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Affinities and Infinities

Joseph Smith and John Milton

Rosalynde Welch

This article is a lightly revised version of a talk prepared for a 2011 symposium organized in honor of Richard Bushman. Titled “Mormonism in Cultural Context: A Symposium in Honor of Richard Lyman Bushman on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday,” the conference was jointly sponsored by the Church History Department, Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and the Religious Studies Center. Presenters were invited to examine Joseph Smith and the Restoration in relation to large cultural currents and to significant intellectual movements, with the aim of exploring Mormonism in its most expansive religious context.

John Milton, son of John Milton, was born in Bread Street, London, in December 1608, the son of a middling scrivener; Joseph Smith, son of Joseph Smith, was born in December 1805, the son of a landless farmer. The senior John Milton's fortune depended on the unsavory practice of money lending, but over time he made a handsome life for the family; the senior Joseph Smith's fortunes depended upon the undesirable necessity of money borrowing, and in time a morass of debt defined the family life. The Smith and Milton families resided on opposite sides of the lender-borrower dynamic, but the mystique of money lending shadowed the reputations of young John and young Joseph both.

This coincidental spark between the lives of the two men—one an august, Anglo bard and the other an American folk prophet—is one of a number of curious likenesses and neat differences. Both men were

tireless autodidacts, for instance, with special interest in languages and translation. But Milton received the best education of any man of his generation in England; Joseph received scant formal schooling, though he never hesitated on that account to bring his writings to light. Both men, responding to an explicitly apocalyptic urgency, developed millenarian theo-political ambitions, Milton's pinned to the English Revolution and Joseph's to a project of American Zion-building. Milton lived to see his hopes brutally dashed in the failure of the Commonwealth and the restoration of the English monarchy; Joseph lived to see his Nauvoo with its tens of thousands rise from the wide Mississippi. Above all, both men claimed the mantle of prophecy: this conviction ran like a vein of gold through their writings, each conceived as a kind of third testament thoroughly steeped in a biblical imagination. Both men claimed that their words came from God, that they were visited nightly by a divine being of light, and Joseph might have echoed Milton's sentiment if not his grand style in invoking that muse:

More safe I sing with mortal voice unchanged
To hoarse or mute though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n and evil tongues,
In darkness and with dangers compassed round
And solitude. Yet not alone while thou
Visit'st my slumbers nightly or when morn
Purples the east. Still govern thou my song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few!¹

If Milton called his nightly visitor Urania, and Joseph called his Moroni, we can hardly quibble.

These psychological affinities point to deeper conversations between the textual legacies of John Milton and Joseph Smith. In a pair of articles, John Tanner has identified a number of convergences between Miltonic thought and Mormon teaching, including the denial of ex nihilo creation, an ultimate monism of spirit and matter, defense of polygamy, Christian primitivism and millenarianism, and espousal of lay ministry.² Tanner

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 7:24–31 (hereafter cited as *PL*).

2. John Tanner, "Making a Mormon of Milton," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 2 (1984): 191–206. John Tanner, "Milton among the Mormons," in *Ringing the Bell Backward, Proceedings of the First International Milton Symposium*, ed. Ronald G. Shafer (Indiana, Pa.: Indiana University of Pennsylvania Imprint Series, 1982), 123–32.

also cautions, wisely, against overinterpreting these resemblances or underreading important differences, and indeed it is not my aim to make an unbaptized Mormon of Milton nor an unlettered Miltonist of Joseph Smith. Still, the affinities are there, and the question remains what to make of them.

