THE WISH LIST

Raising Milton's Ghost

John Milton and the Sublime of Terror in the Early Romantic Period

Joseph Crawford

BLOOMSBURY

Raising Milton's Ghost

The WISH List
(Warwick Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities)

Series editors: Jonathan Bate, Stella Bruzzi, Thomas Docherty and Margot Finn

In the twenty-first century, the traditional disciplinary boundaries of higher education are dissolving at remarkable speed. The last decade has seen the flourishing of scores of new interdisciplinary research centres at universities around the world and there has also been a move towards more interdisciplinary teaching.

The WISH List is a collaboration between Bloomsbury Academic and the University of Warwick, a university that has been, from its foundation, at the forefront of interdisciplinary innovation in academia. The series aims to establish a framework for innovative forms of interdisciplinary publishing within the humanities, between the humanities and social sciences and even between the humanities and the hard sciences.

Also in *The WISH List*:

Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare
Peter Mack
ISBN 978-1-84966-061-7 (Hardback); ISBN 978-1-84966-060-0 (Ebook)

The Public Value of the Humanities
Edited by Jonathan Bate
ISBN 978-1-84966-471-4 (Hardback); ISBN 978-1-84966-062-4 (Paperback); ISBN 978-1-84966-063-1 (Ebook)

Open-space Learning: A Study in Transdisciplinary Pedagogy
Nicholas Monk, Carol Chillington Rutter, Jonothan Neelands, Jonathan Heron
ISBN 978-1-84966-054-9 (Hardback); ISBN 978-1-84966-055-6 (Ebook)

Raising Milton's Ghost

John Milton and the Sublime of Terror in the Early Romantic Period

JOSEPH CRAWFORD

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

BLOOMSBURY

LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

First published in 2011 Bloomsbury Academic
Paperback edition first published 2015

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-8496-6332-8
PB: 978-1-4742-4512-8
ePub: 978-1-8496-6419-6
ePDF: 978-1-8496-6421-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed and bound in Great Britain

Series Editor's Preface

Jonathan Bate

In a poem called 'London, 1802', William Wordsworth wrote 'Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour: / England hath need of thee …' Why did the England of the period around the turn of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth have particular need of Milton? That is the question to which Joseph Crawford's book offers the first proper answer.

It has long been known that the major Romantic writers were all obsessed with John Milton and his great English epic poem *Paradise Lost*. William Blake imagined the spirit of Milton entering him via the left foot and inspiring him to write his own epic poetry. It was indeed in the course of the preface to his long visionary poem *Milton* that Blake wrote his most famous lyric, 'And did those feet in ancient time' – it was Milton who enabled him to imagine the building of a New Jerusalem among England's dark Satanic mills. Wordsworth's epic endeavour, *The Recluse* (which was never finished, but which resulted in his two vast poems *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*) was conceived as a conscious over-going of *Paradise Lost*. Keats gave up his *Hyperion* because he thought that he could not match up to Milton's high example. Percy Shelley dreamed of the rising of Milton's ghost and Mary Shelley included *Paradise Lost* among the most significant reading matter of her Creature in *Frankenstein*.

Twentieth-century literary critics paid close attention to these relationships. Blake's pronouncement in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'Milton was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it' has provoked a wealth of strong critical commentary on the charisma of the figure of Satan and its influence on radical Romanticism. Indeed, Harold Bloom's much discussed theory of 'The Anxiety of Influence', in which a quasi-Oedipal sense of the authority of the poetic 'father' is both the spur and the inhibitor of creativity, was developed out of his reading of the Romantics' reading of Milton.

But, as Crawford points out, even the richest of our critical accounts of the Romantics reading Milton have been conducted in an historical vacuum. Crawford is the first to ask how ordinary readers – not to mention editors and biographers, journalists and politicians – raised the ghost of England's great republican writer during the turbulent decade of the 1790s. Wordsworth's desire for Milton to come back to life makes fresh sense in the light of

Crawford's fascinating historical research, such as his account of the poet Helen Maria Williams' description of a scene at the Jacobins Club, Paris, in 1792: 'The names of Milton, of Locke, and of Hampden, re-echoed through the hall, where it was proposed that their busts should also in short time be placed.'

Twentieth-century literary studies often suffered from a divide between formalism, the close reading of texts, on the one hand, and historicism, the contextual placing of texts, on the other. The WISH List endeavours to break down such disciplinary divides as those between literature and history. *Raising Milton's Ghost* is an eloquent and original model of how research in the historical archive can complement the investigation of literary genealogies, and vice-versa.

Acknowledgements

All books are haunted by the presences of those who helped to bring them into being; and ghosts, as my research for this book has taught me, are safer to acknowledge than ignore. So I would like to thank Professor Howard Erskine-Hill, who introduced me to the works of William Blake as an undergraduate; Professor Heather Glen, who helped me to recognise the historical connections which bound Milton and Blake together; Professor Jon Mee, who guided me through four years of graduate study on Milton and Blake at Oxford; and Professor Lucy Newlyn and Professor David Fairer, both for examining my DPhil, and for their insights into Milton and Romanticism and the aesthetics of the sublime, respectively. Modified versions of parts of Chapters Two and Four have been previously published in the *Journal of Eighteenth Century Studies* and *Studies in Romanticism* respectively, and I am grateful to the publishers and editors of those journals for their permission to republish this material here. Less academic, but equally vital, has been the enormous amount of advice, insight and support I have been given by my wife, parents and siblings during the research for and writing of this book. Filipa, Richard, Elaine, Rosa, Oliver and Sophia: thanks for putting up with my Miltonic obsessions for so long. The haunting's finally over now.

Contents

Abbreviations for Works Cited

C	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Complete Works*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 volumes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969–2001).
DNB	H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* 60 volumes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).
DQ	Thomas De Quincey, *Complete Works,* ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 volumes (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–2003).
E	William Blake, *Complete Poetry and Prose,* ed. David Erdman, revised edition (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).
EB	Edmund Burke, *Writings and Speeches,* ed. Paul Langford, 9 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981–2000).
HMW	Helen Maria Williams, *Letters from France,* 2 volumes (New York: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975).
M	John Milton, *Poetical Works,* ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford UP, 1958).
MP	John Milton, *Complete Prose Works,* ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 volumes (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953–1982).
MW	Mary Wollstonecraft, *Works,* eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 volumes (London: Pickering, 1989).
P	William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-book Prelude,* ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 volumes (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991).
TW	John Milton, *Poems on Several Occasions,* ed. Thomas Warton (London, 1785).

The Haunting

'Milton speaks of a spiritual companion that visited his slumbers nightly, and after the same manner Milton came and told me that this book of mine should be immortal.'

– Samuel Johnson, *Court and Country*, 1780

'The report of [Milton's] death was so industriously circulated that the credulity of the public swallowed the bait prepared for them … a figure of him, as large and as heavy as the life, was actually formed, and laid out, and put into the coffin …'

– *The Times*, Wednesday, 6 August 1788

'One of the Parish Officers of Cripplegate, who violated the bones of Milton, has since been deranged in his intellects, and supposes himself to have been grasped by a cold hand …'

– *St James's Chronicle*, 31 August 1791

'The names of Milton, of Locke, and of Hampden, re-echoed through the hall, where it was proposed that their busts should also in short time be placed.'

– Helen Maria Williams, *Letters from France,*
describing a scene at the Jacobins Club, Paris, 1792

'My first thought was wonder, where [Milton] could have been concealed so many years; my second, a transport of joy to find him still alive …'

– William Cowper, Letter to William Hayley, 1793

'[Milton's] attachment to truth was as sincere and fervent as that of the honest Montaigne, who says: "I would come again with all my heart from the other world to give any one the lie, who should report me as other than I was …" '

– William Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 1794

'Sages and patriots that being dead do yet speak to us, spirits of Milton, Locke, Sidney, Harrington! That still wander through your native country, giving wisdom and inspiring zeal! The cauldron of persecution is bubbling against you – the spells of despotism are being muttered! Blest spirits! Assist us, lest hell exorcise earth of all that is heavenly!'

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Plot Discovered*, 1795

'Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee …'

– William Wordsworth, 'London, 1802'

'But Milton entering my Foot; I saw in the nether
Regions of the Imagination; also all men on Earth,
And all in Heaven, saw in the nether regions of the Imagination
In Ulro beneath Beulah, the vast breach of Miltons descent.'

