

MILTON AS POET-HISTORIAN

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Milton's role as national poet has received surprisingly little critical attention, yet an understanding of his conception of this role provides a rich and unified view of Milton's whole career in poetry and prose, public and private. For Milton, the ideal poet is a true historian of his race, singing of its past yet participating actively in its present in order that he may more effectively inspire its future. If we appreciate fully Milton's respect for the duties of this traditional bard, his concept of the subject matter of the bardic song, and the training and experience he regarded as prerequisites for the bard's national poem or epic, we can see the relation between Milton's poetry and his prose writing and his reasons for participating in national, public affairs. No longer shall we accept the common fallacy of Milton's "interrupted" poetic career¹; instead, we shall discover that Milton's public career was an essential experience for the poet who planned to write a great national poem, and that his analysis of his own nation's history was necessary preparation for the bard interpreting "emulable deeds." Finally, we shall see why Milton's "national" poem was transformed into three poems concerned with Man: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

Tillyard has commented on Milton's wish to "sway men, to be a great teacher"²; but he has not extended this interpretation to include Milton's early reference to the bard as one who will "imbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu, and publick civility" (*Ad Patrem*.) Similarly Le Comte declares that Milton in *all* his work "thought of himself as the counselor and

¹For further discussion, see page 54, below.

²E.M.W. Tillyard in his Introduction to Phyllis B. Tillyard, *Milton's Private Correspondence and Academic Exercises* (Cambridge, 1932), p. xxxv.

teacher of his countrymen”³; but Le Comte does not develop the point adequately. Other writers also fail to make use of Milton’s teacher: poet: historian identification and of his own role as *vates* or national poet.⁴

Vates, as in *Ad Patrem* (line 44) is commonly translated as “bard.” But this is the poet-historian of Roman tradition, not the “strolling bard” (or mere reciter of epics—*cyclicus*) of whom Milton writes slightly in *Pro se Defensio*⁵ or the historian (*historicus*) such as Sallust, whom Milton praises so highly in the *Familiar Epistles* twenty-three and twenty-six. The *vates* or national bard Milton emulated was free of the characteristics of common poets and common historians alike. Too many historians are inaccurate and—even worse—have no practical advice for their contemporaries. Milton makes this point clear in his various criticisms of “monkish historians” and of “illiterate and frivolous ones.”⁶ Common poets are no better: “What despicable creatures

³Edward S. Le Comte, *Yet Once More* (New York, 1953), pp. 4-5.

⁴Don M. Wolfe in his notes to Milton’s *Complete Prose Works* outlines five functions of the *vates*: to inculcate virtue by precept and by example; to provide catharsis; to celebrate the glory of God; to celebrate the deeds of the sons of God in his service; and (“essentially Milton’s own” interpretation) to deplore the relapses of England. (Vol. I, 816, n. 109). Douglas Bush has described Milton as “the last English poet whose unified mastery of learning might fairly justify the claim of the *vates* to be a teacher of his age” (in James Thorpe, *Milton Criticism*, New York: 1950, p. 308). E.M.W. Tillyard in his *Milton* (London, 1930) refers to the opening of the second book of Milton’s *History of Britain* as an implied avowal of Milton’s earlier desire to be at once the historian and the poet of the political heroes of 1640 (p. 178). Milton’s own use of the term *vates* clearly follows that of Virgil and is part of his respect for the Romans who “beate us into some civilitie” and whose historians provided the only reliable accounts of British history during the period of Roman influence (*History of Britain*, Columbia Milton X, 51 and 33). But it also includes the British Druids, the bards of *Mansus* who “sang of heroes and their emulable acts”, and whose ancient learning and philosophy offered Milton an example of his own nation’s bardic powers (see for instance references in *Areopagitica* and in the *History of Britain*).

⁵Columbia Milton (referred to hereafter as CM) IX, 286-7.

⁶*History of Britain*, CM X, 33.

our common rimers and play writers be," for they are "libidinous and ignorant poetasters" whose major fault is their harmful teaching of "vicious principles [lapped] in sweet pills."⁷

In contrast, the true poet carries on the tradition of the olden bard "sacred to the gods...their priest [whose] heart and lips mysteriously breathe the indwelling Jove." This description in *Elegy VI* of 1629 repeats the idea often expressed by the youthful Milton that poets are "almost the same thing" as divine oracles (*Prolusions II*) and that poetry is able to "raise aloft the soul smothered by the dust of earth" (*Prolusions III*). Yet Milton was not so naive as to suppose that his own inspiration came without some effort on his own part. "That power with which [divine poetry] is by heavenly grace indued" requires an unusually severe education; it demands continual prayer, as described in the Preface to the second book of *Church-Government* and in *Paradise Regained* (I, 11); and it demands high ethical standards in the poet whose whole life is "a true Poem":

The poet who tells of wars...of pious heroes...
the leaders of men...he indeed must live sparely
after the manner of the Samian master...his
youth must be chaste and free from sin, and his
hand without stain.⁸

In his seventh *Prolusion* Milton had similarly written, "Nothing common or mediocre can be tolerated in a poet"; and he amplified the view in his *Apology against a Pamphlet* of 1642, where he asserted that the poet should not presume "to sing high praises of heroick men...unlesse he have in himselfe the experience and the practice of all that which is praise-worthy."⁹

⁷Of *Education*, Yale Prose [YP] II, 405. *The Reason of Church Government*, YP I, 818.

⁸*Elegy VI*. All translations from Milton's Latin poems in this paper are taken (unless otherwise identified) from Walter MacKellar, *The Latin Poems of John Milton* (New Haven, 1930),

⁹YP I, 288 and 890.

The words "experience" and "practice" suggest that in poetry as in virtue Milton preferred activity to the cloistered life. The "unpremeditated" verse of *Paradise Lost* (IX, 23) came after Milton had himself followed a rigorous program of education, discipline, and experience. God's inspiration, and Clio's, together with the dictation of that "Celestial Patroness,"¹⁰ came only to a vessel suitably prepared for such divine illumination. Milton's own preparation included public service and prose participation in public affairs under the Cromwells. This experience and practice helped him toward the maturity lacking when he left "The Passion" unfinished because it was "above the years he had when he wrote it."¹¹

The poetic gift of England's own bard is clearly developed and nurtured through all of his writing, not excepting the prose that is so often regarded as an interruption in his poetic career. Milton began with an awareness of the bard's traditional role as a poetic participant in national affairs; he developed his own bardic gift through his travels, his private studies (especially the reading of history) at Horton, and through his early poetic exercises. After this educational preparation, Milton was ready to embark on the second stage of preparation for divine illumination: that activity and experience which must precede the

¹⁰*Paradise Lost* IX, 21.