Influence, Transmission, and Comparison

First a word about transmission. Was Joseph influenced directly by Milton's works? Almost certainly not. Yet Miltonism abounded in the discursive culture of early America. The flowering of radical Protestant sects in Revolutionary England, sects with which Milton was associated, created a vernacular energy for archaic ideas of hermetic divinization and dispensational restorationism. This vernacular persisted beyond the restoration of the English monarchy in a popular religious idiom that crossed the north Atlantic and took root in the New England folk culture into which Joseph Smith was born. This is the intellectual history traced by John Brooke in *The Refiner's Fire*.³ The spirit of Milton ranged over the moral and intellectual life of the young nation, figuring both the old neoclassical learning and a new romantic hunger. The literate elite of the young nation saw Milton as "a combined scholar and genius, as a witness for Christianity and as a spokesman for God, [and] as a consummate artist"; ordinary Americans, for their part, "spoke of him so often and made him such an intimate part of their lives that before the eighteenth century closed he had become a household and a community word."⁴ New England's enthusiasm for Milton was more than the naive enthusiasm of a young nation: Milton was important to Americans "because he spoke to—and so seemed to provide answers for—the crisis of authority that continued to confront them."⁵ This crisis of political and cultural authority directly shaped the religious environment into which Joseph Smith was born and in which the Restoration offered its message of spiritual renewal. Ultimately, though, the literary-historical question of influence is peripheral to the aims of this paper.

3. See John Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

4. George Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 17, 5.

5. K. P. Van Anglen, *The New England Milton: Literary Reception and Cultural Authority in the Early Republic* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 42.

Given the strong likelihood that Joseph Smith was not influenced directly by Miltonic thought, however, the question arises: why launch a comparative study between Joseph Smith and Milton—or any historical figure lacking a direct connection to the Restoration project—in the first place? After all, comparative studies of this type are fraught with complication: the temptation to distort one or both figures in order to emphasize superficial parallels between the two; the impulse to make an “unbaptized Mormon” of one’s historical pet; or simply the fruitlessness of setting up an arbitrary rhetorical relationship between two unrelated objects of study.

This question has prompted vigorous debate among scholars of religion. Postmodern critics have rightly pointed out that some comparative religious studies have been confused, subjective, and covertly imperialist in their methods.⁶ But a defense of the comparative method can be constructed from the same postmodern premises. Kimberly Patton and Benjamin May argue that “comparison is an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best undertaken as an intellectually creative exercise, not as a science but as an art—an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge.”⁷ If the comparative method is undertaken with appropriate intellectual modesty in the spirit of creative exploration rather than scientific classification, fruitful insights may emerge. Moreover, scholars of Joseph Smith have recently called for precisely this kind of transnational and transhistorical comparative study: “Pursuing broader questions, future historians may compare Smith to the great mythmakers of history like Dante, Milton, Blake, and Nietzsche,” Richard Bushman said in 2005. “How does Smith look alongside religious figures such as Augustine, Luther, Gandhi, or Muhammad?”⁸ For Bushman and other Latter-day Saints, the strength of a wide comparative view is clear: “To a large extent, Joseph Smith assumes the character of the history selected for him. The broader the

6. See Jonathan Z. Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” in his book *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19–35.

7. Kimberly Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4. Comparative theory is useful in many fields, such as law, literature, and international trade.

8. Richard L. Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Many Histories,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 11.

historical context, the greater the appreciation of the man.”⁹ Scholars have responded to Bushman’s call, and the past ten years have seen a new crop of these comparative studies.¹⁰ The aim of these studies has not been to homogenize or harmonize the real differences between the historical objects of study, but rather to plumb similarities *and* differences so as to more fully illuminate Joseph Smith and his movement in a world context.

It is in this spirit of mutual respect and intellectual play, then, that I offer the present study. I believe that the parallels I’ve sketched above—the theo-political preoccupations and grand ambitions of both men, the revelatory quality and deep biblicism of their respective textual legacies, and the convergences in their doctrines—justify the comparison between Smith and Milton. Yet it is not to these parallels that I address my argument: John Tanner has already ably covered this ground in the pieces cited above. Rather, I look to a neatly symmetrical *difference* between Joseph Smith and John Milton centering on the problem of social institutions, and I identify a series of three textual convergences that illustrate this contrast. I do not suggest that this represents a novel contribution to Milton studies; rather, the sparks that fly from rubbing together these two richly imagined narrative theologies may throw into relief certain aspects of the Restoration that otherwise might remain in shadow.

