



# Romantic Satanism

## Myth and the Historical Moment in Blake, Shelley, and Byron

Peter A. Schock

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*To my mother and father*

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# Introduction

## I.

Appended to the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) is a discussion, pitched almost entirely on William Godwin's customary plane of abstraction, of the co-existence of 'eminent talents' and virtue, not only in great men but in great bad men as well. Acknowledging that the highly talented often do pursue 'other objects,' Godwin yet insists that such men, 'even when they are erroneous, are not destitute of virtue' and that therefore 'there is a fullness of guilt of which they are incapable.' Their apparent evil is actually misdirected nobility, which Godwin explains by appealing to environment. A man may possess a powerful intellectual grasp of social and political justice, he points out, and yet, from 'an unfortunate concurrence of circumstances,' that person 'may, with all his great qualities, be the instrument of a very small portion of benefit.'<sup>1</sup> Midway through this barren set of propositions, Godwin suddenly shifts register to offer a startling illustration of circumstantially thwarted greatness:

It has no doubt resulted from a train of speculation similar to this, that poetical readers have commonly remarked Milton's devil to be a being of considerable virtue. It must be admitted that his energies centered too much in personal regards. But why did he rebel against his maker? It was, as he himself informs us, because he saw no sufficient reason, for that extreme inequality of rank and power, which the creator assumed. It was because prescription and precedent form no adequate ground for implicit faith. After his fall, why did he still cherish the spirit of opposition? From a persuasion that he was hardly and injuriously treated. He was not discouraged by the apparent inequality of the contest: because a sense of reason and justice was stronger in his mind, than a sense of brute force; because he had much of the feelings of an Epictetus or a Cato, and little of those of a slave. He bore his torments with fortitude, because he disdained to be subdued by despotic power.

He sought revenge, because he could not think with tameness of the unexpostulating authority that assumed to dispose of him. How beneficial and illustrious might the temper from which these qualities flowed, have been found, with a small diversity of situation!<sup>2</sup>

A reader familiar with the eighteenth-century vogue for Milton's Satan might still be struck by Godwin's overreading and idealization of this figure, seemingly so uncharacteristic of this writer's notoriously ratiocinative sensibility. But this is no mere display of rhetorical colors: by the end of this passage, Godwin has transformed Milton's Satan into a vehicle of the values to which the anarchist philosopher was most committed. He conceives of Satan as an embodiment of the fully autonomous intellect that discerns and rejects the radical injustice of a 'despotic' and 'assumed' power analogous to the arbitrary authority of prescription and precedent that governed England in the 1790s and that Godwin believed would wither away in time.

What is most striking about this passage is its assured tone: Godwin seems to see nothing extraordinary or controversial in his own remarks. To conceive Satan as he does involves putting considerable interpretative pressure on *Paradise Lost*, but it would be an overstatement to call Godwin's remarks his own 'appropriation' of Milton's Satan, since his point of departure is a view of this figure he assumes most readers share. Although Godwin's conception of Milton's Satan is transgressive, in that it expresses political values palatable to few readers of the day, it rests unselfconsciously on an anterior appropriation, one performed by his surrounding culture.

—This is a book about Romantic Satanism, the literary phenomenon produced by the convergence of that larger appropriation and the transforming consciousness of the individual writer. The chapters that follow study the flowering of various forms of Satanism in the writing of Blake, Shelley, and Byron, viewing them in the context of their social and cultural origins. By the early 1790s, the sublime and humanized figure of Milton's epic antagonist, which had already gained heroic stature earlier in the eighteenth century, was further reshaped by Romantic writers into a vehicle of artistic and ideological freight, much of it iconoclastic or at best only marginally acceptable to polite readers. Romantic Satanism so defined is found in a relatively narrow literary stratum, but it is embedded in the broad interest in the demonic shown by the era. By the end of the eighteenth century, among the literate classes in England, belief in the existence of the Devil had all but vanished. Yet if in one sense this supernatural figure was killed off, then in another it is resurrected in the form of a modern myth.<sup>3</sup> For the Romantic age exhibits a resurgent fascination with the Satanic, visible in the quests of comparative mythographers and in the revisionary criticism and illustration of *Paradise Lost*. Both endeavors encouraged the employment of a form of demonic iconography in political

writing of all kinds. Across this spectrum, representations of Satan appear in response to an emergent, collectively felt need. Jacobinism, Millenarian antinomianism, the imperial ambitions of Napoleon, plebeian blasphemy, the threat of civil insurrection during the Regency – these portentous forces and events demanded answerable mythic embodiments to render them intelligible and to shape public opinion.

