To the question assigned us—why does Milton matter?—I would add two additional questions: Matter to whom? And matter as what? The second—matter as what?—is the crucial one, for I take it to be true that things matter in particular ways—nothing matters in every way—and I also take it to be true that the particular way a thing matters is a function of what it is intended by its maker or author to be. That is to say, when evaluating a human production (as opposed to a natural phenomenon) one must begin with a precise understanding of its purpose. What was it meant to do? What task was it fashioned to perform? Once these questions have been answered, you are equipped with a framework from the perspective of which you can identify the relevant features of a performance. And once those features have been identified, you can go about the business of determining what they mean, all the while keeping in mind that the meanings you seek to establish will be meanings specific to the purpose of the agent or agents who set out to do something, not everything. (Here I reaffirm C. S. Lewis’s assertion that, “The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.”1) It is in relation to the something purposive actors set out to do that the end result must be evaluated. If the evaluation is strongly positive, you say, “that’s a really good instance of X or Y or Z—a really good song, or a really good wine, or a really good automobile, or a really good movie.” And if this positive evaluation is transmitted to, and shared by, generations subsequent to the initial appearance of the something someone set out to do, you can then say, “this really matters,” by which you will mean that in the history of the effort to do that kind of thing, this is a shining and lasting and exemplary contribution.

With these general speculations (to which I shall return) as background, I can now answer the question “Why Milton Matters” by posing and answering the secondary (really primary) question, “matters as what?” Insofar as Milton matters, he matters as a poet, for it is poetry he set out to write; and, moreover, if this is so, then it seems to me that the best scholarship now being produced by the most intelligent, learned, acute students of Milton is de-
signed, not self-consciously of course, to ensure that in time he won’t matter. No one will care.

How can this be? How can a scholarship at once be best and be (at least potentially) responsible for the diminishing of its object? There is no puzzle or paradox here: the scholarship I refer to is best because it is scrupulous, well informed, wide-ranging, illuminating, full of insights, pathbreaking. But its very virtues are likely to have the negative effect I predict because in the exercise of those virtues the authors of this scholarship pick up the stick from the wrong end.

It’s time for an example, and remember, it’s an example of something excellent in many respects except for the one respect that counts. The year 2002 saw the publication of an important (and award-winning) collection of essays entitled *Milton and the Terms of Liberty*, edited by Graham Parry and Joad Raymond. In the introduction to the volume Parry identifies it as the report of the International Milton Symposium, a conference assembled “to discuss the current state of Milton studies” and declares that “the collection of papers presented here reflects the predominance of interest in Milton’s constant adjustment of his political ideas to the changing circumstances of the nation” (xv). This predominance is reflected, he points out, in the fact that “many of the conference papers considered the larger question of Milton’s place in the history of political thought in early modern Britain and Europe.” “This bias,” he concludes, “seems likely to continue to influence the future direction of Milton studies.” That’s just what I’m worried about, for although Parry mentions, in passing, that there was some attention paid at the conference to “the interconnections between linguistic register, literary form and ideas in the expression of political concerns,” it is clear that in his mind and the mind of his fellow contributors, political concerns came first, their expression in linguistic and literary form second.

That is what I mean by picking up the stick from the wrong end. If what is important is Milton’s place in the history of political thought, the form taken by his political reflections will be a matter of (at most) secondary interest. If you think of Milton as being in competition with Thomas Hobbes, John Harrington, John Locke, John Lilburne, William Prynne—a competition he would most likely lose—the fact that he wrote in verse will no doubt be noted, but it will not take center stage, and the history of poetic conventions—along with the imperatives for performance encoded in those conventions and the meaning-making recipes they provide—will first become background and then, after a while, fade from sight; and fading with them will be any recollection of why—as an instance of what general purpose—Milton wrote these things in the first place. In short, if Milton’s value—the degree to which he matters—stands or falls on his contribution to English and Euro-
pean political thought, it will fall. After all, the only reason anyone would care about “Milton’s constant adjustment of his political ideas” is because he’s the guy who wrote *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, Lycidas,* and *Samson Agonistes*; and if those poems are quarried for political or economic or agricultural or military views, the collection and analysis of those views as politics or economics or agriculture (as if those disciplines named the arena of Milton’s ambitions) will displace any interest in their status as poems, and as a result we will have lost our grip on what kind of accomplishment they are.