Iconoclasm and Iconofacture

One way to conceptualize the relationship between John Milton and Joseph Smith is through the categories of iconoclasm and its opposite, what I’m calling “iconofacture.” Milton was an iconoclast, and not only in the narrow Reformation sense, though certainly his sympathies were with the vestment-burning and altarpiece-smashing sectarians of the Revolution. Milton’s iconoclasm extended further, to the foundational

9. Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Many Histories,” 4.

10. See, among others, Stephen C. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Richard Dilworth Rust, “‘I Love All Men Who Dive’: Herman Melville and Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 1 (1999): 151–69, reprinted in *Joseph Smith, Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); David L. Paulsen, “What Does It Mean to Be a Christian? The Views of Joseph Smith and Søren Kierkegaard,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 55–91.

institutions of human society. He titled his 1649 pamphlet defending the regicide of Charles I *Eikonoklastes*, and for good reason: the destruction of corrupt institutions that restrain human liberty is, for Milton, the purest form of iconoclasm. The reasoning that informs his anti-monarchical position runs with a keen coherence through his anticlerical pamphlets, his divorce pamphlets, his defense of the free press in *Aereopagitica*, and through the narrative philosophy of *Paradise Lost*: Neither the state, the church, the family, nor even poetry itself escaped the executioner's blade.

Milton's iconoclasm begins with a deep sense of the slavish condition of human nature since the fall of Adam.

Since [Adam's] original lapse true liberty
Is lost which always with right reason dwells . . .
Reason in man obscured or not obeyed
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart passions catch the government
From reason and to servitude reduce
Man till then free. Therefore since he permits
Within himself unworthy pow'rs to reign
Over free reason God in judgment just
Subjects him from without to violent lords
Who oft as undeservedly enthrall
His outward freedom.¹¹

These lines contain the principal lesson of *Paradise Lost*: internal moral reason and external political liberty are twinned, in constant contest with “double tyrann[ies], of Custom from without, and blind affections within.”¹² Thus Milton's life became a battle against these twin tyrannies, the mental tyranny of passion and the political tyranny of customary human institutions. At first, Milton believed in the capacity of human reason to rebuild godly—that is to say, liberty-preserving—institutions: this belief motivated his tireless civil service in the new Commonwealth. Thus the curious irony that John Milton, revolutionary and iconoclast, spent so much intellectual energy in defense of authority, excusing English regicide to continental elites, for example, or excusing God's ways in the extended theodicy of *Paradise Lost*. With the failure of the English political experiment, however, his faith in human institutions

11. *PL* 12:83–95.

12. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 3:190.

waned and his vision turned inward to what he called a “church of one,” a single reading believer who seeks truth in the private liberty of the mind. We hear the mature Milton as his Adam leaves the failed external Paradise of Eden for a Paradise within:

Then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far.¹³

Joseph Smith’s relationship to the iconoclastic impulse, on the other hand, is inconsistent and difficult to define, but it emerges more clearly when compared to Milton’s. Certainly the church Joseph Smith founded absorbed from its New England context some trappings of the austere Puritan iconoclasm that Milton himself helped to disseminate. And certainly some of Joseph’s religious discourse was informed by a fiery anticlerical and anticreedal vocabulary, as when he is instructed by the Lord in his first vision “that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt” (JS–H 1:19). But Milton’s iconoclasm originates in the tragedy of “original lapse,” while Joseph’s springs from an optimistic vision of human nature freed from the taint of Adam’s transgression, presiding in a fortunately fallen world, even sharing in the divine substance. Milton’s project was the dismantling of unjust human institutions in favor, finally, of a personal “church of one.” Joseph, however, deploring clerical and political tyranny and corruption as Milton did, can be seen to make a sort of equal and opposite departure in the other direction. Joseph’s work was not the smashing of iconic forms of tyranny, not the work of iconoclasm, but the work of iconofacture: the ceaseless making (in myth) and the building (in ritual) of social institutions, above all familial. These “icons” were not (or not primarily) sacred vestments and images, but multiplied and formalized—indeed sacramentalized—roles and relationships ratified by priesthood, what Sam Brown has recently called “the great chain of belonging.”¹⁴ “Covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations and expectations”: here at the theological center of Joseph’s restoration, the “new and everlasting covenant,” we find a catalog of social forms, instituted in law and in custom, not incidental to salvation but its very stuff. Latter-day Saints rightly focus on the eternal