– William Blake, *Milton*, 1802–4

Yea, our blind Poet, who, in his later day,
Stood almost single, uttering odious truth,
Darkness before and danger's voice behind;
Soul awful! if the earth hath ever lodg'd
An awful Soul, I seem'd to see him here
Familiarly, and in his Scholar's dress …

– William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805

'Think'st thou, could he, the blind Old Man, arise
  Like Samuel from the grave, to freeze once more
The blood of monarchs with his prophecies,
  Or be alive again – again all hoar
With time and trials, and those helpless eyes
  And heartless daughters, worn, and pale, and poor,
Would *he* adore a sultan? *he* obey
The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh?'

– Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, 1819

'I dreamed that Milton's spirit rose, and took
From life's green tree his Uranian lute;
And from his touch sweet thunder flowed, and shook
All human things built in contempt of man …'

– Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1820

'Milton's spirit came to me, and warned me to beware of being misled by *Paradise Lost*.'

– William Blake, in conversation with Henry Crabb Robinson, 1825

Introduction

This is a ghost story.

Like many ghost stories, it features a missing will, a violated grave, a disputed inheritance, sinister paintings and mysterious dreams. In the best Gothic tradition, it takes place against a backdrop of violence and upheaval, with a supporting cast of scholars, poets, madmen and revolutionaries. The ghost is that of John Milton, whose haunting commenced in the 1780s, and began in earnest in about 1791. When it ended – *if* it ended – is far harder to discern.

This story has not been told before. Many of the events it describes have been noticed by other scholars, but individually they were no more than historical curios, anecdotes with which to enliven passages of literary history; it is only when they are brought together that they become something more. It has never been adequately observed how thoroughly the 1790s were haunted by Milton's ghost; how often his name and works were invoked, how many forms his revival took or how frequently the trope of his return or resurrection was deployed by the writers of the time. The aim of this book is to bring together this mass of previously unconnected material in order to chronicle the last and strangest chapter in the history of the eighteenth-century Milton cult, and to discern why, in the 1790s, Milton appeared to be having such trouble remaining at rest.

Was it a mere historical accident that the decade which began with the violation of Milton's grave ended with the exhibition of Fuseli's Milton Gallery, a monument to Fuseli's obsession with Milton, from whose works he had derived the subject matter for more than forty gigantic canvasses? Was it simply coincidence that the same decade saw the publication of an unprecedented number of editions of *Paradise Lost*? Was it by chance that, within a year of the French erecting a bust of Milton at the Jacobin's Club, the British had another sculpted for his previously monument-less grave? Was it only blind luck that a dozen different writers chose the figure of Milton's Samson to symbolise the French Revolution, or that Cowper, Coleridge, Hayley, Blake, Wordsworth, Godwin, Byron and Shelley all dreamed of, imagined or longed for Milton's resurrection or return?

I would argue that it was not, any more than it was a coincidence that in the 1780s Jefferson turned to Milton's prose works for guidance in legislating for religious freedom in Virginia, Mirabeau translated them into French,

Gibbon called for their suppression and Thomas Warton spent years searching in archives for Milton's missing will. All these events were symptoms of a wider phenomenon, a phenomenon that this book sets out to explore and, if possible, explain. 'The dead brood over Europe', wrote Blake in 1790, and among the army of ghosts watching over this pivotal moment of European history, Milton's appears to have been among the most prominent. The question, then, must be: why wouldn't John Milton stay dead?

The Purpose of This Book

This book aims to fill a gap in the scholarship on Milton and the Romantics, by describing the historical context within which the encounter between Milton and his Romantic heirs took place. It appears to have hitherto largely escaped the notice of scholars that in the very years when Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth were reading, writing and dreaming about Milton, his cultural status was in an unprecedented state of flux. It was not only poets who had to renegotiate their relationships with their illustrious predecessor; at this moment of national stress, their entire culture had to find new ways to think about and live with Milton's spirit and Milton's legacy. The anxiety about Milton's influence was not just personal, experienced only by poets; it was national, and expressed itself in a variety of ways. Blake was not the only man in those years to encounter Milton's ghost; Wordsworth was not the only one who wished Milton was living at that hour; Coleridge was not alone in feeling that the time had come for some new poet or prophet to write a modern version of *Paradise Lost*. The importance of Milton to the major Romantics has been chronicled extensively; what has almost never been shown was what he meant to their contemporaries. It is this that my book sets out to explore, with the aim of re-examining the relationships of the major Romantics with Milton in the light of the knowledge thus acquired.

This book is not intended to replace any existing works on Milton and Romanticism; instead, it is meant to complement them, providing historical context for the literary relationships they describe. In particular, I hope it can form a companion volume to Lucy Newlyn's important work, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*. Newlyn gives an excellent account of the ways in which Wordsworth, Blake and Coleridge read Milton, but her book is limited chiefly by its scope, its examinations of everything other than the works of the major Romantics being extremely brief. My book concerns itself with some of those late eighteenth-century readers of *Paradise Lost* who happened *not*

to be major Romantic poets, as well as a few who were; not only because the ways in which such people read Milton are important in their own right, but also because once they are known, the readings of Milton by the major Romantics can be better understood.

This book is divided into three parts, each of two chapters. The first deals with Milton's cultural status in the late eighteenth century, and the ways in which it was affected by the American and French Revolutions: Chapter One follows this story to 1790, and Chapter Two takes it from 1790 to 1800. The second examines certain aspects of the Milton cult in more detail: Chapter Three explores Milton's importance to the discourse of the sublime, while Chapter Four deals with the many minor poets who attempted to establish themselves as Milton's successors. The third and final part examines, in the light of what has gone before, the works of two major Romantics, William Wordsworth and William Blake, placing their engagements with Milton in the context of their times, and comparing their attempts to write Miltonic epics and their uses of the Miltonic sublime to those of their literary contemporaries: Chapter Five deals with Wordsworth; Chapter Six with Blake. Finally, the Epilogue looks forward to De Quincey and the nineteenth century, suggesting that the events discussed in this book may have had long-term consequences extending far beyond the political and poetical controversies that created them; that the very concept of the literary may have been shaped by the curious case of Milton's coffin, and the ensuing struggle to ensure that John Milton stayed dead.

CHAPTER ONE

Milton's Legacy

I

John Milton died on the night of 9 November 1674. No longer a living presence, a blind old man still labouring away at his poems and polemics until a few months before his death, he remained at least for a few days more as a visible, tangible object, a pale corpse lying on a bed in his house on Artillery Walk; then, on the twelfth, he was buried beside his father in the church of St Giles' Cripplegate, in London.[1] In 1790, his remains would be most rudely disinterred: but between his burial and his exhumation lay a century in which Milton remained present only in books, memories and legends.

For a dead man, his presence remained considerable. His poems were endlessly reprinted, with one edition after another absorbed by an increasingly book-hungry public; while from the 1690s onwards a stream of critics and commentators devoted themselves to writing about his works, ensuring that his literary reputation remained very much alive. But the Milton whose cultural presence was sustained and strengthened throughout the eighteenth century was, inevitably, not quite the same as the Milton who had breathed his last in 1674. In the place of the turbulent polemicist who, while he lived, had flung himself into the thick of every political crisis and controversy within reach, the critics, editors and publishers of the eighteenth century constructed a new version of Milton, one they felt would be more acceptable to their readers: not a man of politics but a man of God, a saintly author of sacred poetry, untroubled by petty and divisive temporal concerns. This version of Milton, whilst unquestionably a force to be reckoned with within eighteenth-century culture, was also – crucially – present within it only at a *distance:* a reverend figure seated afar off in glory, in some pantheon of Great English Poets, Whig worthies or Protestant saints. He was read, admired and even worshipped, but none of his admirers or worshippers doubted for a moment that he was dead and in heaven, rather than alive and active in Hanoverian England.

It is not hard to understand why this transformation took place; as a republican defender of regicide in politics, and a freethinking dissenter in religion, Milton could hardly have been accepted without major modifications

by the Anglican constitutional monarchists who came to dominate British political life after the revolution of 1688. His acknowledged poetic greatness made it desirable to annex his name to the new (and, at least initially, still highly unstable) political and religious order; but if he were to be posthumously taken into the fold, it could only be on the condition that his politics were reduced to a vague belief in 'liberty' and his religion to a generic form of Protestantism.[2] Milton had to be rendered safe, reinterpreted so as to pose no threat to the established order. 'The Milton that had been adulated by earlier generations of the eighteenth century', writes Stephen Prickett, 'was a carefully sanitised version; Milton the religious heretic, the social, political, and sexual rebel had been tacitly allowed to drop from sight. What was left was simply the lover of liberty and great "religious poet", the author of *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*'.[3]

The way in which this reinterpretation was accomplished requires closer examination than it has hitherto received. First and foremost, if any account is to be given of the forms which Milton's presence took in the eighteenth century, some basic questions must be posed: questions so basic that it seems astonishing that, after eight book-length studies of Milton's eighteenth-century influence, they seem never even to have been seriously asked, let alone answered. Who read Milton's poems? Who read his prose? How well known were they? Did the average late eighteenth-century working man even know who Milton was? If he could read, was he likely to have read him? If he did, what did he make of him? The limitations of the surviving sources prevent these questions from being answered with any great precision; but enough evidence exists to at least make a more meaningful attempt to solve them than has been attempted hitherto.

