
Luther, Milton and *Parrhêsia*: the Reformed roots of free speech

Louise Mabile, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow
Faculty of Theology
North-West University
31611133@nwu.ac.za
louisemab2@yahoo.com

Opsomming

Die artikel volg die verband tussen die Hervorming en die ontwikkeling van die moderne begrip van vryheid van spraak. Anders as wat graag aanvaar word, is hierdie reg nie 'n fondasionele waarheid sub specie aeternitatis nie, maar is gekoppel aan 'n bepaalde subjeksbegrip en afhangend van die ontwikkeling van die persoonlike gewete. Daar word gedemonstreer dat die huidige opvatting van die begrip afhanklik is van die antieke begrip van parrhêsia. Lg. verwys na die wyse waarop waarheid deur 'n persoon van mindere mag teenoor 'n gesagsfiguur gespreek word. Paulus en Luther is deurslaggewende voorbeelde, en daar word aangevoer dat John Milton se klassieke verdediging van spraakvryheid in die Areopagithica as 'n voortsetting van die Lutheraanse posisie beskou kan word.

Every believer has a right to interpret Scripture for himself, inasmuch he has the Spirit for his guide, and the mind of Christ in him; nay, positions of the public interpreters can be of no use to him, except they are confirmed by his own conscience.

John Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*

1. Introduction: The origins of *Parrhêsia*

It is commonplace to think of freedom of speech as a distinctly secular issue, informed by Enlightenment values such as freedom from traditional authority, equality and juridical neutrality. As such, the first thinker to come to mind where this right is concerned is arguably John Stuart Mill, whose defence of freedom of expression in *Of Liberty* (1859) is usually taken to be the foundational text for this particular right. To be sure, interpreters of this text are usually more than willing to acknowledge the role of John Milton's argument against governmental censure of 1644, the *Areopagithica*, in anticipating Mill's liberalism. A relatively recent textbook on the history of free speech even claims that Mill's celebrated defence of free speech merely follows the outline of the *Areopagithica*.¹

Against the classic liberal notion that free speech is a transcendental right attached to a timeless and autonomous subject, this article seeks to demonstrate that the genealogy of the latter-day notion of free speech can be traced to specifically Protestant ideas, specifically to the implied defence of the personal conscience by Martin Luther in 1517. It will be demonstrated that John Milton's famous defence of free speech forms is closely intertwined with his Reformed ideals, more specifically his understanding of *truth*, and that this in turn is predicated upon the Lutheran stance. It is argued that Milton's particular version of the ideal of free speech is better understood as an early modern appropriation of *parrhêsia*, the ancient practice of speaking truth to power, and that viewed freedom of speech as a particular tool to be used in the defence of Christian truth.

Today, freedom of speech tends to be conceived as the generally unornamented utterance by an apparently unconstrained subject. However, this is a comparatively recent development. Contemporary views are largely a product of nineteenth-century liberalism which tended to conceive of free speech in *laissez-faire* terms as one of the fundamental rights of an autonomous, but mostly private subject. As a result, most modern discussions on freedom of speech lean towards abstract, universal terms: factors like occasion, context and the relationship between the speakers are largely irrelevant for the purposes of defining the legal right. Unlike the later modern version of free expression which is understood in terms of a 'free market of ideas', *parrhêsia* was seen as an activity pursued in the defence of *truth*, particularly when it is abused or suppressed by political authority.

¹ Alan Haworth, *Free Speech* (London and New York: Routledge 1998), p. 120, and Lana Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric: Milton's Iconoclasm and the Poetics of Desire* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 130-135.

Quintessential examples in antiquity include Socrates and Cicero,² but there are important Biblical figures as well, such the rather ironic example of Nathan (see 2 Samuel 12:7-14).³ Through the actions of Paul and the other apostles, *parrhêsia* became a key element in Christian witnessing at least until Christianity became the official religion during the Roman Empire. It would make another dramatic re-appearance during the Reformation, this time with Luther stepping into the Pauline role.

Parrhêsia (παρρησία) is derived from the Greek 'pan' (πᾶν) meaning 'all' or 'everything' and 'rhesis' (ῥῆσις) 'utterance' or 'speech'. Literally, *parrhêsia* means 'to say everything', 'not holding back', 'to speak freely'.⁴ In the original Greek context, the *parrhesiastes* (the one engaging in *parrhêsia*) was supposed to give a complete and precise account of what he believes to be true, without deceit or holding back, even when it goes against authority or generally accepted belief. Reduced to its most basic definition, *parrhêsia* is the rhetorical trope employed by a speaker or writer in the act of conveying a perceived truth to a more powerful individual or institution, whether employed on the fictional plane, or in political literature or speech. As the only rhetorical trope concerned with truth, it implies an ethical relationship: not only between a *parrhesiastes* and the figure or institution that he addresses but also between the speaker and himself. By contrast, ancient *parrhêsia* always occurred within a particular set of circumstances or on a particular occasion (*kairos*). The occurrence of *parrhêsia* depends upon the presence of two essential factors: a significant difference in power between the speaker and his addressee(s), and a commitment to the truth content of his discourse on the part of the speaker. Michel Foucault writes that the *parrhesiastes* is