¹¹Though Milton may be a "passive instrument of God" (*Judgment of Martin Bucer*, CM IV, 11), he is never an unconscious one, in spite of the already-quoted reference to the "Celestial Patroness [who] dictates to me slumbering." Milton is, on the contrary, always conscious of the responsibility of his position. Unfortunately, to modern students Milton's sense of mission may seem at best grandiose, a sign of lifelong confusion between his own powers and those of the Almighty that has often been "discovered" in Milton's Christ-Hero-Milton identification. The "instrument of Divine Will" (*Ad Patrem*) may be in twentieth-century psychology a victim of insane delusion; but in Milton's classical tradition, as in the Hebraic and Druidic, the bard is noblest of men. Milton never forgets that the Oracle for Kings and nations to consult is ultimately Christ (see *Paradise Regained*, III, 12 ff), while as poet-historian he serves as interpreter of the Divine Wisdom England so sorely needee.

bard's full understanding of the deeds about which he sings, helping him to draw from these events appropriate lessons. And throughout his prose "activity" Milton never lost sight of his ultimate poetic goal. Innumerable allusions to his poetic ambitions and standards and the full discussion of poetry in such a seemingly inappropriate context as *The Reason of Church-Government* further testify to Milton's continuing sense of his role as England's bard.

The National Poet's Duty

Milton's poet-historian, then, is no idle rimester singing of love but a teacher singing of the heroic past—both its greatness and its errors—and in so doing teaching the nation to "Know itself." This oracular concept of the historian is another aspect of the Delphic Oracle's admonition, so beloved of Renaissance Neoplatonic poets, to Know Thy Self. Milton's realization of the need for national self-knowledge is a key to his view of his own role as poet; and in his *History of Britain* Milton explains that such self-knowledge will aid the nation against being "puft up with vulgar flatteries...to enterprise rashly and come off miserably."¹² The prose *History* specifically compares "the late civil broils" with the condition in which the ancient Britons found themselves; its descriptions of ignorant and corrupt clergy, tyrannous and hypocritical leaders, and ignorant citizens who confuse license with liberty apply equally to ancient and contemporary Britain. Milton's hope "to raise a knowlege of ourselves both grave and weighty" was unfortunately not fulfilled, although history clearly offered examples that could save England from "the causes of such misery and thraldom to those our Ancestors,"¹³ if only England would heed the warning.

Milton's belief in the need for national self-knowledge and his insistence on the poet's duty in this respect has not been suf-

¹²CM X, 103.

¹³*Ibid.*, 316.

ficiently utilized in discussions of his poetic theory, perhaps because the reference to national self-knowledge is found only in the *History*. Yet Milton values the work of a true poet (*vates*) over that of an idle rimester both for its historical content and its national (though not narrowly "political") instruction. The national poet's power for the good of his own country is suggested in lines that may seem only praise for entrancing song: "Sad *Electra's* poet had the powr'/To save th'*Athenian* Walls from ruin bare" (Sonnet VIII); England had indeed "need of thee" to avert *her* ruin. As "interpreter and relater" of heroic history Milton would first reexamine those "noble atchievments that had been made small by the unskilfull handling of monks and mechanicks"¹⁴ and then present fit examples of national conduct to England's contending civilians, soldiers, and ecclesiastics. In so doing, he followed the true poet's role as "foe to tyrants"¹⁵ and as restorer of his nation's strength.

Other sixteenth and seventeenth-century poets wrote poetic histories. They also wrote epics—national and biblical—offering ethical instruction of the sort exemplified in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Milton, however, is unique in adhering so closely to the Roman conception of national poet and in extending that conception to include his own belief in active Christianity, his own comprehensive view of liberty and virtue, and his insistence that before the poet can *shape* national virtue he must participate actively in national affairs. Ironically, this participation contributed to the blindness which became yet one more appropriate

¹⁴*Reason of Church-Government*, YP I, 812. In spite of such allusions, Milton's sense of history is frequently misunderstood. For instance Don Cameron Allen remarks that "poets cannot be respectful of history if they wish to remain poets" (*The Harmonious Vision*, Baltimore 1954, p. xv), although examination of all the references to poets and poetry, historians and history assembled in the *Index* to the Columbia Milton fails to provide evidence that Milton ever believed in such fundamental incompatibility. Milton's poet *must* know and respect history.

¹⁵*Defensio Secunda*, CM VIII, 79.

aspect of this bard, whose whole life was devoted to preparation for the great epic pronouncement offered to his country. Milton alone among modern poets was prepared "to guide Nations in the way of truth/By saving Doctrine."¹⁶

Milton's Analysis of Bardic Song

The ancient bard had sung of heroes, as Milton noted in the much-quoted lines of *Ad Patrem*: "The bard...used to sing the feats of heroes and their emulable deeds...and the broadly laid foundations of the world." This bard was the first and best of historians; yet Milton would not be satisfied with merely telling of heroes. Milton wished the bard to draw from heroic exploits a song that would "imbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu, and publick civility" as he sang "the deeds and triumphs of just and pious Nations."¹⁷ This demand for a lesson suggests also an extension of Milton's meaning in *Ad Patrem*, where he described the lack of pleasure provided by bardic music "empty of voice." Here, Milton was not merely pleading with his father to approve of his poetic aspirations but also hinting of the necessary content or meaning in the song of the *vates*.

When Milton describes the bard's song further as disclosing "the secrets of the distant future" he has not slipped into a superstitious concept of the seer as one catering to the whims of the people (who are described in *Paradise Regained* as "a herd confus'd/A miscellaneous rabble"). Milton's poet-historian makes disclosures that are based on a reasoned analysis of past events, as Milton analyzed his own nation's history before he sang of *Paradise* lost and regained. Like his Divine Historian Raphael, Milton

¹⁶*Paradise Regained* II, 473-474, These lines also offer a hint about Milton's reason for settling on a Christian epic—his discovery that inculcating Christian virtue in the individual man must precede any attempt to restore national virtue, and that Christian wisdom was a prerequisite for the national self-knowledge referred to in his *History*.