The more popular and politicized forms of discourse invoked Satanic myth propagandistically, as a tactic of demonizing adversaries. In their writing, Blake, Shelley, and Byron turned Milton's fallen angel into a different kind of mythic anchor for ideological identification. A figure projecting the oppositional values of their social groups as well as the ambivalence generated by these commitments, Satan served as a rhetorical instrument in controversial or speculative writing. Such a character could be readily adapted to these purposes because Romantic writers found him trapped, as John Carey explains, 'within an alien fiction.'<sup>4</sup> As if misplaced in the ideological structure of Milton's epic, the figure of the fallen angel invited his own excision and insertion into different contexts. For all of these reasons, Milton's Satan assumes in the Romantic era a prominence seen never before or since, nearly rivaling Prometheus as the most characteristic mythic figure of the age. A more active and ambiguous mythic agent than the bound, suffering forethinker and benefactor of humanity, the reimagined figure of Milton's Satan embodied for the age the apotheosis of human desire and power.

## II.

The presence of various forms of 'Satanism' in Romantic writing has been widely acknowledged. By now a familiar phrase in literary history, 'Romantic Satanism' conveys to many readers the sense of moral transgressiveness exhibited by figures like Byron's protagonists. This conception of 'diabolism' gained wide currency in the twentieth century through Mario Praz's monumental study, *The Romantic Agony*.<sup>5</sup> Critics after Praz have redefined the concept by tying it closely to allusions to Milton that evoke Romantic subjectivity. Peter Thorslev identifies the following speech as the *locus classicus* of the Satanic stance in Romantic writing:

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what I should be, all but less than he  
Whom thunder hath made greater?<sup>6</sup>

Satan's defiant assertion of autonomy, delivered on the burning plain of hell, was so broadly influential, Thorslev notes, that it is possible to

distinguish four kinds of thematic adaptations of this stance in Romantic writing: psychological, Stoic, epistemological, and proto-existentialist.<sup>7</sup> All of these senses of Satanism have been extended to cover a range of Romantic attitudes or stances – typically individualism, rebellious or defiant self-assertion, and daemonic sublimity.<sup>8</sup> To other (disapproving) readers, Satanism is a rubric for misreadings of *Paradise Lost* in Romantic criticism and literary allusion, founded on an uncritical idealization of Milton's fallen archangel.<sup>9</sup>

Conceived and applied in these ways, Romantic Satanism has acquired, for better or worse, the facile explanatory value of a commonplace literary term.<sup>10</sup> It is surprising that this has taken place without significant incorporation of the concept of Satanism into either the leading theoretical constructions of Romanticism or the more comprehensive critical explorations of the writing of the era. Its absence is particularly glaring in those influential studies that have emphasized the Romantic revision of traditional myth. Romantic Satanism is essentially alien, for example, to the 'natural theodicy' M.H. Abrams expounds in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), the secularized versions of Fall, Redemption, and Apocalypse traced through the major writers. Elements of myth involving metaphysical rebellion, defiance, revenge, and other forms of aggression cannot be grouped under Abrams' central rubric, 'the Romantic theme of the justification of evil and suffering.'<sup>11</sup> This example illustrates, of course, the kind of 'gerry-mandering' of the literary map Jerome McGann has noticed, when reigning critical paradigms include certain kinds of writing while excluding others. But even in the heyday of myth criticism, the more comprehensive taxonomy of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) found room only for brief comments on what he called 'demonic modulation.'<sup>12</sup>

Still less has been said on the subject since the later 1970s, when critical study of Romantic writing turned away from its mythic features. Historical inquiry during the last two decades has largely bypassed Romantic myth, rejecting the essentialist and formalist assumptions on which archetypal criticism had operated. Perhaps many critics have avoided Romantic myth for another reason – because it is so readily associated with the capacity of poets to enwrap themselves in an ideology of literary production that invites critical idealism: the poet as mythmaker, the oracle of a private religious vision that transcends history. In any case, the relative silence about Romantic myth in the last two decades suggests that Roland Barthes' assertion – that 'Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all history' – is taken as axiomatic.<sup>13</sup>