- 2 In Cicero's most famous case, *Pro Ligario*, a defence of Quintus Ligarius offered to Julius Caesar in 46 BC. Cicero appears to engage in frank speech, but his language is so tempered by praise that he comes dangerously close to departing from *parrhêsia* altogether and invoking instead *captatio benevolentiae*, a flattery of the audience or reader at the beginning of a speech or poem to a positive disposition on their part. Cicero declares that "I will speak without reserve of what I feel, Caesar. If in the greatness of your fortunes, the clemency in which you purposely – yes purposely – persist, and I realize what I am saying – had not been equally great, then your triumph would have been overwhelmed in a flood of bitter mourning." Cicero, *The Speeches*, trans. and ed. by N. H. Watts (London: Penguin, 1972), p.456.
- 3 Given the events of 2 Samuel 7:4-17 (Nathan's Oracle), it would be possible to describe 2 Samuel 7:4-17 also in parrhesiastic terms as there is also an element here of speaking truth to power.
- 4 As can be seen in its German translation, '*Freimütigkeit*' (boldness) and the French, '*franc-parler*' (frankness) the term refers not only to the honest conveying of correct information, but also to the relationship of the speaker with him- or herself, in other words, the ethical context of the statement.

always

in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. The *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one to whom he speaks. The *parrhesiastes* comes 'from below' as it were, and is directed towards 'above'. This is why an ancient Greek would not say that a teacher or parent who criticizes a child uses *parrhêsia*. But when a philosopher or poet criticizes a tyrant, when a citizen criticizes the majority, when a pupil criticizes his teacher, then such speakers may be using *parrhêsia*.⁵

Parrhesiastic speech is therefore generally critical: the conveying of unwelcome truths often requires bold speech. It also takes courage to be a *parrhesiastes*: the practice of truth-telling is usually accompanied by considerable risk. Although *parrhêsia* may overlap with satire in certain literary contexts, it tends to be bolder, blunter, and clearly directed towards the offending power. Although it is possible to profess one's convictions sincerely before an audience or readership, the 'threshold' of *parrhêsia* will be crossed only at the point where these convictions genuinely engage the shortcomings of one's addressee[s].

Parrhêsia is perhaps most adequately defined simply as speaking truth to power. The truth in question refers to fundamental ethical or political truths that allow for opinion and difference, rather than simply verisimilitude. The kind of truth involved here is not the conveying of everyday facts, for example Paul's request to Timothy to remember his cloak (2 Tim. 4:13).⁶ In fact, it is possible to state that the act of engaging in *parrhêsia* comprises the enunciation of the truth in question itself, as well as the affirmation by the speaker that he truly believes in what he says. *Parrhêsia* is therefore the discourse of principle and conviction. That is, the truth spoken by the *parrhesiastes* is far from arbitrary, but a firmly held and justifiable belief.

5 Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (New York: Semiotexte 2001), p.25. The Athenian constitution (*politeia*) originally guaranteed Athenian citizens the equal right of speech (*democrat isegoria*), equal participation in the exercise of power (*isonomia*) and *parrhêsia*, the right to speak their minds fearlessly in the public assembly. Very little was written on the use of *parrhêsia* until the publication of Michel Foucault's *Fearless Speech* in 1983. Foucault, troubled by the reductionism of the modern-day Cartesian model of evidential necessity, sought to recover a mode of discourse that allows one to speak openly and truthfully about one's opinions and ideas without the formal constraints made by epistemology. Foucault found this in the ancient practice of *parrhêsia*, a public practice that allowed for a unique way of self-fashioning in the form of 'giving an account of oneself', or developing a public persona – a self-fashioned identity in the public sphere.

6 When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchment'.

Furthermore, parrhesiastic speech is usually representative in nature: the truth speaker commonly expresses widely held but suppressed views. Such a speaker can often be seen to act as the conscience of his group, such as the blind seer Tiresias in Sophocles' plays, or, as will be shown, the republican poet Milton in seventeenth-century England. While *parrhêsia* originated in fifth-century Athens, it was not the only source for the revival of the concept in the early modern period. 'Speaking truth to power' attained a new significance with the rise of Christianity. Scripture was as much of a source of inspiration for the seventeenth-century challenger of power as classical literature had been. The Old Testament provided strong examples of honest and outspoken counsellors like Nathan (I Kings 1) whose actions resemble those of a Greek sage, but stood in a more intimate position with respect to divine authority. In the New Testament, *parrhêsia* becomes a definitive element of Christian speech. It is used in speech by Christ, the apostles, Stephen, the first martyr, and the speech of Paul on the Areopagus, a noticeable inspiration for the title of Milton's 1644 tract defending free speech. 'Truth' in the Christian context referred to divinely revealed truth rather than the worldly truths of ethical practice and political action associated with the ancient *polis*. Consequently, the truth in question is spoken with a greater urgency, and the focus tends to fall more on the boldness and courage of the speaker, rather than just on his rhetorical skill. Although *parrhêsia* in both its pagan and Christian manifestations was very much a public phenomenon, for the Christian – especially the early modern Protestant – speaking truth to power was accompanied by a critical self-awareness absent in antiquity.