¹⁷*Reason of Church-Government*, YP I, 816-817. Milton ultimately took his deeds and triumphs from Scriptural "history" in order to inspire *future* greatness of deeds and triumphs in his own nation.

recommends the use of reason in determining right action ; but he knows that the rational argument clothed in eloquent words will be a more persuasive lesson. For this reason, the bard uses eloquence in recounting history. True Eloquence, it should be noted, "charms the soul,"¹⁸ and is thus associated with Truth ; in contrast, rhetoric appears in the "glozing" speech of Comus or Satan.

In his *History* Milton's eloquence was largely confined to the famous "Digression"—at first suppressed and thus scarcely effective as instruction. Yet if straightforward history did not benefit the nation as much as Milton would have wished, he knew that eloquent history (i.e., the bard's song) could do so. Evidence

¹⁸PL II, 556. The importance of "eloquence" to Milton's poethistorian cannot be over-emphasized, since it is an essential aspect of Milton's view of the poet-historian's method. Satan describes the effect when "resistless eloquence/Wielded at will that fierce Democracy,/Shook the Arsenal and fulmin'd over Greece" (PR IV, 268). The desirable power of eloquence in the *vates* is presumably due to his Divine inspiration. Milton's Christ asks, "But to convince the proud what Signs avail,/Or wonders move th'obdurate to relent?" (PL VI, 789-790) but Milton has already provided the answer ; Eloquence can charm such obdurate souls. In contrast, mere rhetoric or Satanic sophistry would only contribute further delusions.

In *Of Education* Milton describes poetry as "less subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous, and passionate" than rhetoric. I believe that the correct interpretation of this comment rests on the unpleasant connotations of "subtle" and "fine" and on the high ethical associations of "simple," "sensuous," and "passionate." "Subtle" clearly means "wily" in the preface to the second book of *Church-Government* or "sly," in the *Second Defense*; Milton despises the "Suttle prowlers" in his *History*. The use of "fine" in *Eikonoklastes* shows that fineness and rhetoric are identical: the "artificialist peece of fineness to perswade men into slavery" (CM V, 111). "Simple," on the other hand, reminds us of the first simplicity of Adam and Eve. "Sensuous" suggests the Platonic Sensuous (through the senses) first step to Truth. "Passionate—in view of Milton's customary extension of the meanings of words—can mean "arousing passions"; and these are "high passions" of Greek tragedy rather than the evil upstart passions that catch government from reason (PL XII, 88). Furthermore, true eloquence comes from a "good" man (cf. the "good" poet) according to Milton's *Apology* (YP I, 874), while false rhetoric is the weapon of the evil deceivers Comus, Satan, and Dalila.

of Milton's belief in the efficacy of history is found in the *Prolusions* of his Cambridge years :

History, skilfully narrated, now calms and soothes
the restless and troubled mind, now fills it with
delight, and now brings tears to the eyes; soft and
gentle tears, tears which bring with them a kind of
mournful joy.¹⁹

The skillful narration recommended for history is clearly described in terms reminding us of Milton's poet-historian, the eloquent and persuasive teacher. The suggestion of catharsis in the description of the effect of history sounds like an echo of Aristotle's *Poetics* and clearly puts the historian in a literary context. Milton further criticized the usual historians ("hordes of old men in monkish garb" who produce only quibbles) for failing to contribute to the enrichment of literature.²⁰ His conclusion that such historians "Lamentably betray their ignorance and absurd childishness when faced with a new situation outside their usual idiotic occupation" seems to anticipate the later insistence on a true national poet-historian's need for experience.

The bard Milton has in mind will presumably use his experience well. As he suggests in the seventh *Prolusion* :

The influence of a single wise and prudent man
has often kept loyal to their duty a large number
of men who lacked the advantages of Learning.²¹

When Milton notes that the two things "which most enrich and adorn our country" are "eloquent speech and noble action" he again reminds us of his own role as historian, ranging over "all the lands depicted on the Map"—as in his *Histor of Muscovia*—

¹⁹*Prolusions* III, YP I, 244.

²⁰*Ibid.* Bad historians—like bad pad poets—offer "vicious" lessons. True historians of course are not included in this criticism (see page 56, n. 45 below).

²¹YP I, 292.

“places trodden by heroes of old [and]... the regions made famous by wars.” Here, too, is a description of the epic which is the bard’s greatest achievement, although Milton did not publicly declare his own intention of writing such national poetry until 1642:

What the greatest and choicest wits of *Athens*,
Rome, or modern *Italy*, and those Hebrews of old
did for their country, I in my proportion with
this over and above of being a Christian, might
doe for mine...England hath had her noble atchiev-
ments made small by the unskilful handling of monks
and mechanicks.²²

In 1642, however, Milton was still debating whether to cast his account of “England’s atchievements” in “Epick” form or in tragic.

Milton’s descriptions of his own developing bardic song range from early references in the Cambridge *Prolusions*, in correspondence with his friend Diodati (1637), in his plea *Ad Patrem*, in *Mansus* (1639) and in *Epitaphium Damonis* (1640) to notations in his *Commonplace Book* and hints and promises in the prose pamphlets. And there is in *Areopagitica* a description that reminds us of Milton’s epic, where Adam is likened to “Herculean Samson” rising from “the Harlot-lap/of Philistean Dalilah.”²³ In *Areopagitica* Milton writes:

Methinks I see in’ my mind a noble and puissant
nation rousing herself like a strong man after
sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.

The description further suggests a political analogy between Adam in *Paradise Lost* and the fallen Nation that had failed to appreciate its Cromwellian Eden and had “with thir freedom

²² *Reason of Church-Government*, YP I, 812

²³ *Areopagitica*, YP II, 558; *Paradise Lost* IX, 1060-1061.

lost all virtue [and] fear of God”²⁴ Individual self-knowledge may be attained by observing the Fall of Adam in Milton’s epic; but national self-knowledge is intended to follow. When Milton wrote in his sonnet “To the Lord General Cromwell” in 1652: “Peace hath her victories/...new foes arise” he was writing/as the true bard prepared to offer suitable instruction to his nation. In the faults of Samson and Adam and in the virtues of Christ Milton eventually found more eloquent means of instruction.

