the restorative and utopian as in constant

conflict, yet as also intertwined, and messianic possibility becomes activated when "the

energies that lay dormant in these two elements would emerge into conflict with each

other—the conflict of tradition of the past versus the presence of redemption" (51).

Scholem's understanding of messianism stresses that the past and future are constantly

connected yet constantly in tension, but that in their collision, messianic redemption is

possible.

Milton's *Samson Agonistes* can be read as a literary manifestation of the tension

between past and future described in Scholem's messianic rupture and in Benjamin's

dialectical image. In the beginning of the play, Samson is introduced as a man tormented

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[184] See Scholem's *The Messianic Idea in Judaism:* "Messianism became tied up with the idea of eternal progress and the infinite task of humanity perfecting itself" (26); "We have been taught that the messianic idea is part and parcel of the idea of the progress of the human race in the universe, that redemption is achieved by man's unassisted and continual progress, leading to the ultimate liberation of all the goodness and nobility hidden within him. This, in essence, is the content which the Messianic idea acquired under the combined dominance of religious and political liberalism" (37).

[185] Agamben explains Scholem's dialectic: "messianism is animated by two opposed tensions: the first is a restorative tendency aiming at *restutito in integrum* of the origin; the second is a utopian impulse turned towards the future and renewal" (*Potentialities* 166).

by the difference between what potential he had in the past and the reality of what he has become in the present:

> …I seek
> This unfrequented place to find some ease,
> …
> From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
> Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone,
> But rush upon me thronging, and present
> Times past, what I once was, and what I am now.
> O wherefore was my birth from Heaven foretold
> Twice by an angel, who at last in sight
> Of both my Parents all in flames ascended
> …
> Why was my breeding order'd and prescrib'd
> As a person separate to God,
> Designed for great exploits ; if I must dye
> Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my eyes out (16-33)

What is most interesting about Samson's meditation on the contrast between his past glory and present agony is that—not only does Samson remember "times past, what I once was"—but he recalls the *promise* that once existed in the past when he inhabits the moment of the prophesy made long ago. He recalls a moment he could have never seen, the moment that an angel predicts his future glory and ascends back to heaven.[186] Samson is preoccupied with a recollection of the past in which the promise of the future still existed, as he contemplates the gap between the possibilities "order'd," "perscrib'd," and "designed" in the past and his present defeated state.

Later in the play, Samson is presented in an almost parallel scene of anguish as he contemplates the contrast between what was promised in the past and what has befallen instead:

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[186] See Judges 13: 5: " For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines," and Judges 13: 20: "For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground."

> Thoughts, my Tormentors arm'd with deadly stings
> Mangle my apprehensive tenderest parts,
> …
> I was his nursling once and choice delight,
> His destin'd from the womb,
> Promised by Heavenly message twice descending.
> …
> He led me on to mightiest deeds
> Above the nerve of mortal arm
> Against the uncircumcis'd, our enemies.
> But now hath cast me off as never known (623- 641)

While Samson reflects on the distance between the "mightiest deeds" of his past and the present, he again thinks back to a past in which his future greatness was still possible: "His destin'd from the womb,/Promised by Heavenly message twice descending." Samson keeps returning to the image of the angel twice ascending and descending, and I suggest that the various ambiguities of the text can be better understood when this temporal compression is read through the lens of Benjamin's dialectical image.

Like the temporal recapitulation of Revelation, the experience of these dialectical images in *Samson* compresses moments of the future and the past simultaneously. Benjamin describes these moments of messianic temporality—moments of constellation that form dialectical images—as instances of sudden recognition of the potential that existed in the past, which serve as a catalyst to rethink our notions of history and the movement of time. Samson's recognition comes as he inhabits the memory of "times past, what I once was," while observing "what I am now," and he experiences the potential of what was once "order'd," "perscrib'd," and "destin'd." In the moment of messianic compression that recalls a past that never was, we see the past is not "completed" because there were other possibilities , and in the acknowledgment that such possibilities were available, we can glimpse how the present moment could be different.

