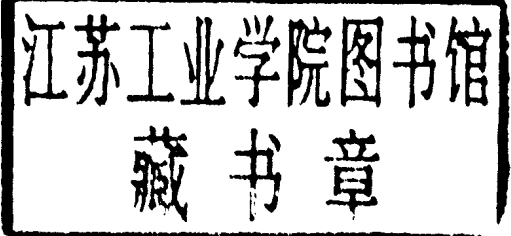






WILLIAM BLAKE: MILTON





WILLIAM BLAKE

*Milton a Poem*

and the

Final Illuminated Works:

*The Ghost of Abel*

*On Homers Poetry [and] On Virgil*

*Laocoön*

Edited with Introductions and Notes by  
ROBERT N. ESSICK and JOSEPH VISCOMI

BLAKE'S ILLUMINATED BOOKS

Volume 5

General Editor DAVID BINDMAN

*The William Blake Trust / The Tate Gallery*

WILLIAM BLAKE: *Milton a Poem*

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## *General Editor's Preface*

WITH THE publication of *Milton* the project to provide a new facsimile of all of Blake's Illuminated books moves close to its conclusion. *Milton* is, with *Jerusalem*, one of the two longest of Blake's printed illuminated books and in its final form of 50 plates it acts as a kind of prelude to *Jerusalem*'s 100 plates. *Milton* is much less obviously inviting than *Jerusalem* but there is no doubt of the power of many of the images nor the sense of Blake's own personal struggle which is intimately related to his tribulations in his brief period at Felpham. No other work of Blake's is quite as solipsistic nor as touching, despite the complexity of thought.

The copy chosen for reproduction in this volume is the superb one in New York Public Library and the Blake Trust is grateful to the Library for its cooperation. This volume, like the previous one in the series, is edited by Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi, who have tackled in masterly fashion the complexities of *Milton*, and the Blake Trust is greatly indebted to them. In addition we have also reproduced the so-called 'Sibylline Leaves' from his last years which contain some of Blake's most pungent aphorisms, often taken out of context.

As with the previous volumes John Commander has shouldered the burden of putting the volume together, and making something that the Blake Trust can take great pride in. We are sincerely grateful to him.

Without the whole-hearted support of our co-publishers, Tate Gallery Publications, and of Iain Bain in particular the whole project would probably not have been realized. Certainly it is hard to believe that it could have been so harmoniously pursued with another partner. It is gratifying that the purpose and initiative of the Trust in planning the collected edition has been so confidently endorsed by the national custodians of so much of Blake's work.

DAVID BINDMAN

## *Foreword*

THE ILLUMINATED works reproduced in this volume are as follows:

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*The Ghost of Abel*, copy A. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

*On Homers Poetry* [and] *On Virgil*, copy A. Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

*Laocoön*, copy B. Collection of Robert N. Essick.

We are grateful to the owners of these works for permission to reproduce them, and to the following institutions for permission to reproduce materials from their collections in our supplementary illustrations: the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Henry E. Huntington Library, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Yale Center for British Art.

For their many contributions to this series of reproductions we are grateful to Iain Bain, David Bindman, and John Commander. For their generous assistance with our research we thank Karen Blansfield, Brian Carpenter, David Halperin, Carlye La Belle, Jenijoy La Belle, Thomas V. Lange, Kimberly Orlijan, Morton Paley, John Villalobos, and particularly Edward Seffel, whose bibliographical and computer expertise were invaluable.

R. N. E., J. V.

Los Angeles, California

*April 1993*



## Citations and Abbreviations

QUOTATIONS FROM Blake's writings, other than those printed here, are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, Newly Revised Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), cited as *E* followed by page number. References are also provided to *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), cited as *K* followed by page number. The illuminated works reproduced in this volume are cited by plate and line (or line only, for works of one plate) as numbered in our letterpress texts (e.g., *Milton* 5:20, *Laocoön* 20). Plate numbers (except for *Milton*) and the letter designations for copies of the illuminated works follow G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

*Milton* presents special difficulties in plate numbering because Blake used three different sequences in the four copies he produced. His editors have also used different numbering systems. In this volume, all references to *Milton* follow the numbers Blake wrote upper right on the plates in the copy (C) reproduced here, a sequence that includes two numbers with asterisks, 8\* (following plate 8) and 32\* (following plate 32). Blake also numbered both the title page and the first text page '1'; to eliminate confusion we refer to the title page by that name and to the first text page as '1'. For plates on which Blake's numbers vary from the sequence of numbers and letters in Bentley's *Blake Books*, his numbers (or letters) are given in parentheses following the plate-number headings in our letterpress text of *Milton* and, where necessary, in our discussions of the book's production history. This will allow for easy coordination between the numbers we use in this volume and Bentley's standard enumeration. Other plate numbering sequences are employed in *E* and *K*; these are ignored here to avoid confusions among different systems.