Education and History: Bardic Preparation

Milton’s poet-historian, as I have already noted, requires an unusual education in preparation for his public role as teacher and prophet. Obviously much of his education must consist of historical reading—not merely of British authors but of those Greeks, Italians and Germans described in Milton’s 1637 letter to Diodati. While he was “growing my wings and meditating flight,” Milton himself apparently pursued studies like those described in *Of Education*:

I call therefore a compleate and generous Education
that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully,
and magnanimously all the offices both private and
publike of peace and war.²⁵

This education is designed so that children will be “stirr’d up with high hopes of living to be brave men, and worthy patriots, dear to God, and famous to all ages”; the ideal teacher infuses “such an ingenuous and noble ardor as would not fail to make many ‘of them renowned and matchlesse men.”²⁶

The phrasing here demonstrates the close relationship between poetry and education in Milton’s theory²⁷; the Miltonic *vates* is a

²⁴*Paradise Lost* XI, 799-800. The theme of *Paradise Lost* is discussed more fully below, pp. 59-65.

²⁵YP II, 377-379.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 385.

²⁷Several commentators have remarked on Milton’s desire to instruct his contemporaries (see pages 39-40, above). B. Rajan has further noted that the importance of education in Milton’s theory of poetry is usually neglected (“Simple, Sensuous, and Passionate” *RES XXI*, [1945], p. 289), although he has not related history and political activity to that theory.

bard who offers poetic history of emulable deeds and who stirs his compatriots to such high achievement. A further clue appears in Milton's conclusion: "What glorious and magnificent use might be made of Poetry both in divine and humane things." The reforming of education is "one of the greatest and noblest designs...for want whereof this nation perishes"²⁸; national poetry provides such education. And since the end of this learning is "to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright"²⁹ Milton's own epic theme inevitably shifted from national to divine heroism.

In the preface to the second book of *The Reason of Church-Government* Milton reveals that he felt fortunate in being provided with such an education by own father. Yet Milton's formal education still fell short of his ideal, especially in its failure to provide the very stuff of national poetry: history. Milton was thus forced to read history independently and to make his own analyses to replace the inadequate monkish commentaries he so despised. The range of historical reading demonstrated in Milton's *Commonplace Book* and by the years he devoted to careful sifting and organization of historical evidence³⁰ shows Milton as a bard capable of meeting his own extraordinarily high educational standards and continually aware of history's lessons. I would, therefore, challenge Firth's assertion that "History meant to [Milton], when he began, merely the art of story-telling."³¹ Milton's

²⁸*Of Education*, YP II, 262-263.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 366-367.

³⁰As outlined in James Holly Hanford's "The Chronology of Milton's Private Studies," *PMLA* XXXVI (1921), 251-314.

³¹Sir Charles Firth, *Essays Historical and Literary* (Oxford, 1938), p. 66. Milton was surely more conscious of the Greek use of *historia* (ἱστορία) - inquiry. But whereas Greek epic poetry preceded history, Milton's history preceded epic composition. Milton's own didactic epic is indebted to Virgil's view of the *vates*; but his personal reaction against the usual "heroic" epic may also remind us of the origin of the Greek didactic epic it was a reaction against the Ionian heroic epic. Milton was clearly conscious always of the *didactic* function of history: as poet-historian he inquired into past events in order first to ascertain the *truth* of familiar stories of the nation's achievement and then to draw lessons from these past events that would benefit his fellow countrymen.

historia was didactic in intention. It is true, however, as Firth suggests, that the *History* itself "elucidates" both Milton's political writings and his poems. But the *History*, like *Of Education*, has a further value in its elucidation of Milton's plans to become a national poet.

Milton's insistence on the educational value of poetry is frequently indistinguishable from his insistence on the educational value of history, the bard's raw material. Yet as Bryant notes, critics generally regard Milton's historical writing either as "produced by accident of circumstances" or as the "product of a frugal attempt to salvage material that he had collected for poems he no longer wanted to write."³² Nevertheless, Bryant's assertion that Milton wrote of himself "filling first of all the office of national historian to which the office of orator or controversialist was secondary"³³ fails to set Milton's historical writing in its correct context: preparation for an aspirant to the role of national poet. Bryant's quotation from the *Second Defense*—"I have celebrated...actions which were glorious, lofty"—has its counterpart in *Ad Patrem*, where such a description applies specifically to the bard, i.e., poet-historian. The material of Milton's *History* is an integral part of his poetry, as his study and analysis of history was essential to his poetic development.

Milton's *History of Britain* offers a specific setting right of "facts" that had been falsely presented by the ignorant monkish historians; it is Milton's demonstration of his theory that the bard's proper understanding of history demands first of all accurate information. True lessons cannot be taught by using false material, and in evaluating Milton's interest in history we should keep in mind that the "inspiration" of the bard Milton is always very closely related to his own intellectual efforts. It is not necessary for us to argue about the tone in which Milton de-

³²Joseph Allen Bryant, Jr. "Milton and the Art of History: A Study of Two Influences on *A Brief History of Muscovia*." *PQ* XXIX (1950), 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, n. 1.

clared that he was offering the data of his *History* for the benefit of poets; we do not have to determine whether the remark is a serious recognition of the good poet's dependence on history and of his duty to use it in educating his nation or a sneering allusion to ignorant poetasters and rimesters. We only need to remember that Milton regarded *himself* as a national poet-historian and that in his view the history that may "best instruct and benefit them that read"³⁴ is sung by an eloquent Christian bard.

In his prose historical lesson Milton describes the faults of those usually styled "historians." Often men have had to depend for history on authors who are "in expression barbarous...; in civil matters...dubious Relaters...strook with superstitions; in one word, Monks" or on "obscure and blockish Chronicles."³⁵ Scholars generally have commented on Milton's low opinion of such religious historians and garrulous chroniclers. Milton's chief objection to these men, however, is not directed at their fundamental inaccuracy, religious or political bias, or clumsy style. He is concerned rather with the terrible *effect* upon a nation of such incompetent testimony. Milton contrasts the valuable work of classical historians with that of the incompetent compilers of his own nation's history.