As R. D. Havens points out, 'between 1705 and 1800 *Paradise Lost* was published over a hundred times', compared to fifty editions of Shakespeare's plays, and just seven of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.[4] These editions became more rather than less frequent as the century went on, especially after 1774, when the end of perpetual copyright led to a boom in the publication of classic English authors such as Shakespeare and Milton.[5] The Tonson family, which owned the copyright on *Paradise Lost* until 1767, became extremely rich on the proceeds, and when their involvement in the book trade ended they sold the copyright for the immense sum of £900.[6] It was clearly a monumentally popular poem; indeed, based on the simple number of editions that booksellers were able to sell of it, it seems uncontentious

to say that it must have been one of the most popular poems of the eighteenth century.

Furthermore, there is ample evidence of the extraordinarily high cultural status that Milton enjoyed among the educated classes in eighteenth-century Britain and America. *Paradise Lost* was compulsory reading for anyone with any pretence to culture or education: as Dr Johnson grumpily remarked, Addison had 'made Milton an universal favourite, with whom readers of every class think it necessary to be pleased'.[7] Of England, Havens states: 'it is hardly an exaggeration to say that from Pope's day to Wordsworth's Milton occupied a place … which no poet has held since and none is likely to hold again'.[8] Of America in the same period, Sensabaugh writes that 'Milton commanded an authority rarely granted any person, in any country, at any time', and that many Americans 'saw Milton as the supreme author of all time'.[9] Any number of contemporary statements could be quoted to back them up. *Paradise Lost* was routinely compared not only with the works of Shakespeare, Virgil and Homer (which were usually judged to be either equally great or slightly inferior to it), but to the Bible itself.[10] Thomas Newton declared in 1749 that 'Whoever has any true taste and genius, we are confident, will esteem this poem the best of modern productions, and the scriptures the best of all ancient ones'.[11] John Wesley wrote in 1763 that 'Of all the Poems which have hitherto appeared in the World, in whatever Age or Nation, the Preference has generally been given, by impartial Judges, to *Milton's Paradise Lost*'.[12] Mrs Grant of New England recalled that in the 1770s there had been in her household 'not the smallest doubt of [Milton's] being as much inspired as ever Isaiah was', while George Gregory, looking back in 1808, remarked that 'our grandsires, and even perhaps many grave Doctors of Divinity, would exclaim against the impiety of that man who would dare to question a syllable of the authenticity of all that [Milton] had related, of the war in heaven, of the rebellious spirits, &c, &c'.[13] For these people, as for many others, *Paradise Lost* was clearly very nearly holy writ.

One of the most frequently reprinted and highly regarded poems of the century: granted. But who actually read it? That Milton's poetry was regularly inflicted on schoolboys, at least in small doses, is clear from the frequency with which sections of it appeared in the poetry anthologies frequently used in schools, such as Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts*, William Enfield's *The Speaker* and *Exercises in Elocution*, and Edward Bysshe's *Art of English Poetry* and *British Parnassus*.[14] But does it follow from this that one could

walk into any mid-eighteenth-century English village, say the words 'Milton's *Paradise Lost*', and expect the villagers to know whereof one spoke, perhaps even to have read the poem themselves? According to Havens, the answer was yes, and a man of the eighteenth century who wished to avoid either the poet or the epic would have had a very difficult time of it:

> No village was free from the contagion; and if he sought peace in the country, he came upon Il Penseroso alcoves, upon travellers reading *Paradise Lost* by the roadside, ploughboys with copies of it in their pockets, and shepherds, real shepherds, 'poring upon it in the fields'. Even among the poor and the uneducated it was the same: not only ploughboys and shepherds, but threshers, cotters, cobblers, and milkwomen read and imitated the poet who expected his audience to be 'few'.[15]

This is an extraordinary claim; but closer reading of Havens shows it to be based on very slender foundations. We know of *one* milkwoman – the poet Ann Yearsley – who read *Paradise Lost*, and that *one* man *once* saw a shepherd reading – or, perhaps more likely, attempting to read – a copy in the fields.[16] The ploughboy with *Paradise Lost* in his pocket can only be Robert Burns, sometimes known during his lifetime as the 'heaven-taught ploughman'; but he was tenant farmer, as was his father, who paid for him to have an education such as no common farm labourer would have been able to afford, making him stand out sharply from his rural contemporaries.[17] As for the 'threshers, cotters, [and] cobblers', they appear to be pure fantasy, as Havens cites no sources to verify their existence. Yet, giving only these cases as his evidence, Havens blithely claims: 'These facts almost make one accept at their face value such [eighteenth-century] assertions as "*Paradise Lost* … is read with Pleasure and Admiration, by Persons of every Degree and Condition".'[18]

In a similar vein, Wittreich has claimed that 'Milton was first and foremost the property of the popular culture'.[19] His main proof of this is the number of Milton editions published, but his evidence that any considerable number of them found their way out of the hands of the educated classes is slight. He suggests that lower-class children may have learned about Milton in schools, stating in support that 'her first editor reports of Susanna Blamire, who attended only the village school, "We have clear proof … that she was conversant … [at a very early period of life] with the writings of Milton"'.[20]

But Blamire was the daughter of a wealthy squire, not a farm labourer, and she shared her house with a bookish aunt of literary tastes: it seems much more likely that she gained her familiarity with Milton and the rest of the English classics from books borrowed from her aunt than from the village school, especially as her editor reports that 'the amount of information obtained [at the school] was small'.[21] She was also familiar from childhood on with Collins, Prior and Gray, yet Wittreich does not thus assume that these, too, were known to every English child with a village school education. Newlyn, in *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, makes no explicit claims for the popularity of *Paradise Lost* with the lower classes, but she still writes that 'along with *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible, [*Paradise Lost*] was the most widely read book of the century'.[22] If true, this would make it very widely read indeed; the Bible was read by everyone who was even semi-literate, and there is ample evidence of the vast popularity of *Pilgrim's Progress* with readers at every level of society. But there are strong grounds for thinking that *Paradise Lost* never attained this level of ubiquity, or even that of slightly less widely read but still massively popular works such as *Robinson Crusoe*, and that its readership was substantially smaller than Havens, Wittreich and Newlyn have claimed.

First, it is worth asking whether Haven's 'threshers, cotters, and cobblers' could have obtained a copy of *Paradise Lost* even if they had wanted one. The English Short Title Catalogue lists 125 separate eighteenth-century editions of *Paradise Lost*, which is certainly an impressive figure: but a closer examination shows that many of them were luxury publications, aimed at a small and wealthy audience, and probably printed in small numbers at high prices. *Paradise Lost* is long for a poem, but not for a book; printed in small but perfectly legible type, it could easily be fitted into a few hundred duodecimo pages. Yet of these 125 editions of the poem, only half were single-volume duodecimos or smaller: the rest were folios, quartos or octavos, often sprawling across multiple volumes, lavishly illustrated with plates and buttressed with biographies, critical essays and voluminous notes. Even the duodecimos often contained plates or illustrations, a fact that would have substantially increased their prices. A relatively prosperous London tradesman, such as William Blake's father, could have bought one without much difficulty, especially if he purchased it from one of the capital's many second-hand bookstalls rather than a bookshop. But in a period when a provincial tradesman might easily have to support a family on just 14s a

week, and a farm labourer on even less, 3s 6d for an illustrated duodecimo edition of *Paradise Lost* would have represented a significant luxury purchase.