As Agamben defines the messianic in *The Time that Remains*, "here the past "(the complete) rediscovers actuality and becomes unfulfilled, and the present (the incomplete) acquires a kind of fulfillment" (75).[187] In Milton's play, the two moments of messianic compression, the dialectical images in which Samson recalls future prophesies from the vantage point of the past when their potential to be fulfilled still existed, forces the reader to acknowledge the potential that is still unrealized and how the present world of the play could have been different. Lewalski's description of the text bears a striking likeness to the possibilities opened up by the dialectical image: "we are made constantly aware of what might have been (without Samson's sin, without the radical sinfulness of us all) and what will be again (at the Apocalypse), and the contrast intensifies our consciousness of the miserable, grief-filled, painwracked life that now is."[188] In these moments of constellation, we can judge Samson's actions as decisions, meaning that his fate was not inevitable but the effect of choices and contingencies. This sudden moment of recognition shows us how *our* present could be different.

This is because in the messianic rupture of divine violence, our laws and accepted beliefs are destroyed in order to be overturned. In this way, the destruction of our certainties is generative; as Benjamin claims of divine violence, "in annihilating it also expiates." The expiation comes as we clear away our old ways of interpreting the world around us to make room for new ones. The annihilation and expiation that I argue occurs at the conclusion of *Samson Agonistes* has ties to Milton's specific post-Civil War political beliefs and is compatible with Milton's rhetorical strategy throughout his career.

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[187] See also page 77: "just as the past becomes possible again in some fashion through memory—that which was fulfilled becomes unfulfilled and the unfulfilled becomes fulfilled—so too in messianic recapitulation."

[188] *"Samson Agonistes* and the 'Tragedy' of the Apocalypse," 1062.

Holly Sypniewski and Anne MacMaster read the play's ambiguity as consistent with the

influence of Euripidean tragedy on Milton's play and as a result of Milton's political

beliefs after 1660. They contend that, following the defeat of the Good Old Cause in the

English Civil War, Milton uses ambiguity in *Samson* to "initiate the exchange of opinions

that he saw necessary to the pursuit of truth in a free society," and so he "deliberately

effected an ethically problematic ending in order to bring competing voices into direct

dialogue" (146).[189] As Ryan Netzely puts it, "The radicalism of Milton's dramatic poem

consists in its insistence that reading is the source of political action and change…

[reading] fosters the sort of vigilance and virtue that enables effective political

engagement" (528).[190] The political and ethical possibilities of *Samson* reach beyond the

specific historical conditions to which Milton responds, though, because it is reading—

with its "competing voices" and calls for "vigilance"—that is the condition for political

action. Consistent with Milton's views on liberty and his belief in the political potential

inherent in acts of reading, the messianic time and divine violence of *Samson* disrupt the

reader's sense of certainty in order to provoke doubt, discussion, and debate. Suzanne

Woods' recent reading Milton's images of monstrosity and dismemberment throughout

his career provides a useful description of the generative possibilities of Milton's

violence, which can be aligned with the function of divine violence as I have presented it

here:

> By taking advantage of their [the violent images of dismemberment] disruptive
> power to capture attention and provoke often radical rethinking…he [Milton] uses
> images and stories of violence to push his reader out of complacency and toward

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[189] "Double Motivation and the Ambiguity of 'Ungoldy Deeds': Euripides *Medea* and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Quarterly* 44.3 (2010): 145-167.

[190] "Reading Events: the Value of Reading and the Possibilities of Political Action and Criticism in *Samson Agonistes*," *Criticism* (Fall 2006)48.4 :509-33.

more complex interpretations of the classical and biblical material from which he draws…Milton is also demanding that the reader see and make choices, a process at the heart of Milton's many descriptions of liberty. (4)[191]

That so many contemporary scholars continue raise questions and engage in debate through their interpretations of *Samson*—as I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter—strengthens the possibility that the uncertainty of this text is indeed the condition of making choices in a way that makes reading a political and ethical act.