This view is untenable, as attention to the historical and cultural contexts surrounding literary treatments of myth in the era reveals. Marilyn Butler has argued for a shift of critical orientation to replace the ahistorical archetypalism and 'idealist bias' in the work of Frye, Abrams, and the early Harold Bloom, who assume 'the ultimately religious intentions' of the

mythmaking poet. Butler examines instead what moors Romantic myth to the historical moment: the social and political milieu of the oppositional poet during the Regency, for example. That situation, she demonstrates in a study of 'Romantic Manichaeism,' drove Byron and Shelley into anti-Christian, iconoclastic treatments of myth.<sup>14</sup> In another study that rejects essentialist approaches to Romantic myth, Anthony Harding explores the historically contingent use of myth in the era. Legitimate critical inquiry, Harding asserts in *The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism* (1995), must first 'address the question of how the writers in a given period understood and received myth; what they understood "the mythic" to be.'<sup>15</sup>

Romantic Satanism is one such historically embedded phenomenon, the transformation of a received myth that is rendered intelligible largely by reading the cultural and political circumstances shaping that revision. The diverse forms of Satanism in English Romantic writing arose out of a set of cultural acts and forces converging in the historical moment: anti-Christian or 'infidel' polemics and histories of religious myth, political and propagandistic uses of the figure of Satan, and the widespread fascination with Milton's sublime archangel, propelled by the revisionist criticism and illustration of *Paradise Lost*. Collectively these constitute the cultural matrix out of which Romantic Satanism emerged, the subject of the first chapter of this book. The attenuation of belief in the existence of the Devil, along with the rise of comparative or syncretic mythography, established Satan as a purely mythic figure. These forces at the same time freed the myth for artistic and political treatments. The latter proliferated in the decade of the French revolution and continued through the Regency: throughout the era British conservatives and radicals alike seized the myth of Satan to demonize the political 'other,' using it propagandistically, branding and castigating the opposition by satanizing it. Finally, during the Romantic age, critics and illustrators of Milton's epic intensified the sublime, human, and heroic aspects of the conception of Satan that had emerged in the eighteenth century. Collectively the three dimensions of this matrix drained much of the traditional authority and force from the religious myth of the adversary, and a different fiction took its place, flexible, radically ambiguous, and open to artistic and ideologically charged adaptation.

The many versions of this Romantic fiction are constructed out of figures and episodes – Miltonic 'mythemes,' as it were – drawn from *Paradise Lost* involving cosmogony and origins, rebellion, resistance, defiance, temptation, and tyranny. Incorporating this Miltonic material, Romantic writing adapts its stances of Satanic autonomy and anti-authoritarianism into various contexts – political, religious, metaphysical, moral, and psychological. In key works of Blake and Shelley, Milton's Satan is constructed as an idealized antagonist of an Omnipotence embodying the dominant political and religious values of the era. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93),

the Lambeth Prophecies (1793–95), *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) and the essay 'On the Devil, and Devils' (ca. 1819–20; 1880) all contain a primary form of Romantic Satanism, a Gnostic countermyth that idealizes revolution and free thought. Yet Satanism is not monolithic or univocal in its rhetorical function, and it serves equally well as a mouthpiece for satire and irony. For example, in *The Vision of Judgment* (1821), the Satanic persona articulates Byron's ironic view of political change; in the *The Deformed Transformed* (1824) the demonic figure punctures various idealizations of eros, the soul, and military heroism. And in other contexts the fallen angel is a deeply ambiguous figure, portraying social violence, aggression, and even tyranny. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) syncretically blends the Titan with the vengeful fallen angel, thereby mingling the 'beautiful idealism' of Promethean unbinding with the specter of the bloody insurrection this writer anticipated. With Blake's major prophecies the figure of Satan reverts to the traditional role of the adversary, embodying the forces that block apocalyptic liberation: state religion and imperial war.

In her study of mythmaking in the Shelley circle, Marilyn Butler contends that 'Critics often claim that myth is a significant element in Romantic poetry: it would be more exact to say that English poets of one persuasion, the radical, were disposed to use myth, but with different emphasis at different times.'<sup>16</sup> Each of the different employments of myth Butler identifies – antiquarian polemic, controversialism, and the conveying of belief – has ideological value, especially in its expression of the identity of a group. By invoking Malinowski's conception of the pragmatic or functional value myth holds for societies, Butler thus reinterprets the provenance and employment of myth in Romantic writing. Reading Romantic Satanism in compatible terms means examining how it intricately displays the social roles and rhetorical purposes carried out by authors. Its various forms adaptable to a range of thematic situations, Satanism helped Romantic writers interpret their tempestuous day: it provided them with a mythic medium for articulating the hopes and fears their age aroused, for prophesying and inducing change. Romantic Satanism, then, is not merely 'individualism' or authorial subjectivity mythologized, 'the mind is its own place' invoked in a social vacuum; it exhibits the response of writers to their milieu.

