

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

Poetry against Empire: Milton to Shelley

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OF THE TEMPTATIONS OFFERED to Christ in the wilderness few are more enticing than possession of the kingdoms of the world. In the Gospels, Christ refuses, and summarily orders the devil to get behind him. In Milton's retelling of the story in *Paradise Regained*, Christ gives a much fuller, though just as unequivocal, rejection of the power, wealth, and glory of empire:

They err who count it glorious to subdue
By conquest far and wide, to overrun
Large countries, and in field great battles win,
Great cities by assault: what do these worthies,
But rob and spoil, burn, slaughter, and enslave
Peaceable nations, neighbouring or remote,
Made captive, yet deserving freedom more
Than those their conquerors, who leave behind
Nothing but ruin wheresoe'er they rove,
And all the flourishing works of peace destroy,
Then swell with pride, and must be titled gods,
Great benefactors of mankind, deliverers,
Worshipped with temple, priest, and sacrifice . . .¹

Read at the Academy 8 November 2001.

This lecture owes its general inspiration to the work of David Erdman, in particular his study *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (rev. edn. 1969). My thanks to Jonathan Scott, David Skilton, Peter Marshall and, above all, Peter McDonald for comments, information, and advice.

¹ *Paradise Regained*, III. 71–83 in Milton: *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd edn. (London and New York, 1997). Quotations from his edition are hereafter given in the lecture text.

For Christ, imperialism is a moral evil incompatible with the flourishing of true civilisation, and empire is the opposite of peace, liberty, piety, and culture. By contrast, Christ's own dominion will be both peaceful and global; it will begin in the private, inner life of individual believers, but it will slowly unite the peoples of the world as willing subjects of a hidden kingdom. At the end of the poem, Christ 'Home to his mother's house private returned' (IV. 639), not to avoid public action, but to prepare for government. When his time comes to sit on David's throne, Christ tells Satan, it shall be 'as a stone that shall to pieces dash / All monarchies besides throughout the world, / And of my kingdom there shall be no end' (IV. 149–51). The words 'private' and 'kingdom' are among the most prominent in the poem: the latter in accordance with the Gospels, but the former insistently to distinguish Christ's role from all previous and subsequent kinds of public leadership (his mother Mary remarks that his life has always been 'Private, unactive, calm, contemplative', II. 81). The Son of God is the harbinger of a paradoxical kind of empire; one which will integrate private spirituality with civic duty, and which will, of its very nature, represent a repudiation of all worldly structures of sovereignty to the extent that it might be better termed a universal anti-empire.

My aim in this lecture is to situate Milton's vehement anti-imperialism at the beginning of a poetic tradition, stretching as far as Shelley and beyond, which was global in sensibility and in which opposition to empire was a central form of imagination. My argument is that the major poets of this era not only articulated a powerfully anti-imperial vision of the world, but also contended that artistic culture could not flourish under the political conditions of modern imperialism. This is partly a historical claim, and one which assumes that poetry in this period played an important role in the public contestation of Britain's changing place in the world; but it is also a literary claim about the continuing salience of the classical and early modern traditions which governed poetic forms of imagination right up to the Romantic age. My purpose is not simply to record a series of improvised poetic responses to the growth of the British Empire: this would be to view the issue from the wrong end of the telescope since both anti- and, indeed, pro-imperial poetry in Britain preceded by many years the historical fact of the Empire. Rather, it is to show how a poetry grounded since the Renaissance in universal habits of thought and expansive modes of territorial vision was transposed onto an evolving historical reality, and how this process of imaginative transposition took on a heightened sense of political urgency as the implications

of Britain's imperial activities broke upon public consciousness. It is one of the ironies of literary history that the anti- and pro-imperial poetry of this period articulated a far more coherent sense of empire than anything warranted by the Empire itself. It was not until late in the eighteenth century that Britons started to realise that their country had anything resembling a unified empire, as opposed to a number of apparently unrelated overseas settlements in North America, sugar plantations in the Caribbean, trading posts in India, fortresses in West Africa, and penal colonies in the South Seas. Poets conceptualised the British Empire as a total world system long before the maps of the world were coloured pink, and they were, from the beginning, committed to the idea that global imperialism could only be resisted by a poetry capable of imagining on a global scale. They were not merely reactive, but nor were they nebulously prophetic; it was by thinking politically through the adaptation of inherited traditions and genres, that poets helped to make opposition to the British Empire conceivable and iterable.

To give primacy to the anti-imperial aspects of poetic tradition, and to include within this tradition many of the period's major poets such as Milton, late Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith, Blake, and Shelley, is certainly to go against the grain of current critical argument. Most recent studies of literature and empire read the twin ideologies of imperialism and modernisation as hegemonic for this period, and assume that poetry was fundamentally engaged in reifying and legitimating the hierarchies of national and racial difference upon which the public acceptability of empire depended.² By these tokens, anti-imperial poetry is usually read as a derivative of imperial writing, doomed to remain trapped within its universal imaginative forms and totalising Western European assumptions about nature, culture, and historical progress. Imperialism is a literary version of original sin from which there is no possible redemption. Recently, however, some critics have argued that anti-imperial poetry resided in a counter-tradition, ultimately derived from Lucan, the republican poet and opponent of Roman imperialism, which rejected the

² Most recently Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000), and the sophisticated studies by Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1998) and Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge, 1993). Also, many of the essays in Peter Kitson and Tim Fulford, eds., *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780–1830* (Cambridge, 1998). Author-specific studies which adopt this line of interpretation are listed in notes below.

universal language and teleological narrative forms of imperial literature.³ This has been a fruitful line of inquiry, and generative, in David Norbrook's *Writing the English Republic*, of a profound re-reading of Milton, but it does inevitably downplay the historical entanglements of imperialism and republicanism; we certainly cannot assume for this period a clear opposition between a royalist tradition and a republican counter-tradition in the domain of imperial representation.⁴ Far from taking refuge in alternative republican languages and forms, anti-imperial writers more often struggled for visionary supremacy within the *same* vocabularies and forms as their pro-imperial contemporaries. Both kinds of writer proceeded through recapitulation and inversion: the idea of a peaceful universal British Empire could, in the hands of some anti-imperial poets, mutate into a cosmopolitan vision of a global fraternity of nations; the imperial vision of Britain as a global power on a par with ancient Rome was shadowed by the recollection of Britain as a conquered province of the Roman Empire. This symbiotic relationship between pro- and anti-imperial images and forms should not be taken as the sign of imperial hegemony, rather as evidence of the poetic attempt to create and maintain the discursive co-ordinates within which power, conquest, commerce, slavery, and empire could be meaningfully contested. This much I hope to demonstrate in the readings of particular poems which follow; readings which are points on an interpretive map of the different strands of globally aware, anti-imperial poetic sensibility. It is a map which, as is probably clear by now, recognises no distinct borders between the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries and what is far too often delineated as a separate country called Romanticism.

A final introductory point must first be made about the kinds of historical assumptions I am making about the ideologies of imperialism taking shape in this era. Since Linda Colley's study of nearly a decade ago, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, we have become accustomed to considering the period from the late seventeenth century to the end of the Napoleonic Wars as the crucible of British nationalism, such as it was

³ This is the approach of David Quint's *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton, 1993), the most important study to date of anti-imperial, as well as imperial poetry in this period. David Armitage takes a sceptical approach to the imperial/anti-imperial import of early modern literature in 'Literature and Empire' in *Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Nicholas Canny, vol. I of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 99–123.