13. *PL* 12:585–87.

14. Samuel Brown, “The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (2011): 1–52.

nature of the family form and the priesthood authority by which it must be ratified. To set Joseph's vision of social institutions multiplied into eternity against Milton's vision of a "church of one" is to step back and first grapple with the basic presence and purpose of mediating social institutions themselves. Joseph might have envisioned a utopia like Milton's, free of the customary contracts, bonds, and obligations that are prone to corruption and tyranny, a heaven in which the soul enjoys absolute freedom to mingle or retreat without mediation of social forms and obligations. This was not the heaven Joseph saw or the freedom he sought. He did not come to destroy corrupt social institutions but to redeem them.

If Milton's great struggle was against tyranny, Joseph's was against social incoherence, and this struggle informed his ceaseless effort to secure the eternal "welding link," "a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories . . . from the days of Adam even to the present time" (D&C 128:18). Milton's iconoclasm ultimately left him in the austere purity of his church of one; Joseph's work of iconofacture brought him his church of ten thousands.

Council, City, Spouse

With these categories in mind, I will turn now to three specific intersections between Milton's thought and Joseph's teaching, briefly exploring the ways in which each unpacks the notions of iconoclasm and iconofacture. First to the Council in Heaven. Milton's account in *Paradise Lost* adapts scripture, patristic literature, and medieval hexaemeral poems and paradise plays in the stately cadence of blank verse, while Joseph's is clothed in a plain biblical idiom.¹⁵ Yet the two accounts are broadly similar, beginning with the fact that neither is a straightforward narrative: Milton imagines four grand councils, two in heaven and two in hell, while Joseph's account of the Grand Council emerged piecemeal in translations, sermons, and revelations.¹⁶ Both recount the

15. See Stella Purce Revard, *The War in Heaven: Paradise Lost and the Tradition of Satan's Rebellion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980).

16. See Doctrine and Covenants 29:36–38, 76:25–29, Moses 4:1–4, Abraham 3:23–28; Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 341, 345, 351, 358–59, 367. See also "Accounts of the 'King Follett Sermon,'" on Church Historian's Press, *The*

story of a charismatic Satan's envy of the Only Begotten, the dramatic moment of Satan's self-assertion, his eventual expulsion from heaven with his angels, and Christ's investiture as Messiah. And both freight the narrative with a theology—and theodicy—of free will that verges on Arminianism, though to very different effect: Milton's God, more a collection of treatises on free will than a personality, famously laughs in derision at the "vain designs" of the rebels, while Joseph's weeps with all of heaven.¹⁷

The Council narratives offer a convenient occasion to compare the natures of the two Gods. Both Milton and Joseph rejected *ex nihilo* creation and denied any essential distinction between spirit and matter; they were both material monists, suggesting that the universe shares a common substance with God. Milton demonstrates this monism by making the "War in Heaven" a mock epic in which warrior angels operate heavy artillery and by imagining the details of angelic combat.¹⁸ In contrast, Joseph does it by placing God among a community of co-eternal intelligences who together organize existing elements and prepare the cosmos for the advent of the human family's second estate. Their shared monism thus diverges at the nature of God: Joseph arrives at a founding parent moving among his cosmic family; Milton arrives at the invisible *cynosure* of a theocentric universe. After the second Council in Heaven, Milton's angels sing:

