As we have seen, Puritan iconoclasm offered Milton a point of departure, not an end in itself. Milton did not adopt any single theory of representing the sacred. Rather, he entered into an extended exploration, across his prose and poetry and throughout his authorial career, seeking to work out a difficult poetics of the passion. One of the central guidelines for handling divine ideas and words that Milton discovered is the dialectic of omission and supplement, a system of concealment and revelation, presence and absence, which characterizes Protestant art on divine subjects. Milton often calls upon a vocabulary of omission and supplement to describe his process of composition and to portray scenes of writing. This discourse, which appears in Milton’s prose and issues from his poetic narrators, promises a poetics of absence and restoration. For instance, the invocation at the beginning of Paradise Lost characterizes the poem’s content as “Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rime” (I: 16) and Paradise Regained promises a song of “deeds / Above Heroic, though in secret done, / And unrecorded left through many an Age” (I: 14–16, my emphasis). Instances of the words “omit” and “omission” in Milton’s prose works often refer to his authorial decisions. These terms indicate conscious choices rather than negligence. Frequently, by pointing out an omission, Milton in fact supplies what he purports to have excluded, as when in The Likeliest Means he claims to “omitt also” the “violent and irreligious exactions” of the prelates: “thir seising of pots and pans from the poor, who have as good right to tithes as they; from som, the very beds; thir sueing and imprisoning” (VII: 296). Similarly, in the History of Britain Milton clearly identifies omission as a deliberate element of composition when he pledges that

1 Stanley Fish’s reading of Areopagitica points out how, in Milton’s conception, even the text of the Bible is an outward form subject to idolatry. See How Milton Works (Cambridge: Belknap, 2001), 205–06. Fish’s claim that for Milton, truth will be reassembled in forms that are necessarily disunified, insufficient, and incomplete, is instructive for the readings of Milton’s texts on the passion below (213).
“if ought by diligence may bee added, or omitted, or by other disposing may be more explain’d, or more express’d, I shall assay” (V: 41).

The technique of omission allows Milton to identify himself as an author with the rhetorical practices used by Christ in the gospels. In _Tetrachordon_, for instance, Milton asserts that in his quotations from Scripture, Christ himself sometimes omits because

He himselfe having to deale with treacherous assailants, useth brevity, and lighting on the first place in _Genesis_ that mentions any thing tending to Marriage in the first chapter, joynes it immediately to the 24. verse of the 2 chapter, omitting all the prime words between, which create the institution. . . . (II: 648).

Christ’s omissions place the burden of interpreting Scripture on his readers:

If heere then being tempted, hee desire to bee the shorter, and the darker in his conference, and omitt to cite that from the second of _Genesis_, which all Divines confesse is a commentary to what he cites out of the first, the _making them Male and Female_; what are we to doe, but to search the institution our selves. (II: 649)

These passages suggest that omissions represent choices made by the author for the sake of brevity and clarity but also to signal negative sources of meaning and to shift responsibility for that meaning to readers.

_Areopagitica_ contains Milton’s most famous discussion of supplement, a protest against pre-publication licensing based on the importance of revision to the process of composition. Milton asks

And what if the author shall be one so copious of fancie, as to have many things well worth the adding, come into his mind after licencing, while the book is yet under the Press, which not seldom happ’ns to the best and diligentest writers; and that perhaps a dozen times in one book. The Printer dares not go beyond his licenc’ copy. (II: 532)

The characterization of addition as a literary tool is revealing. Milton uses terms for supplement (usually forms of the word “add”) in much the same way that he uses terms for omission, to direct the reader’s attention to his exertion of control over the text, as in his claim in the conclusion of the second edition of _The Readie and Easie Way_, that “Many circumstances and particulars I could have added in those things wherof I have spoken; but a few main matters now put speedily in execution, will suffice to recover us, and set all right” (VII: 462). Here, and in many similar passages, the supplement remains a strictly writerly device.