Blake did not include two of his *Milton* plates in copy C. These are reproduced as the first two plates in the supplementary illustrations immediately following the plates from copy C. The texts of these two additional plates appear as an Appendix to our letterpress text and are referred to by 'Appendix' followed by Bentley's number or letter ('Appendix 2' and 'Appendix f').

Blake's paintings and drawings are titled according to Martin Butlin's standard catalogue, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), cited as Butlin followed by 'no.' and the catalogue entry number. Works by authors other than Blake are listed in Works Cited and are referred to by author or, when necessary, author and short title.

# *Milton a Poem*

## Introduction

THERE IS NO getting around the fact that William Blake's *Milton* is a difficult poem. More than one reader, attracted to Blake's more accessible texts like the *Songs of Innocence*, has picked up one of his three long poems (*The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, or *Jerusalem*), read a page or two, and put it down on the principle that preserving one's sanity is more important than understanding Blake. Almost all criticism of *Milton* has been written by scholars for scholars and is little help to readers coming to one of Blake's epic ventures for the first time. The purpose of this brief introduction is to help such readers by confronting the issue of difficulty head-on, exploring its characteristics, and suggesting some ways of dealing with it. This is followed by a commentary on the major designs and an essay on the work's compositional history. Some readers may wish to skip this final and more technical section, but the way Blake put together the copy of *Milton* reproduced here offers some of the intrigue of a mystery story (we know who did it – but how? why? and when?) and thus should be of interest to those who usually avoid bibliographic essays.

What happens in *Milton*, and who are the actors? Even these simple questions are fraught with complexities. The titular hero's major actions can be quickly summarized:

Book 1. Milton leaves heaven and returns to earth to do battle with forces opposed to art and the human spirit.

Book 2. Milton's female counterpart, Ololon, returns to earth to unite with Milton in preparation for apocalypse.

Such a summary, even if extended for many pages, is of limited help. These central events are surrounded, even smothered, by a host of others, seemingly unrelated to them. The cause and effect relationships we expect in conventional narratives are not completely absent but are often missing when we need them most. The story jumps about from events in the Bible, to British history, to Blake's own life, to places and people unknown outside his mythological poetry. And are they really 'people'? Treating Palamabron, Rintrah, and a host of even more exotically named folk as though they were novelistic characters like Tom Jones or David Copperfield makes sense only for brief passages. Harold Bloom's description of *Milton* as an 'extended crisis lyric' (124) is matched by a reading crisis many have felt upon first encountering the poem.

In such circumstances, readers might assume that we are dealing with an allegory in which the personages represent abstract concepts (love, imagination, nature, etc.). Even the more recognizable figures – Christ, Charlemagne, Rousseau, and of course Milton himself – seem less participants in an action than representatives of ideas or points of view. *Milton* is indeed an allegory, but one that lacks the stability of one-to-one relationships we find in its medieval forebears, or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, or even some episodes in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. A character may represent several concepts at the same time, and several characters tend to merge and indicate the same concept. But to speak of 'a' character may be misleading, for some (including Milton) seem to have multiple personalities that inhabit different places (heaven, Jerusalem, Blake's body) at

the same time. But even ‘place’ and ‘time’ drift from their usual moorings in disturbing ways.

Let us entertain the notion that one of Blake’s purposes in writing *Milton* was to create these difficulties (and a good many more) and disconcert the very presuppositions about self and other, space and time, we normally rely on when reading texts that appear to follow the same rules as our everyday world. Blake treats as mere conventions what most of us assume to be part of an unalterable reality not subject to radical transformation. The similarity between such a textual strategy and certain forms of insanity adds a further note of uneasiness to the proceedings. But Blake was not the first (see the Book of Revelation) nor the last (see van Gogh’s late paintings) to plunge us into a kind of madness to lift us outside the normal so that we can see normality as only one among many imaginable ways of reading, seeing, feeling, thinking, living.