I here give voice to a concern that has been expressed with some frequency in recent years. Michael Clark, commenting on the recent tendency to subsume literature in “a more general symbolic determinism,” observes that when “the system as a whole, rather than anything specific to the literary text” takes front and center stage, “Literature as such simply disappears against a general background of material action or symbolic determination.” Richard Strier is making the same kind of argument when he declares that in giving up formalism, we “give up both the question of value and the conception of ‘the literary.’” Ellen Rooney is even more pointed when she insists that, “For a critical reader bereft of the category of form, the subject matter of literary and cultural analysis loses all standing as a theoretical object.” Once the category of form has been attenuated, she concludes, every text is reduced “to its ideological or historical context,” and “reading has been displaced by a project of sorting by theme.” Of course, themes can be found embedded in any form whatsoever, and if you make themes the focus of your analysis, the particular form that gives them experiential life will receive no attention whatsoever.

I can imagine at least two objections to the arguments I have just rehearsed: (1) Why couldn’t it be the case that the inventorying of Milton’s views on a number of subjects illuminated rather than overwhelmed the poetry? and (2) Isn’t the idea of a distinctively literary performance a relic of a long-since-rejected aesthetic idealism with its built-in alibi for a poetic genius floating free of the entanglements of the world? The inventorying of Milton’s views on history, politics, theology, and so on, will indeed have a chance to illuminate the poetry, but only if those views have been tabulated in response to a literary question: that is, you notice, as everyone since Addison has, that the God of *Paradise Lost* is a puzzlingly unsympathetic figure and you look in Milton’s writings on theology and kingship for a key to the puzzle. If, on the other hand, you simply ask and then answer the question, “what did Milton think about X,” you will have marshaled a good deal of information, but there will be no way to get from it to the poetry you want it to illuminate. Let me illustrate with another example, again a scholarly work that is in many respects impeccable: Jeffrey Shoulson’s “Milton and Enthusiasm: Radical
Religion and the Poetics of *Paradise Regained.* Early on, Shoulson identifies his project by posing it as a question: “Is it possible to determine from *Paradise Regained,* a poem so deeply engaged in the matter of messianic salvation and its relation to history, Milton’s attitudes toward these various enthusiastic movements?” (3). The answer is, “sure it’s possible,” and in fact Shoulson does it for the rest of an elegantly constructed and argued paper. But when it comes time for him to make good on his subtitle—“Radical Religion and the Poetics of *Paradise Regained*”—he has nowhere to go because nothing in his framing of the essay’s question and therefore of its agenda is in touch with any poetic or aesthetic concern. The pages he devotes to *Paradise Regained* as a poem at the end of the essay are interesting and incisive, but they don’t grow out of the longer exposition that precedes them. That exposition was the exposition of a historian of theology, and while it is certainly possible and indeed likely that the history of seventeenth-century theology will be relevant to *Paradise Regained,* that relevance will not emerge if you simply lay the exposition next to the poem. Rather, the relevance must be elaborated and argued for, and argued for in specifically literary terms. There is, to be sure, an argument in Shoulson’s paper, but it is not, until the very end, a literary argument, and its materials will not transform themselves into poetically significant materials without the intervention and controlling guidance of the literary interrogation Shoulson never sets in motion. What he does set in motion is an interrogation that proceeds from quite a different angle; and as that angle takes over his paper any sense of *Paradise Regained* as a poem, as a production of a particular and distinctive kind, pretty much disappears and the aesthetic object is absorbed by the cultural materials that now surround it.