⁴ David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge, 1999).

before Post-War decolonisation and Scottish and Welsh devolution.⁵ James Thomson's 'Rule, Britannia' of 1740 is often cited as the epitome of the British Protestantism, patriotism, and imperialism which emanated from that period, and is taken as evidence for the ways in which an aggressive ideology of imperial expansion accrued from the British people's investment in a distinctively Protestant form of nationalism.⁶ By contrast, more recent historical studies, notably those by David Armitage and Steven Pincus, have revealed the extent to which imperial ideology in Britain was, at least at its inception, cosmopolitan, liberal, and comparatively secular in tone.⁷ Armitage, in particular, has written of the ways in which British imperial thinkers tried to reconcile traditionally incompatible concepts of liberty and empire through the idea of a peaceful, commercial empire of the sea. More will be said later about the ways in which this idea of the empire of the sea found its way into British poetic myth, and also about the respects in which 'Rule, Britannia' represented little more than a brief and untypical moment in the history of British imperial poetry. British imperialism was not, in my view, the outgrowth of British national identity, but preceded, and even, to some extent, forestalled it. Britons thought of themselves as potential Roman imperial lords of the world long before they thought that their superior native qualities of Britishness had anything to do with their entitlement to Jamaica, Bombay, or New York. In the literature, as in the history, of this period, nationalism and imperialism remained distinct, asymmetrical ideas. Even the revival of interest, in mid- to late eighteenth-century literature, in native British religion and culture had no immediate impact on the cosmopolitan and global terms within which empire was both represented and opposed.

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The seeds of cosmopolitan imperialism and anti-imperialism were sown in the Protectoral era when political thinkers and literary writers loyal to Cromwell attempted to articulate and represent his peculiar form of

⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992).

⁶ Suvir Kaul's study is somewhat typical in beginning with a discussion of this poem: *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire*, pp. 1–8.

⁷ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000); Steven Pincus, *Protestantism and Patriotism: Ideologies and the Making of English Foreign Policy, 1650–1668* (Cambridge, 1996) and 'The English Debate over Universal Monarchy' in *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 37–62.

republican imperial power. Cromwell consolidated British overseas power in Ireland and the Caribbean, and also, significantly, put an end to a war against the Dutch designed to break their commercial domination of the seas. This first Dutch War had been the Commonwealth's war for empire of the sea—*imperium pelagi*—and it posed significant ideological difficulties both for its proponents and its opponents, because it was the first war for empire ever to have been waged between two Protestant powers. The fact that Cromwell came to power as an opponent of the war did not entirely obviate the need for his poetic supporters to celebrate him as the head of a newly victorious commercial power. In the days when the Spanish Empire had represented the main threat to English trading interests, such victories could be celebrated in a Spenserian idiom, with poets prophesying the triumph of Protestant Empire over Catholic universal monarchy. This poetic language was clearly no longer serviceable, so a number of poets, most notably Edmund Waller in his influential 'A Panegyrick to my Lord Protector' (1655), forged a new, more secular language in which to celebrate Cromwell as a new Augustus making peace with fellow Protestants in order to inaugurate a free and global British empire. David Norbrook has termed this idiom 'Protectoral Augustanism', and it was one which, with the notable exception of Marvell's poetry, permeated contemporary artistic representations of Cromwell.⁸ Where previous Caroline court poets had deployed a martial idiom in which to celebrate England's overseas ventures (for example, William Davenant's 'Madagascar' of 1638), Protectoral poets emphasised the simultaneously seductive and effortless character of England's overseas trading ventures:

To dig for Wealth we weary not our Limbs,
Gold (tho' the heaviest Metal) hither swims:
Ours is the Harvest where the Indians mow,
We plough the Deep and reap what others sow.

(Waller, 'Panegyrick').⁹

In the same year as Waller's 'Panegyrick', the idea of effortless maritime empire bringing the luxury goods of the world home to London as easily

⁸ *Writing the English Republic*, chap. 7. Other examples include the poets (among them John Locke) who celebrated Cromwell's imperial ventures in the *Musarum Oxoniensium Elaiophoria* (1654), discussed by Gerald M. MacLean in *Time's Witness: Historical Representation in English Poetry, 1603–1660* (Madison, 1990), pp. 236–40. Also Dryden's 'Heroique Stanza's, Consecrated to the Glorious Memory of Oliver' (1659) and Thomas Sprat's 'To the Happie Memorie of the most Renowned Prince Oliver' (1659).

⁹ *A Panegyrick to My Lord Protector* (1655) ll. 109–12.

as water flows into the sea was also, and most memorably, articulated in an expanded version of John Denham's royalist poem 'Cooper's Hill'; here the Thames is celebrated as he 'Visits the world, and in his flying towers / Brings home to us, and makes both *Indies* ours'.¹⁰ Despite the currency of Denham's poem, Protectoral poets were determined to retain the idea for their own use, and Cromwell's resumption, soon after the Dutch War, of a more confessional foreign policy did nothing to displace this new, secular idiom of effortless global empire. At the Restoration many of the same poets, including Waller in his poem 'To the King, upon his Majesties Happy Return' and Dryden in 'Astraea Redux', effected a smooth transfer of this Augustan idea to the regime of Charles II. During the first two decades of his reign, Charles, the new Augustus, undertook two more wars against the Dutch, each time eliciting poetic defences of his effortless and free global empire of the sea, and attacks upon the rival monopoly empire. In panegyric, ode and brief epic forms, poets consolidated a baroque poetics of empire which would define the terms for imperial representation until far into the eighteenth century. In particular, Dryden's highly influential *Annus Mirabilis* of 1667 combined a cosmopolitan myth of a British empire of peace and free trade (in which the Dutch play a doomed Carthage to Britain's Rome) with a figuratively rich language of precious metals, commodities, and luxuries. With its insistent use of the first person plural, the poem places unprecedented emphasis upon the idea of war for empire as a national enterprise. The poem also envisages a further collective role for the people as consumers, their appetites and desires being almost enough to secure effortless possession of the riches of the globe; and so the poem closes with the famous lines:

Thus to the eastern wealth through storms we go;
But now, the Cape once doubled, fear no more:
A constant trade-wind will securely blow,
And gently lay us on the spicy shore.¹¹

The baroque myth of empire given such full expression in *Annus Mirabilis* sought to obfuscate some of the realities of this period, which included regular, aggressive warfare against the Dutch and French, and waves of restrictive trade legislation. It was also a time of considerable activity on

¹⁰ In Brendan O Hehir, *Expans'd Hieroglyphicks: A Critical Edition of Sir John Denham's Cooper's Hill* (Berkeley and LA, 1969), rev. 1668 version, ll. 183–4.

¹¹ *The Poems of John Dryden, Volume I, 1649–1681*, ed. Paul Hammond (London and New York, 1995), ll. 1213–16. On pro-imperial poetry in this period and after, see Karen O'Brien, 'Protestantism and the Poetry of Empire' in *Culture and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, eds. Jeremy Gregory and Jeremy Black (Manchester, 1997), pp. 146–62.

the colonial front as new commercial ventures such as the Company of Royal Adventurers and the Royal Africa Company tried to grab a portion of the international gold and slave trades, and charters were issued for new, privately run settlements in Carolina, New York, and Pennsylvania (of these, only William Penn's Pennsylvania enshrined the rights of the native peoples). England's commercial presence in India was also enhanced when the ambassador Sir Richard Fanshawe obtained Bombay as part of the dowry of Charles II's Portuguese bride. Hardly coincidentally, Fanshawe had earlier published a translation of the great Portuguese epic of imperial adventure, the *Lusiad*, or *Portugals Historical Poem* (1655).¹²

It was in this atmosphere of colonial expansion and international imperial rivalry, and in the same year as *Annus Mirabilis*, that Milton completed and published *Paradise Lost*. Although he had started composing the poem in an earlier period, and may have delayed publication after completion, *Paradise Lost* must have appeared urgently contemporary in 1667 coming, as it did, shortly after the infernal Fire of London and near national defeat by the Dutch. Critics have observed how Milton presents Satan as a figure for the dangers and injustice of imperial wars.¹³ He indirectly likens Satan to Vasco da Gama, hero of the *Lusiads*, journeying to Paradise and inhaling its scent like those who 'sail / Beyond the Cape of Hope, and now are past / Mozambic, off at sea' where 'winds blow / Sabean odours from the spicy shore / Of Arabie the blest'.¹⁴ At many points in the poem, Milton appropriates Waller and Dryden's rich language of spices, scents, and precious metals as a means of showing how possessive consumer desire for the luxuries of the 'spicy shore' is really a sign of moral turpitude. Satan sees himself as an epic voyager in search of new empires, but Milton exposes him as a commercial adventurer in search of a proprietary colony, like those 'gentlemen adventuring

¹² See *The Poems and Translations of Sir Richard Fanshawe*, ed. Peter Davison, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1997–9). The work was again topical as British interests in India expanded in the late eighteenth century, and it was retranslated by William Julius Mickle as *The Lusiad, or the Discovery of India* (1776). In the preface, Mickle describes Camoens' work as 'the epic poem of the birth of commerce'.