Another way of gauging the popularity of *Paradise Lost* is to compare it to three works that are known to have been truly popular in the broadest possible sense: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Paine's *Rights of Man*. The English Short Title Catalogue lists 190 eighteenth-century editions of Defoe's novel, with a further ten editions of the second part published separately, and 196 editions of Bunyan's work over the same period, not counting the many separate reprints of the spurious 'third part' added to it in 1693. Part I of *Rights of Man* went through forty-five editions in just ten years, from 1791 to 1800, and Part II went through thirty editions between 1792 and 1800, despite the fact that from 1792 booksellers could be prosecuted for seditious libel for selling either of them; to emphasise just how popular it had become, Benjamin Vaughan remarked in 1792 that '[*Rights of Man*] is now made as much a Standard book in this Country as Robinson Crusoe and the Pilgrim's Progress'.[23] In *The Englishman and His Books in the Early Nineteenth Century*, Amy Cruse quotes Mrs Gaskell as saying that *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* were among the books to be found 'in nearly every house' among the small farmers of Cumberland and Westmorland, but comments immediately afterwards that:

> The two books of which [the village peddler] sold the most copies were *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*. These two books were read by almost everybody who read at all, from the working man to the prince. The pedlar had copies that he would sell for a few pence, and those who bought nothing else bought these.[24]

In her case studies of 'working-men readers' in the period, most had read *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*, but only John Clare read *Paradise Lost*. Furthermore, as Pat Rogers has shown, both Defoe and Bunyan's works were repeatedly adapted into chapbooks for the very poor – a sure sign of the breadth of their appeal.[25] (Chapbooks called *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* did exist, but rather than abridged adaptations of Milton's works, they contained ballads on the same subjects; in any case, only one edition is known of each.)[26] We must also be aware that eighteenth-century print

runs could vary wildly in size, from 500 for a work by a hitherto unknown novelist to 4,000 or 5,000 or more for best-selling novels or pamphlets at the height of their popularity.[27] Unlike *Paradise Lost*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Rights of Man* were all overwhelmingly published in large, cheap editions, so the disparity in their numbers may be many times greater than a simple count of their editions would suggest. A single cheap duodecimo run of *Robinson Crusoe* might represent as much as eight times as many actual books as a luxury edition of *Paradise Lost*.

Such figures serve to put Milton's popularity into perspective. It must certainly have been widespread, comparable to that of Thomson, Young and other best-selling poets of the eighteenth century, but it was clearly far from the ubiquity enjoyed by writers like Bunyan.[28] Nor is it necessary to seek far for a reason. In 1762, William Dodd observed:

> While all read and admire Milton, it is confessed that few understand him; few, at least, of the common Readers; More learned ones frequently find themselves at a Loss, so unbounded is he in his knowledge …[29]

The following year, John Wesley stated the problem even more plainly:

> This inimitable Work [i.e. *Paradise Lost*], amidst all its beauties, is unintelligible to abundance of Readers: the immense learning which [Milton] has every where crowded together, making it quite obscure to persons of a common Education.[30]

Given his tireless travelling and preaching amongst the rural poor, Wesley should surely have had some idea of what the common people were or were not reading, and his objection seems a reasonable one: how many lower-class readers, tolerably literate but lacking any literary education, would have been able to make their way through 10,000 lines of Latinate verse, crammed with learned and classical allusions? Earlier in the century, Addison had made the same point more obliquely, writing in *The Spectator* that 'Homer, Virgil, or Milton, so far as the language of their poems is understood, will please a reader of plain common sense': implicitly placing Milton alongside Homer and Virgil as a writer whose story was potentially comprehensible to anyone, but whose language required a specialised education to understand.[31] The fact that George Green's prose version of *Paradise Lost* – an English translation

of Dupré de St Maur's French version, which had translated the poem into French prose – was reprinted at least twelve times between 1745 and 1784 suggests that a good number of readers were attracted by Milton's subject matter, but put off by the difficulty of his poetry. Some struggled through regardless: lower-class poets such as John Clare, Anne Yearsley and Steven Duck all read *Paradise Lost*, and were profoundly influenced by it. But they read it precisely because it was a talisman of the literary culture that they aspired to join, not because it was already part of the popular culture into which they had been born. Duck's case is instructive:

> Stephen [Duck] read it over twice or thrice with a Dictionary, before he could understand the Language of it thoroughly .... He studied *Paradise Lost*, as others do the Classics.[32]

Far from growing up with Milton, Duck did not discover him until his twenties; and when he did it was not by chance, but because he was making a deliberate effort to educate himself. He struggled through it despite finding it almost incomprehensible at first, in the same way and for the same reasons as upper-class men of the same era struggled through Homer and Virgil: because by doing so they were able to make a claim to be literary men, with all the cultural prestige that implied. Duck lived near the beginning of the century, but the situation does not seem to have been very different at its end. Seventy years later, John Clare worked his way through *Paradise Lost*, although he could only obtain a 'shattered' second-hand copy; but his semi-literate father – presumably a more typical representative of the English labouring classes than his prodigiously gifted son – read nothing but fairy tales and broadside ballads.[33] John Wesley attempted to introduce Milton's poetry to the common people, printing an abridged version of *Paradise Lost* in 1763 and making it compulsory reading for Methodist preachers.[34] But despite having Wesley's publishing and distributing machine behind it, and a massive potential audience of literate, self-improving, working-class Methodist readers, it did not sell well: its price was lowered from 2s 6d to 1s 6d in 1777, and no new edition was called for until 1791.[35] The Methodists, like the literate lower classes in general, evidently preferred their poems to be substantially shorter.

It is possible that the situation was different in the cities, with their higher levels of literacy and easy availability of circulating libraries and second-hand

books. Visiting London in the 1780s, the German traveller Carl Moritz rented a room from a tailor's widow, of whom he wrote:

> [She] reads her Milton; and tells me, that her late husband first fell in love with her, on this very account; because she read Milton with such proper emphasis. This single instance perhaps would prove but little; but I have conversed with several people of the lower class, who all know their national authors, and who have read many, if not all of them.[36]

Moritz's account should be taken seriously. Clearly some people in the lower classes did develop a taste for literature, and after the end of perpetual copyright in 1774 it became increasingly possible for them to gratify it, at least in large cities like London: working their way through *Bell's British Poets* one sixpenny number at a time, Moritz's landlady and her literary friends could quite easily have come to 'know their national authors'.[37] While living in Bristol as a shoemaker in the early 1770s, James Lackington clubbed together with his Methodist friends to buy 'what *we* called a very good library': by spending 'every shilling [they] could spare' at 'old book-shops, stalls, &c', they soon acquired a collection of more than fifty titles. Most were religious works, but they made room in their collection for Gay's *Fables*, Pomfret's *Poems*, Hobbes's translation of Homer and, of course, 'Milton's *Paradise Lost*'.[38] But people willing to devote so much time and money to literature remained very much a minority, and *Paradise Lost* did not form part of the general cultural vocabulary of the late-eighteenth-century English lower classes in the cities any more than in the countryside. In Leigh Hunt's sketches of London types, written at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Old Gentleman, the Old Lady and the Maid-servant all own Bibles and popular novels, but it is only the Old Gentleman who owns a copy of *Paradise Lost*.[39]

It thus seems possible to come to a tentative conclusion: unlike the genuinely universal *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost* remained very much part of the cultural property of the educated classes during the eighteenth century. It was read by all educated men and women, and by those aspiring to become such, who saw it as a touchstone of cultural achievement: in John Aikin's immense *General Biography* of 1799–1815, the entry on Milton concludes by stating that '[Milton's] poetical compositions are standards of English literature, which it is a high effort of critical skill duly to appreciate, and a proof of cultivated taste justly to admire'.[40] It was thus necessary for those

who wished to be thought to possess such taste to be able to demonstrate some knowledge of Milton, and especially of *Paradise Lost*. They did not necessarily read it carefully, or even all the way through; in *Agatha*, an anonymous novel of 1796, the half-educated gentlewoman Miss Milson is described as being 'absolutely enamoured, as she styled it, of the sublimity of Milton, from the first book of whose *Paradise Lost* she daily quoted some lines, beyond which, it has been supposed, she had never read'.[41] They were fond of displaying their knowledge and taste by quoting from it, although they did not necessarily remember the original context of their quotations: in Maria Edgeworth's 1801 novel *Belinda*, the eponymous heroine at one point reminds Harriet Freke that 'it is not Milton, but Satan, who says "Fallen spirit, to be weak is miserable"', which convinces Harriet that Belinda is 'a reading girl', but later in the novel Belinda comforts Mr Vincent with the observation that 'the mind is its own place', seemingly unaware that *she* is now quoting Satan rather than Milton, too.[42] But they did read it, or at the very least they read extracts from it in anthologies, because some familiarity with its chief scenes was assumed by the world in which they moved, and by alluding to it and praising it they demonstrated their own education and good taste. However, the average field or factory workers, who were by the late eighteenth century at least semi-literate, would almost certainly not have read it.[43] Furthermore, they may well never even have heard of it or of its author, although if they read the newspapers they might sometimes have seen editions of his poetry advertised in them, and if they lived in London they might have known of him through other mediums, such as the various theatrical adaptations of *Comus* or *Samson Agonistes*, or Philippe de Loutherbourg's 'immensely popular' 1782 eidophusikon, which turned *Paradise Lost* into a picture show.[44]