2. Biblical and Christian use of *Parrhêsia*

In the Old Testament, *parrhêsia* tends to appear as part of prophetic discourse and is associated with figures like Elijah, Samuel, Isaiah, Nathan and Jeremiah, who as vessels of Godly truth, speak that truth to earthly power.⁷ However, their admonitions tended to occur in a private context, and usually concerned the virtue – or lack thereof – of the monarch. Consequently, the speech acts themselves cannot be viewed as fully political in nature, although as visionaries, these prophets served as powerful models in shaping the Western view of itself and its relationship with the divine.

Of particular importance for the present article is the renewed emphasis in the seventeenth century on the Old Testament *agon* between the prophet (or

⁷ Although *parrhêsia* also appears in Jewish rabbinic (Midrashic) literature as a condition for the transmission of the Torah, it is largely irrelevant for the purpose of this article.

judge) as direct representative of God, and monarch as corruptible worldly power, a conflict that begins with the reluctant anointing of Saul by Samuel (1 Samuel 10). Whereas ancient poets like Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Lucan served as models that influenced the development of Milton's poetic vision, the Old Testament prophets may be regarded as playing an important role towards informing the content of Milton's thought, in particular with respect to developing a sense of urgency in his attempts to speak truth to power.

The New Testament is more complex as parrhesiastic source. John uses the term *parrhêsia* more as a marker of plainness, or in a sense of being 'out in the open', than as a term for bold speech. In John 7:4, for example, Jesus' brethren, still doubting him, suggests that he go into Judea and show his works openly: 'For there is no man that doeth anything in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly (*parrhêsia*). If thou do these things, show thyself to the world'. There are similar uses in John 10:24, and 11:54, and in chapter 16, it is used in a sense comparative to Quintillian, namely to 'speak plainly', i.e., not in parables (adorned or figurative speech). A similar use occurs in chapter 11 when the disciples misunderstand Jesus' metaphorical use when he says that Lazarus is sleeping, and the disciples read his statement literally. Jesus then corrects himself: 'Then said Jesus unto them plainly (*parrhêsia*), "Lazarus is dead" (John 11:14). In all of these contexts, John emphasizes plainness, clarity, and absence of ambiguity. Its purpose is to demonstrate the truth of Christ's words as opposed to the falseness of the Jewish aristocracy and the Roman invaders.

Even more than Socrates, Christ can be regarded as a *foundational parrhêsia*stes, that is, a figure whose challenge to power brings about an entire paradigm shift and who enacts a wholly new legislative order. That is to say, while most parrhesiastic figures (such as Milton) 'speak truth to power' regarding how their addressees failed to meet the standards of an existing moral order, Jesus and Socrates are the only figures to have challenged the existing moral code itself. While Jesus may be regarded as a more 'complete' *parrhesia*stes as his challenge to the reigning model of truth stretches beyond Socrates' largely epistemological endeavour, Jesus himself uses the word in the distinct Greek sense of challenging power only once. After being arrested at Gethsemane, he states that 'I spake openly to the world (*parrhêsia*) I even taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, where the Jews always resort; and in secret I have said nothing' (John 18:20). The word *parrhêsia* is usually translated in the Vulgate as *palam*, which translates more or less to 'speaking openly in the presence of', i.e. John 16:25: 'These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly [*parrhêsia*/'

palam] the Father'. Strictly speaking, this differs considerably from classical usage, but it opened the way for an entirely new use of *parrhêsia*, this time in service of Christianity itself.

The third sense in which the term occurs in scripture is found in the Acts, and in selected epistles by St Paul. These books are concerned not as much with recording Christ's words and actions, as John's Gospel is, but with the persuasive speech employed by the apostles in spreading the gospel. Consequently, *parrhêsia* in these books are translated in the Vulgate as *fiducia* (confidence) or *constantia* (steadfastness or constancy). In the King James Version, *parrhêsia* in these books is translated not as 'openness' but closer to the classical conception as 'freely' or 'boldly'. In Acts 4:13, for example, where Peter and John are interrogated by the high priest and his company, the latter are astonished by the 'boldness' of their speech. The implication is that the eloquence of Peter and John are divine gifts, not the result of rhetorical practice. According to Heinrich Schlier, 'the *parrhêsia* of the apostle who preaches openly and eloquently to the hostile world is also a *charisma* – a divine power'.⁸ The fact that *parrhêsia* – to a latter-day reader merely 'plain' or 'bold' speech – could evoke such strong emotions, affirms the power of the concept, and makes the care with which the Romans have engaged with this apparently prosaic rhetorical term all the more understandable.

Parrhêsia is used again in Acts 13 and 14 to describe the boldness of Paul and Barnabas' actions towards the Jewish population of Antioch and the residents of Iconium. A classic example of parrhêsastic speech to authority occurs in Acts 26:26 where Paul describes his conversion to Agrippa and Porcius Festus, the Roman procurator: 'The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him'.⁹

As Christian *parrhesiasthai* are inspired by the Holy Spirit to act as witnesses for their faith, *parrhêsia* in the New Testament is neither a civic virtue to be claimed as it was for the Greeks, nor merely a rhetorical trope as it was for the Romans. In early Christianity, *parrhêsia* was transformed into a definitive Christian virtue: it is now a cardinal element in the Christian identity as witness to God's truth. Whereas in the Hellenistic world the exercise of *parrhêsia* was a personal choice offering the reward of public recognition, for the Christian, speaking out in defense of his faith was seen as an essential

8 Heinrich Schlier, '*Parrhêsia*', in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol 5, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 1964-76), p.882.