¹³ For an overview of these debates, see the introduction to *Milton and the Imperial Vision*, eds. Balachandra Rajan and Elizabeth Sauer (Pittsburgh, 1999). Specifically, David Armitage has interpreted Satan as, in part, a figure for Milton's disillusionment with Cromwell as a republican imperialist: 'John Milton: Poet against Empire' in *Milton and Republicanism*, eds. David Armitage, Quentin Skinner and Armand Himy (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 206–25.

¹⁴ *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alistair Fowler, 2nd edn. (New York and London, 1998), IV. 159–63. All quotations from the poem are from this edition.

into Hudson's Bay' to whom Charles II granted a charter in 1664, or like the Dutch, 'Close sailing from Bengala, or the isles / Of Ternate and Tidore, whence merchants bring / Their spicy drugs' (II. 638–40).

There can be no doubt, from the many references in the poem of this kind, of Milton's steadfast opposition to the idea of commercial empire, or of his rejection of the spurious distinctions made by his contemporaries between the peaceful British and aggressive Dutch, French, and Portuguese empires. Yet equally, there is evidence of Milton's commitment to the classical idea, clearly evinced in his earlier political writings and career, that some measure of aggression and expansion is unavoidable for robust republics, and that some peoples are barbarous or degenerate enough to deserve subjection.¹⁵ As the angel Michael explains to Adam: 'sometimes nations will decline so low / From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong / But justice, and some fatal curse annexed / Deprives them of their outward liberty, / Their inward lost.' (XII. 97–101). The rebellious angels, and the Irish subjugated by Cromwell were among those who, for Milton, had forfeited their right to outward liberty. There appears to be a marked contradiction, in *Paradise Lost*, between Milton's hostility to mercantile empires which exploit the innocent, and his view that imperial subjection can often be the outward sign of inner slavery; this is a contradiction which lies at the heart of the problem, in a republican poem, of Milton's presentation of Heaven as a hierarchical, universal monarchy.¹⁶ Just as the unwary reader can be seduced into reading the Father as an absolute monarch and Satan and his followers as heroic republican rebels, so it is hard to resist the temptation to read the contest between God and the devil for domination of the earth in imperial terms.

God gives Adam domestic, but not political, authority over the inhabitants of the earth, which apparently leaves imperial territorial power open to competition between the powers of good and evil. Satan states that, in conquering Paradise, 'at least / Divided empire with heaven's king I hold' (IV. 111–12). Towards the end of the poem, Adam is given a vision of all the future empires of the world, and of the course of human history up to and beyond the time of Christ. This history, too, can be read as the supplanting of bad Satanic empire by good divine empire. Milton's readers were, after all, accustomed to reading the coming of Christ through the metaphor of a divine, global empire of peace, not least

¹⁵ For a deeply informed discussion of this problem, see Sharon Achinstein, 'Imperial Dialectics: Milton and Conquered Peoples' in *Milton and the Imperial Vision*, pp. 67–89.

¹⁶ For an important contribution to this much discussed problem in Milton, see Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, pp. 477–80.

through their familiarity with traditional Christian interpretations of Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*; this poem predicts the cessation of war by land or sea after the birth of a sacred child during the time of Augustus. Yet Milton is at pains to avoid even the possibility of a metaphorical slippage between bad worldly empire and good divine empire. Michael chides Adam for speaking of the contest between God and Satan as though it were a fight with 'victors' and losers:

Dream not of their fight,
As of a duel, or the local wounds
Of head and heel: not therefore joins the Son
Manhood to Godhead, with more strength to foil
Thy enemy (XII. 386–90).

As the film is lifted from his eyes, Adam learns that God's hidden kingdom is not an empire but an anti-empire, that is, a kind of universal order which is never quite imaginable through worldly analogies of monarchy, sovereignty, and imperial power. Earthly empires such as those which Michael shows to Adam, or which Anchises shows to Aeneas, exist only in the absence of true sovereignty, and it is as the unimaginable opposite of all corrupt worldly polities that divine empire is best understood.¹⁷

The lessons which Adam learns from Michael were not heeded by Milton's first few generations of readers, and his legacy to the poetics of empire was a two-fold and paradoxical one. Many pro-imperial poets in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries espoused Milton's blank verse, exotic or sublime diction, and pre-lapsarian themes. Some picked up on Milton's ambivalent recognition, particularly in the Irish context, that good republics sometimes need to attack and subjugate others in order to defend their internal integrity. Many more simply found it impossible to read and recapitulate *Paradise Lost* in terms other than the global competition between good and bad empires, and so obtained a means of representing the good, peaceful British Empire as a recovery and expansion of Eden. James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726–30, revised 1746), perhaps the most popular poem of the eighteenth century, led the way with its sweeping imaginative integration of the Edenic landscape of England with overseas territories either colonised or ripe for imperial annexation. To his fellow Britons, Thomson urged: 'with superior Boon may your rich Soil, / Exuberant, Nature's better Blessings pour / O'er

¹⁷ I am indebted here to Alistair Fowler's notes to books XI and XII in his revised edition of *Paradise Lost*.

every Land, the Naked Nations cloath, / And be th'exhaustless Granary of a World'.¹⁸ In addition, the georgic elements in Milton's depiction of Eden provided *The Seasons* and many later eighteenth-century poems such as John Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757), and James Grainger's colonial West Indian poem *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), with a means of synthesising agricultural labour with the idea of a peaceful, mercantile British world order.¹⁹

It would certainly have been, from Milton's point of view, both politically and theologically erroneous to extrapolate from *Paradise Lost*'s distinctly regal Heaven the ideal of a divinely sanctioned, worldly empire of peace. If neither Pope nor the Romantics read Milton in this way, it was partly owing to their further reading of *Paradise Regained*. Milton's exploration of the nature of worldly empire in relation to the kingdom of God deepened in this poem—a work fully the product of the Restoration with its mercantile wars, colonial adventures, and mounting public concern about the rival expansionist powers of Holland and France. The poem certainly has an arresting temporal immediacy, conveying the sense that Christ is out in the wilderness now, at the very moment when Mary and the disciples wait for his return. This immediacy invites, without invoking, contemporary parallels with defeated but expectant English republicans.²⁰ In the poem, the disciples expect imminent, decisive action, possibly the delivery of Israel from the Roman Yoke, an aspiration which even Christ himself admits that he once entertained. So it appears logical that, after his offer of worldly empire is refused, Satan tempts Christ to assume the role of anti-colonial liberator; if he refuses this role, Satan taunts, Christ will be seen by the world as 'Irresolute, unhardy, unadventurous' (III. 243). Satan offers him a choice of league with or conquest of one of the two contemporary super-powers, Rome or Parthia, as a means of creating a liberated, independent Judaea. Here again, Milton shows his readers how neither imperialism nor even republican opposition to

¹⁸ James Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford, 1981), *Spring*, ll. 74–7.

¹⁹ See Karen O'Brien, 'Imperial Georgic, 1660–1789' in *The Country and the City Revisited*, eds. Donna Landry, Gerald MacLean, and Joseph P. Ward (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 160–79. On Grainger, see John Gilmore, *The Poetics of Empire: A Study of James Grainger's The Sugar-Cane* (London and New Brunswick, 2000). On the Miltonic literature, see the valuable article by Nicholas von Maltzahn, 'Acts of Kind Service: Milton and the Patriot Literature of Empire' in *Milton and the Imperial Vision*, pp. 232–54.

