The essays in this book take various positions on these matters. In the opening chapter, Hugh Wilson argues that Milton belongs to a much longer human rights tradition, which, from Aeschylus to the United Nations Declaration of 1948, favoured the advancement of liberty in all spheres of life. Wilson does not think important the distinction we have made above between the rights Milton defended and the “universal rights” of the eighteenth century. Then, in a different vein, the most cherished of all liberties – Milton’s “liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience” – is the subject of Cherrie Gottsleben’s highly original essay on Areopagitica as Ars Moriendi of an “Immortal Nation,” although her approach might be qualified by recalling that this liberty is not extended to Catholics. In this respect, William Kolbrener reminds us of John Illo’s famous 1965 comparison of Milton’s London with the Petrograd of 1919, a chilling link with another and quite different Revolution.1

Milton symposia often generate interestingly opposing views. Thus two distinguished scholars, Barbara Lewalski and Annabel Patterson, are here at odds over Milton’s poetry: the former reads Milton’s great poems as an expression of the political commitments in his prose, whereas the latter finds little human rights talk in his poetry. This is a long-standing debate, though neither Lewalski nor Patterson can comfortably be aligned with either side. One view was most influentially expressed by Christopher Hill, the late Marxist historian from Oxford: in Milton and the English Revolution (1977), he laid stress on Milton’s activity as a political radical in the English revolution, and argued that his poetry would have been much different if there had been no such event. Another tradition, going back at least to Samuel Johnson, and represented by the recently deceased William B. Hunter, endeavoured to dissociate Milton the poet from Milton the polemicist, so that Paradise Lost could be read as a theologically orthodox poem about the eternal verities. Patterson does not associate herself with that school, but she is intensely aware of how unfashionable her argument will seem.

A further turn was given to this debate by Blair Worden who argued in a 1990 article for the importance of the period in which Milton wrote a particular work. Thus Milton may well advocate “the liberty to write, to argue freely according to conscience” in Areopagitica in 1644, but, writing after the Restoration, we can see him take a very different line: he may have been

disillusioned with his own party as he “withdraws from politics into faith.” Many have disagreed. For Sharon Achinstein, for example, Milton did not renounce his commitment to republican ideology, though he may have felt the need to encode his continuing dissent in the ambivalent rhetoric, images and situations of the great poems, to force his readers to reject easy interpretations. And David Norbrook explicitly opposed Worden in arguing for Milton’s continued intervention in the diminished public sphere, so that even his God is like the English republicans in that he “undertakes a series of experiments in freedom and finds them confounded.”

Certainly Milton’s poetry should not be read independently of his political convictions, and yet a great literary work must obviously not be treated as an ephemeral political pamphlet.

French scholars have also contributed to the debate: Armand Himy read *Paradise Lost* as a theologico-republican treatise whereas Roger Lejosne tried to reconcile the Milton he saw as the advocate of divine monarchy in *Paradise Lost* (and thus the denouncer of Satan’s republicanism) with Milton the adversary of “monarchical tyranny” and the champion of republicanism in his prose.

These questions should also be read in the light of a further and especially influential approach to seventeenth-century politics advocated in recent years by Quentin Skinner. He argues for a republican tradition deriving from ancient Rome, and passing through such influential political philosophers as Machiavelli. He distinguishes this from the concept of negative freedom identified by Isaiah Berlin as central to the English Revolution. Milton’s views developed rapidly, and for him, Skinner argued, as for many other intellectuals, the terms in which political rights were understood and articulated during the years of most intense conflict derived explicitly

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from Roman law and from a classical idea of liberty.⁷ We are glad to include here a paper by Martin Dzelzainis, one of Skinner’s former students at Cambridge. He writes on “Liberty and the Law,” exploring the notion of “manumission” in Roman law as related to Milton’s concept of liberty. William Walker, of the University of New South Wales (Sydney, Australia), also aligns himself loosely with this school, but he challenges any easy link between *Paradise Lost* and the republican tradition. For example, Michael’s punitive God of Book 12 is alien to the naturalistic explanation of civil freedom that prevails in Polybius, the Romans, and Machiavelli. Not everyone agrees with Skinner’s approach, it must be said. Even the later Milton, according to Thomas Corns, rehearsed “republican values” or “republican consciousness,” not “republican argument.”⁸ It was the idea of Christian liberty which moved him to action. This was certainly true in the earliest period of Milton’s engagement in controversy. David H. Sacks, of the University of Oregon, also rehearses the arguments over Skinner’s approach and contributes a paper on liberty and monopoly reminiscent of Blair Hoxby’s recent *Mammon’s Music*: the denunciation of all monopolies, he suggests, whether of commercial societies, of the church or of the state, may be a leitmotiv, a *fil rouge* as we say in French, to unravel Milton’s prose