Thee, Father, . . . omnipotent,
 Immutable, immortal, infinite,
 Eternal King, . . . Thyself invisible
 Amidst the glorious brightness where Thou sitt'st
 Throned inaccessible.¹⁹

It's hard to imagine a God more remote from Joseph's, who begins his cosmogony with "I came down in the beginning in the midst of all the intelligences" (Abr. 3:21).

Both Gods are heretical by the standards of historical Christianity, though at first blush Joseph's would seem to be the more iconoclastic; certainly it is more shocking to suggest that God is of the same species as humans than to propose he is merely of the same substance. But

Joseph Smith Papers, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-king-follett-sermon>.

17. *PL* 5:735; Doctrine and Covenants 76:25–29; Moses 7:28.

18. *PL* 6:589–90.

19. *PL* 3:372–78.

in the broad sense of iconoclasm that I outlined above—the impulse to destroy the customary roles and institutions that mediate human relationships—I would suggest that Joseph’s vision is on the contrary profoundly iconogenic. His Council places God in a primal condition of community, a hierarchical community, to be sure, but a hierarchy of adjacency, not of Miltonic disjunction. Divinity is constituted of, not merely figured in, God’s roles in the universal institutions of family and council: he is God because he is Father, he is God because he is Head of the council, not the other way round.

We find a second relevant occasion for comparison in the Enoch narratives. From among the generations of Adam, both Milton and Joseph single out Enoch as a mythic leader, greatly expanding on the few lines in Genesis 5.²⁰ Milton’s Enoch appears in the context of a grand panoramic vision unfolded to pre-exilic Adam by the archangel Michael, a vision not unlike the one unfolded to Joseph’s Enoch. Both men seem to have identified personally with their Enoch: Milton makes his a lone voice for political liberty in a world of tyranny; Joseph’s is a young prophet called from a wicked world to build a holy city. The narratives are thematically similar in the beginning, with Enoch rising up to preach to an angry mob:

The only righteous in a world perverse
And therefore hated, therefore so beset
With foes for daring single to be just
And utter odious truth.²¹

Here the accounts part ways: Milton’s Enoch so incenses his audience that they would have seized him violently had not “a cloud descending snatched him thence / unseen among the throng.” Milton’s apotheosis thus emphasizes the isolation of the godly in a wicked world: Enoch was the “only righteous” who “dared single” to utter truth, prefiguring Milton’s own retirement to a “church of one.” Joseph’s Enoch, by contrast,

20. The extent to which Milton may have been influenced by pseudepigraphic Enoch literature is a matter of some debate. See Grant McColley, “The Book of Enoch and Paradise Lost,” *Harvard Theological Review* 31, no. 1 (1938): 24; and Arnold Williams, “Milton and the Book of Enoch: An Alternate Hypothesis,” *Harvard Theological Review* 33, no. 4 (1940): 292. A similar debate, of course, has examined the possibility of Joseph Smith’s exposure to pseudepigraphic Enoch tradition, originating with Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, vol. 2 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986).

21. *PL* 11:665–68.

goes on to found the holy city of Zion that is taken up whole to the heavens. This apotheosis insists that salvation works through communal forms such as the city, forms that unite individuals not only in space but also in time: Enoch sees in vision his city of Zion meeting a latter-day city of Zion, and the images describing this reunion are some of the most moving in Mormon scripture: “And the Lord said unto Enoch; Then shalt thou and all thy city meet them there, and we will receive them into our bosom, and they shall see us; and we will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon our necks, and we will kiss each other” (Moses 7:63). The holy intimacy in these verses is striking in its intensity, and it invites comparison with Milton’s notorious description of angel intimacy. For Milton, heavenly intimacy is a complete and unmediated union of soul with soul, “easier than air with air”: no “membrane, joint or limb” constrains a total mingling.²² Joseph imagines holy intimacy not as an immediate mixing of souls but as a sacramental encounter of cities, the central social form of early Restoration theology. Union occurs not in spite of the mediating social institutions that shape human relationships—society’s membranes, joints, and limbs—but precisely by means of them.