²⁰ The most persuasive recent discussion of modes of political meaning in *Paradise Regained* is David Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries: Religion, Politics and Radical Puritanism* (Cambridge, 2001), chap. 8. See also Laura Lunger Knoppers, *Historicizing Milton: Spectacle, Power and Poetry in Restoration England* (Athens, Ga, 1994).

empire can provide them with an analogical means of comprehending the utterly different kingdom of God. Christ rejects anti-imperial political action as simply part of the cycle of tyranny and rebellion inherent in all worldly empires. He insists that he was not sent to free either the Jews ('themselves were they / Who wrought their own captivity', III. 414–15) or any of the peoples of the Roman Empire 'victor once, now vile and base, / Deservedly made vassal' (IV. 132–3). He will not perpetuate, even by anti-colonial action, the imperial dialectic of master and slave, but, rather, transcend it by self-mastery and patient faith: 'To [God's] due time and providence I leave them' (III. 440). Readers of Shelley, and of Blake (who illustrated this work), will recognise in this poem of mental fight, still more than in *Paradise Lost*, the genesis of the Romantic anti-imperial imagination. Through the dialogues of Satan and Christ, Milton demonstrates the need to inhabit and contest modes of political discourse in order to travel beyond them, to a truer understanding of the relationship of the spiritual self and the external world with its forms of power, oppression, and corruption. Inwardness, as Shelley shows in *Prometheus Unbound*, is the true route to the anti-empire; anti-colonial political struggle is not enough.

Among the first to recognise, and, initially, to misinterpret the imperial preoccupations of Milton's work was Dryden, the most accomplished imperial poet of the Restoration era. In 1674 he adapted *Paradise Lost* as an opera which overtly allegorised Satan's attack on Eden in terms of the third Dutch War.²¹ Dryden's ideas about war, conquest and empire were completely overturned by the Glorious Revolution, and, as a consequence, he revisited and reconsidered the imperial aspects of Miltonic and classical epic (in 1693, he wrote that he had now dropped plans to carry out Milton's plan for a national epic on King Arthur). The arrival of William of Orange plunged Britain into nine years of continental warfare, some of it fought out in colonial theatres in America, Ireland, India, and Africa. Dryden refused to accept the legitimacy of William's monarchy, and stated in public verse that he and his merchant supporters were wasting lives and money.²² In 1697, Dryden responded to the conclusion

²¹ *The State of Innocence, and Fall of Man: An Opera* (circulated widely from 1674, printed London, 1677).

²² The reference to Dryden's early plans for an epic are in the 'Discourse of the Original and Progress of Satire' (1692) in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. Paul Hammond. III. 433. On the War of the League of Augsburg, retrospectively, 'To my Honour'd Kinsman, John Driden of Chesteron' (1700), ll. 142–69 in vol. III of *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1958).

of the war in his incomparable ode, *Alexander's Feast*, in which Alexander, a figure for William, is celebrated by his court musician for his acts of violent imperial conquest. The musician stands for the amorality of imperial art, an art ultimately supplanted in the poem by the Christian music of St Cecilia: 'He rais'd a Mortal to the Skies; / She drew an Angel down'.²³ In the same year, Dryden published his translation of the greatest of all imperial works of art, Virgil's *Aeneid*. The translation has a just claim to be seen as a great English epic in its own right, yet, ironically, it is a work permeated with the translator's ambivalent attitudes towards conquest, empire, and the potential complicity of art with both of these. Critics have recognised the extent to which Dryden's *Aeneis* dramatises Aeneas' conquest of Latium in terms which invite comparison with William III's appropriation of Britain from James II.²⁴ Yet, Dryden's translation also goes well beyond opportunistic Jacobite allusions to encompass a wide-ranging meditation on the nature, ethics, and consequences of colonial conquest. The central question for Dryden is whether Aeneas is justified in his aspiration 'to conquer and command the Latian state' (as Aeneas puts it, in a phrase which has no original in Virgil), even though he knows that this will ultimately lead to the foundation of Rome.²⁵ In *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes that his biblical subject matter is more heroic than the 'rage / Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused' (IX. 16–17), implying a small measure of sympathy for Turnus, whom Aeneas ultimately defeats, and an identification of Aeneas with Satan. In turn, Dryden's Aeneas has something in common with Satan; he and his comrades comprise a 'navy', to use Dryden's terminology, of imperial adventurers and would-be colonisers. Dryden converts Virgil's Mediterranean scenery of cultivated landscapes and sophisticated peoples into a harsh geography of frontier settlements, desolate seas, and hostile, uncivilised natives. Aeneas visits Dido's rival 'Tyrian colony' on the 'wild uncultivated shoar' of Carthage, before proceeding to the 'inhospitable coast' of

²³ *Alexander's Feast; or the Power of Musique, An Ode*, ll. 169–70 in vol. III of *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley. For a discussion of this and other poems of Dryden's late period, see Howard Erskine-Hill, *Poetry of Opposition and Revolution: Dryden to Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 42–5 and *passim*.

²⁴ Notably, Steven N. Zwicker, *Politics and Language in Dryden's Poetry: The Arts of Disguise* (Princeton, 1984), chap. 6 and Richard F. Thomas, *Virgil and the Augustan Reception* (Cambridge, 2001), chap. 2. More generally, see Paul Hammond, *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome* (Oxford, 1999).

²⁵ *The Works of John Dryden*, eds. E. N. Hooker and H. T. Swedenberg *et al.*, to be completed in 20 vols. (Berkeley and LA, 1956–), vols. V and VI, book VI, l. 103. Compare Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 66–7. Dryden's *Aeneis* will hereafter be cited by book and line number.

Latium where Palinurus the helmsman is butchered by a 'cruel Nation' of savages (I. 425; VI. 490–92). As Aeneas battles to defeat Turnus and his Latian allies, Juno, the villainess of Virgil's poem, makes a plausible case for the rights of these Italian natives whom Aeneas plans to conquer (X. 112–15, greatly embellishing Virgil, X. 75). She is vindicated in the end when Jupiter promises, again without warrant from Virgil, that 'The Natives shall command, the Foreigners subside / All shall be Latium' (XII. 1213–14; Virgil, XII. 836). Aeneas is forced to learn his lesson, and adopt a strategy of peaceful settlement and ethnic coexistence; at the end of the poem, he is more of a William Penn than a William of Orange.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Dryden and Milton had created two kinds of poetry through which poets would apprehend and anticipate the spectacular imperial developments of the next century. Dryden's ambivalent, highly contemporary rendition of the *Aeneid* all but disabled imperial epic for most of this period, and engendered many literary narratives of peaceful settlement as an alternative means of national expansion. Dryden provided subsequent poets with a means of celebrating the exploits of William Penn, James Cook, or the peaceful Georgia colony of James Oglethorpe as models of non-coercive, non-colonial settlement that would ultimately enhance the greatness of Britain. From Milton poets derived the tendency to figure foreign enemies, especially the French, as proponents of would-be Satanic empire, and to imagine a peaceful, universal empire as its alternative and opposite. And from both Milton and Dryden, poets developed an intense preoccupation with the relationship between empire and artistic culture. Milton's rejection, in *Paradise Regained*, of classical learning in favour of biblical culture informed a wider debate as to whether the arts flourished best when diffused through a large territorial empire, or whether they fared better under conditions of competitive emulation between small, independent states. In opposition to Britain's imperial expansion during the eighteenth century, poets increasingly adopted the latter position, associating artistic renewal with small states, and artistic stagnation with large empires. The relation between liberty and the arts became, in itself, a central poetic myth, with poets doubting that the two could ever be combined under an imperial regime, even an empire of the seas. This is the central theme of Pope's *Dunciad*, and it was reiterated early in the next century when Romantic poets counterpoised against modern imperial Britain the idea of ancient Greece as a federation of small states in which liberty and the arts had once flourished. Shelley prefaced *Prometheus Unbound* with the prediction that poetry would flourish in England if it

were only subdivided into forty republics on the model of ancient Athens. From Pope to Shelley, many of the most influential poets of this period were determined that there could and should be no imperial arts under the Hanoverian monarchs.²⁶