What, specifically, are some of the conventions *Milton* shakes off or disconcerts? Our reference to ‘time’ and ‘space’ above was no mere hyperbole. The poem treats historical quantifications of time (the traditional ‘six thousand years’ of creation Blake refers to eleven times in the poem), the smaller calibrations that govern our daily lives, and the minuscule units essential to Newtonian physics and mathematics as the powerful but fallacious projections of a limited and limiting mentality – the result, as it were, of a political conspiracy of cosmic proportions. *Milton*, both explicitly in its intellectual content and implicitly in its form, proposes alternative ways of measuring our days. Some are taken from the Bible and its genealogies. For example, the story of Jacob’s sons and their division into twelve tribes is figured forth as a way not only of measuring the history of Israel but as a cyclical event (division, dispersal, reorganization) repeated time after time.

In the temporal universe of *Milton*, the moment and eternity often meet and merge. Time travel is not only possible but inevitable. The prospect fulfils a common human desire, but it also results in an uncommon way of writing. Rather than an arrow of time pointing in one direction (the backbone of conventional plot lines), all events are seen as variations on certain underlying, endlessly repeated, patterns. The verbal expression of this perspective is an insistent paralleling of different characters and events, widely separated in conventional time and space, that creates a variety of relationships treated as more than mere metaphors. Rather than just stating that one person or event is ‘like’ some other, as in most history writing or poetry, Blake’s figures of speech tend to gravitate toward a visionary literalism in which similarity becomes identity. This mode extends to imaginative junctures between the Bible and the mythology Blake invented and used in several of his poems. These intertwining of two texts, the Bible and Blake, continue the tradition of reading the Bible typologically (that is, finding parallels between the Old and New Testaments) and extend into contemporary practice Robert Lowth’s discoveries about the parallel structures of Biblical rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> Thus it makes perfect (Blakean) sense for the sons of Jacob also to be sons of a character named ‘Los’, the personification of the imagination in the temporal world, and for Milton’s wives and daughters to be given the names of Zelophehad’s daughters from the Book of Numbers. Space, in its

<sup>1</sup> See Lowth’s *Lectures*, first English edition 1787. The typological approach is based on St Paul’s comments in Romans 5.14–15, 19; see Rivero for discussion of typology in *Milton*.

common verbal form of place names, comes in for similar treatment, as Biblical places are aligned with British equivalents like imaginary map overlays.

Typology may also have influenced the parallels among different passages in *Milton*. Susan Fox has traced in detail the similarities between the poem's two books, but this approach tends to mask the inordinate repetitiveness within each. We suspect that much of this repetition, which some scholars find to be self-consciously crafted, detail by detail, may actually be the result of Blake's method of composition. Blake claimed he composed one of his long poems (it is hard to determine which one) from 'immediate Dictation . . . without Premeditation' (letter of 25 April 1803, *E* 729, *K* 823). What he heard from these dictating presences was the habitual motifs of his own linguistic imagination, the internalized patterns of his cultural inheritance re-externalized into a poem (see Essick, *Language of Adam* 160–94). This way of writing relates Blake's poem to the formulaic, incantatory, and oral utterances of the ancient bards, Hebraic and British, invoked on the first text plate of *Milton*.

Blake offers other reconfigurings of the real in *Milton*. In the famous 'vortex' passage (14:21–35), time and space are defined – indeed, created – by a journey both spiritual and physical based on a geometry not of three axial dimensions but of the cone. Such a journey is repetitious (like Blake's poetry of parallelisms) as the traveller spirals along the cone, and yet is progressive as the pilgrim (Milton, Blake, Blake's reader) moves from the mouth of the cone to its tip, comes to the tip of another cone, and spirals expansively along its surface to infinity/eternity. Straight lines become arcs, as we can see in the chart of 'Miltons Track' on plate 32. This sort of imaginary revision of space/time, and of the grammar and syntax of a language adequate for its representation, will seem familiar to readers who have already confronted the cosmologies of our own century, such as Einstein's concept of a curved yet infinite universe shaped like a saddle.