It is ridiculous to speak of Milton's interest in history as being either more or less important than his writing of poetry. For Milton the poet is inspired by Clio, the muse of History. As one emulating the Roman *vates*, however, he cannot be satisfied with recording history; he is a maker of history through the influence upon the nation of his eloquent poetic instruction. And Milton's poetry repeatedly shows his conviction that if the nation is to succeed men must be "bred up...in the knowledge of Antient

³⁴*History of Britain*, CM X, 3.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 101 and 179. Milton similarly condemns "illiterate and frivolous" history (p. 33) and "unskilfull handling" of history (*Reason of Church-Government*, YP I, 812); this history does not offer "ripe understanding and many civil virtues" (YP I, 812).

and illustrious deeds."⁸⁶ The bard who so instructs his nation develops to the utmost his intellectual powers, continually strives to lead a virtuous life, and participates actively in his country's affairs whenever active participation will best serve his nation.

The Poet's Role in Public Affairs

Milton's public duty was as much a result of "some diviner monitor within"⁸⁷ as was *Paradise Lost*. Peaceful study and pleasant travel, though essential to Milton in his preparation for the role of national poet, were not appropriate while the nation was in turmoil:

I thought it base, that I should be travelling
for the improvement of my mind abroad, while my
fellow-citizens were fighting for their liberty
at home.⁸⁸

⁸⁶*History of Britain*, CM X, 325. This knowledge is most appropriately given in the epic; but it is not true that Milton's early plans for an epic poem were "rapidly cooled after he had begun a serious study of historical sources for the proposed poem" and as he became dissatisfied with discrepancies in the material and weaknesses of the historians. (This "cooling" process is described by Putnam Fennell Jones in "Milton and the Epic Subject from British History." *PMLA* XLII (1927), 901-909.) Critical opinion of Milton's *History of Britain* ranges from Masson's assertion that it is not a work of real research and criticism but the work of one who "wrote all the while with a kind of contempt for the work in which he was engaged" (*Life of Milton*, New York, 1946 ed., p. 644) to French's conviction that it is the work of a "pure scientist"—of a man more historian than poet ("Milton as Historian," *PMLA* L, 1935, 470). Even James Holly Hanford, who remarks on the History's emphasis on the relation between national morality and national prosperity (*A Milton Handbook*, New York, 1954 ed., p. 118), has spread the common view (p. 51, above) of the *History* as merely a "commutation of Milton's earlier projects for a drama or an epic on a British legendary theme." (*Handbook*, p. 115). Ida Langdon refers to the poet's vital connection with society, but fails to see that in Milton the poet and historian are one—not the two separate men she describes (*Milton's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, New Haven, 1924 p. 73).

⁸⁷*Defensio Secunda*, CM VIII, 69.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 125.

Now was the time to participate in his nation's destiny more actively. Milton felt that it was time to put into practice his theory that the *vates* needed "experience" and "practice," as well as "insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs"—with emphasis on the word "affairs"—by adding "Deeds to... knowledge answerable."³⁹

The poet's participation in public affairs is, however, scarcely as uncommon as the apologists for Milton's pamphlets and political activity seem to suppose. Spenser had been active in Ireland while writing the *Faerie Queene*: and Milton regarded Spenser as "a better teacher then *Scotus* or *Aquinas*."⁴⁰ Sidney too, although Milton was less enthusiastic about his verse,⁴¹ gave his country both political and poetic service. Yet Milton, who refused to praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, and who was a conscientious bard rather than an idle "rimester," is supposed to have "forsaken" poetry in favor of prose and "the lure of the world!"⁴²

The widespread view that there is some sort of chasm between Milton's poetry and his pamphlets and political activity reveals misconceptions similar to those in accounts of his *History*. Milton certainly regretted the premature ending of the first (theoretical and educational) stage of his preparation for his role as bard:

³⁹*Apology*, YP I, 890; *Reason of Church-Government*, YP I 821; PL XII, 581.

⁴⁰*Areopagitica*, YP II, 516.

⁴¹Milton admitted that Sidney's *Arcadia* was "a Book in that kind full of worth and witt" *Eikonoklastes*, CM V, 86); his censure of it as a "vain Amatorious Poem" is largely a reflection of the follies of King Charles in substituting its "heathen" prayer for Christian (p. 61, n. 56 below).

⁴²J. Milton French, "Milton as Historian," pp. 475-477.

With what small willingnesse I endure to interrupt
the pursuit of no lesse hopes then these, and leave
a calme and pleasing solitarynes...to imbarke in a
troubl'd sea of noises and hoars disputes.⁴³

But his prose pamphlets again and again include his views on national education and poetry, while his poetry continually betrays his concern with national ethics and national glory.

In the *Defensio Secunda* (1654) Milton clearly expresses his sense of duty in terms related to the poet's role. He describes those poets (*poetas*) who are truly so-called, and whom he loves and reverences as "the sworn foes of tyrants."⁴⁴ Allusions to his "divine monitor" and to oracles, and quotation from the *Iliad* further suggest the inseparability of Milton's public (and prose) activities from his plans for writing national poetry. Further, many of Milton's poems are occasioned by political events such as the Gunpowder Plot (various verses *In Proditionem Bombardicum*, *In Quintum Novembris*, and *In Inventorem Bombardae*) and the assault "intended on the City" in 1642 (Sonnet VIII). Others include admonitions or moral comment drawn from specific events for the benefit of the nation or of individual national

⁴³*Reason of Church-Government*, YP I, 821. Some of the misunderstanding may be related to Milton's assertions, as in his letter to Oldenburg of July 6, 1654, that he had been "engrossed in more delightful occupations" and participated in controversy "much against my will" (Phyllis B. Tillyard translation of *Milton's Private Correspondence*, Cambridge, 1932, p. 30). Here, however, Milton does not object to the necessity ("I am far from thinking that I have wasted my time to no purpose") for political action or prose, but to its inevitably inconvenient timing. Yet Barker believes that "the controversialist in Milton was born of the frustration of the poet" *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma* p. 6, quoted by Rajan. "Simple, Sensuous..." pp. 299-300, n. 5). Tillyard declares, "Politics got the better of poetry for a spell" (*The Miltonic Setting*, Cambridge, 1938, pp. 168-169). Even Don M. Wolfe describes Milton's "conscious choice of a career of political agitation just when he felt a great creative life ripening within him" (*Yale Prose* I, 207). None of these views makes proper allowance for Milton's early and consistently rephrased assertion of his role as bard: a bard who in turn studies, participates in, sings of, and finally makes (through his eloquent epic) the history of his nation.