There were, of course, those who hoped for new Virgilian epics and new Horatian odes, and, at several moments in the early eighteenth century, poets proclaimed a cultural revival in the wake of new imperial developments. Whig poets responded to the wars which followed the Glorious Revolution by fashioning a bellicose poetic idiom in forms which synthesised ode, epic, and panegyric. Among the most talented of these were Matthew Prior and Joseph Addison. Prior was unabashed in his celebration of William III's martial kingship, seeing imperial expansion as a likely corollary of his military successes on the continent: 'our Master's Fleets shall go, / As far as Winds can bear, or Waters flow, / New Lands to make, new Indies to explore, / In Worlds unknown to plant Britannia's Power'.²⁷ Addison contributed the single best war poem of the eighteenth century, *The Campaign* (1705), an exhilarating, fast-paced miniature epic written to celebrate the Marlborough's victories over Louis XIV along the Danube and the Rhine: 'Rivers of blood I see, and hills of slain, / An Iliad rising out of One campaign'.²⁸ The most conspicuous ideologue of the new bellicose Whigism was the court doctor, Richard Blackmore. Blackmore's epics of the late 1690s, *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697), allegorised William III as King Arthur, praising his martial valour and heroic conquest of England. Though much ridiculed by his contemporaries, Blackmore was in fact the first poet to make a serious attempt to recapture both Milton and Virgil for the cause of British imperialism. He combined an overtly Miltonic machinery of devils and angels with plot lines from the *Aeneid*, all within the deliberately nostalgic framework of Spenserian Protestant imperial myth; in his eyes, if in hardly anyone else's, Blackmore had cropped both Milton's and Dryden's

²⁶ This prominent eighteenth-century debate has not been much discussed by critics, but see, for some background, Michael Meehan, *Liberty and Poetics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London and Sydney, 1986) and Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1970). Hume's essays (especially 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' (1742) and 'Of Luxury' (1754) represent a central contribution to this debate.

²⁷ 'Carmen Seculare, For the Year 1700. To the King' in *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, eds. H. Bunker Wright and Monroe K. Spears, 2 vols., 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1971), ll. 482–5. On Whig poetics and criticism in this period, see David Womersley's introduction to his edition of *Augustan Critical Writing* (Harmondsworth, 1997).

²⁸ Joseph Addison, *The Campaign. A Poem: To His Grace the Duke of Marlborough* (1705), ll. 11–12.

laurels by writing the Arthurian national epic which his two predecessors had got no further than planning. Blackmore's strain of belligerent Spenserianism during the long British campaign against Louis XIV continued during Queen Anne's reign, and Prior endeavoured to rehabilitate the Spenserian stanza itself as a means of celebrating her imperial monarchy ('An Ode, Humbly Inscri'bd to the Queen. On the Glorious Success of Her Majesty's Arms', 1706). When the wars were brought to an end by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, there was a huge flurry of poetic celebration heralding a return to the poetics of peaceful empire. Howard Erskine-Hill, in his Warton lecture of 1994, surveyed this large body of poetry, and argued compellingly that Pope's poem on this occasion, *Windsor-Forest*, demurred from the mood of national triumphalism on the grounds that the peace treaty included improved slave trading rights for British companies. No other poets seem to have allowed the 'Asiento Clause' in the Treaty to dampen their enthusiasm for the arrival of a peaceful, and soon-to-be universal British Empire.²⁹

The early Hanoverian years saw little activity on the colonial front, and it was a straightforward matter for Whig supporters of the regime to update the baroque myth of peaceful empire to fit contemporary, uneventful realities. Poetic pronouncements on the wondrous Augustan peace of the Georgian empire became so routine that Swift made fun of them in 'On Poetry: A Rapsody' (written 1733), a satirical guide for the modern hack panegyrist.³⁰ The Whig poet Edward Young played some part in the development, during the 1720s and 1730s, of a revised idea of the British Empire as an international commercial community in his poem *Imperium Pelagi: A Naval Lyric* (1730); in this he declared that 'Kings, Merchants are in league and love', and attempted one of the eighteenth century's very few poetic defences of slavery.³¹ The idea of the Empire as a commercial community was also developed in the Caribbean and American colonies themselves by poets as well as by political writers; such poetry was often traditional and derivative, but, in the Americas, the reiterability of British imperial poetics could be read as a sign of the viability of a white colonial identity, and of the cultural health of the colonies.³² The return to bellicose imperialism came, spec-

²⁹ 'Pope and Slavery' in *Alexander Pope: World and Word*, ed. Howard Erskine-Hill, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 91 (1998), pp. 27–53.

³⁰ 'On Poetry: A Rapsody' in *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 2 vols., 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1958), ll. 418–30.

³¹ Edward Young, *Imperium Pelagi. A Naval Lyric* (1730) III. 76.

³² On the American poetry of this period, see David S. Shields, *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics and Commerce in British America, 1690–1750* (Chicago, 1990).

tacularly, in 1739 when Britain declared war on Spain and embarked on a naval campaign in the Caribbean aimed at protecting and furthering its imperial interests. The government yielded to intense lobbying for war by opposition Whig groups, including that of Pope's friend Lord Bolingbroke, demanding an expansion of Britain's trading empire. It was this Whig opposition which now erupted into patriotic, imperialist poetry, with Thomson's 'Rule, Britannia' (1740) leading the way, hard on the heels of works such as Richard Glover's *London: Or, the Progress of Commerce* (1739). The patriot poets, as Christine Gerrard has described them, wrote in a style which was both rooted in British tradition and Protestantism, and aggressively expansionist, demonstrating, for the first time, that a British imperial identity need not be a cosmopolitan one.³³ The patriots' wholesale appropriation of Miltonic verse and diction was of a piece with this native strain of imperialism; not only was Milton seen as the poet of good, universal empire, but the return to Miltonic unrhymed verse, after decades of carefully crafted couplets, was itself a sign that culture would be renewed by the resurgence of national imperialism. Expectations of imperial cultural renewal ran high—even Pope and Samuel Johnson were caught up in them for a time—but they were quickly dashed once the naval war with Spain mutated into prolonged continental warfare.³⁴ Vociferous anti-Catholicism did not, in the end, appear to provide a basis for a unified ideology or poetics of empire, and subsequent defences of empire re-adopted a more secular and cosmopolitan tone. The Miltonic revival continued, but the fashion changed in the direction of philosophical-topographical poems such as Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination* (1744)—works in which Edenic landscapes were scrutinised afresh from a free-ranging, deliberately non-proprietary perspective.

The most important outcome of the attempted patriot renewal of British imperial culture was the poem which struck the most decisive blow against the whole project: Pope's *Dunciad* of 1743. This poem has never been read in terms of its anti-imperialism, yet it is clearly a powerful and central contribution to the eighteenth-century debate about the relationship between arts and empire; it combines a sophisticated attack upon the idea that imperial culture might be possible, or even desirable, under the

³³ Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry and National Myth, 1725–42* (Oxford, 1994).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, chaps. 4 and 8.