Elsewhere in *Milton* space and time become biological. Places in the landscape are also parts of the human body, although that body is sometimes conceived as the dispersed fragments of a fallen giant, Albion. The lowest reaches of natural, fallen space are imaged as a monstrous sea creature, the Polypus. Time is given bodily presence as a 'Pulsation of the Artery', the moment of inspiration in which 'the Poets Work is Done' (28:1–3). By these means Blake humanizes the world, gives to mental acts the vitality of physical labour, and recovers an alienated otherness by making it part of ourselves. The whole body, not just the senses 'shut in narrow doleful form' (Appendix plate f:19 in the letterpress text), becomes a medium of interchange between subjectivity and objectivity, the latter only a projection of the former. The result is a reversal of a basic rationalist premise about humans and their world: instead of a finite mind stranded in an infinite universe, Blake imagines an infinite humanity taking control of a finite universe.

We mentioned earlier how characters in *Milton* tend to split into pieces or merge with others. This rather cavalier treatment of human identity needs a bit more consideration. The most dramatic interpenetration of two individuals is the descent of Milton as a comet into Blake's foot, an event described on plates 14 and 20 and pictured on plates 14 and 29. This and other unions hark back to the incarnation of the Son of God in the



man Jesus, but their proliferation in *Milton* suggests a world in which such singular miracles have become commonplace. More sinister combinations can be traced through the poem, like the chain of identifications ('x is y' or 'x is part of y') that link Milton's Shadow, his Spectre, Albion's Spectre, Urizen, Satan, the Covering Cherub, and Blake's patron William Hayley into one being.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, these and other characters become fragmented and self-divided. A notable example occurs on plate 14, where in the course of the first sixteen lines Milton splits into a shadow, a sleep-walking body, and his 'immortal Self', each apparently taking different journeys in different spaces. Similarly, Ololon in Book 2 is variously a river, a place, its inhabitants, and a twelve-year-old virgin. Are we witnessing the decomposition of a single figure in such passages, or are we seeing the 'same' figure from multiple perspectives? If the first, then the object perceived has undergone a radical transformation; if the second, then the subject who perceives is similarly affected. In either case, we have had our everyday notions of the real pulled out from under us. But *Milton* does not stop with just a few such disturbances. Several important characters divide into female 'emanation' and male 'spectre', the latter associated with aggressive self-substantiation – what Blake calls the 'selfhood'. The relation between these gendered polarities is often contentious, pulling the human into warring camps. While this type of dismembering and dispersal is terribly destructive, *Milton* celebrates a form of self-annihilation that attempts to overcome the self-centredness that radically divides a single self or a community from all others and casts that other as the enemy. This is, however, not merely a criticism of an unsavory personality type, for Blake's critique of selfhood goes to the heart of Western metaphysics, the *cogito* of Descartes – 'I think, therefore I am' – that posits a unitary self as the basis of existence. It is an existence Blake wished to overcome and replace with a more fluid and open concept of being where the gulf between self and other is bridged – indeed, annihilated.

A poet who imagines such radical transformations of the real and tries to embody them in the form of his poem is not going to produce an easy reading experience. To do so would thwart his purposes by accommodating the unconventional to conventional modes of discourse. 'A degree of obscurity must occasionally attend this style of composition', as Lowth said of the 'mystical allegory' of the Bible (*Lectures* 1:246). Blake does not – indeed, could not, if he wanted any audience at all – completely dispense with the grammar and syntax of his inherited language, but he goes a long way in forcing English to its outer boundaries. This way of writing continually threatens to blow itself apart as it abandons in its form and attacks in its content the fundamental unities (of time, space, self) and bipolar distinctions (self/other, inside/outside, unity/multiety, life/death – among others) by which we read most texts (including the 'text' of the world). What then keeps *Milton* together? There are some obvious devices, such as the long march of septenary lines of verse used by Blake in his illuminated books from the early 1790s. The parallelisms and repetitions, mentioned earlier, tie together many passages. There is even a loose form of numerology, much of it based on the Bible, that repeats certain key numbers, including three (classes of men), six (the wives and daughters of

<sup>2</sup> For brief introductions to these characters, see our notes accompanying the letterpress text to 1:11, 1:14–15, 2:6, 2:41–3:3, 3:22, 5:6–49, and 12:36.