### III.

Viewing each of the forms of Romantic Satanism constructed by Blake, Shelley, and Byron as the response to milieu and as an expression of group identity reveals the performative or functional value of this kind of writing. Blake, whose developing monomyth exemplifies both the prophetic function of Satanism – and its remarkable instability – is the first major figure explored in this book. Blake's Satanism expresses primarily his relationship

with the liberal and radical culture of the 1790s. In its two phases, Blake's myth of Satan embodies and then critiques the rationalistic and revolutionary milieu from which it arose, assimilating it to the larger body of Satan that subtends all forms of worldly tyranny. Transgressive adaptations of Milton's Satan in Blake's early work become the central vehicle for celebrating the revolutionary, apocalyptic capabilities of humanity, while the more conventionally conceived Satanic figure later introduced into the major prophecies looms as the central force blocking human liberation. Both mythic forms thus carry out, though in contrasting ways, a primary function of Romantic Satanism: imagining the elements of a vast social transformation. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake's revolutionary Satanism emerges in an iconoclastic revision of the myth colored by the values and the social identity of the implied audience of this work, the circle of writers and artists surrounding Joseph Johnson, the London publisher and bookseller. Here Blake develops the voice of the Devil, the 'son of fire,' and the other infernal figures of this work into personae embodying the desire and energy that trigger apocalypse. This agenda continues with the myth of Orc found in the Lambeth prophecies. But in *The Book of Urizen* (1794), Blake reverses direction in his treatment of the myth of Satan, re-establishing its traditional role in the titular figure, a conflation of the rebel angel and God the Father. The culminating work in the 'Bible of Hell' thus clarifies the mythic foundation of tyranny in the present age, and in doing so marks the increasing distance between Blake and his ideological center in the early 1790s. In the major prophecies that followed, *The Four Zoas* (1797–1805?), *Milton: A Poem* (ca. 1804), and *Jerusalem* (ca. 1820), the Satan who embodies material vision and the war-making alliance of church and state progressively displaces the figure of Urizen. In these works, moreover, Satan occupies roles – the tyrant, tempter, destroyer, and enemy of humanity – that seem to revert to tradition, yet Blake's iconoclasm only appears to reach its limit here. Though it no longer celebrates a liberating energy, Blakean Satanism retains its defamiliarizing function. In the titanic Satan of the major prophecies, Blake unmasks and renames the psychological and world-historical forces that inhibit apocalypse.

The next three chapters explore the modes of Satanism embodying the oppositional stance assumed by the Byron–Shelley circle in response to the repressive social and political climate of the late Regency. Read in this context, the central works reveal Shelley – not Byron – to be the driving force in the development of the Satanist writing of this group. While Byron early on cultivated through his writing and behavior a diabolical aura, it was not until his reputation began to sink that the social meaning of his Satanic identity – and its power – became clear to him. This awakening followed the hostile reception of Byron's satire, especially the first two cantos of *Don Juan* (1819), so deeply offensive to reviewers that they seemed to



have been written by a fiend. Byron's later works feature Satanic personae, vehicles of his counterattack on the defenders of Tory oppression, the voices of the *Quarterly Review*. The mature form of Byronic Satanism, then, is rhetorically reflexive and socially defensive, antagonistically assuming the demonic group identity fastened to the Byron-Shelley circle by their adversaries. In adopting the stance of the diabolical provocateur, Byron was led by the precedent of Shelley. Responding to the critical assault and the suppression of anti-Christian writing, both of which intensified in 1819, Shelley encouraged Byron to counterattack while developing new forms of Satanic writing on his own, designed to subvert and reconstruct traditional myth. Through these methods Shelley sought to hasten the transformation of religious and political opinion in the various strata of the British readership.