Hanoverian kings, with a more far-reaching assault on the whole idea of an expansive British Empire.³⁵ *Paradise Lost* and Dryden's *Aeneis* supply the poem with its anti-imperial register within which Pope exposes, with savage humour, the stagnation and degeneration of the arts under a corrupt, would-be universal empire. The first three books of *The Dunciad* were published in 1728–9, and tell how the goddess Dullness sets about restoring her old empire on earth; she first anoints the editor and dramatist Lewis Theobald as her earthly representative, and then enthrones him, exactly like Milton's Satan, 'High on a gorgeous seat, that far outshone / Henley's gilt tub, or Fleckno's Irish throne'.³⁶ His coronation is celebrated with public games, and then, like Aeneas, he is granted an Elysian vision of the universal empire which he will found, and is reassured that 'the Hour is on its way, / That lifts our Goddess to Imperial Sway' (III. 123–4). In 1742, Pope's disillusion with patriot cultural projects and with the imperialist ideas of Bolingbroke led him to add a fourth book to *The Dunciad*, and, the following year, to revise the whole, placing the new poet laureate Colley Cibber in the role of king of the dunces. In the final version, the empress Dullness has now taken complete control of commerce and politics; in the famous closing lines her apotheosis precipitates the return to primordial Chaos: 'Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restor'd; / Light dies before thy uncreating word: / Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall; / And Universal Darkness buries All' (IV. 653–6). Cibber, as both a popular playwright and as the King's laureate, stands for the league of commercialism, art, and monarchy which court poets, such as Young, celebrated and which Pope derided. The empire of Dullness is emphatically a would-be universal empire in the modern, eighteenth-century sense, purporting to emulate and surpass the ancient empire of Rome in power, extent, and cultural hegemony. For Pope, it is simultaneously a commercial empire of peace of the kind celebrated by Whig apologists for the Hanoverian regime—so peaceful, in fact, that everybody is bored to sleep at the end—and a Satanic universal

³⁵ The studies which have been most useful in this line of enquiry have been Aubrey Williams' *Pope's Dunciad: A Study of its Meaning* (1955), Pat Rogers, 'Empire, Gold and Lawn: *The Dunciad* and the Coronation of George II' in *Literature and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (Brighton, 1985), and Emrys Jones, 'Pope and Dullness', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 54 (1968), pp. 231–63, an essay with which every critic of this work has to reckon, and with aspects of which this reading takes implicit issue.

³⁶ *The Dunciad*, ed. Valerie Rumbold (London and New York, 1999), I, ll. 1–2 (these lines are the same in all earlier versions of the poem). All citations are from this edition.

monarchy, posing a serious threat to the inner freedom and outward liberty of those who succumb to it. By superimposing these two images of empire in the poem, Pope exposes the contemporary myth of Britain's new world order of peaceful trade for what it is: the ideological mystification of political subjection and unequal trade, and the mercantile corruption of state power. Pope parodies the best known of the (tacitly pro-slavery) Utrecht Treaty poems, Thomas Tickell's *On the Prospect of the Peace* (1713), at the point where Settle gives Cibber a vision of the wondrous spicy shores which are to become part of the empire of Dullness:

Ascend this hill, whose cloudy point commands
Her boundless empire over seas and lands.
See, round the Poles where keener spangles shine,
Where spices smoke beneath the burning Line,
(Earth's wide extremes) her sable flag display'd,
And all the nations cover'd in her shade! (III. 67–72)

A few lines later Settle disturbs this vision of global peace with a hint that the empire of Dullness might not always be harmonious: 'In peace, great Goddess, ever be ador'd; / How keen is war, if Dulness draw the sword!' (III. 119–20). The intellectual consequences of the empire of Dullness, as Pope states in a note to the fourth book, will be similar to those experienced by the Roman Empire during its most tyrannical phase of government (IV. note to l. 175). Pope's implication is that real liberty of thought and speech and meaningful public action are all snuffed out by the Georgian system of deference and hierarchy: after all ideas and principles have been eliminated from the brains of the dull, there is 'nothing left but Homage to a King!' (IV. 524). The lewdness and scurrility of Grub street are not, then, to be taken as signs of cultural irreverence, but are merely carnivalesque, indications that the state will tolerate licentiousness in order to prevent genuine dissent.

The Dunciad evinces a genuinely Miltonic anti-imperialism, in the sense that, unlike many of his contemporaries, Pope clearly did not believe that meaningful distinctions could be made between good, peaceful empire, and bad, Satanic Empire. And yet, like *Paradise Lost*, *The Dunciad* makes it difficult to imagine an anti-empire—a different kind of political and cultural order—capable of undoing the Chaos at end of the poem. The poem frustrates any possibility of accessing the ideal opposite of the empire of Dullness through a hermeneutic of inversion; in my view, Pope does not posit an alternative, Jacobite empire waiting behind the final curtain, nor does he postulate the Roman Empire as an alternative

ideal for Britain.³⁷ In the latter case, Pope was far too conscious of the price which Rome's subject peoples paid for its political and cultural greatness; in the images of the city of Rome depicted on Roman coins he saw both cultural greatness and colonial exploitation: 'Imperial wonders rais'd on Nations spoil'd, / Where mix'd with Slaves the groaning Martyr toil'd; / Huge Theatres, that now unpeopled Woods, / Now drain'd a distant country of her Floods', just like Milton's Romans in *Paradise Regained*, who 'govern ill the nations under yoke, / Peeling their provinces' (IV. 135–6).³⁸ When Pope did articulate political and cultural alternatives to the ways of both Rome and Hanoverian Britain elsewhere in his works they were, in fact, along lines suggested by Dryden's *Aeneid*. Around the same time as he was revising *The Dunciad* Pope drew up plans for a Virgilian epic poem on the subject of Brutus, the mythical Trojan founder of Britain. Like Dryden's Aeneas, Brutus is portrayed in the plans not as a conqueror, but as the founding father of a peaceful new settlement. Brutus comes, Pope writes, 'not to conquer and destroy the Natives, but to polish the People', and to liberate them from the tyranny of giants given to 'eating Captives' and 'carrying away virgins'.³⁹ The Brutus idea, though never written up as a national epic poem, enjoyed continuing salience during the eighteenth century, and had already been the subject of Hildebrand Jacob's poem *Brutus the Trojan: Founder of the British Empire* (1735).⁴⁰

Pope may have drawn some inspiration for the idea of autonomous, peaceful settlements as a genuine alternative to territorial empire from recent history, specifically the case of the Georgia colony newly created by General James Oglethorpe. Oglethorpe obtained a charter in 1732 to set up a colony designed to provide independence and land for poor people of all religious persuasions without slavery or infringement of the rights of the native peoples. The colony was, at first, a remarkable success and beacon of philanthropy. When Oglethorpe returned to England to visit in

³⁷ For readings of this poem as a crypto-Jacobite work, see Douglas Brooks-Davies, *Pope's Dunciad and the Queen of Night: A Study in Emotional Jacobitism* (Manchester, 1985) and Murray G. H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994).

³⁸ 'To Mr Addison Occasioned by his Dialogues on Medals' (1720), ll. 4–7 in vol. VI of *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt et al., 11 vols. (1939–69). On the distinctions made by Pope's contemporaries between the violent Roman and peaceful British empires, see Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), chap. 7.

³⁹ 'Brutus' (c.1740), British Library, MS Eg. 15900, ff. 4–6.

⁴⁰ See Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, pp. 192–3.

1734, he was greeted with an outpouring of poetic tributes, and later received this brief homage from Pope in one of the *Imitations of Horace*: ‘One, driv’n by strong Benevolence of Soul, / Shall fly, like *Oglethorp*, from Pole to Pole’.⁴¹ At the time of Pope’s Brutus project and revised *Dunciad*, Oglethorpe was vigorously defending his colony against the Spanish, and Pope and others were angry at how little support he was getting from the British navy: hence the lines in book four of *The Dunciad* where Pope complains that, under the reign of Dullness, ‘chiefless Armies doz’d out the Campaign; / And Navies yawn’d for orders on the Main’ (IV. 617–18). Time ran out for Oglethorpe’s enlightened settlement ten years later when it reverted to the crown, and soon became yet another large plantation-farming, slave-owning southern colony. But for Pope, as later for Oglethorpe’s good friends Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith, the Georgia project had demonstrated that it was possible to have emigration without exploitation, colonial settlement without imperialism.

Pope’s synthetic and hostile vision of the British Empire as a single territorial and cultural unit was certainly ahead of public perception of what still seemed to most a patchwork of settlements, mercantile companies and trading bases and fortresses. The event which decisively changed that public perception, as well as the nature and scope of the Empire itself, was the Seven Years War of 1756–63, at the end of which Britain had made massive territorial inroads into India, acquired Canada, taken control of the slave trade from the French, and gained more islands in the Caribbean. Slowly, the British public came to recognise that the domestic economy and their overseas possessions were part of a single, global system of consumption and exchange.⁴² Once again, global habits of imagination enabled poets to formulate new visions of empire, and once again, it was the poets most opposed to empire who gave it the fullest and most coherent articulation. Johnson’s famous dismissal of the war (‘only the quarrel of two robbers for the spoils of a

⁴¹ ‘The Second Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated’ (1737), ll. 277–8 in vol. VI of the *Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*. This is not cited in the otherwise comprehensive survey of the large poetic response to Oglethorpe’s schemes, Richard C. Boys, ‘General Oglethorpe and the Muses’, *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 31 (1947), pp. 19–29. See also John C. Inscoe, ed., *James Edward Oglethorpe: New Perspectives on his Life and Legacy* (Georgia Historical Society: Savannah, 1997).