But isn’t that just the point (and here I take up the second obvious objection). After all, it has been the project of cultural studies to achieve just such an absorption by denying to the literary object its splendid but irresponsible and historically impossible isolation. Raymond Williams stands in here for the innumerable proclaimers of the same sentiments: “We cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws. They may have quite specific features as practices but they cannot be separated from the general social process.” Well, yes and no. While it is true that no discourse occupies a privileged, self-defining, independent, and autonomous place, and while it is also true that all discourses are both culturally constituted and constitutive of culture, participating in and productive of a “general social process” they affirm and modify, it can nevertheless be said of a particular discourse that it is separate and distinct; not distinct in the impossible sense of being free-standing, but distinct in the sense that it reflects the general and shared set of
discursive practices in a way appropriate to its claimed function. Writing a sermon and writing a history and writing a poem are all conventional activities enabled by and feeding back into the same social conditions of articulation, and no one of them is finally independent of the others; but “finally” is a very abstract measure, and short of it the differences that attend different purposes are operationally real and result, despite what Williams says, in “quite special and distinct laws,” the law, for example, that a sermon must have a homiletic and hortatory point, or the law that histories must offer explanations of the events they report, or the law that poems must at once utilize and display the resources of language, or the law that fictions can set aside the requirement of verisimilitude. To be sure, it is always possible to focus on the set of generally enabling conditions and to discover its traces in particular performances, but if you do only that and always do that you will lose sight of the conventional—not essential—differences that make things what they are; you will fail to ask the right questions and you are likely to be distracted by the wrong ones.

The lesson is simple and it is the one I began with: in the act of assessing a performance you must always be in mind of its point, of what it is trying to do. This was a lesson forgotten by those moviegoers who in 1967 criticized Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* because in a crucial scene the hero, played by Dustin Hoffman, drives his Alfa Romeo across the upper level of the Bay Bridge in a direction prohibited by the traffic laws. It was said that Nichols spoiled the movie by making this mistake, but it wasn’t a mistake at all; it was a cinematic choice that had to do no doubt with the position of the sun, the quality of the light, the panorama available to the camera, and the relation of all of these to the film’s dramaturgy. It was to those conventions and conventional resources—the conventions and resources of movie making—that Nichols was being responsible; he was not responsible to the conventions of the documentary or the conventions of news broadcasting or the conventions of history or the conventions of driving practices. Those viewers who held him to the decorums of another practice got hung up on something that was irrelevant to his achievement, and so they missed it.

I would say the same about Raymond Williams’s famous thesis about the pastoral, the argument that if we focus only on the formal and genre aspects of poems like *Lycidas* and *To Penshurst* we miss the fact that, by perpetuating the myth of an “enameled” country life, such productions functioned as screens and apologies for the reality of oppressive agricultural practices—enclosure, eviction, conditions of near-slave labor. The accusation is that both the poets and the critics who follow the standard line of analysis are accomplices to the outrages they fail to address. They don’t bring to light what was really going on at Appleton House or Tintern Abbey. My response
is, right, they don’t, and that wasn’t what they set out to do. They set out to write poetry in a particular genre.

This doesn’t mean that the poetry they produced is without any connection whatsoever to issues of agricultural reform, peasant labor, foreclosure, enclosure, and the like. Virgil’s Eclogues, a model for would-be pastoral poets in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, are explicitly concerned with all of these matters, and after Virgil the formal/conventional properties of the pastoral genre are understood to include them. In his influential and authoritative The Art of English Poesie (1589), George Puttenham says of the pastoral that “under the veil of homely persons” it glances “at greater matters and such as perchance had not been safe to have been disclosed in any other sort.” Thus, when Milton begins Lycidas with the words, “Yet once more,” his readers know that the pastoral poet’s lament will touch on matters greater than the “rustical manner” (Puttenham) the representation suggests. In short, substantive concerns are built into the formal signatures of the genre.π

What is not built into the formal signatures of the genre, however, are the concerns of the Marxist/materialist critics who, following Williams and others, focus on what the genre, at least in its classical instantiations, leaves out. Poems leave out many things—indeed the vast majority of things—but an account of what a poem leaves out cannot be an account of the intention of the author (and of the poem’s meaning) unless it can be shown that the author wanted the reader to notice the exclusion and to make something of it. In general, anything can count as relevant to meaning (even an exclusion, if, for example, an allusion to a mythical hero leaves out half of his story) so long as it can be linked up to the author’s intention. Something in the present, something in the past—it doesn’t matter. Historical proximity to the act of composition is neither a requirement for nor a guarantee of relevance. The fact that an author said or did something does not make that something part of his intention even if what he did was causally productive of the object of interpretation.