Milton), seven (angels), eight (immortals), twelve (tribes of Israel and books in *Paradise Lost*), and twenty-seven (churches or periods in the history of religion). Operating behind and within these techniques, which at times seem more than a little arbitrary and mechanical, is a unity of tone and purpose growing from Blake's fundamental aesthetic ideal, the search for a seamless interchange between conception and execution that will bind together message and its mode of expression, the poem's teleology and the ways it struggles in language to represent its goals. One of those goals is to find or create readers adventuresome enough to discover value in the poem's strategies of disconcerting.

Another way Blake searches for a shape and method for his poem paradoxically contributes to its difficulty for the modern reader. *Milton* is densely packed with allusions to an array of other texts and events. Many such allusions are probably the result of Blake's formulaic method of composition, rather than studied literary devices, and thus have few keys by which we can recognize them. Here again the simultaneity of different perspectives, and of centrifugal and centripetal forces, comes into play. From one point of view, the poem draws into its impacted rhetoric a vast and disparate collection of texts; from a less sympathetic perspective, the poem seems to fly off in all directions at once. Our notes to the letterpress text are intended to help readers sort through and understand the intertextual echoes in *Milton*, although we suspect that there are many we have failed to recognize. Before venturing into those details, however, it may be helpful to look briefly at a few of the most important texts and experiences from which *Milton* emerged and to which it refers.

'The Old & New Testaments', as Blake says in his *Laocoön* engraving reproduced in this volume, 'are the Great Code of Art' (99–100). Much of the 'code' of *Milton* remains obscure unless we attend to the Bible. Passages quoted and alluded to, often with a single phrase, range from Genesis to Revelation; the latter figures prominently because of the poem's insistent eschatological impetus toward destruction, judgment, and resurrection both personal and cosmic. Blake was so fully imbued with the language of the Bible that it is frequently difficult to separate purposeful allusion from the unselfconscious repetition of habitual patterns in many of Blake's poems. But there can be no question of how thoroughly and consciously *Milton* intersects with its most important pre-text. These intersections range beyond simple reference; it is almost as if Blake were attempting a synoptic reconstruction of the Bible – or writing an additional book for it. At some points a third presence, the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, intrudes between Blake and the Bible to complicate their interchange. Blake's fascination with Swedenborg began in the late 1780s, but soon declined into satire and rejection in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790). Swedenborg returns in *Milton* as a renewed influence, the 'strongest of men, the Samson shorn by the Churches' (21:50). Since the Swedish mystic commented on many of the Biblical passages used by Blake, particularly those in Genesis and Exodus, it is always possible that Swedenborg's prolific writings are part of the intertextual interplay.

Sometimes *Milton* celebrates the Bible, its language and message as Blake understood them, but he can also be very critical, particularly of parts of the Old Testament. The Jewish occupation of Canaan was for Blake the degeneration of a spiritual ideal into materialist conquest – a conversion of the Holy Land into the Bloody Land – not unlike

the wars of trade and dominion of his own Napoleonic era. Moses' code of 'thou shalt nots' was for Blake a negative crime-and-punishment legalism, the antithesis of Christ's way of overcoming enemies by forgiving them. The enclosure of the tablets bearing those laws within an ark hidden within veils (Exodus 25–6) combined the worst of two evils – repressive reason and mystery. Blake also hints at a suspicion that the Israelites picked up ideas of blood sacrifice from the peoples they conquered and converted them into false notions of atonement like those based on the story of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16. He associated such practices with the Druids of ancient Britain, as they were understood by eighteenth-century mythographers. He thereby forged a link between Hebraic and Britannic history, seeing both as narratives of a divine vision perverted into cruelties. Blake opposes rationalist laws and rituals that punish the other for the crimes of the self with his concept of self-annihilation, the route to human renewal.