It is clear that to the vast majority of people, if Milton meant anything at all he meant *Paradise Lost*. The number of editions of his other poems, although considerable, is substantially smaller than those of his endlessly reprinted epic: *Paradise Lost* was reprinted at least 144 times in the eighteenth century, compared to eighty-two reprintings of *Paradise Regained* and seventy-two of *Samson Agonistes*, and allusions to these other works are uncommon outside of poetry.[45] Unlike *Paradise Lost*, which appears to have been read by anyone with any pretence to education, they seem chiefly to have been read by literary men, and there must have been many people like the young Ann Yearsley who were unaware that Milton had written more than one

poem in his life.[46] But the real rarities were Milton's political and religious prose works. In 1713 Jacob Tonson, perhaps looking for a way to distinguish his latest edition of Milton's poems from all those that had gone before it, bundled Milton's relatively harmless *Tractate on Education* together with his poems, and from that point on Tonson – as well as the various other printers who took their copy-texts from Tonson's editions – very often included the *Tractate* in editions of Milton's poetic works, making it by far the most reprinted of Milton's prose tracts in the eighteenth century.[47] But with this one exception, Milton's prose works – especially his political prose works – were not easy to obtain.

The low profile of Milton's prose works, as compared to his poetry, is clear from their respective histories of anthologisation. As mentioned earlier, Milton's poems were a mainstay of the literary anthologies used in eighteenth-century schools, whether of poetry (such as Bysshe's *British Parnassus*) or mixed poetry and prose (such as Enfield's *Speaker*); however, I have not discovered a single instance of Milton's prose works being anthologised in this way. Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts of Poetry* contains swathes of verse culled from *Paradise Lost* and Milton's other poems; but its sister volume, *Elegant Extracts of Prose*, did not contain any of Milton's prose works. To set against those 125 editions of *Paradise Lost*, the eighteenth century produced only *two* reprintings of Milton's collected prose works, one in 1738 and one in 1753. The 1738 edition was a gigantic work, running to 1,389 folio pages; the 1753 edition was physically smaller, but had even more content, consisting of 1,523 pages in closely printed quarto and retailing for two guineas. Both were produced by, and for, the small circle of radical Whig 'Commonwealthmen' described by Caroline Robbins, at the centre of which was the wealthy, Milton-worshipping republican Thomas Hollis.[48] It was Hollis who paid for the 1753 edition of Milton's prose works, Hollis who sent them as gifts to the American universities, Hollis who financed the mid-century republication of *Areopagitica* and *Eikonoklastes* in pamphlet form – and it was probably from Hollis's texts, rather than Toland's old and scarce edition of 1698 or the original pamphlets of the 1640s and 1650s, that the men who republished Milton's prose works as pamphlets in Revolution-era Britain and America took their copy-texts. Without him, eighteenth-century access to Milton's prose works would have been almost nil; and even with his energetic activities on their behalf, the circle of readers they reached was tiny compared to that of Milton's poetry, limited to a small group of liberal

Whig intellectuals. Many of Milton's general readers, coming across the brief, embarrassed references to his polemical writings in the short biographies that commonly prefaced editions of *Paradise Lost*, were probably unaware that any of them still existed. There are simply no grounds for believing Joseph Wittreich's claim that 'Milton's prose works were being widely circulated and just as widely read'.[49] On the contrary, Richard Baron – Commonwealthman, Milton enthusiast and editor of the 1753 edition of Milton's collected prose – wrote that 'It is to be lamented that his divine writings are so little known. Very few are acquainted with them; many have never heard of them.' Baron's explanation, on the strength of the testimony of one '*John Swale*, a Bookseller of *Leeds*', was that a conspiracy of 'High-Church Priests and Doctors' was buying them up and burning them in order to prevent them being read.[50] There is no reason for us to believe such a theory, and Baron's opponents were swift to suggest that Swale had simply been trying to drive up the price of his wares; but even Baron would hardly have believed him if Milton's prose works were to be met with on every bookstall.[51]

The net effect of these divergent publishing histories was to ensure that Milton became identified almost entirely with a single work, namely *Paradise Lost*. Milton's physical presence on eighteenth-century bookshelves consisted almost exclusively of religious poetry, and as a result Milton himself came to be thought of almost exclusively as a religious poet, preoccupied with vast, cosmic themes. With the near-disappearance of his prose works, Milton's political activities came to be de-emphasised and sometimes even forgotten: the redoubtable old enemy of the monarchy, once so much at home amidst the skirmishing of pamphlet warfare and the day-to-day business of diplomatic affairs, was remembered increasingly as a sage and saintly epic poet, interested only in the long ago, the far away and the eternal. His appropriation by the cultural elite as a kind of honorary classic, suitable for the education of well-born young men and the serious study of learned gentlemen, further emphasised his status as an authoritative but distant figure, to be admired, like Homer and Virgil, at arm's length. He belonged to the past, not the present; to the elite, not the people; to heaven, not to earth. He was very grand, and very holy, and very, very dead. But he was not to remain at rest forever.

II

In 1785, Thomas Warton – then poet laureate – published a magnificently learned, annotated edition of Milton's *Poems on Several Occasions*.

Accomplished though he was, he was a latecomer to the field of Milton scholarship; and in order to make his edition stand out from those of Newton, Richardson and the rest, he resolved to 'enrich this publication with a copy of Milton's Will' (TW xxii). He was not the first to go in quest of this relic: Thomas Hollis, who collected everything connected with the poet and once presented Akenside with the bed Milton died upon as a gift, had tried and failed to locate it.[52] But Warton believed that he could succeed where Hollis had failed:

> It is not to be found in the Prerogative Office, where it had been long ago sought by the industrious Oldys, and the late Mr Hollis. But here, as Milton died possessed only of a small fortune in Middlesex, it never could have been properly lodged. If anywhere, it was to be discovered among the records of the bishoprick of London. (TW xxii)

But, in spite of a 'very tedious and intricate' search, Warton was unable to locate the will there, either. It appeared that there *was* no will. But how could that be reconciled with the tradition that Milton had left £1,500 to his wife and daughters after his death? Warton devised an ingenious hypothesis: the Restoration authorities had deliberately suppressed it, perhaps destroyed it, for such was their hatred of Milton that 'whatever might serve in any kind or degree to perpetuate his name or memory, would naturally be treated with contempt' (TW xxiii). This theory prompted Warton to wax lyrical:

> The jealous partisans of the Restoration little suspected that an age would arrive, in which their old antagonist would again triumph: that this turbulent republican, whom they had so confidently condemned to disgrace and oblivion, would at length become the idol of universal veneration, that the minutest occurrences of his life would be collected with a fond enthusiasm, that his monument would be reared amid the shrines of monarchs, and that his works would be ranked among the highest honours of his country. (TW xxiii–iv)

That age had now arrived, but it had not been an easy journey. As always happens when someone dies without a recognised will, Milton's legacy was fiercely contested. Until the Glorious Revolution, opinions were heavily divided along political lines: either one supported the House of Stuart, and

thus considered him a diabolical regicide devoted to the cause of fanaticism and anarchy, or one opposed them, and thought him a courageous enemy of tyranny who had defended the sacred liberty of Britain.[53] After the accession of William of Orange, when the question of whether Britain was to be an absolute monarchy or a kingless republic was regarded by those in power as having been solved through the perfect compromise of constitutional monarchy, Milton's politics were allowed to fade into the background. This process had already begun as early as 1691, with Nahum Tate – soon to be made poet laureate by William III – presenting Milton as entirely friendly to constitutional monarchy:

> Behold where MILTON Bow'rd in Lawrel Groves,
> A task beyond his Warring Angels moves;
> Himself a Seraph now, with sacred flame
> Draws Scheme proportion'd to great WILLIAM's Fame;
> (For common-wealths no more his Harp he strings,
> By NASSAU's virtue Reconcil'd to Kings.)[54]

This toleration was largely due to his adoption by the Whigs as a kind of patron saint, whose beliefs they held to have been forerunners of their own.[55] Addison, who did more than anyone else to secure Milton's eighteenth-century reputation, was a Whig; so too was Thomas Newton, who edited the great variorum Milton edition of 1749, and wrote in its dedication to the Earl of Bath that '[Milton] would be pleased with the offering of any of his writings to Your Lordship' because the Earl acted 'always upon the true Whig principles'.[56] Milton the republican radical blurred into Milton the benevolent proto-Whig liberal and champion of British liberty.