⁴⁴CM VIII, pp. 77 and 79.

leaders. In Sonnet XV "On the Lord General Fairfax at the Siege of Colchester" (1648) Milton comments, "In vain doth Valor bleed while Avarice and Rapine share the Land." Milton attacks the "New Forces of Conscience under the Long Parliament" (1646?). A sonnet complimenting Lady Margaret Ley is largely devoted to eulogizing her father's uncorrupted political life, "unstained with gold or fee." An ode "accompanying a volume of my poems which was lost" (*Ad Joannem Rousium*, 1647) includes a comment on "these accursed tumults among the citizens." Lines "On the Detraction which followed upon my writing certain treatises" (1646) refer to "hatred of learning" in terms reminiscent of Milton's attacks on the ignorant monkish historians. As early as 1637, the beautiful *Lycidas* is a vehicle for bewailing the "ruin of our corrupted clergy." And this criticism is another aspect of the national poet's duty that Milton fulfills throughout his entire career and in increasingly complex poetic expression.

We cannot separate the intention of such poetry from the intention of parallel prose passages, although the massacre at Piedmont, for instance, is treated differently in Sonnet XVIII than in Milton's State Letter on the same theme. Each of Milton's pamphlets deals with ideas that can be traced—varying in expression, developing as he matures, yet never self-contradictory—through the poetry too. The political aptness of many of Milton's critical remarks indicates the scope permitted to the national poet (in contrast to that permitted the plain historian, who was not permitted to invade the office of political writer⁴⁵). Milton's

⁴⁵*Familiar Epistles* XXIII, CM XII, 92, and FE XXVI include Milton's praise of Sallust, Polybius, and others. Milton's allusions to these admirable historians throughout his work show that he was well aware that their historical facts did not lack eloquent "adornment." In his own *History* Milton declared that rather than follow the example of the incompetent historians he would "choose to present the truth naked though as lean as any journal" (CM X, 180); this did not prevent Milton from making ethical comment and offering political lessons in his own history, however, although the majority of his political lessons were confined to the "Digression."

political writing and activity⁴⁶ are activities inseparable from his national poetry.

The Left Hand of Prose

The high place Milton assigns to the poetry of the *vates* is not, however, coupled with disdain for prose. When Milton refers to the "left hand" of prose (in the *Reason of Church-Government*) as a manner of writing "in which I am inferior to myself"⁴⁷ he is in part expressing his belief that poets (by reason of their Divine guidance) give the best pictures of truth—an idea that he had used in the sixth *Profusion*. Milton may even be speaking of his left-handed "inferiority" in a spirit of self-deprecation appropriate to little-known authors, since in 1642 he was not well-known as a literary or as a public figure.⁴⁸ But if rulers—as in *Eikonoklastes*—use will as the right hand and reason as the left, bards may surely use the left hand of prose in developing their own invaluable powers of reason and preparing their epic composition. In his prose also Milton was "inferior" to himself in the sense of not yet being quite ready to write his own greatest poetry.

⁴⁶Here as elsewhere in my paper I use the term "political" to include all Milton's public pronouncements and duties. Whether the subject be ecclesiastical or civil liberty, the freedom of printing or the necessary confinement of false rulers, Milton's prose is related to the conduct "politick" to his nation. Milton's phrasing of State Letters during his service as Secretary shows the same ethical, didactic cast.

⁴⁷YP I, 808. The use of prose is in part related to "the careless and interrupted listening of these tumultuous times" YP I, 807). But the pamphlets may also be regarded as rational prologues or parallels to the themes of Milton's three great poems. Analysis of recurrent themes, assembled in Le Comte's *Yet Once More* and in the *Columbia Index*, suggests three stages in Milton's bardic development: hints in his early poems, rational or formal analysis in his prose, and eloquent instruction in the three great poems that close his career.

⁴⁸See William Riley Parker, *Milton's Contemporary Reputation* (Columbus, 1940).

This poetry would not have been possible, however, without Milton's preparatory, left-handed exercises. For it is in the prose pamphlets that Milton reshapes his own early and often rather conventional concept of the *vates* or bard.⁴⁹ In *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642) Milton describes the poet's duty to sing of the deeds and triumphs of just and pious Nations, at the same time promising to do for his own country what the "greatest and choicest wits"—classical, Hebraic, contemporary Italian—had done for theirs. Milton expands this analysis of bardic duty in *An Apology Against a Pamphlet* (1642), declaring that the bard should make of his life a true poem, "not presuming to sing high praises of heroick men...unlesse he have in himselfe the experience and the practice of all that which is praise-worthy." Milton's description of the education that will train superior citizens in *Of Education* (1644) often sounds like a paraphrase of his description of national poetry. And in the *Defensio Secunda* (1654) Milton describes the poet's national duty and influence.⁵⁰

Milton's prose also includes full discussions of all the ideas recurring in his poetry. For instance, the prose discussion of ideal marriage in Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* reappears years later in the poetic distillation of *Paradise Lost*. The theme of liberty in Milton's prose is related to various aspects of civil, religious, and domestic life, while in *Paradise Lost* Milton finds true Liberty in submission to the Will of God. Here, Milton's *History of Britain* once again offers clues linking Milton's pamphlets and his poetry. In the *History* Milton says, "The gaining or loosing of libertie is the greatest change to better or to worse that may befall a nation under civil government...Stories teach us that libertie sought out of season in a corrupt and degenerate

⁴⁹As in *Elegy VI*, where the bard is sacred to the gods, and in Milton's accounts of poetic "persuasion" in the *Prologues*, *Ad Patrem*, and *Mansus*.

⁵⁰For fuller discussion of these quotations, see pages 41, 45, 50, and passim, above.

age brought Rome itself into further slavery.”⁵¹ The recovery of liberty conduces to the beauty or glory of one’s country, as Milton had written in *Defensio Secunda*; and the defense of liberty was the “noble task” of Milton’s political and pamphlet-writing career, the occasion of his blindness, as Milton explained to Mr. Cyriack Skinner (Sonnet XXII).