This is a point missed, I think, by Stephen Dobranski in his learned and illuminating Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade;∫ Dobranski forcefully argues that an overemphasis on the picture of Milton as a solitary genius (a picture, as he notes, Milton himself sometimes draws) has deflected attention away from “the material conditions of Milton’s authorship” (3). Dobranski is particularly interested in the transactions between Milton and his printers and booksellers, and it is his project “to reconstruct such relationships based on his publications and personal letters, as well as documentary evidence about the book trade” (3). This project is organized, he tells us, by three questions: “What role did Milton play in the production of his texts? What
can we learn about the author by examining his practices of writing and publishing? How does the material creation of Milton's books affect their meaning? But if you will allow me a Sesame Street moment, question three is not like the others. Questions one and two are historical and empirical questions and are interesting in their own right. Question three is an interpretive question; it assumes that there is a relationship between the details of composition and publication—How long did it take to write? To whom were various drafts shown? What were Milton's negotiations with his printer?—and what the published product means. There is no such relationship, or, rather, there isn't any except in the case of two special circumstances: (1) When the history of composition and publishing is incorporated explicitly into the text or is rehearsed in a prefatory note; (2) When there is a question of attribution that requires an examination of compositional practices and the identity of booksellers or printers in order to determine who the author actually was, a determination necessarily preliminary to any specification of his or her intention. In any other circumstance information about the “practices of writing and publishing” will stand to the side of the interpretive effort, for while those practices are surely part of an author's biography, they are not evidence of what he or she set out to do even if they are evidence of the route pursued in the doing of it.

Again, it is not that information about compositional habits and publishing practices can never be relevant to interpretative concerns. Rather interpretative concerns must be in place first; otherwise, one could never establish relevance and one would be in the position (as many historicists, in fact, are) of considering relevant any and every fact that came one's way. It may be, as Jerome McGann contends, that authorship “takes place within the conventions and enabling limits that are accepted by the prevailing institutions of literary production,” but those conventions, even if they are necessary to the production of meaning, are not what the literary work means; they are not the author of the work; they do not have intentions. Dobranski’s claim that by “analyzing Milton’s books as physical objects we gain new insights into the circumstances of their production” is certainly true and even tautological; but the assertion that follows in the same sentence is certainly false: “and thereby improve our understanding of the individual texts’ meanings.” An understanding of a text's meaning can only be achieved by first understanding the purpose—literary or otherwise—that animates and impels its unfolding. In Milton's case, that purpose will not have been to contract with a certain bookseller or secure the services of a certain printer.

Critics like Dobranski draw a wrong conclusion from a correct premise. The correct premise is by now a commonplace and I have already alluded to
it: literature is not a privileged, uniquely complex and transcendent discourse, but is rather “one of many culturally productive discourses susceptible to critical analysis” and on that level no different from any of the others. The wrong conclusion is any conclusion that follows from the premise, for all the premise tells you is that literature is historically situated and produced. But so is the sermon, the political pamphlet, the encyclopedia, the catechism, the rhetorical handbook, the formal oration, the eulogy. In order to take the next step, or any step, you have to attend to the specificity of the discourse that has solicited your attention, and that means attending to its history, not to history in general (there is no such thing) but to the history of a form.