9 Acts 26:26: For the king knoweth of these things, before whom I also speak freely (*parrhesiasomenos*).

duty. According to David Colclough, Scripture made it clear that the proper relationship between the individual Christian and non-Christian power should consist in the bold and fearless witnessing of the word of God 'whatever the circumstances'.¹⁰ As a result, the *parrhêsia* became an established role in the Christian Church, with St Paul seen as a model to be imitated. This ancient model would be linked with newer ideals of rational autonomy to form the free-speaking self in the seventeenth century. As it also offered the opportunity for bold action, *parrhêsia* may be viewed as offering an escape from what Foucault has deemed the 'normalizing impulse' in Christianity.¹¹

The first four centuries saw the transformation of *parrhêsia* into a quintessential Christian form of expression, gradually replacing the pagan remainders of the Stoic and Cynic schools. There are several examples of parrhesiastic speech between representatives of the growing Christian Church and Roman power. The most significant example of early modern religious free speech can be seen in the encounters between St Ambrose (340-397 AD) and the emperors Theodosius and Valentinian. Patrick Collison regards Ambrose as a decisive example to figure in the Elizabethan church, noting Bishop John Jewel's inclusion of Ambrose as an 'honorary member' of the Church of England in his *Apologia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (1562).¹²

3. Free speech in the Protestant revolution

Protestantism initially emerged in the sixteenth century as an exercise in formal theological correction. However, it ushered in an era of unprecedented individualism concomitant with a higher degree of self-reflexivity than hitherto experienced in the West. It may well be argued that Protestantism itself originated as a parrhesiastic discourse: Michel Foucault writes that Martin Luther's gesture of critique in 1517 came at a time

when the governing of men was essentially a religious practice linked to the authority of a church, to the magisterium of Scripture, not wanting to be governed in that way was essentially a seeking in Scripture a relationship other than the one that was linked to the operating function of God's teaching.¹³

10 Robert Colclough, *Freedom of Speech in Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 81.

11 For the original discussion on this theme, see Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris, Gallimard, 1976), pp. 182-190.

12 Patrick Collison, 'If Constantine, then also Theodosius: St Ambrose and the Integrity of the Elizabethan *Ecclesia Anglicana*' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30:2 (1979), p.205.

13 Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume I: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), p. 385.

The disenfranchisement of established truth, the disruptions of established mechanics of a civilization and the undermining of normative values informed a rather apocalyptic vision underlying the sixteenth century. From Pascal's 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me' to John Donne's '[T] is all in pieces, all coherence gone'¹⁴ one finds an increasing discomfort in the individual's relationship with his or her context, in particular an increased awareness of his own insignificance on the part of the subject with respect to the greater cosmological expanse. Whereas the medieval individual was to some extent comfortably ensconced in a given ontological order, from the sixteenth century onwards, the individual of the early modern period was increasingly burdened with the duty of self-legislation, that is, with the obligation to determine the nature of the world and the moral order within it by himself. In Foucault's terms, the early modern individual found himself in the position of having to set 'the comfortable landmarks of our thought'¹⁵ himself. By moving the moral gravitational centre from the symbolic representative of the divine in the form of priest and monarch to the 'priesthood of the believer', Protestantism made the individual believer the seat or anchor for the political and moral order alike. With the Reformation, conscience became more than mere personal responsibility for moral conduct, or an intensified self-awareness, concisely described as being 'privy to one's own secret'¹⁶ – it became part of the complexity of modern political consciousness itself. Consider for example, Luther's celebrated declaration at Worms in 1521 during which he stated that his conscience is subject only to God, adding that 'I cannot and nor will I retract anything, since it is neither safe nor virtuous to go against conscience.'¹⁷ No sooner had he spoken than Johann Eck, secretary to the proceedings, realized the implications of the issue that Luther had raised, and exclaimed, 'Lay down your conscience, Martin!' [*Depone Conscientiam, Martine!*]¹⁸ 'Conscience' in this context is by no means simply an early modern neologism. It was a staple element in scholastic thought, appearing in texts such as Peter Lombard's *Sentences* to extensive

14 Blaise Pascal in 'The Misery of Man Without God' in *The Thoughts of Blaise Pascal*, ed. by Auguste Molinier (New York: C. Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 18; John Donne, 'An Anatomy of the World' in *The Collected Poems by John Donne*, ed. by Robin Roberts (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 75.

15 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge 2012), p. vi.

