



# The Poetry of John Milton

By Gordon Teskey

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John Milton is regarded as the greatest English poet after Shakespeare. Yet for sublimity and philosophical grandeur, Milton stands almost alone in world literature. His peers are Homer, Virgil, Dante, Wordsworth, and Goethe: poets who achieve a total ethical and spiritual vision of the world. In this panoramic interpretation, the distinguished Milton scholar Gordon Teskey shows how the poet's changing commitments are subordinated to an aesthetic that joins beauty to truth and value to ethics. The art of poetry is rediscovered by Milton as a way of thinking in the world as it is, and for the world as it can be.

Milton's early poems include the heroic Nativity Ode; the seductive paired poems "L' Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"; the mythological pageant *Comus*, with its comically diabolical enchanter and its serious debate on the human use of nature; and "Lycidas," perhaps the greatest short poem in English and a prophecy of vast human displacements in the modern world. Teskey follows Milton's creative development in three phases, from the idealistic transcendence of the poems written in his twenties to the political engagement of the gritty, hard-hitting poems of his middle years. The third phase is that of "transcendental engagement," in the heaven-storming epic *Paradise Lost*, and the great works that followed it: the intense intellectual debate *Paradise Regained*, and the tragedy *Samson Agonistes*.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

Every so often a critical book comes along that is so intelligent, so full in its range of treatment, so just in its moral and human judgments, that praise can't begin to do justice to it. Such is Gordon Teskey's book on Milton's poetry...[It] is wholly available to anyone who has been or wants to be a student?that is a *reader*?of Milton's poems...Not to be missed by anyone who aspires to be a better reader of Milton, especially of *Paradise Lost*. (William H. Pritchard *Hudson Review* 2016-02-01)

A major new response to the poetry...Throughout his study, Teskey displays his own erudition with a light hand. He illustrates how classical, mythological, historical and Scriptural resonances are significant and functional in Milton, but never lets them clog the poem under discussion...Teskey is clear that Milton spent his life urging his readers to reimagine their world. Teskey's approach to this life is compendious and in careful touch with recent Milton scholarship. His book is like a Renaissance commentary, long-meditated and expansive. There is a close and delicate attention to the historical and biographical frames of individual poems, which in turn prompt and inform rich formal analysis and interpretation. We also get Milton's theme as they are caught and refracted through later texts: there are countless fine aside on writers ranging from Heidegger to Larkin...It is superbly balanced in appreciation of both the language of the poetry and its moral arguments...Milton sought ever more ambitious ways of bringing his readers to reconsider their position in history and to think of ways of changing it. The means he used to provoke such wondering are considered beautifully and extensively in *The Poetry of John Milton*. (John Stubbs *Literary Review* 2015-09-01)

The pleasure of reading Milton is something that Teskey conveys with abundant ease in this major guide to the poetry, from *Lycidas* to *Samson Agonistes*...Teskey's treatment of *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont* is a model of the kind of close criticism he executes so well [and]...he is impressively attentive to the language, sources and afterlife of the poem. There is sensitivity and subtlety here that made me return to the poem and scan it anew...I was reminded of just how rich Milton's poetry is. (Willy Maley *Times Higher Education* 2015-07-16)

Gordon Teskey has lavished a life in scholarship on one poet. *The Poetry of John Milton* is a long book, but only just big enough to hold its wealth of commentary. It is an exercise in a pure kind of literary criticism, beholden to no particular ideology, bringing in biographical and social details only where strictly necessary, dwelling rather on matters of meaning and form, influence and reception, than character and event...It offers a compelling total interpretation of the work of one of our greatest poets. (Robert Minto *Open Letters Monthly* 2015-08-01)

His prose style, with its engaging first-person voice and the wide variety of literature and other topics Teskey draws on, is one of the pleasures of this informative, intelligent, and accessible book. (B. E. Brandt *Choice* 2015-11-01)

Teskey makes criticism feel again like an activity which is one of the highest and most necessary activities of the mind. With a confidence and command whose like one can scarcely meet elsewhere, Teskey revives for us in its full strength and serenity a practice of thinking and writing which one had feared irretrievably lost to the philological arachnids. It will be a central summit of the literature on Milton and on poetry for many, many years to come?a summit on a range which it will itself play no small part in continuing to keep upright. (Simon Jarvis, University of Cambridge)

Gordon Teskey's study of Milton is a capacious, extremely well-judged statement that takes the reader across the full range of the poet's poetry, including the shorter verse produced during the revolutionary years. I enjoyed greatly the comparing of Milton with other key works of European literature from different periods. Teskey also accounts for Milton as poet of the English Revolution, yet we feel by the end that the critic too has revealed himself as artist, and that the reading itself has declared its own liberating power. This book has that kind of aesthetic energy. (Nigel Smith, Princeton University)

#### About the Author

Gordon Teskey is Professor of English, Harvard University, and editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

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