While expansive in its cultural reach, *Milton* is also one of Blake's most personal poems. He is an actor in the drama and speaks *in propria persona* at several important points. Thus it is helpful to know something of the events in Blake's life, particularly in the first years of the nineteenth century, that lie behind important episodes in the poem. In September 1800, Blake and his wife Catherine left their home in Lambeth, then a suburb of London, to live in the village of Felpham in Sussex. There Blake worked under the patronage of the popular writer and country gentleman William Hayley, engraving illustrations for Hayley's books, decorating his library, and painting portrait miniatures of his circle of friends. Blake was initially delighted with the arrangement, in part because he thought this pastoral interlude near the sea would free him from the commercial struggles of being a copy engraver in London and would give him leisure to exercise his talents as an epic poet (he had already begun a vast poem in manuscript, *Vala* or *The Four Zoas*) and an artist in the grand style of history painting. These hopes soon soured into frustration with himself and with Hayley, a decline we can trace in Blake's letters and Notebook verses from 1800 to 1804. Rather than encouraging Blake's high ambitions, Hayley discouraged him from anything other than 'the meer drudgery of business' and intimated 'that if I [Blake] do not confine myself to this I shall not live' (letter of 10 January 1803, *E* 724, *K* 812). Hayley's genteel kindness and well-intentioned advice became for Blake a condescension worse than honest opposition; as Blake states in *Milton*, 'Corporeal Friends are Spiritual Enemies' (3:26). Apparently Hayley was the sort of man who derived ego gratification by taking under his wing eccentric geniuses and molding them to his own tastes – first the poet William Cowper, who died insane in 1800, and then the engraver William Blake.<sup>3</sup> Hayley seemed an unctuous hypocrite to Blake; worse yet, he turned Blake into a hypocrite who outwardly suffered Hayley's directions while seething within. Blake made plans to return to London, a resolve strengthened by the events of 12 August 1803. On that day he evicted a drunken soldier, John Scolfield, from his garden; in revenge, Scolfield charged Blake with sedition for having damned the King (as Blake may very well have done in anger at one of the King's soldiers). Although Hayley generously supported Blake in his successful defense at trial in January

<sup>3</sup> See Blake's Notebook poem 'William Cowper Esq<sup>re</sup>': 'For this is being a Friend just in the nick / Not when hes well but waiting till hes sick / He [Hayley] calls you to his help be you not movd / Untill by being Sick his wants are provd' (*E* 507, *K* 551). For a discussion of the Blake–Hayley–Cowper relationship, see Paley, 'Cowper as Blake's Spectre'.

1804, Blake in his distress seems to have associated Hayley with the forces of repression, political and cultural, also represented by Scolfield. Back in London by the autumn of 1803, where Blake lived for the rest of his life, he corresponded regularly with Hayley, engraved illustrations for the 1805 edition of Hayley's *Ballads*, and helped in various ways with Hayley's *Life of George Romney*, not published until 1809. But the events at Felpham continued to haunt Blake. Writing *Milton* was in part an attempt to understand, and set within a broad historical context, his complex intellectual and emotional responses to Hayley and all that he came to represent.

E. J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats, writing in 1893, were the first to suggest that Blake's experiences with Hayley lay behind the story of Rintrah, Palamabron, and Satan, most of which is concentrated into the so-called 'Bard's Song' (1:26 through 11:44 in *Milton*).<sup>4</sup> Each character is a 'state' (see 32\*:22–38 and our note to 2:10) which any individual can inhabit or escape, but we can begin to grasp the multifarious allegory by taking Satan to be Hayley and Rintrah and Palamabron as contrary aspects of Blake's response to Hayley – the mild and acquiescent (Palamabron) and the wrathful (Rintrah), the latter requiring expression to free Blake from the bonds, both economic and psychic, tying him to Hayley. The identification of Hayley with Satan is more than a little curious, but becomes less so when we recall that 'Satan' means 'adversary' in Hebrew. The figure in *Milton* is neither the rebel of *Paradise Lost* nor the Devil in Blake's own *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, both figures of energy. Satan/Hayley is an establishment type, akin to God the Father in *Paradise Lost* (as Blake interpreted that character) and to Urizen in Blake's mythological poetry. He is one of the 'elect' in Blake's three classes of men, whose evil resides in the manipulation of false pity and the promotion of repressive conventions, including the classicism Blake so roundly condemns in the Preface to *Milton* (Appendix plate 2 in the letterpress text). Recent criticism has tended to shun biographical readings of the 'Bard's Song', apparently on the supposition that to pursue them would reduce the universal to the petty. We suggest to the contrary that the origins of *Milton* in Blake's relationship with Hayley and the poem's veiled references to it provide a grounding in quotidian experiences that make the work more accessible, more human in everyday terms. Thus, in our notes to the letterpress text, we outline a biographical approach to several key passages, some not previously considered from that perspective.