Here we come, I think, to the crux of the matter. The mistake polemic historicists often make is to think that there is an opposition between criticism that attends to history and politics and criticism that attends to aesthetic forms. But as I have already argued, aesthetic forms have their own histories and those histories are almost always more than “merely” aesthetic. The debates in the period about stressed and unstressed verse, writing in Latin and writing in the vernacular, the virtues and defects of the Senecan and Ciceronian styles, the merits of rhyme and blank verse are unintelligible apart from the issues of nationalism, political authority, and public morality thought to hang on the choice between these forms; and we cannot understand the force and meaning of literary forms without first understanding their implication in such issues. A criticism that focuses on aesthetic form is no less historical than any other, and, therefore, there can be no opposition between historical criticism and aesthetic criticism; rather, the opposition is between different kinds of historical criticism; and to the question which of the various histories is the one appropriate to the description and evaluation of literary works, the obvious, and indeed tautological, answer is the history of literary forms, so long as we remember that far from excluding social and political concerns, literary forms are, more often than not, their vehicles. As Ellen Rooney puts it, formalism, properly understood, “is a matter not of barring thematizations, but of refusing to reduce reading entirely to the elucidation, essentially the paraphrase, of themes—theoretical, ideological, or humanistic.”

It is the tendency of much criticism that labels itself historicist to go directly for those themes and to bypass the particular forms in which they are expressed. But when this happens no pertinence whatsoever is given to the fact that the discourse in question is a poem, and, therefore, there is no possibility of gauging (because one does not even recognize) the particular effectivity of poetic representation. Moreover, if one keeps in mind the laws of poetic representation—the assumptions and requirements that are part
and parcel of a fully developed genre like the pastoral—one knows what questions to put to the materials that present themselves for incorporation into an interpretation. That is to say, literary criticism has the advantage of actually having a direction and a point (provided by the intentional structure of its object) while the historical criticism that has no method except to proclaim loudly, “we’re historical and you’re not,” often has neither. Informed only by the conviction that if it’s a historical item, it’s relevant, such a criticism, as Richard Strier has observed, ends up being nothing more than a series of mentionings. The mention in the text of any “item . . . taken to be politically or culturally significant . . . is sufficient to get the machinery of ‘archeology’ and archive-churning going.”

That machinery does, of course, generate things to notice. As Strier declares, “Much that is rich and strange is turned up”; but what is turned up cannot settle anything, cannot determine or even help you to determine what the text means. The moral is not that historical investigation is to be opposed “as such.” Rather, as Mark Cousins points out, “All that is opposed . . . is the claim that such investigations can resolve problems within the human sciences.” Of course, such investigations can indeed resolve problems within the discourse of history because it is within the framework of that discourse—a framework that defines the object of study and the appropriate means of studying it and identifying what is and is not relevant—that the problems are set and present themselves for consideration. What historical investigation as such cannot resolve are problems in other disciplines, for those other disciplines—literature, theology, anthropology, political science, and so on—come equipped with their own stipulations of what is relevant and noticeable. There is no general transferability of observation from discipline to discipline and, therefore, it is a mistake to assume that conclusions reached in historical investigation as such are relevant to investigations undertaken in other domains. The question one most always asks is, what is pertinent to this particular production of the human mind undertaken in response to a particular disciplinary agenda and purpose? A criticism that does not ask this question and then guide itself by the answer is a criticism that can say nothing because it can say anything.

I began by observing that the best minds of our profession are attracted to this kind of criticism and indeed believe not only in its methodological superiority—despite the fact that it is without method—but in its moral superiority. Why? The answer is politics. The practitioners of cultural studies or cultural materialism generally situate themselves on the left and for them the rejection of formalist criticism is a political act that demonstrates their political virtue. As Mark Rasmussen puts it, it is a “tendency of contemporary
academics to find their own post-modern alienation mirrored in the anxieties of works produced at the inception of modernity.” If you can link the so-called literary work with revolutionary sentiments, or with the crisis of the nation state, or with the emancipation of the liberal subject from the hegemony of religion and political tyranny, you’re doing the Lord’s, or rather the proletariat’s, work. And it follows then that you must enroll your poet in the same standing and marching army. That’s why so many critics have a stake in demonstrating that the Milton they admire professionally has the right political values—their values—and believe that if he were alive today he would be against the war in Iraq and for multiculturalism. Actually, Milton probably would have been a cheerleader for the war in Iraq and he would have been horrified, I think, by the tendency of multiculturalism in its stronger versions to forgo judgments of right and wrong in favor of an ever-expanding ethic of mutual respect. Not that any of that matters, at least for the question of why Milton matters; for as I have said over and over again, any answer to that question must be a literary answer in relation to which historical and political matters matter chiefly as the material of an aesthetic achievement. Describing and evaluating that achievement, which while it is often inconceivable apart from historical and political concerns cannot be identified with them, is the proper business of literary criticism. It is not the proper business of literary criticism to pronounce grandly on the substantive issues an author chooses to raise in the course of implementing the intention to write a poem.