16 Timothy C. Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.3.

17 D. Martin Luther, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* Vol VII (Weimar: Böhlau, 1997), p.176.

18 Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* Vol I (St. Louis: CPH, 1959), p.88, no. 269.

treatments in Aquinas and Bonaventure.¹⁹ Eck's objection was thus not to the conscience as a purely moral and universal faculty as it was understood since the fifth century but to a pernicious new form of it, a highly personal guide to conduct (i.e. Calvin's 'engraven of God in the myndes of men' in Thomas North's early translation),²⁰ bound only by its direct communication with God as revealed in scripture, which left no room for intermediary arbiters of relations between the divine and personal. In contrast to Desiderius Erasmus' conception of conscience, who perceived it merely as one among many mental faculties, Luther saw the call of conscience as a searing, life-transforming, absolute and singular message from the Holy Spirit itself.

The rise of the personal conscience was accompanied by an unprecedented absolutizing of moral accountability on a personal level. Whereas the pre-Reformation individual had the luxury of an established moral order where 'the good' was largely defined in terms of duty and obedience to authority, the post-Reformation subject was obliged to become *responsible* for himself, leading to the well-analyzed juridification of the individual mind. When Luther broke with Roman authority, he inaugurated a process of transferring unimpeachable transcendent authority to the impeachable self. Unlike the medieval confessional self, whose sins were formally defined and classified as the sins of all mankind, the Protestant self was increasingly private and thus bore a greater personal responsibility for his transgressions – or the lack of them.

Although the individual was ostensibly to some degree freed from the demands imposed by political authority, those demands now migrated inwards: external authority was now joined by an inner judge, and man became both prosecutor and defendant in his own inner moral drama, the drama of conscience. In other words, the usurpation of ecclesiastical by temporal authority created a need for the re-allocation and re-definition of moral power. The impact of this drama abounds in Renaissance literature.²¹

19 See for example, Lombard's *Sententiae* II. For more information on the medieval notion of conscience, see Potts, *ibid.*, p. 93, and for a brief genealogy of the notion of conscience, see Brian Cummings, 'Conscience and the Law in Thomas More', *Renaissance Studies* Vol 23, No. 4, p. 468-470.

20 John Calvin, *Institutions of Christian Religion*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Morton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.124.

21 The 'interiorization of man' made its first noteworthy appearance from the late fifteenth century. Indeed, as Kenneth S. Rothwell argues, the 'unimpeachable self, embryo for the alienated self, has coloured art and life in ways unthinkable before the Reformation'. 'Hamlet's Glass of Fashion: Power, Self and the Reformation' in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. 81.

What Milton called the 'Umpire Conscience' (*Paradise Lost* III 195) – the faculty that allows one to distinguish between right and wrong – in the seventeenth century, would be vested with an increasing legal and political importance: consider for now the example of the legalistic language of the early seventeenth century sonnet 'To His Conscience' of Robert Herrick (1591-1674) who regarded his conscience as his 'private protonotary', a personal record-keeper, whose records are only to be accessed by the speaker and his God: 'For times to come I'll make this vow,/From aberrations to live free;/So I'll not fear the Judge or thee' (14-16). Engaging in a private battle with one's conscience does not by itself translate into parrhesiastic activity – Richard III for example, is engaging in private reflection, not parrhesiastic speech. However, parrhesiastic speech can only be produced by a well-integrated, autonomous subject that had the opportunity to form personal opinions distinct from standard orthodoxy or official discourse, make judgments at least with some degree of autonomy and the formation of the conscience is an integral part of this process. The re-emergence of *parrhêsia* in the sixteenth century after a considerable absence after the fall of the Roman Empire was part of a process that may be described as the decentering of truth: truth was by no means relativized as a value nor was its attainment abandoned as an ideal, but the relationship between knower and known underwent considerable change. Truth was increasingly validated by the personal commitment of its adherents, in particular with respect to religious conflict (Luther, at risk in 1534 of losing his life writes in a personal letter to Emperor Charles V, 'As long as my conscience is captive to the Holy Scriptures, which have furnished evidence for all my books, I cannot recant if I am not proven wrong').²² In addition, post-Reformation Europe, increasingly informed by a spirit of critical reason and the successes of the Baconian empirical sciences, saw a growing need for the public testifying to, and testing of, truth claims. Protestantism itself had its origins in the more radical application of scholastic logic and more intense training in rhetoric and argument since the fifteenth century. G.R. Evans shows in an essay on sixteenth century theological debates that 'Luther's career as a reformer began with a series of more or less formal disputations'.²³ The scholastic tradition provided the structural context according to which Luther could frame his objections: his training in scholastic rhetoric provided the conceptual structure through which Luther initiated his enquiry into Church

22 D. Martin Luther, *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel 18 Volumes* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930-1985, Vol II, p.307.

23 G.R. Evans, *Problems of Authority in the Reformation Debates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.103.

authority. Moreover, Luther's objections to the practices of the Church were not formulated as new doctrine, but as theses to be debated on the public stage.