Milton’s Choice of Epic Theme

Milton’s view of the Fall in *Paradise Lost* is clearly related to Adam’s failure to heed the Divine Historian. The use of that word “historian” here is significant; for Raphael offers the sort of warning to be expected from the best national poet—not superstitious prophecy but an account of the past (Satan’s crimes) designed as a warning against future disaster: “O for that warning voice,/...that now,/While time was, our first Parents had been warned.”⁵² Adam had not accepted the historian’s warning; but perhaps Milton’s contemporaries would do so, before they had utterly destroyed their chances for happiness in England’s new, Cromwellian, Eden. In his *History*, Milton spoke of “the many miseries and desolations, brought by divine hand on a perverse Nation,”⁵³ and his *Paradise Lost* is at least in part an attempted cure of contemporary perversities.

Milton originally had promised to sing of heroes, to “summon back our native kings into our songs” and to “proclaim the magnanimous heroes of the table” in *Mansus* and in *Epitaphium Damonis*, for instance. As he analyzed the supposedly “emulable” deeds of Britain’s heroes, however, Milton discovered that the

⁵¹CM X, 317, 324.

⁵²PL IV, 1-6. There is here, of course, a fundamental theological problem as to whether Adam and Eve *could* under any circumstances have avoided a Fall ordained by God. But Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana* shows his interest in re-examining the tenets of Christianity, while the range of critical arguments concerning Milton’s “meaning” in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* reveals the complexity of the answer in Milton’s re-examination.

⁵³CM X, 140.

triumphs were too often defeats, poorly concealed by lying, over-imaginative historians, or that they had been obtained by such unheroic figures as the "frantick" Boadicea, wildly flinging a hare from her bosom by way of military encouragement.⁵⁴ Milton's prose *History*, in spite of its eloquent "Digression," makes the negative nature of the British historical lesson all too clear. Further, as Milton participated in his country's affairs he continually discovered examples of corrupt clergy, magistrates, royal advisers, and public figures. Before he could admonish a nation so infested, "Know Thy Self," he must restore individual virtue.

There was no suitable national hero to inspire such virtue, and Milton appropriately reverts to his early conception of Christ as "the most perfect Hero." When Milton wrote these lines in "The Passion," in 1630, he had neither the experience nor the maturity required of a national poet. Christ's deeds are even "above heroic"⁵⁵—they are superior to the deeds of classical heroes in the sense that Milton's epic is "above" that of the wits of Athens, Rome, and even the Hebrews by reason of the Christian ethic, and as Christian virtue is superior to that of the ancients.

The various arguments about Milton's shift in allegiance from British heroes (*Arthuriad*) to Saxon ones in his *History of Britain* frequently note the contemporary association of Arthur with Royalist and Alfred with Cromwellian interests. Milton's preference, however, seems to be founded not so much on political grounds as on his personal belief that Princes should be learned in histories and that they should listen to their bards as Alfred did. In Alfred, Milton discovered a hero "in all vertuous employments both of

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁵*PR* I, 14-15. Hebrew poets praise God aright (*PR* IV, 348) but lack the positive inspiration of Christ's redeeming power. The argument of *Paradise Lost* is more heroic than that of the *Iliad* or *Aeneid* (IX, 13) because Greek and Roman heroes lack Christian enlightenment and are even "Ignorant... of God" (*PR* IV, 310).

mind and body...conning *Saxon* poems day and night...[who] thirsted after all liberal knowledge,...[translated] Beda's History."⁵⁶ Unfortunately, the facts of Alfred's reign were too sparsely recorded for Milton's purpose of national inspiration. And even the richest store of heroic anecdotes could not raise Alfred higher than a "mirror of Princes" whereas Christ was Prince of the Kingdom of Heaven, exemplifying Truth and Virtue in his own person.

Only Christ could serve as Hero for Milton, who was a bard continually conscious of the Will of Heaven and of "my great task-Master's eye."⁵⁷ Even King Alfred, who might have seemed a good hero for Milton's national poem, was king of the Saxons ("a barbarous and heathen Nation"⁵⁸). Therefore Milton's own bent towards active Christian virtue combined with the unavoidable circumstances of English history—the unreliability of its so-called truths and the unsuitability of its so-called heroes—to make his final epic choice quite consistent with his earliest views of the bard's duty. Adam fails to heed the Divine Historian; Samson rouses from his folly and defeats his enemies; Christ's virtue stands above all. The moral and political lessons of *Paradise Lost*, the accomplishment of Samson in the tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, prepare Milton's nation for their own regaining of Paradise.

Those who regard Milton's shift from national to Scriptural epic as the fruit of political disillusionment frequently forget that his first recognition of Christ-as-Hero was made in a poem written before he began the readings in history outlined in Hanford's

⁵⁶*History of Britain*, CM X, 220-221 and 223. Milton noted that princes should be learned in histories in his *Commonplace Book* (CM XVIII, 137), and such histories were traditionally sung by the bards who had graced the banquets of Kings (*Ad Patrem*). Part of Milton's attack on Charles in *Eikonoklastes* was based on the King's substitution of Heathen orisons for Christian (CM V, 89) and on the King's folly in accepting the "instruction" of "vain amatorious" poetry (*Ibid.*, p. 86) for true wisdom. Arthur of course was also unsuitable as a hero because of his lack of "puissance" (CM X, 128) and because his very existence was in doubt (*Ibid.*, pp. 127-128).

⁵⁷"How Soon Hath Time," 1632.

⁵⁸*History of Britain*, CM X, 113.

Chronology. They ignore also Milton's respect for the clarity of the Bible's *Truth*, which he contrasted with the "cloudy legends" and "trash" of British history. Further the prophets, as men "divinely taught," are superior teachers not only of Biblical truth but of "The Solid rules of Civil Government."^{58a} The degenerate world described by Michael merely repeated a "pattern" that Milton had already observed throughout history; its ills could only be cured by a fundamental reformation of individual virtue—but Milton had not suddenly become aware of individual depravity.