By interpreting Samson's final act as a literary manifestation of divine violence and the play's temporality as one of compression and dialectical images, we can understand the possibilities that are inherent in the violent and uncertain impulses of the messianic. The destruction of the Philistine temple, which occurs alongside moments of messianic temporality in the text, is an act of annihilation which produces a lack of certainty, and causes us to rethink the way we view the world. Not only is uncertainty caused by Samson's apocalyptically-violent final act, but the reader's expectations are also undermined by Milton's refusal of seventeenth-century tragic conventions.[192] Like the ending of *Trauerspiel*—a sixteenth-and seventeenth- century German baroque "mourning play"—in which Benjamin claims authors turn "the theater against itself into a site of its own subversion," the conclusion of *Samson* likewise "does not leave any kind of 'truth' in its wake, but only the ruins and pieces of sovereign and eschatological logic, a site temporarily cleared of its idolatrous and mythological certainties" (Martel 59). Both

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[191] "Inventing Rival Hermeneutics: Milton's Language of Violence and the Invitation to Freedom" in *Milton's Rival Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard J. DuRocher and Margaret Thickstun (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2012): 3-16. See also page 11: "the reader must make its own judgments, fill in the gaps of information, see examples provided by the play, weigh them, and reconstitute the body of meaning. The play both illustrates and requires the thoughtful choices that make up the ethical task of the postlapsarian world."

[192] For readings of Milton's exploration of various dramatic genres in this text see Russ Leo's "Milton's Aristotelian Experiments: Tragedy, Lustratio, and 'Secret Refreshings' in *Samson Agonistes*," in *Milton Studies* 52 (2001): 221-261; and Lewalski *Life*, 494, 523-4.

the German baroque play and Milton's *Samson* employ the destruction of generic

assumptions in order to interrogate notions of certainty and inevitability. According to

Benjamin, eschatological belief instills a sense of fate and inevitability, which was

reinforced by the predictability and certainty characteristic of *Trauerspiel*. In rebelling

against the conventions of the tragic genre, these plays rejected the blind adherence to

fate endorsed by apocalyptic thinking: "the language of the baroque is constantly

convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up" (Benjamin 207).[193]

For example, these German mourning plays did not end with redemption or

transcendence but instead with an interference of audience expectations. That is, these

texts replaced the expectation of strong sovereigns and transcendent endings with

indecisive and irresolute kings and insignificant finales, which Benjamin claims

simultaneously resisted eschatological notions of fate, certainty, and inevitability.

Because of this, *Trauerspiel* was often viewed as a failure: "the *Trauerspiel* thus took on

the appearance of an incompetent renaissance tragedy…*Trauerspiel* stands condemned,

its most characteristic features denounced as so many stylistic shortcomings" (Benjamin

50). However, these works were generative in their disappointments; though they

"represent a decline", it may be "a decline of a fruitful or prepatory kind" (Benjamin 56).

Thus the *Trauerspiel* rejects the conventions of sixteenth-and seventeenth-century

tragedy as it calls into question the orderly totality assumed by tragedy's eschatological

certainty.

Like *Trauerspiel,* Milton's text is "convulsed by rebellion on the part of the

elements that make it up," and *Samson* turns the conventions of contemporary theater

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[193] "At least for a time, the objects in the world were relatively unarranged, not as subject to some grand order of meaning. For Benjamin, this moment then represents an opportunity to reconsider the absoluteness and inevitability of eschatological certitudes" (Martel 55).

against themselves. In his prefatory note to the text, Milton announces his rejection of the Restoration stage by claiming his play is written "after the Greek manner," which he defines as "coming forth after the antient manner, much different from what among us passes for best" (799).[194] He condemns "the Poets error of intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness…corruptly to gratifie the people" commonly found in Restoration drama, and he seeks to "to vindicate Tragedy from the small esteem, or rather infamy, which in the account of many it undergoes at this day" (799). Milton thus overturns the expectations of his seventeenth-century audience by consciously crafting a Greek tragedy, in what Flannagan interprets as "an affront and a rebuttal to the entire world of the Restoration stage" (793). [195]

Beyond his repudiation of contemporary dramatic practice, in a parenthetical remark that comes in the middle of *Samson's* prefatory note, Milton goes even further to deny the text any theatricality: "Division into Act and Scene referring chiefly to the Stage (to which this work was never intended) is here omitted" (800). While he highlights the play's deployment of Greek tragic conventions, Milton simultaneously undermines the text's status as drama at all in his claim that the play was never meant to be performed. Not only is *Samson* not a Restoration play, but its status as a closet drama

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[194] Flannagan calls Milton's preface to the text "belligerent and revolutionary in spirit" (787).