Luther's *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517) was originally written as a set of texts for exam purposes at the University of Wittenberg at which Luther served as Dean of the Faculty of Theology. Even the Ninety-Five Theses were originally stylistically framed as a set of propositions to be debated in public in a university, an ideal to some extent fulfilled in Heidelberg in 1518 and Leipzig in 1519. Luther initially saw the need to defend himself against the accusation that he was founding a new doctrine. 'We are accused of heresy and of being authors of new doctrine, so we must defend ourselves in public disputation.'²⁴ Furthermore, the practice of freedom of conscience is potentially plagued by the threat of boundlessness: one could in principle adhere to any position. It is an ambiguous concept and the possibilities of its contents infinite: 'Conscience is a word of great latitude, and infinite dispute', Samuel Clarke wrote in *Medulla Theologiæ, or, The Marrow of Divinity Contained in Sundry Questions and Cases of Conscience, Both Speculative, and Practical* of 1659.²⁵ To avoid the threat of solipsism,²⁶ leading Protestant theologians saw the need to counterbalance the highly private character of personal conscience by introducing a new emphasis on testing doctrine in public, through rational discourse: in other words, making free thought public in the form of free speech.

4. Milton as Early Modern *Parrhesiastes*

Milton's attempt to open the way for Truth involves a distinct dilemma: any attempt to speak the Truth – to power or otherwise – means speaking more than just *Truth*. In a passage which seems strikingly modern, Milton describes the intertwined nature of good and evil as follows:

Good and evil we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confused seeds which were impos'd on *Psyche* as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt. It was

24 Evans, G R., *ibid*, p.103.

25 Quoted by Jessica Beckwith, 'Milton's Evolving Faculty of Conscience in *A Treatise On Civil Power and Paradise Lost*', *Exemplaria* Vol 24, Issue 1-2, 2012.

26 The position that one can only be certain of the contents of one's own mind. It was a typical seventeenth-century concern, exemplified by the Cartesian ego.

from out the rinde of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil (*CPW* II:514).²⁷

One is immediately struck by the almost uncanny resemblance to post-structuralist thought: neither good nor evil are 'interdependent' terms, one element can only be known through comparison with its antithesis. For Jacques Derrida, language itself is a deferred and deferral infrastructure, consisting of an endless play of signs that allow for meaning to manifest itself through the endless interaction of words and letters: 'the movement of *differance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language, such as, to take only a few examples, sensible/intelligible, intuition/signification, nature/culture, etc.'²⁸

As part of a differential order, good and evil – and by implication truth and falsehood – imply each other, rather than merely asserting themselves as self-sufficient concepts. As much as Milton accepts the principle of contrariety; for him, conceptual differentiation is not quite as arbitrary: he still attempts to follow the traces of Truth. At first, he attempts to soften the metaphysical blow: good and evil are almost inseparable; so involv'd and interwoven that they are 'hardly' to be distinguished. Good and evil 'cleave together' in the very attempt to distinguish them. Milton draws upon the notion of the *agon* (the notion of productive, but non-destructive struggle) to overcome the problem of contrariety. Instead of abandoning all hope by focussing upon the ways in which falsehood or vice drags Truth or Virtue down, they both stress the ways in which a productive contest with their opposites can strengthen Virtue and Truth.

Milton regards the battle of equivalency as personal. In an oft-quoted passage he writes:

And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive

27 All the Milton quotations come from the *Aereopagithica*, in particular *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. by Don M. Wolfe, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-1982.

28 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, ed. and trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 9.

and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is triall, and trail is by what is contrary (*CPW*: II:514-515).

Once 'lost', the only way to recover virtue and Truth is through the crucible of intellectual exercise. At the heart of Milton's parrhesiastic endeavour lies an invitation, an invitation to his fellow citizens to join him in the public sphere, and engage in the search for Truth for themselves. To some extent, it is possible to say that the central idea of the *Areopagitica* cannot be captured in the language of principle or universalizable *dicta*, but rather in the vocabulary of virtue ethics. The limits of virtue ethics are not as clearly delimited as universal rules (e.g., the eighteenth-century Kantian Categorical Imperative) and are therefore more open to interpretation. There is a distinct strain of Aristotelian teleology throughout the *Areopagitica*, and it informs Milton's view of humanity: according to him, the believer is directed towards a richer, sublimated existence. Teleology is the attempt to describe objects in terms of their apparent purpose, directive principle, or goal. Although it forms the basis of Aristotle's ethics (i.e. the four causes), it is in fact the German thinker Christian Wolff who coined the phrase in his *Philosophia Rationalis, Sive Logica* of 1728. The ancient concept still had a strong presence till relatively late in modernity, where it was mainly replaced by deontology and utilitarianism. Traditionally, the Aristotelian 'end' of man is described as 'an activity of soul in accordance with virtue'.²⁹ It is possible to view Milton's parrhesiastic endeavour in terms of such a teleology. He presents a case for the attainment of autonomy and a more developed degree of maturity (in whatever form it may appear) rather than just disinterested republican freedom. Maturity is the virtue that authenticates all other virtues. Choices made after critical reflection reveal the true individual. The description of an inauthentic 'virtue', an *abdicated* faith, that 'slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat' recalls St Paul at his most Aristotelian, the St Paul of 2 Timothy 4:7: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith'. Furthermore, it continues St Paul's defence of a maturing faith in I Corinthians 13:15: 'When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me'.