⁴² This view of the Seven Years War as a decisive event in the reformulation of the practice and ideology of empire in Britain is derived from the work of P. J. Marshall. See, for example, his ‘Britain and the World in the Eighteenth Century: I, Reshaping the Empire’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series, 8 (1998), pp. 1–18.

passenger') is of a piece with his earlier, blisteringly satirical attack on all worldly imperial ambition in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749). This poem in turn, through explicit allusion to Addison's *The Campaign*, repudiates the imperial poetics of the recent past: 'For such [empty glory] in distant lands the Britons shine, / And stain with blood the Danube or the Rhine'.⁴³ Another voice raised against the war and against Britain's deepening involvement in North America and India was that of the Whig satirist Charles Churchill. His *Gotham* (1764) opens with a sarcastic attack on imperialism, far-sighted in its targeting of the evangelical 'missionary felons' who are, for him, an integral part of contemporary British and continental colonialism: 'Happy, thrice happy *now* the Savage race, / Since Europe took their *Gold*, and gave them *Grace!*'⁴⁴ However, the most powerfully imagined anti-imperial poems of this moment were undoubtedly Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' (1770) and 'The Traveller' (1764), the latter written immediately after the Seven Years War and extraordinarily prescient in its perception of its consequences. Goldsmith's attitudes to empire were formed by his Irish background, particularly his view of empire as an economic system which perpetuated domestic poverty and inequality. His views on the Seven Years War were similar to Johnson's: 'I see no reason why we should aggrandize our colonies at our own expense'.⁴⁵ His poems have often been regarded as works of Tory nostalgia for pre-commercial rural life, yet, like *The Dunciad*, their real subject is the way in which the progress of civilisation has been distorted by the advent of commercial empire. 'The Traveller', an overview of European countries from a prospect in the Alps, is a cosmopolitan poem of the Enlightenment in the sense that it acknowledges and respects different national traditions within a general narrative of modernisation. Goldsmith's point is that, in the British case, this modernity was being self-defeated by imperial expansion; the imperial cash nexus reduced slaves and poor white emigrants to a value equivalent to other traded commodities, with grave consequences for the well-being and cohesion of British society:

⁴³ *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, ll. 181–2 in *The Poems of Samuel Johnson*, eds. David Nichol Smith and Edward L. McAdam, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1974). The best account of Johnson's anti-imperialism is Clement Hawes, 'Johnson and Imperialism' in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 114–26.

⁴⁴ *Gotham. A Poem*, ll. 72 and 67–8 in *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*, ed. Douglas Grant (Oxford, 1956).

⁴⁵ 'Some Thoughts preliminary to a general Peace' (1759) in *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1966), III, p. 33.

Have we not seen, round Britain's peopled shore,
 Her useful sons exchanged for useless ore?
 Seen all her triumphs but destruction haste,
 Like flaring tapers brightening as they waste;
 Seen opulence, her grandeur to maintain,
 Lead stern depopulation in her train,
 And over fields where scattered hamlets rose,
 In barren solitary pomp repose?⁴⁶

Here, as in 'The Deserted Village', Goldsmith is strikingly original in considering the domestic impact of imperialism on politics, social relations and moral culture within an imaginative vision which fully integrates life at home with the overseas empire.

Goldsmith's distinction between European cosmopolitanism and imperialism was inspired by other anti-imperial poets such as Pope, and it was bolstered by more recent writers of the French Enlightenment such as Voltaire. Enlightenment histories of empire, notably Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756 and after), Raynal's *Histoire des philosophique . . . des deux Indes* (1770 and after), and William Robertson's *History of America* (1777) were underpinned by a cosmopolitan vision of the world as a system of interdependent states, a vision which could shade into either liberal imperialism or radical anti-colonialism.⁴⁷ Before the American Revolutionary War, there was constant slippage between the idea of enlightened empire, and that of a cosmopolitan fraternity of free trading states. The distinction between cosmopolitanism and imperialism made much greater sense to British readers after the loss of the American colonies dealt a fatal blow to the myth of empire as a global fraternity of peace and free trade. After 1776, the cosmopolitan language of empire was decisively and permanently appropriated by anti-imperial writers. On both sides of the Atlantic, poets set about creating a post-colonial language for the new world economic order; it drew upon the universal humanitarianism of Enlightenment world histories, as well as upon images of the decayed Spanish Empire, as a way of meditating upon where Britain went wrong. The language of peaceful free trade and global cultural revival was particularly appealing to evangelicals and dissenters as a means of reinstating a post-colonial version of the idea of a Protestant Atlantic community. In Britain, Helen Maria Williams's

⁴⁶ *The Traveller, or A Prospect of Society*, ll. 397–404 in *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London and New York, 1969).

⁴⁷ Anthony Padgen has written of the ways in which imperialism was transformed by Enlightenment rationalism in *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c.1500–1800* (New Haven, 1995), chap. 6.

post-Revolutionary War poem *Peru* (1784) gave an allegorically pointed narrative of a failed Inca revolt against Spanish imperialism which ends with a prediction of future colonial liberation. In the newly independent America, Joel Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* (1787) described a vision in which the discoverer of America foresees the harmonious post-colonial world order which will come about after the defeat of the Spanish and British Empires.⁴⁸ William Cowper, the most influential evangelical poet of this period, reminded his readers that 'the band of commerce was designed / To associate all the branches of mankind', and not to subjugate them to an imperial order.⁴⁹ Cowper's long, philosophical and topographical poem, *The Task* (1785), is, in part, about the moral unfitness of England for empire. Yet, though fiercely critical of the slave trade and of East India nabobs, and though unusually sceptical for his time about the benefits of Cook's voyages, Cowper does not entirely preclude the possibility, sometime in the future, of a morally regenerated British imperialism.

Dissenting and evangelical poets were vocal and highly effective opponents of monopoly trading companies, slavery, and the exploitation of India. Yet in capturing, for their own reformist purposes, the cosmopolitan language of empire, they left it open, particularly after the abolition of the slave trade, for moral rehabilitation as a language of revitalised imperialism. Most continued to equate economic with moral globalisation, and, for them, world trade was morally salvageable as a means of spreading enlightened British Protestantism. The alternative would be a future of moral and economic decline for Britain. A growing tendency, in the later eighteenth century, for poets to broach the theme of empire by projecting themselves forward onto a post-imperial vantage point was strengthened by the popularity of Volney's *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, 1791 (translated from the French by Joel Barlow, among others). Volney's work, in which a traveller seated among the ruins

⁴⁸ The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a significant poetic revival of interest in Spanish imperialism, for example, also James Ralph, *Zeuma: or, the Love of Liberty* (1729), Samuel Rogers, *The Voyage of Columbus* (1812), and William Lisle Bowles, *The Spirit of Discovery* (1804) and *The Missionary* (1822). An excellent article on this subject is Alan Richardson, 'Epic Ambivalence: Imperial Politics and Romantic Deflection in Williams' *Peru* and Landor's *Gebir*' in *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture, 1780–1834*, eds. Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (Bloomington, 1996).