The third chapter takes up the works that exemplify the so-called 'Satanic school,' exploring the efforts of Byron and Shelley to develop mythic vehicles of religious controversialism. Shelley's begin with an iconoclastic Satanism similar to Blake's early inversion of the figure of Milton's fallen archangel. His practices here are strategic, designed to disable traditional myth and infuse it with a core of oppositional values and attitudes. In *Queen Mab* (1813) Shelley transforms the legendary figure of Ahasuerus into an idealized avatar of Milton's Satan who personifies the infidel cause itself. Shelley's satanized Wandering Jew mythicizes resistance to oppression, creating the means to outface the humiliation of the radical publisher Daniel Isaac Eaton, tried in 1812 for blasphemous libel, then imprisoned and pilloried. This programmatic form of diabolism continues in Shelley's later essay, 'On the Devil, and Devils,' composed during the height of the government's campaign to suppress blasphemy. Yet in this essay and *The Cenci* (1820), the tragic play written during this period, Shelley's Satanism modulates into less polemical and more indirect, literary forms. All of these works anticipate and undoubtedly influenced the construction of Byron's *Cain: A Mystery* (1821). In this dramatic revision of the story of the first murder, Byron introduces the figure of Lucifer, who functions as an ironized mouthpiece for free thought. Lucifer's attacks on divine authority and the response they provoked in the first readers of *Cain* confirm that a major purpose of Byronic Satanism was to press against the limits of what could be published and tolerated in the last years of the Regency.

The fourth chapter concentrates on Shelley, examining the Satanic agents of political and social change featured in his major poems and dramas. These figures embody not only Shelley's interest in idealizing revolution but also the ambivalence emerging in his mature works over the retaliatory aggression he feared would accompany a popular insurrection in post-Waterloo England. The allegorical introductory canto of *The Revolt of Islam*, like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, offers a Gnostic myth of the benevolent spirit animating revolution, a story involving a rival or



suppressed account of origins wherein a traditionally demonized agent is identified with the struggle to liberate humanity. A more difficult and unstable form of Satanism appears in *Prometheus Unbound*. In the syncretic construction of the Titan, Shelley attempts to harmonize images of insurrection and passive resistance, but the mythic stance thus created embodies an unbending resistance to tyranny that just barely succeeds in refusing the revenge impulse. The Luciferean figure who awakens the mind of the multitude and bloodlessly installs a new social order in 'The Mask of Anarchy' (1819; 1832) constitutes Shelley's final idealization of the Satanic agent of change. In the fragmentary prologue to *Hellas* (1821), Shelley at last reverts to traditional mythic form, introducing a Satanic figure who embodies a vast power subtending the tyranny of the Holy Alliance itself. Here Shelley invokes a theologically orthodox conception of Satan to prophesy, warning of a future shaped by the violence and re-enslavement that might overtake the Greek war for independence.

The final chapter of this book explores the ironized forms of Satanism Byron and Shelley developed, through which these writers recoiled from the world of the late Regency. In Shelley's 'Julian and Maddalo' (1819; 1824), Satanic troping provides the mythic lens not for heroic resistance to oppression but the implosion of Shelleyan meliorism. From this ironic form of Satanism Shelley turns to the tactics of straight demonizing in his major satire, *Peter Bell the Third* (1819; 1839). In the character of the 'Devil,' Peter's gentleman patron, Shelley ridicules the dull and deadening influence of the nouveau riche, thereby attacking one element of the social and political crisis he saw in the England of 1819. Byron develops a more ambiguous and ironic form of Satanic satire in *The Vision of Judgment*. Here the rhetoric of the 'President' of hell, Byron's diabolical spokesman for the political opposition, is unstable, alternating between impassioned denunciation of George III and the dismissive air of the disaffected aristocrat. The functional ambiguity of the Satanic figure is intensified in Byron's late unfinished drama, *The Deformed Transformed*, where 'the Stranger,' the play's enigmatic Devil, tempts Arnold, the hunchbacked protagonist, with the means to transcend his physical state. This dramatic subject offers Byron scope for developing a totalizing ironic perspective, as the Stranger progressively deflates Arnold's hollow idealism and voices, as a corrective view, Byronic materialism, elevating the claims of the body over those of the soul.

Conceived in traditional as well as unconventional terms, the forms of Romantic Satanism range as widely as the literary contexts to which Milton's fallen archangel is adapted. The complex appeal of this character to those who invoked and rhetorically harnessed him is captured in William Hazlitt's 1818 lecture, 'On Shakespeare and Milton.' Here Hazlitt evokes the ambiguous grandeur of the fallen angel, whom he calls a figure 'gigantic, irregular, portentous, uneasy, and disturbed – but dazzling in its