Of course, the fact remained that Milton had been an enemy of the British monarchy, but this was easily explained away. Tate's sentiments were to be frequently repeated by a chorus of Whig critics over the next century: Milton, the argument ran, had only opposed kings because the kings in his time were tyrants, and if only he had lived under the benevolent constitutional monarchs of their own day he would never have dreamed of criticising the institution of monarchy. He would have stayed well away from pamphlet warfare, espoused 'the true Whig principles' of individual liberty and constitutional monarchy, and concentrated on his poetry instead. Even those who did not share the contempt that many Whigs felt for Charles I, or their sympathy

for Milton's liberalism, were often willing to accept their basic claim that Milton's political activities had been no more than an unfortunate historical accident, and that his true callings had been poetry and religion, not public affairs. As a last resort one could, like the author of the 1739 poem *Candour*, simply draw a hard division between Milton's poetry and his public life, and insist that when 'Milton' was praised or honoured it was only Milton the poet who was being referred to:

> Yet shall *Britannia's* vocal Sons proclaim
> His [i.e. Milton's] pen their Glory, tho' his Cause their Shame:
> Princes shall stretch their Bounty to his Heirs,
> And gracious view his Tomb approach to theirs.[57]

The change in emphasis, towards Milton the religious poet and away from Milton the politician, can be seen in the biographies of him that often prefaced eighteenth-century editions of his works. Perhaps the most frequently reprinted biography of all, Elijah Fenton's 'Life' of 1725, hurried over Milton's involvement in the politics of his day with something like embarrassment:

> Milton was now grown famous by his polemical writings of various kinds, and held in great favour and esteem by those who had power to dispose of all preferments in the state. 'Tis in vain to dissemble, and far be it from me to defend his engaging with a party combined in the destruction of our church and monarchy. Yet [...] may I presume to observe in his favour, that his zeal, distempered and furious as it was, does not appear to have been inspirited by self-interested views.[58]

Fenton's biography of Milton became one of the standard texts of Milton scholarship, often appearing alongside Addison's essays and Dr Johnson's critical notes on *Paradise Lost* in the front matter of eighteenth-century Milton editions. This triumvirate of paratexts, all of which either play down or do not mention Milton's political activities, served – when coupled with the extreme rarity of his prose works – to establish a firmly non-political Milton, whose involvement in the politics of his day was an unfortunate but forgivable false step in an otherwise admirable life.

For most of the eighteenth century, this arrangement seemed perfectly satisfactory: only stubborn radicals like Hollis still insisted on dragging

Milton's political works into print, and his political career back into the public eye, where it was for the most part politely ignored. His political ideas were, in any case, seen as defunct: the obsolete remnants of a struggle between the equally outdated principles of absolute monarchy and republicanism. In eighteenth-century England the kind of republicanism that Milton had espoused in pamphlets such as *A Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* was an extremist position, held only by a few radical Whigs; most people, and even most liberals, considered it to be something outside the terms of normal political debate. To the Whiggish Milton enthusiasts who saw his ideals as having been realised in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the idea that his political writings might one day be used as the basis for a critique of British constitutional monarchy would have appeared far-fetched indeed.

Although the heroes of the British Commonwealth were sporadically invoked by the British radical movement of the 1760s and 1770s – the days of 'Wilkes and liberty' – it was not until the American Revolution that attitudes really began to change. Wilkes had associated with Hollis, and once jokingly compared himself to Cromwell, but neither he nor the Bill of Rights Society ever aimed for the kind of large-scale political change that would have been required to put a Miltonic political programme into action.[59] On the more radical wing of the movement, John Horne Tooke approvingly quoted Milton's *Eikonoklastes* in his deliberately provocative *Petition of an Englishman*, a work in which he also invoked some of Milton's old comrades: 'Spirits of Hampden, Russel, Sidney! Animate … my Countrymen!'[60] But this seems to have been a one-off; Horne Tooke would not refer to Milton in this way again until 1786, when he responded to Warton's edition of the *Poems* in his *Diversions of Purley*.[61] So far as I can tell, neither Wilkes, Churchill nor Junius ever mentioned Milton's political writings or career, although Wilkes and Churchill occasionally quoted his poetry: proof of the extent to which Milton's poetic fame had eclipsed his political reputation, even among those who might be most likely to remember the latter.[62] But as the rebellious American colonists began, in increasing numbers, to openly profess a republican ideology, it seemed clear that declarations of the death of republicanism as a serious political philosophy had been premature – and so, perhaps, had been declarations on the final nature of Milton's legacy.

Dr Johnson blamed the American Revolution on Hollis, who had been bombarding the fledgling universities of America for years with copies of

English republican classics by Harrington, Milton, Sidney and the rest: it was hardly surprising, in the view of conservatives like Johnson, that such fare had turned the poor colonists' heads.[63] To say that Milton 'caused' the American Revolution would be a grotesque overstatement – according to the count made by Donald Lutz, he was only the twenty-second most quoted author in American political writings of the revolutionary era, more infrequently cited than the far less political Pope (twenty-first) or Shakespeare (nineteenth), and any survey of the period shows that his poetry was much more often drawn upon than his prose.[64] But his writings did exercise some influence. In the *Boston Gazette* of 12 March 1770, the leading article was not the famous report of the Boston Massacre – that appeared on page two – but a letter from 'An Independant [*sic*]' which insisted that the loyalty to a king or parent did not extend to obeying any 'unnatural demands' they might make. In support of his position, 'An Independant' quotes from 'the very applicable sentiments of an author, whose strength and life were spent in the service of his GOD and his country' – none other than John Milton, although 'An Independant' does not mention him by name. Yet the 'very applicable' work quoted is not *Paradise Lost*, but *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, Milton's blueprint for a republican state and his call to arms for its establishment, published on the eve of the Restoration in 1660.[65] Where could 'An Independant' have come across such a relic? Perhaps he owned a copy of the original pamphlet edition, treasured by his family since the days of the Commonwealth; more likely he had found it in one of the compilations of Milton's prose works sent over to America by Hollis. Either way, the fact that 'An Independant' was quoting Milton's supposedly obsolete political ideas as 'very applicable' to the present moment shows that Milton's prose works were not simply gathering dust in university libraries; they were being read, not only as historical curiosities, but as works relevant to the present political situation.

'An Independant' was not the only American looking to Milton for political inspiration. In the years leading up to the Revolution, Milton's *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* – a call for what the American revolutionaries would soon describe as 'the separation of church and state' – were twice reprinted in America, in Philadelphia in 1770 and in New Haven in 1774. Among their potential readers were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both devotees of Milton; later, once the Revolution had begun, Jefferson would draw upon Milton's

ideas to hammer out the legislation for the religious disestablishment of Virginia, and Adams would consider (and reject) Milton's blueprint for a republic when wrestling with the problem of whether America was to be governed by a legislature of one or two chambers.[66] In that debate, Adams found himself arguing against Paine, who favoured a single chamber; when Adams protested that one of Paine's proposals seemed wildly unsuitable, Paine laughed and said that he had borrowed that part of his argument from Milton.[67] Tony Davies has even detected Miltonic echoes in the Declaration of Independence – written, of course, by Thomas Jefferson.[68] Milton was hardly the guiding genius of the American Revolution; there were many other thinkers – Montesquieu and Locke, for example – whose influence on the young republic was much greater. But he was *an* influence upon it, whose ideas were at least discussed in the weightiest political contexts; and after the revolution it was very much harder to forget that the poet had also been a politician, or to pretend that his political ideas were merely the obsolete ideology of a bygone age.