This suggests a third point of comparison: divorce and marriage. In a series of passionately argued pamphlets, Milton advocated liberalizing divorce law to permit divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable psychological differences. For Milton, neither sexual union nor procreation is the primary end of marriage as originally ordained by God. The aim of marriage is, in fact, something like the angelic intimacy described above: a total psychological and emotional union, a powerful psychic merging of two minds into a single self. This view of marriage is dramatized in the creation scenes of *Paradise Lost*. Shortly after Adam wakes from his primal sleep, God is pleased to find that his only rational creature among the beasts desires what he calls “fit conversation.” God knew it was not good for man to be alone, and now that Adam knows it, too, he promises:

What next I bring shall please thee, be assured,
Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self
Thy wish exactly to thy heart’s desire.²³

22. *PL* 8:620–25.

23. *PL* 8:449–51.

This is indeed what Adam finds in Eve: a second self, total identification exactly matching his heart's desire. For Milton the iconoclast, true spiritual marriage springs spontaneously from Adam's desire, unmediated by the social institution of the same name. The contrast with Joseph's understanding of marriage is, I hope, already suggesting itself. Adam and Eve are central to Joseph's notion of celestial marriage, as well, but not because they demonstrate a love that exceeds roles and institutions: on the contrary, "Adam" and "Eve" *are*, precisely, the offices that husband and wife assume as they enter the institution of marriage, offices that constitute the saving condition of marriage. Milton's Adam and Eve inaugurate an ideal of marriage as an unmediated, intensely personal melding of souls; Joseph's Adam and Eve become the structuring categories of a formalized, institutionalized vision of marriage that organizes divine law and society.

Joseph, like Milton, was portrayed by his enemies as a libertine advocating sexual lawlessness. Milton was no libertine, but his vision of marriage exists over and against law and society; it does imply a kind of antinomianism. Though Joseph's doctrine of plural marriage was a more egregious breach of cultural sensibilities than Milton's emphasis on divorce, Joseph's vision of marriage is in some ways the more "conventional" of the two, in the sense that it aims for a *sacralized establishment* of human convention in law and society, not the dissolving of institution into unmediated personal union. Celestial marriage as Joseph revealed it is entirely bound up with law and society; indeed, it multiplies them a hundredfold. Celestial marriage is not the collapsing of two selves into an ecstasy of total identification; it is the multiplication of selves and linking affiliations in an infinity of "eternal lives" (D&C 132:24).

Conclusion

Matched in the scope of their cosmic visions, united in their fearless independence of mind and fiery opposition to the false creeds of the fathers, John Milton and Joseph Smith stand in mutual regard with a kind of equal and opposite force. Milton, profoundly iconoclastic in his political and historical sensibilities, imagined a world of infinite social forms in which political, religious, and familial institutions were exploded in favor of a flexible social field free from traditional obligations and allegiances. Yet this infinity of social forms was balanced by Milton's deep sense of the frailty of finite human understanding, of the limiting effects of the Fall on human possibility. Joseph, in contrast, proclaimed a glorious infinity of human understanding, of eternal progression, of an inherent human dignity and

an exalted human destiny. But Joseph shared very little of Milton's iconoclastic impulse. His cosmic vision of the independence of the human soul was tempered by his ceaseless mission to define social forms that create coherence and connection—that is, to limit and train the forms of human desire and relatedness. Joseph stands in colloquy with Milton across the centuries, two visionaries training their sights in opposite trajectories on the affinities and infinities of the human spirit.

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