One last example, from popular culture. Jody Rosen has written a book entitled White Christmas: The Story of an American Song. Rosen’s interests are broadly cultural and sociological. He discusses the shift from the urbane popular sound of Cole Porter to the more nostalgic and sentimental music that began to appear in the early years of World War II when “White Christmas” was written and recorded; and he makes much of the fact that Irving Berlin, a Jewish immigrant from the Lower East Side, produced not only “White Christmas” but also “Easter Parade” and “God Bless America.” But Rosen is a careful enough historian to note that Irving Berlin’s thoughts about his music were of another kind. When Berlin finished “White Christmas” and showed it to his manager, he said, “Not only is it the best song I ever wrote, it’s the best song anybody ever wrote.” Or, in other words, I have soared above the Aonian Mount and written something the world will not willingly let die. That’s his perspective on things, and it is also Milton’s and it should be ours. If I might quote or misquote from the gospel according to James Carville, George Stephanopoulos, and Bill Clinton, “It’s the poetry, stupid.”

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5. It is not that fidelity to historical fact can never be pertinent to the evaluation of a film as film. If, for example, verisimilitude is a part of the director’s claim, if he or she signals us that his or her intention is a documentary one as well as a narrative one, the question of responsibility to fact will be relevant to the cinematic achievement. That is why the objections put to Oliver Stone’s movies about JFK and Richard Nixon are to the point, while objections to Mike Nichols’s flow-of-traffic error are not. To some extent it is a question of historical distance. The recent TV bio-pic about Ronald Reagan was criticized because some words spoken by the former president were obviously made up, or, at the very best, composite versions of what he might have said on one or more occasions. There was a feeling that there was something wrong about taking factual liberties with a still-living person. But when Reagan early in his career played George Custer to Errol Flynn’s Jeb Stuart, no one seemed bothered by the fact that the two were far apart in age and had never actually met.
7. See Douglas Bruster, “Shakespeare and the Composite Text,” in Rasmussen, Renaissance Literature, 44. “New Formalism could be defined as follows: A critical genre dedicated to examining the social, cultural, and historical aspects of literary form, and the function of form for those who produce and consume literary texts. The New Formalism sees language and literary forms—from the single-lettered interjection ‘O’ to the stanza, the epic battle, and epic itself—as socially, politically, and historically ‘thick.’” There is a danger that by arguing for the substantive content of literary forms, those forms are rendered merely instrumental in relation to that content. In this scenario attention to aesthetic form is legitimized, but at the cost of denying it a value of its own, a value we traditionally take note of with words like “beautiful,” “powerful,” “stunning,” “ingenious,” “innovative,” and “wow.” See on this point Heather Dubrow, “Recovering Formalism and the Country House Poem,” in ibid., 85. “The assumption that formalism may once again become respectable simply because it can serve the needs of its host, historical and political criticism, relegates the formal to a secondary, supplementary role that neglects the depth and range of its contributions to style and meaning.”
9. Ibid., 181; Jerome McGann, cited in ibid., 105.
10. See on this point Edward Pechter, “Making Love to Our Employment; or, The Immateriality of Arguments about the Materiality of the Shakespearean Text,” Textual Practice 11 (1997): 54: “They [materialist accounts] demonstrate merely that Shakespeare’s texts may be studied as an aspect of the history of printing . . . and that if they are examined from within the assumptions of this discipline, Shakespeare will be produced not as an author . . . but as a product of the early modern printing industry.” This is a materialist version of one thousand monkeys pecking away on typewriters for many years and accidentally producing King Lear.
15. Rasmussen, Renaissance Literature, 2.