Thus, by the time Warton set about looking for Milton's will, the stakes were much higher than they had been a decade earlier. Milton was still, in most people's opinion, one of the world's greatest poets, but it was becoming clear that his poems had not been his only legacy. As a staunch Tory, Warton was uncomfortable with Milton's politics, and lamented that he could not have kept to poetry:

> Those years in which imagination is on the wing, were unworthily and unprofitably wasted on temporary topics, on elaborate but perishable dissertations in defence of innovation and anarchy. To this employment he sacrificed his eyes, his health, his repose, his native propensities, his elegant studies. Smit with the deplorable polemics of Puritanism, he suddenly ceased to gaze on *such sights as youthful poets dream* … (TW xi)

Warton's language in this passage betrays his anxieties, for it describes Milton not as he was, but as Warton wanted him to have been. His 'native propensities' are for poetry, but after being 'smit' by politics – presumably in the same way that one might be smitten by plague – he turned away from it to the 'unworthy' field of public affairs, to defend the cause of 'innovation and anarchy'. Warton describes Milton's political activities as 'unprofitable', 'perishable' and 'temporary', as if attempting to reassure his

readers (and himself) that they no longer posed any threat to the established order: they were a mere fit of madness, a temporary sickness, achieving nothing, creating nothing that could last, leaving nothing behind to threaten future generations. The poems Milton wrote lived after him; the pamphlets were interred with his bones. Or so Warton wished to believe.

Warton's anxieties about Milton's politics keep cropping up in his edition of the *Poems*, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly. Unlike many of the Whigs, he would not accept that Milton's ideals were essentially those of the existing system of constitutional monarchy: 'In point of doctrine', he writes, 'they are calculated to annihilate the very foundations of our civil and religious establishment, as it now subsists: they are subversive of our legislature, and of our species of government'. Fortunately, '[Milton's prose works] were neglected and soon forgotten. Of late years, some attempts have been made to revive them, with as little success. At present, they are almost unknown' (TW 587–8). *Some attempts have been made to revive them* … Warton must have had Hollis in mind. And with the Miltonic tones of the Declaration of Independence still ringing in his ears – for the American Revolutionary War had ended only two years before – his assertion that these attempts had met with 'little success' sounds, once more, like an attempt at self-reassurance. Elsewhere in the *Poems*, Warton reflects on how 'inconsistent and unworthy' it was that Cromwell, 'enemy … to all that is venerable and majestic', should have been buried in Westminster Abbey (TW 387). So why was he content to see Cromwell's old henchman, Milton, with a 'monument … reared amid the shrines of monarchs' (TW xxiv)? His answer is telling: 'This splendid memorial did not appear, till we had overlooked the author of Reformation In England and the Defensio: in other words, till our rising regard for Milton the poet had taught us to forget Milton the politician' (TW 589). But what if people were starting to remember him again?

One people who were starting to recall this side of Milton's legacy were the French. As political crisis loomed in 1788, Mirabeau translated an abridged version of Milton's *Areopagitica* into French: the first time that any of Milton's prose works had been translated, aside from translations of his Latin tracts into English. The next year, as the Revolution came into full swing, he published a compilation of extracts from Milton's prose works, including an abridged translation of Milton's *Defensio Pro Populo Anglicano*.[69] They were portentous choices. *Areopagitica*, Milton's defence of the liberty of the

press, had long been a Whig favourite, as it showed the tolerant, liberal side of Milton that they most liked to remember: it had been twice reprinted in England, in 1738 and 1772, and even Warton had been willing to make an exception for it in his otherwise sweeping denunciation of Milton's political writings (TW 588). But the *Defensio* was another matter, for what it defended was the right of the people to bring their kings to trial, pass judgement upon them, and if necessary to depose or even execute them. Unsurprisingly, the *Defensio* had never been reprinted except in the great collections of Milton's prose works; for Warton it was anathema, one of those works which had to be forgotten before Milton could be regarded with anything but abhorrence (TW 589). As the events in Paris unfolded in 1788–9, British observers watched anxiously from across the Channel. Was France moving towards a Glorious Revolution of its own, one that would bring it a constitutional monarchy, British liberties and the kind of principles celebrated in the *Areopagitica*? Or was this new French Revolution to be something much more radical, closer to the principles of the *Defensio*, partaking more of the spirit of 1649 than of 1688? Mirabeau and the other leading revolutionaries clearly saw themselves as following in the footsteps of, among others, Milton. But *which* Milton – the pious Whig, safely ensconced in his distant heaven, or the old king-killing republican?

CHAPTER TWO

Milton's Ghost

I

On 6 August 1788, a curious article appeared in *The Times*. *A propos* of nothing whatsoever, it related an 'Anecdote of Milton (not generally known)'. This 'anecdote' was a story of how, after the Restoration, John Milton had faked his own death in order to escape punishment for his actions during the Interregnum; his friends had held a mock funeral, and buried a coffin containing 'a figure of him, as large and as heavy as life', while the poet himself remained in hiding until the danger was past. The article was anonymous, cited no sources and has never been taken seriously by any modern Milton scholar.[1] But it was a sign of things to come; the first of many suggestions that John Milton was not nearly as dead as he ought to be.

John Good, who first noticed the increasing prominence of Milton in British culture at the end of the eighteenth century, suggested that Milton's popularity was enhanced by an increased interest in him as a political figure, an interest triggered by the American and French Revolutions.[2] Clearly, some of the renewed interest in Milton was politically motivated; the republications of his prose tracts in the 1790s certainly were. But there were also other factors at work, of which perhaps the most powerful was sheer national anxiety. For most of the eighteenth century, Great Britain had by contemporary standards been a remarkably stable and successful state: it had grown in power and prosperity, seen off the Jacobite threat, defeated France in a series of wars and added many territories to its growing empire. But following the loss of the American colonies, and the consequent rapid fall of the North, Shelburne and Rockingham ministries, there was a growing feeling that all was not well in Britain, a sense of unease that deepened with the arrival of the French Revolution. Some hoped for a similar uprising in Britain, and some feared it; some called for the invasion of France, while others predicted a French invasion of Britain; but everyone with any interest in politics at all felt that momentous changes were about to unfold. In this mood of expectant uncertainty, Milton's cosmic drama of good and evil – the closest thing that Britain had to a national epic – served as a reassuring touchstone of British identity, but its meaning was contested: Milton's history was adopted by both

parties. Was Milton a champion of orthodox British liberty and Christianity, or an ideological precursor to the French and American revolutionaries? If Milton *had* faked his own death, if he *was* still alive – which side would he be on?

In 1788 and 1789, the French Revolution was widely viewed in Britain as a positive development: France, it was thought, was finally beginning to abandon absolutist monarchy, moving towards a constitutional model of government inspired by the post-1688 British state. Even many Tories, the ex-Whig Prime Minister William Pitt among them, initially greeted the Revolution with cautious approval as a step in the right direction, while the likes of Charles James Fox welcomed it with open arms, seeing it as proof that the French had finally seen the light and decided to embrace the principles of the Whig party.[3] At the 1789 meeting of the Revolution Society – founded the year before to celebrate the centenary of the Glorious Revolution – the radical Dissenter Richard Price delivered a *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* which explicitly linked the events in France to those in England a century before. In both cases, Price explained, the groundwork for the subsequent revolution had been laid by earlier philosophers: just as English republicans like Milton had cleared the way for the Glorious Revolution, so the French *philosophes* like Rousseau had prepared the path for the French, who could now expect to enjoy the fruits of liberty just as the British had been doing for the last 101 years.[4]

Price's *Discourse* was a classic elision of the two seventeenth-century English revolutions. He presented 'Milton, Locke, Sidney, Hoadley, &c' as a unified body, a phalanx of philosophers marching shoulder to shoulder against the forces of despotism, overlooking the fact that while Locke had written in favour of William III and 1688, Milton had defended the rather different principles of Oliver Cromwell and 1649.[5] Price probably scarcely gave a second thought to this as he penned his sermon; for liberal Dissenters such as him it was axiomatic that Milton, Locke, Hoadley and the rest of the Whig worthies formed a single glorious tradition of religious tolerance and political liberty, whose writings had led first to the Glorious Revolution and now to 'those revolutions in which every friend to mankind is now exulting', i.e. the American and French Revolutions.[6] Edmund Burke, however, did not see matters in quite the same light, and he rapidly wrote a response to Price's sermon in the form of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a work that became an instant bestseller and the bible of counter-revolutionaries all

over Europe. In his *Reflections*, Burke insisted that the French Revolution was nothing like the Glorious Revolution; instead, it resembled the tumults of the Interregnum, and the learned men like Price who supported it were equivalent, not to the sober philosophers like Locke who had helped to build the Glorious Revolution, but to the fanatical preachers of Oliver Cromwell who, in Burke's view, had contributed to the destruction of the nation (*Reflections*: EB 8:63). In effect, Burke drove a wedge between the two wings of historical supporters that Price marshalled in his sermon. On one hand were wise men like Locke, who had supported the Glorious Revolution, while on the other hand were turbulent republicans like Sidney, who had supported the Commonwealth; and Burke made it clear that, in his view, only the latter group would have had much sympathy for the French Revolution. Although Burke does not once mention or quote from Milton in the *Reflections*, it seems probable that he, like Warton, would have seen Milton's political writings as falling squarely into the second group: fit, as Warton put it, for 'a fast-sermon before Cromwell' (TW 588). Thus he and Price might well have agreed that Milton's political philosophy was ideologically similar to that of the French *philosophes*, which both men saw as being the guiding influence behind the unfolding French Revolution. Where they would have disagreed was over where that ideology led: Price believed that it would bring to France the liberty and prosperity that Britain had gained after 1688, whereas Burke held that it would culminate in the kind of regicidal extremism that Britain experienced after 1649.