[195] See Kahn's "Aesthetics as Critique," 105-6 for an explanation of the ways in which Milton rejects the sentimentalism and conventions of Restoration theater. In this article, Kahn argues that because of his rebellion against Royalist expectations of the tragic genre, *Samson* shows how aesthetics can be used to critique politics, and she concludes that Milton's rejection of Aristotelian "pity" and "fear" in the drama transforms the text from *Trauerspiel* to tragedy.

confounds its identification as Greek tragedy, and challenges our conventional definition of a drama as a work written to be performed on stage.[196]

Benjamin claims that a disruption of certainty occurs contemporaneously with a rejection of tragic conventions in *Trauerspiel*; by considering a textual moment in *Samson* in which the divine violence of Samson's apocalyptically-violent act occurs simultaneous with an overt reference to the play's refusal of dramatic conventions, I suggest Milton's text exemplifies Benjamin's argument. When the messenger describes Samson's act of revenge, for the first and only time in the text, the Philistine temple is referred to as a "theater": "The building was a spacious Theater/ Half round on two main Pillars vaulted high,/ With seats where all the Lords and each degree/ Of sort, might sit in order to behold" (1605-8). This is a modification to the biblical Samson story, because in Judges 16: 27, though it can hold an immense number of Philistines, the building is referred to as merely as a "house." It seems as though Milton makes a deliberate revision of his biblical source in likening the temple to a theater. [197] More than this though, while Milton's preface to the text announces his disavowal of the conventions of tragedy, this moment of the text—in which Samson pulls down the pillars of the temple, leaving it in ruins—enacts Milton's refusal of theatricality in this utter annihilation of the "Theater." In the disruption of audiences' generic expectations, occurring alongside acts of divine violence, both *Trauerspiel* and Milton's *Samson* create textual moments which dislodge familiar paradigms. Highlighting the link between the rejection of contemporary theater

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[196] "Milton completely rejected Elizabethan tragedy while writing a dramatic poem not intended for the stage" (Flannagan 794).

[197] In his gloss of these lines, Flannagan notes that George Sandy's *A Relation of a Journey* (London: 1615), 149 describes the ruins of the Philistine temple as a "theater of Samson," and Flannagan suggests it is possible that this was Milton's source.

conventions in *Trauerspiel* and *Samson*—and the uncertainty produced by both—demonstrates how the messianic temporality of divine violence can enact a change in our way of thinking through literature. Like Benjamin's reading of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German baroque drama, Milton's text disrupts our generic expectations, and in shaking us out of our certainties, the text opens up the possibility of new ways of thinking.

Although the writings of Walter Benjamin which formulate these ideas of divine violence and messianic time appear much later that Milton's composition of *Samson*, through the patterns of recapitulation in Revelation, we see that a very similar temporality—a temporality of compression, in which memory and future potential are in a dialectic—exists in Milton's source text. Through this messianic temporality, what Revelation, Milton's text, and Benjamin's thought provide for us is a way of living within linear, eschatological time that disrupts the notion of inevitability, and allows for a rethinking of our accepted narratives of time, law, and truth.