Michael's tirade in the eleventh Book of *Paradise Lost* against men cool'd in zeal, living worldly and dissolute, can be read as a summary of national corruption. It recalls those men who "hucster the common-wealth," who have failed to remain "unstained with gold or fee," and whose "avarice and rapine share the land."⁵⁹ The corrupt clergy of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* are "Eremites and Friars / White, Black and Grey, with all their trumpery"; Satan climbs into God's fold as "since into his Church lewd Hirelings climb"; the "Hypocrite or Atheous Priest"⁶⁰ works his evil effects. These clerical gentlemen resemble the "unlernerd, unapprehensive, yet impudent, suttle Prowlers, Pastors in Name, but indeed Wolves;...[intent to] well line themselves...seising on the Ministry as a Trade."⁶¹ Their brethren are the prelates attacked in *Of Reformation* and *The Reason of Church-Government* and *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, for instance, as well as in such poetic contexts as *Lycidas* and the sonnet addressed to Cromwell.

Most of the admonitions in *Paradise Lost* can well be extended to political applications. Michael's cry, "All shall turn degenerate," suggests the result for those who fail to heed the warning: "Let it profit thee to have heard/By terrible Example the reward/Of

^{58a} PR IV, 356-358.

⁵⁹*History of Britain*, CM X, 320; Sonnet X; Sonnet XV.

⁶⁰PL III, 474-475; IV, 193; PR I, 487 ff.

⁶¹*History* CM X, 134.

disobedience.”⁶² Adam and Eve themselves show what happens to men who disobey God and ignore His Divine Historian. And as Coleridge observed, Satan is “a character so often seen *in little* on the political stage.”⁶³ Eve’s error is largely related to her credulity, her response to that “glozing Tempter”—the archetypal politician—Satan. Her susceptibility to flattery, when Satan addresses her as “Empress of this Fair World,” for instance, recalls the false counsel that hastened the fall of King Charles and of Cromwell’s heirs alike. Allusions to courts, palaces, and riots are timeless: and the idolatry “for which thir heads as low/Bow’d down in Battle, sunk before the Spear/Of despicable foes”⁶⁴ suggests the national consequences of similar errors in allegiance. National faults, however, are in turn continually related back to the individual’s weakness or unreason:

Therefore since hee permits
 Within himself unworthy Powers to reign
 Over free Reason, God in Judgment just
 Subjects him from without to violent Lords.

(PL XII, 90-93)

⁶²PL VI, 909 ff.

⁶³In James Thorpe, *Milton Criticism* (New York, 1950), p. 95. Clearly Satan resembles the flatterers who have “puft up” Milton’s nation, as we see him “Fawning, and lick [ing] the ground whereon [Eve] trod” (PL IX, 526).

⁶⁴PL I, 435-437. Of course none of these political allusions or specifically national lessons indicates that *Paradise Lost* is to be reduced to a political allegory. Nevertheless, our understanding of the political extension of its meaning and the relation between the various political-national allusions here and in Milton’s other poetry and his pamphlets will help us to place the three great poems correctly (see page 61, above). Milton’s design was not to write an epic in praise of his country—a design that failed because Milton’s country failed in its crisis, according to Tillyard (*Miltonic Setting*, p. 199); he wished to *inspire* his country by praising the true hero (Christ) and suggesting steps on the Christian nation’s path to Wisdom. Frank Kermode (“Milton’s Hero,” *RES* ns. IV, 317-330) and others offer a much deeper analysis of Milton’s Christ-hero than is possible within the scope of this paper.

Adam does not merely reveal the error of our first parents. He also stands for Milton's other erring man: Samson. Adam is a figure of "Herculean Samson" rising from the "Harlot-lap/Of Philistean Dalilah," and thus recalls Milton's use of the Samson-image for England, "rousing herself...and shaking her invincible locks."⁶⁵ Milton's method of inspiring national virtue, his own training as bard, is also reflected in the Adam-Samson image. From Adam's education in *Paradise Lost* Milton proceeds to Samson's experience in *Samson Agonistes*, finally giving true Virtue in the person of Christ in *Paradise Regained*. And this is, of course, the way to heroic wisdom by which Milton would rouse England and re-educate those "bad men who have ill manag'd and abus'd [a just and noble cause]."⁶⁶

Various scholars have read Michael's critical speech in *Paradise Lost* as a reflection of Milton's disappointment or disillusionment in contemporary national affairs. But Milton's study of history and his participation in national affairs—both as government servant and as official and unofficial pamphleteer—had surely led him to write his great poems in the spirit of positive inspiration appropriate to the *vates*. Certainly Milton regretted that his nation was not the new Jerusalem or Eden anticipated after Cromwell's first reforms of Church and State. His purpose, however, remained as an intention to rouse England: to do "What might be publick good...to promote all truth."⁶⁷ For Milton was now indeed truly one of the fellowship of blind bards, calling upon Celestial Light to "Shine inward...that I may see and tell/Of things invisible to mortal sight sight" and joining the company

⁶⁵*PL* IX, 1060-1061; *Areopagitica*, YP II, 558 (see page 48, above). As Ernest Sirluck points out in his note in the *Yale Prose*, Milton had already used Samson as a symbol of England in the *Reason of Church-Government*

⁶⁶*The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a free Commonwealth*, CM VI, 117. Milton would, (to paraphrase his promise in *Church-Government*) plant seeds of individual "vertu" from which new "publick civility" would spring; his examples would be drawn from the deeds and triumphs of just and pious *Biblical* figures.

⁶⁷*PR* I, 196-197.

of Thamyris, Homer and Tiresias.⁶⁸

The study of history and the experience of public life had entitled Milton to make his great epic poetry, to instruct his nation in great deeds and heroic. His use of Scriptural "history" rather than national is more appropriate for inspiring Christian virtue than any heathen or barbaric deeds could be. Yet it is no idle, idealized doctrine but a way to active virtue—a virtue that Milton knows must be found "in Daily Life." Milton's true Hero alone could reclaim men "degenerate, all depraved" and effectively "admonish" them "of thir wicked ways,"⁶⁹ in order that they might by their own active Christianity rise to glory and regain Paradise both on earth and in heaven. With Christian virtue they would assure the "deliverance of both commonwealth and church"⁷⁰ and cast out the Satan-politicians as the true Hero, Christ, had cast down Satan and was "Sung Victor" at the conclusion of *Paradise Regained*.

⁶⁸PL III, 51-55, 35-36.

⁶⁹PL XI, 807, 812-813.

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