

**03/17/08 - For and Against Cromwell**

Harold Bloom (in *The Visionary Company*) writes that just as "French culture has been divided between those who have accepted the French Revolution and its consequences and those who have sought to deny and resist them," so English culture is "divided between those who have accepted the Puritan religious revolution of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century and those who have fought against it."

Romanticism in England arose from the pro-Puritan group: "Like that of all the English Romantic poets, Hazlitt's religious background was in the tradition of Protestant dissent, the kind of nonconformist vision that descended from the Left Wing of England's Puritan movement. There is no more important point to be made about English Romantic poetry than this one, or indeed about English poetry in general, particularly since it has been deliberately obscured by most modern criticism." Romanticism is not straight Puritanism, of course; it is "astonishingly transformed by different kinds of humanism or naturalism," yet Romantic poetry remains religious.

T. S. Eliot, Bloom says, is central to the backlash against Protestant poetry: "It is no accident that the poets deprecated by the New Criticism were Puritans, or Protestant individualists, or men of that sort breaking away from Christianity and attempting to formulate personal religions in their poetry." The Protestant poets of England start with Milton and Spenser, move through the Romantics and Victorians, and are represented in the 20th century by Hardy and Lawrence. The other line moves from Donne, Herbert, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Hopkins, down to Eliot and Auden. One line is "Protestant, radical, and Miltonic-Romantic; the other is Catholic, conservative, and by its claims, classical."

Bloom is not happy with the results when the high church party offers critical commentary on the Puritan party: "too many students . . . learned to read Milton in the dubious light of C. S. Lewis' *Preface to Paradise Lost*, in which the major Protestant poem in the language becomes an Anglo-Catholic document." When Milton begins his poem invoking the Spirit-Muse who "before all temples dost prefer/ the upright heart and pure," Bloom thinks he really means it: Milton "is repudiating the temples, all of them, and offering instead his own arrogantly pure and upright heart as the true dwelling place of the creative Word of God." And the Romantics are "direct descendants" of this Miltonic spirit.