In my reading then, Samson's final act is both destructive and redemptive. The pulling down of the Philistine temple annihilates any sense of certainty and doesn't replace it with any new truths. Readers can never know if Samson's acts are sanctioned by God and they are left wondering whether to interpret these events as an example of godly obedience, an act of religious terrorism, or a warning against radicalism. The redemption comes, though, in asking these very questions. The renewal and possibility of expiation is in our way of thinking, our way of seeing the world. The messianic time of *Samson Agonistes*, which culminates in a literary manifestation of divine violence, disrupts our uncritical narratives and ways of thinking about time, causality, and

inevitability. This alternative notion of temporality recognizes that there are multiple

possibilities that could be realized in each moment of time. Messianic ruptures are

moments when the possibility of the past flashes up as an excess in our present moment

and disrupt our complacent traditional concept of the relationship between past, present,

and future experiences. We see the past could have been different, which opens up

possibilities in the present moment; if the past is not complete but is fragmented, then the

present moment too contains potentiality and choices. Reading Milton, his apocalyptic

source text Revelation, and the writings of Walter Benjamin in tandem—specifically in

the ways in which they share a similar rethinking of temporality—helps to give us a

better sense of what possibilities are opened up by a particular way of experiencing time

and interpreting the world around us.

CODA

This dissertation contributes to the renewed critical interest in Milton's

involvement in seventeenth-century millennial belief by broadening the framework

through which we understand the influence of apocalyptic expectation on early modern

thought. Extending recent scholarly work that has interrogated the traditional view that

Milton abandoned apocalyptic anticipation after the Restoration, and readings that have

sought to connect eschatological belief to a variety of early modern discourses, this

project suggests that seventeenth-century apocalyptic thinking fundamentally changed the

way people imagined time and that his epistemological shift can be understood via the

temporality of Milton's poetry. The imminent apocalypse fostered a conception of time

as a linear, unidirectional progression, inevitably speeding towards its end. Events during

the tumultuous Civil-War years heightened the expectation that the end of days was near,

and this intensified the finitude and closure implied in apocalyptic thinking for Milton

and his contemporaries. I have suggested that Milton's poems create an alternative

temporality in which time is not necessarily linear, as they enact a rethinking of temporal

closure. That is, in the texts I have examined here—*Areopagitica,* "On the Death of a Fair

Infant," the Nativity Ode, "On the Late Massacre at Piedmont," *Paradise Lost*, and

Samson Agonistes—Milton invokes apocalyptic imagery, while simultaneously he

undermines the notion of linear time that underpins the logic of apocalypse with a

different kind of temporality—messianic time.

The rethinking of temporality that occurs in these apocalyptically-inflected texts

also opens up new ways of understanding ideological ambiguities embedded in Milton's

poetry. I demonstrated how these texts interrogate and revise early modern generic

conventions—in occasional verse, the sonnet tradition, and seventeenth-century drama;

how the poems grapple with shifting scientific paradigms, as in the possibility of

alchemical transmutation; how they are impacted by, and in turn inflect, early modern

biblical exegesis and ways of reading history; and how all of these issues are tied the

malleable political rhetoric of the seventeenth century, with its debates about nationhood,

toleration, and Civil War propaganda. Therefore not only does this dissertation engage

recent critical interest in Milton's millennial beliefs, but I have attempted to redefine the

terms through which we understand seventeenth-century apocalyptic thinking more

generally, by exploring its constitutive temporal structure and by demonstrating how this

epistemological shift simultaneously transforms theological, political, and scientific

belief in Milton's England.

  Bringing the concept of messianic time—as interpreted in the writings of Walter

Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben—into constellation with Milton's

texts establishes that the latter's poetry exhibits a similar method of rethinking temporal

closure and of navigating uncertainty. Milton's poetics and messianic time present an

alternative to the inevitability and certainty implied in linear apocalyptic time, while

showing the importance of remaining open to what knowledge may come in the future.

The theoretical construct of messianic time and Milton's theory of reading share a

rejection of closure and an emphasis on choice rather than inevitability, and both provide

a productive way of approaching what is not yet known. Both question our accepted

views of truth (whether religious or secular), and both highlight the necessity of

continually revising our ways of thinking until the end of time. Messianic time, as I have

defined it here, resists an uncritical view of history and it calls into question our

narratives of time, history, and truth. I argue that Milton's poetry is a literary

manifestation of the rethinking of temporality inherent in the messianic, and thus his texts anticipate the method of engaging uncertainty suggested by the work of these contemporary theorists. Milton's poetry is a vehicle for the rupture of messianic time, providing us with a critique of our beliefs and a dislocation of our ordinary way of interpreting the world around us.