In fact, 'preaching', 'learning' and 'sermons' would be superfluous if there were only obedience. Free speech would be impossible, and the status of

29 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by J.E.C. Welldone (Buffalo, N.Y: Longman, 1987), I: VII, p.24.

truth is of negligible importance under conditions where there is only power. In more Derridean terms: Law is thus not a substitute for Spirit, but serves as one of its objects of engagement. Truth derives its meaning from being recognized and acknowledged *as such* by a freely thinking, freely chosen subject with the implicit power to falsify or reject it. This makes *parrhêsia* the ultimate degree of free speech: it manifests itself out of conviction, and is expressed in anticipation of resistance and censure. Part of the parrhesiastic contract is an implied freedom for both parties: the value of *parrhêsia* lies in the difference in power between the speaker (or writer) and hearer (reader). Unlike the powerful addressee, the defender of Truth does not have force at his or her disposal, but both parties have the freedom to choose. The *parrhesiasthai* may cease his admonitions, and apologize, and his addressee may refuse to listen, and even take action against him. What matters for Milton is the degree of authenticity that generates such action: truth only becomes truth when accepted as a state of affairs corresponding with the nature of reality by a subject capable of doing so. In the process, man becomes *man*: 'When God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions. We ourselves esteem not of that obedience, or love, or gift, which is of force; God therefore left him free' (CPW II:527). Without such freedom, the human being would be a mere 'artificial Adam', pure exteriority, without the interiority that renders him distinctly human. Interiority maketh the man, without it, he is merely an object among other objects. It is within the deep self, the psyche, that the 'real' human being resides. Importantly, truth proclaimed without inner conviction runs the risk of acquiring the same ontological status as falsehood itself: 'A man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he believe things only because his Pastor sayes so, or the Assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, *yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresy*' (CPW II:543).

Interiority, or having an inner self means that only man is capable of sin. Free will, for example, is a thoroughly interior phenomenon, and for this reason, the mere removal of temptation is not going to restore the human subject to a position of original purity: we bring the impurity into the world with our very thoughts. What matters for Milton is that the inner self should be authentic and genuinely strive for the good. The removal of exterior temptations, such as wicked books, is not going to change the inner self of an individual determined to sin. Hence censorship is a mere artificial remedy and serves no real purpose.

They are not skilfull considerers of human things, who imagine to remove sin by removing the matter of sin; for, besides that it is a huge heap increasing

under the very act of diminishing, though some part of it may for a time be withdrawn from some persons, it cannot from all, in such a universall thing as books are; and when this is done, yet the sin remains entire. 'Though ye take from a covetous man all his treasure, he has yet one jewell left, ye cannot bereave him of his covetousnesse. Banish all objects of lust, shut up all youth into the severest discipline that can be exercis'd in any hermitage, ye cannot make them chaste, that came not thither so: such great care and wisdom is requir'd to the right managing of this point' (*CPW* II:527).

It is clear that Milton closely associates virtue with authenticity, virtue is to be the product of the choosing individual, not to be imposed from without. The charge of asceticism has been brought against Christianity on several occasions, notably by modern German materialists like Feuerbach, and perhaps most famously so by Friedrich Nietzsche. However, one may expand upon Dafaux's statement that the Renaissance anticipates and contains many late modern (or postmodern) elements by arguing that several writers – Christian as most of them were – displayed an intense awareness of the problematic nature of asceticism, the tendency to withdraw from the world into the depths of the self or the isolation of institutions. In fact, Milton espouses a distinctly *anti*-Utopian ethos: 'To sequester out of the world into *Atlantick* and *Eutopian* polities which never can be drawn into use, will not mend our condition; but to ordain wisely as in this world of evill, in the midd'st whereof God hath plac't us unavoidably' (*CPW* II:526). Despite pointing to the value that Plato placed upon education, Milton's vision of Truth is considerably more Aristotelian than Platonic. 'Truth' may be said to be closer to an event than an object, which means that it can only be encountered through virtuous action, and not through isolation or obedience. Milton appears to be sceptical with respect to the merits of utopias as they tend to shut down open engagement and dialogue, essential elements for a free, God-fearing nation.

It appears as if Truth can only be recognized if it is reached independently of 'Custom and authority'. Milton's Puritanism reveals a complex relationship between the interior self and exterior, worldly action. Puritanism, in this case, bears no relationship with notions like 'purging': the world after the Fall is too complex to purify by crude methods like banishment or censure. Actions undertaken must be real and reflect the 'true' inner world of the self. The removal of treasure will not save a man from the vice of 'covetousness', nor would the removal of objects of lust lead to a return to a state of virginal purity. If anything, it would simply add another layer of falsehood to the sinful, fallen world: instead of critically engaging with the roots and nature of sin, censure would now hide it under a fig-leaf. Milton thus establishes sincerity

as a hallmark of an authentic encounter with Truth. This is underscored by the fact that Milton appears to prefer a book burning done by free men even to the elevating commands of a 'Magistrate':

As for the burning of those Ephesian books by St. *Pauls* converts, tis reply'd the books were magick, the Syriack so renders them. It was a privat act, a voluntary act, and leaves us to a voluntary imitation: the men in remorse burnt those books which were their own; the Magistrat by this example is not appointed; these men practiz'd the books, another might perhaps have read them in some sort usefully (*CPW* II:494).

Milton is confident in the ability of Truth to conquer falsehood if only she is allowed to do so. In a famous passage he writes:

The temple of *Janus* with his two *controversal* faces might now not unsignificantly be set open. And though all the windes of doctrin were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licencing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falshood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter (*CPW* II:561).