The startling compound, Satan/Hayley, leads along several pathways to the eponymous hero of *Milton*. Blake had of course known John Milton's poetry since his youth; as Blake wrote in the same month he moved to Felpham, 'Milton lov'd me in childhood & shew'd me his face' (E 707, K 799). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake had offered his now famous critique of *Paradise Lost* in which the Devil turns conventional readings of the poem on their heads and proclaims that Milton 'was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it' (E 35, K 150). Blake's experiences in Felpham renewed his interest in Milton for several reasons. Hayley had written a widely-read biography of Milton and was editing Cowper's annotations to Milton's poems, a project in which Blake was supposed to participate (but in the end did not) by engraving illustrations for the

<sup>4</sup> Ellis and Yeats 2:262, 266. James, *Written* 150–67, offers an overview of biographical interpretations. See the essays by Storch ('Spectrous Fiend') and Helms for psychological studies of the Blake–Hayley relationship.



planned volume. Between 1801 and 1809, Blake produced watercolour illustrations to three of Milton's major poems, including two sets of designs for *Paradise Lost*. Thus Blake's attention was focused on his great predecessor as a poet of Christian epic, but in ways intimately bound up with his feelings about Hayley and what he represented. Much as Blake had to come to terms with that portion of his own personality which found its external corollary in the person of William Hayley, Milton (in the course of *Milton*) becomes conscious of those portions of his self and his culture that inhibited his being 'a true Poet' and struggles to cast them out. In Blake's view, Milton's errors infected his life and writings with classical paganism, moral self-righteousness, and rational materialism.<sup>5</sup> Hayley was the contemporary embodiment of these flaws, evinced by his contempt for Blake's poetry and his contributions to the late eighteenth-century conversion of Milton the revolutionary poet-prophet into a versifier of conventional pieties. Blake further believed that Milton did not understand the role within his mind and art of those aspects of his personality conventionally labelled feminine (mildness, pity, sentiment, submissiveness). The outward expression of this inner disturbance was Milton's strained relationships with his three wives (the first had left him) and three daughters.<sup>6</sup> Once again Hayley provided a rough parallel, but also a contrast. He had separated from his first wife, whom he considered deranged. Unlike Milton, however, Hayley (in Blake's view) had allowed sentimentality to dominate his writings and female friends to dominate his tastes in the visual arts.<sup>7</sup> These interconnections among three poets (Milton, Hayley, Blake) underlie and help to make sense of the chain of identifications, from Milton's Shadow through Urizen to Hayley, noted earlier.

How might Blake release Milton from errors, both those of his own making and the erroneous view of Milton promulgated by the likes of Hayley? Blake could, like his patron, write a biography of Milton or, like Cowper, write a commentary on *Paradise Lost*. But that would hardly get to the heart of the matter – the reformation of Milton himself by himself. This is necessary since only the individual can confess, repent, and be saved (at least in the Protestant tradition). To accomplish something so radical, Blake imagines the return of Milton to this world – in the flesh – or at least in the 'body' of *Milton a Poem*. The process finds its religious precedent in the incarnation of Christ, but it is also a literalization of the idea of influence, of a living poet repeating, reformulating, and in a sense completing the work of a much admired but flawed precursor. Blake advances the process one further step by reversing conventional temporality – the living rewriting the dead – so that the dead can rewrite themselves through the living.

<sup>5</sup> In 1825 Blake told Henry Crabb Robinson 'to beware of being misled by . . . *Paradise Lost*' and that at one time Milton had been 'a sort of classical Atheist' (Bentley, *Blake Records* 316–17; see also *Blake Records* 324–5 for Blake's definition of 'Atheism' as 'worshiping the natural world'). See Sandler 56 for a useful overview of the 'errors' Blake found in Milton.

<sup>6</sup> In his biography of Milton, Hayley defends Milton against Samuel Johnson's charge that Milton had 'a Turkish contempt of females, as subordinate and inferior beings' (quoted in Hayley, *Life of Milton* 197), finds 'a striking resemblance between the poetical and the moral character of Milton' (224), and compliments Milton for a seamless grafting of 'the graceful and the tender to the grand and the sublime' (229). On these same topics Blake found unresolved contradictions, not harmonies.

<sup>7</sup> These female friends included Lady Hesketh, Cowper's ever-solicitous cousin, who criticized Blake's engravings. For further discussion see our notes to 1:19, 9:28, and 16:1–8; Essick, 'Blake's "Female Will"'; and Bishop (on Hayley's life).