This dissertation also demonstrates the value of a way of interpreting Milton's poetry that takes into equal account a close reading of the texts' formal properties and internal contradictions, the specific historical factors and ideological questions influencing writers and readers in the seventeenth century, and the methods of reading language and its uncertainties that have been suggested by several contemporary literary theorists. I show that formalist, new historicist, and poststructuralist ways of understanding language and literature are not only compatible, but in fact can be mutually reinforcing when deployed together to appreciate the contradictions and unresolved tensions in Milton's poetry. I also illustrate that reading Milton's poetry and the texts of these particular poststructuralist theorists is not an arbitrary and anachronistic superimposition of contemporary ideas on early modern texts; rather reading these works in tandem is justified by Milton's belief in progressive revelation and his theory of reading, as evinced in *Areopagitica.* I have continued the work begun by the New Milton Criticism, with its interest in the "sites of contention" (Evans), "irresolvable complexities" (Herman and Sauer), and "productive jostling" (Wittreich) of certainty and uncertainty in Milton's poetry. And I have supplemented its awareness of historical context and focus on close textual analysis with a reevaluation of appreciating early modern texts through ways of reading inflected by contemporary literary theory.

Finally, this project opens the possibility of further investigation in a number of areas: in Milton criticism, in the study of early modern culture more broadly, and in reevaluating methods of literary and cultural interpretation. Hopefully, this dissertation has begun to widen the scope of how we can understand the complexity of Milton's repurposing of seventeenth-century literary genres and the ideologically-conflicting positions that emerge in his poetry. I have started conversations about texts that have yet to be thoroughly examined—Milton's occasional poetry and the genre more generally, as well as the Piedmont sonnet—and I have suggested new perspectives within old debates about poems like *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*.

My reading suggests that there is good reason to undertake further research on how time was imagined in the early modern world, and how apocalyptic anticipation influenced notions of temporality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Additionally, it remains to be proposed how poets contemporary with Milton responded to the apocalyptic time of the seventeenth century in their work—the poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell (to name just a few) would seem to make valuable points of either contact or contrast in investigating whether messianic time is characteristic of a larger period of literature or is unique to the poetry of Milton. It would also be worthwhile to determine whether there is a shift in poetic manifestations of temporality between the age of Shakespeare, the messianic time of Milton's poetry, and the works of the later Restoration and eighteenth century. Lastly, the possibility that messianic time is a response to early modern eschatological anticipation could be strengthened by analysis of other modes of artistic expression. For example, in continuous narration painting—a mode used frequently in the Renaissance—a single

image depicted more than one period of time, in such a way that often was not even portrayed from left to right as in our conventional expectation of temporal progression.[198] That is, the painting tells a story, but not on a linear timeline. For instance, the fresco *The Tribute Money* (1425) by Masaccio recounts the biblical account from Matthew 17 in which Jesus directs Peter to look into the mouth of a fish for a coin. The narrative progression jumps from the center of the painting and the beginning of the story in which Jesus gives Peter his orders, to the left as Peter looks for a fish in the sea, and then it shifts to the right where Peter has found the coin and pays the tax. It seems as though the temporality of this genre of painting mirrors the temporal dislocation of messianic time, and so this is just one example of the ways in which messianic time could be investigated in other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century works of art in order to better illuminate apocalyptic thought and shifting conceptions of temporality in the early modern period.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates the need to reevaluate the usefulness of juxtaposing historically-based and theoretically-inflected methods of reading to reveal the uncertainties and ambiguities in Milton's poetry. While the threefold combination of formalist, new historicist, and poststructuralist methods of interpretation that I have brought into conversation here may not always coalesce in early modern texts, and while this way of reading is not without its difficulties and limitations, I hope that this dissertation has at least suggested the possibility that these three modes of literary interpretation can work in tandem, and to fruitful and exciting ends.

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[198] I am indebted to Erin Lehman, doctoral student in Temple's Art History Department, for first bringing this genre of Renaissance painting to my attention and for suggesting that it may bear similarities to my reading of messianic time in Milton.

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