For Milton, it is clearly important that his fellow believers – and rational subjects – should learn to trust Truth. 'Licencing and prohibiting' is only a hindrance towards Truth's eventual victory. It is interesting to note that the image of Janus, the classical deity of ambiguity and new beginnings, is evoked twice. In the passage above, Milton evokes Janus to urge his revolutionary compatriots to take a wider view of history, to look 'back and revise what hath been taught before', so that they may 'gain furder and goe on', i.e. release the dynamic potential of a free-playing Truth. On the other hand, Milton uses January – named after Janus in order to capture the 'backward/forward'-looking quality associated with the beginnings of a new year – but also the coldest month to describe the icy stasis of a society where all thought is regulated: 'These are the fruits which a dull ease and cessation of our knowledge will bring forth among the people. How goodly, and how to be wisht were such an obedient unanimity as this, what a fine conformity would it starch us all into? doubtles a stanch and solid peece of frame-work, as any January could freeze together' (*CPW* II:545).

By defending Truth as something emergent rather than given, and couching it in abstract terms, open to interpretation by the individual, Milton becomes a distinctly modern figure. Although not as distinctly apocalyptic as the anti-prelatical texts, the *Areopagitica* nevertheless projects a millennial vision of history according to which the regeneracy of the English nation may well be almost complete by the time of 'the second coming' (*CPW* II:549). Here again he is almost a *parrhesiastes* by proxy: rather than bringing a self-

contained Truth to the English people, he invites others to join him in the public sphere to discover it for themselves. In other words: the 'truth' that he 'speaks to power' is a plea to Parliament for the fundamental right of the individual to find Truth for him-(and to a lesser extent, her-)self. The image of the frozen river, as well as the 'muddy pool of convention' (*CPW* II:543), contrasts starkly with the vitality of the 'steaming fountain of Truth', which only remains alive if her water is allowed to 'flow in perpetually progression' (*CPW*: II:545).

Milton is far from the only Protestant to personify Truth as a vibrant warrior. Michael Walzer has demonstrated that bellicose imagery abounds in Calvin, who often expressed his ideas in terms of the Pauline 'fighting the good fight'. Milton's contemporaries have also, upon occasion, used such imagery. In *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution*, published in the same year as the *Areopagitica*, Roger Williams has Truth describe the Wars of Religion as follows:

The Israel of God now, men and women. Fight under the Great Lord-General, the Lord Jesus Christ: their weapons, armour and artillery are like themselves spiritual, set forth from top to toe, (Eph. 6), so mighty and so potent that they break down the strongest holds and castles ... the glorious army of white troupers horses and harness – Christ Jesus and his true Israel – gloriously conquer and overcome the Beast, the false prophet, and the kings of the earth up in arms against them.³⁰

Similarly, the Leveller William Walwynne (1600-1681) in *The Compassionate Samaritane* criticizes the Anglican theologians' refusal to debate arguing that, those who believe in truth 'should desire that all men's mouthes should be open, that so error may discover its foulness, and truth become more glorious by a victorious conquest after a fight in open field: they shun the battle that doubt their strength.³¹

As Milton did, Walwyn identified truth with openness and error with hiddenness. Milton, however, appears to be more committed to military metaphor than Walwynne. Depth may harbour resources for good argument, but it is essential to bring them out in the open: 'man '[draws] forth his reasons' from the 'deep mines of knowledge,' sets up his battle formations and 'calls out his adversary into the plain' (*CPW*: II:562).

30 A.S.P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates* (1647-9) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p.291.

31 William Walwyn, *The Compassionate Samaritane*, 2nd edn. (London: n.p., 1644), 58, repr. in *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution 1638-1647*, ed. William Haller (New York: Columbia University Press: 1933), 3:93

Milton's warrior for Truth is out in the open, desiring only that 'he may try the matter by dint of argument'. Truth is out in the open, because she has nothing to hide. By contrast, his opponents 'skulk' 'lay ambushments' and 'keep a narrow bridge of licencing where the challenger should pass.' (*CPW* II:562). Stratagems are 'weakness and cowardice in the wars of truth' (*CPW* II:562), mere fig-leaves in the face of the robust honesty of Truth. Even in the company of honest adversaries, doing battle over Truth remains necessary, as under conditions of suppression, Truth takes 'all shapes, except her own' (*CPW* II:563). Oliver Cromwell too, believed in the power of open dialogue. Writing in March 1657, he argues,

If only those who dissent would allow themselves to be prevailed upon, so at least that they might consent to disagree more courteously and moderately, dissenting not as enemies, but as bretheren on matters of trivial consequence, but wholly in accord with the most important matters of faith.³²

While notions of warfare and productive conflict may suggest a healthy vigorous public space with strong possibilities for a developed republican ethos, it also provokes the fear of *sparagnos* – an image of a scattered Truth, an original unity pulled apart by those incapable of 'moderate' dissent.

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after Him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the *Ægyptian Typhon* with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming; he shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of lovelines and perfection (*CPW* III:549).

32 The Miltonic State Papers, V, 783.