⁴⁹ 'Charity' (1782) in *The Poems of William Cowper*, eds. John D. Baird and Charles Ryscamp (Oxford, 1980–95), I, p. 86. On Cowper and empire, see Karen O'Brien, '“Still at Home”: Cowper's Domestic Empires' in *Early Romanticism: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Woodman (Basingstoke, 1998), pp. 134–47.

of Palmyra has a vision of the future decay of all the empires of the world, was particularly influential in crystallising and perpetuating the imaginative trope of a future London in ruins. From the anonymous author of 'The State of England, and the once flourishing City of London' (1780) and the dissenting poet Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), in which a Canadian tourist in the far future visits the ruins of London, to similar images, later in the nineteenth century, in Macaulay and Austin Dobson, the British Empire was often visualised and judged in projected retrospect.⁵⁰

In Barbauld's powerfully rendered polemic, the imminent demise of the British Empire is due to commercial as well as moral failure, and there remains, as in Cowper's works, the utopian possibility of an alternative, humanitarian form of economic globalisation. For this reason, her evangelical mode of imperial critique must be distinguished from the more radical anti-imperialism of Romantic poets such as Blake, Shelley, and Byron, as well as from Wordsworth and Southey's more conservative attempts to refurbish the idea of colonisation in terms other than trade.⁵¹ For these Romantic poets, the route to a utopian future would not be opened by free trade, but by the individual achievement of first inner, then outer liberty, as Christ explains to Satan in *Paradise Regained* ('he who reigns within himself, and rules / Passions, desires, and fears, is more a king' (II. 466–7)). In his poem of 1793 *America, A Prophecy*, Blake gave an allegorised account of the American Revolutionary War in which the central Promethean character Orc must first free his mind from mental subjection before unleashing a process of global liberation from empire. History, polemic, personal liberation, and prophecy merge in Orc's declaration that 'empire is no more, and now the lion and wolf shall cease'.⁵² Unlike his evangelical contemporaries, Blake's opposition to empire was properly Miltonic in the sense that his poetry is committed to

⁵⁰ 'The State of England, and the once Flourishing City of London. In a letter from an American Traveller, dated from the ruins of the Portico of St Paul's, in the Year 2199' in *Poems by a Young Nobleman* (1790); *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a Poem* (1812) in *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, eds. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens, GA, 1994).

⁵¹ For example, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, The Excursion, The Recluse*, ed. Helen Darbishire, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1972), V, pp. 295–9. The most authoritative account of Southey's political views is David Eastwood, 'Robert Southey and the Intellectual Origins of Romantic Conservatism', *English Historical Review*, 104 (1989), pp. 308–31.

⁵² *America. A Prophecy*, l. 51 in W. H. Stevenson ed., *Blake: The Complete Poems*, 2nd edn. (London and New York, 1989). See, in general, David V. Erdman, *Blake. Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times*, rev. edn. (Princeton, 1969).

the notion that evil worldly imperialism cannot be countered by imagining an opposing divinely sanctioned, commercial empire; for him, the anti-empire must be conceived as a global reordering of power, time, and space. In other respects, also, Romantic poetry signalled a return to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Miltonic traditions of anti-imperialism, and a rejection of contemporary evangelical poetics. A number of poets deliberately re-conceptualised colonial oppression in pre-modern terms, not as a function of economic hierarchy, but as a consequence of the interdependence of tyrant and slave, and the loss of inner liberty in both. History itself could be understood in terms of typologies of oppression and liberty, tyranny and slavery, and the British Empire was one of many manifestations of this age-old pattern. The sense of looking down on the history of empires, like Adam from his hill in Paradise, is a source of both strength and weakness for the anti-slavery writings of Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Southey which can sound simultaneously powerful, over-generalised and naive.

The loss and recovery of inner liberty, and its implications for the future of the global order, is the subject of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and it is this poem which can be located as both the culmination and terminus of the Miltonic anti-imperial tradition. The action of Shelley's lyrical drama is the moral re-education of Prometheus, a figure for European reason and progress, and his reunification with Asia, a female figure for love and imagination. Prometheus has been punished by Jupiter for cursing him, and has been bound to a rock in the Indian Caucasus. Before this, Prometheus was responsible for the progress of human civilisation and had created a cosmopolitan world order united by navigation and trade; as Asia recollects, 'He taught to rule, as life directs the limbs, / The tempest-winged chariots of the Ocean, / And the Celt knew the Indian'.⁵³ Yet, despite Prometheus's enlightened intentions, this order engendered inequality and oppression, and he eventually learns that the God whom he cursed is really the embodiment of the earthly tyranny which he himself created. If he is to uncreate this phantom of oppression, he must first free himself from thinking of the world in terms of masters and slaves, and understand that empire cannot be ended through the struggle of good and bad imperial wills (just as Christ in *Paradise*

⁵³ *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts* (1820) in *The Poems of Shelley*, eds. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, 2 vols. (London and New York, 2000), II, ll. 92–4. All quotations are from this edition.

Regained refuses to wrestle with Satan for imperial control of the earth). Jupiter falls, and the earth is liberated and transformed by Prometheus' new understanding. Cosmopolitanism, which is the mutual respect of separate and competitor nations, is replaced by post-imperial universalism in which man becomes 'Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless' (III. 195). As the shadows of the old commercial, imperial order slowly lift, the arts revive, and Prometheus inaugurates a new world order in which each man or woman is their own, free republic. To forgive, to love, to hope and to endure, proclaims the mysterious character Demogorgon in the final line of the poem, 'is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory' (IV. 578).

Poets of the anti-imperial tradition from Milton and Shelley both predicted and ensured that there were to be no arts for the British Empire, no great *Lusiads* or *Aeneids*, to give it an enabling myth of global destiny. It is only bad conscience and criticism which have encouraged us to believe that so many of the most powerful writers of this period were in some inevitable way complicit with the worst aspects of British imperialism. Those eighteenth-century writers who attempted to forge a poetics in favour of empire were, in the long run, less successful and, in most cases, less imaginatively forceful than those who opposed it. The literary relationship between the two attitudes to empire was certainly one of mutual dependence, but generally on terms far more favourable to the older, and more lasting traditions of anti-imperialism. The outcome for the nineteenth century was the foreclosure of imperial possibilities for British poetry, and, indeed, of British literature generally, long before the historical extent of Britain's empire had been fully realised. The British Empire was, and remained, an empire without a fully engaged or celebratory imperial literature. The old, universalising habits of imagination, so decisively captured for the anti-imperial cause in the late eighteenth century, did not persist beyond the disappointed hopes of Romantic radicalism. Victorians adopted an insular account of national history which often blinded them to the nature and domestic implications of their empire, and the Victorian imagination segregated the domestic realm and the overseas empire to a far greater extent than its Georgian predecessor. When Victorian poets imagined the Empire, they most often did so by means of imaginative inversion: Britain became the remote, conquered province of the Roman Empire, or a decaying post-imperial ruin, with only a few broken columns to remind visitors of the great power it once was. Victorian imperial melancholy had its roots in the eighteenth century, and was coloured by Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, with its closing description of the ruined city of Rome visited by 'pilgrims from the remote, and once

savage, countries of the North'.⁵⁴ But it was given fullest expression as Arthurian myth in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, a series of poetic romances in which Arthur's Britain becomes a doomed empire, clutching at the straws of civilisation, and soon to be overwhelmed by heathen swarms without and by moral decay within. Empire features in Tennyson's poetry not as part of an enabling myth of national expansion, but as an almost intolerable pressure upon the individual psyche, and on the certainties of family, home, and country.⁵⁵ There was, of course, an attempt by late Victorian and Edwardian poets to re-create a celebratory imperial poetry, but these poets embraced, rather than discarded, Tennyson's provincial, melancholy, belated sense of empire. Despite its commitment to the cause of imperialism, the poetry of Kipling, Henley, and Newbolt was couched in terms of a kind of proleptic nostalgia for an empire which was about to end, a white man's burden too heavy to shoulder for much longer, and soon to be passed on to the Americans. Arts and empire, if they belonged together at all, could not coexist for long. There is a double irony here: if Britain had a fully developed tradition of anti-imperial poetry well before the British Empire became a historical reality, then it also had an imperial poetry of nostalgia for empire many years before the Empire came to an end.

⁵⁴ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1994), III, p. 456.

⁵⁵ See Matthew Reynolds's illuminating discussion of 'Tennyson's Britain: The Empire of the Imagination' in *The Realms of Verse, 1830–1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* (Oxford, 2001), chap. 9.