Burke's silence over Milton, however, is both revealing and representative. The British had so much cultural capital invested in Milton that they were extremely unwilling to be pushed into attacking or disowning him on political grounds, even after it became clear that the French revolutionaries really were using the trial and execution of Charles I – events that Milton had defended in print – as a template for their own proceedings against their king.[7] The year 1798, for example, saw the publication of Mark Noble's *Lives of the English Regicides*, a work entirely devoted to demonstrating to the French the sorry fates that awaited those who dared to kill their kings. In its Dedication – which is addressed to the Jacobins – Noble snarls:

> Preparatory to the murder of your own gracious sovereign, you printed the mock trial of our own unhappy monarch. You will now also see, as a prelude to your own fate, that of Charles I's judges.[8]

Yet this book, otherwise so comprehensive in its coverage of regicidal misery, does not mention Milton once – not even to repeat the old Royalist jibe that he was struck blind as a divine punishment for having written in praise of his sovereign's execution. The friends of the Revolution were eager enough to claim Milton for their cause, but those who opposed it much preferred to avoid mentioning him altogether, allowing him to retain his distance from the messy business of current affairs. Cromwell's preachers, Charles I's judges: *they* were mere rebels, and could be vilified accordingly. But Milton was a national institution, and as such Burke and Noble refrained from attacking him along with his old comrades, probably thinking with Johnson: 'What Englishman can take delight in transcribing passages, which, if they lessen the reputation of Milton, diminish in some degree the honour of our country?'[9]

But events were moving beyond their control; for however much Burke would have liked to keep Milton out of view he would not stay buried, either figuratively or literally. Milton's works were being reprinted in unprecedented numbers, while in 1790 repair works at St Giles' Cripplegate provided an ideal opportunity for the disinterment and breaking-open of what was believed to be Milton's coffin. Philip Neve, a local magistrate who questioned many of the people involved in the disinterment and subsequently wrote a narrative of the event, described the scene of its discovery thus:

> On Tuesday afternoon, August 3rd, notice was brought to Messrs. *Strong* and *Cole*, that the coffin was discovered. They went immediately to the church; and, by the help of a candle, proceeded under the common-council-men's pew, to the place where the coffin lay. It was in a chalky soil, and directly over a wooden coffin, supposed to be that of *Milton's* father; tradition having always reported, that *Milton* was buried next to his father. [...] When he and Mr *Cole* had examined the coffin, they ordered water and a brush to be brought, that they might wash it, in search of an inscription, or initials, or date; but, upon its being carefully cleansed, none was found.[10]

Thomas Strong, a solicitor, was the vestry-clerk of St Giles' Cripplegate; John Cole, a silversmith, was a churchwarden there. St Giles' church would have been an important part of both men's lives, and its association with Milton was, then as now, one of its chief claims to fame, so they may have been

somewhat disappointed at the stubborn muteness and anonymity of the leaden coffin they had discovered, even after they had 'carefully cleansed' of the 'chalky soil' of Cripplegate. We know that they discussed investigating further, because they subsequently made a point of telling Neve that they had ultimately resolved not to do so:

> Conjecture naturally pointed out, both to Mr *Strong* and Mr *Cole*, that, by moving the leaden coffin, there would be a great chance of finding some inscription on the wooden one underneath; but, with a just and laudable piety, they disdained to disturb the sacred ashes, after a requiem of 116 years …[11]

That evening, Cole attended a 'merry-meeting' at a public house belonging to a Mr Fountain, who was one of the parish overseers of St Giles. Cole told the assembled company that he had unearthed Milton's coffin, and 'several of those present expressing a desire to see it, Mr *Cole* assented'.[12]

The next morning, Fountain and his friends – Mr Laming the pawnbroker, Mr Taylor the surgeon and, appropriately enough, Mr Ascough the coffin-maker – visited the church. 'Just and laudable piety' was evidently in shorter supply among this second party, for they had no reservations about pulling the coffin out into the light of day, and requesting one of Ascough's journeymen to break it open so that they might see the body within. The scene that followed shifted rapidly from the reverent to the grotesque, as Neve relates:

> Upon first view of the body, it appeared perfect, and completely enveloped in the shroud, which was of many folds; the ribs standing-up regularly. When they disturbed the shroud, the ribs fell. Mr *Fountain* told me, that he pulled hard at the teeth, which resisted, until someone hit them a knock with a stone, when they easily came out. There were but five in the upper-jaw, which were all perfectly sound and white, and all taken by Mr *Fountain:* he gave one of them to Mr *Laming:* Mr *Laming* also took one from the lower-jaw; and Mr *Taylor* took two from it. Mr *Laming* told me that he had at one time a mind to bring away the whole under-jaw with the teeth in it; he had it in his hand, but tossed it back again. Also, that he lifted up the head, and saw a great quantity of hair … Messrs *Laming* and *Taylor* went home to get scissors to cut-off some of the hair: they returned about ten; when Mr *Laming* poked his stick against the

> head, and brought some of the hair over the head, but, as they saw the scissors were not necessary, Mr *Taylor* took up the hair, as it lay on the forehead, and carried it home. The water, which had got into the coffin on the Tuesday afternoon [i.e. when Strong and Cole washed it], had made a sludge at the bottom of it, emitting a nauseous smell …[13]

Laming then pulled one of the corpse's legs off, but threw it back in, perhaps deciding on further consideration that a human femur was not the sort of relic he wanted for his pawnbroker's shop. When the group departed, the leaden lid was bent back and the coffin returned to its original position, but neither the coffin nor the hole was closed up; so Elizabeth Grant, the gravedigger, and the workmen carrying out the repair works in the church began 'exhibiting' the coffin, the latter demanding beer-money from curious visitors to let them into the church, and the former escorting them down to see the corpse, 'at first for 6d and afterwards for 3d and 2d each person'.[14] Many of the visitors took teeth, bones and locks of hair from the rapidly diminishing corpse; the teeth had all been taken or lost among the 'sludge' by Wednesday evening, and more must have been taken before the coffin was reburied on Thursday afternoon, for when it was reopened once more on 17 August the corpse was 'found entirely mutilated', with 'almost all the ribs, the lower jaw, and one of the hands gone'.[15] Hearing of these events, Cowper was moved to indignant verse:

> Who then but must conceive disdain,
> Hearing the deed unblest,
> Of wretches who have dared profane
> His dread sepulchral rest?
> Ill fare the hands that heaved the stones
> Where Milton's ashes lay,
> That trembled not to grasp his bones
> And steal his dust away![16]

The violation of Milton's grave is an extraordinarily suggestive event, as it occurred at the very historical moment when Milton-the-author was changing from being something known, safe, distant and inert to something dangerously ambiguous, powerfully immediate and threateningly active. It is curiously fitting that the fragments of Milton's body should have been

unearthed and circulated in the very year that his political pamphlets began to be reprinted, some of them for the first time in one-and-a-half centuries; and it is entirely appropriate that, in the midst of debates over Milton's true ideological sympathies, a series of doctors should have been called in to attempt to discern whether the corpse that was being so rapidly dismembered and distributed was really that of Milton at all. (His skull proved, if the phrase may be allowed, to be a particular bone of contention among these learned men.)[17] The playwright James Boaden, who within a few years would begin his career as a writer of Gothic melodramas, was convinced that the body was not Milton's; he was thus perplexed by why it should have been found buried under Milton's tombstone, and formulated two possible theories to account for this. The more innocent explanation was that Milton's body might simply have disintegrated entirely: 'one hundred and sixteen years was a period adequate to the demolition of all but the *literary* remains of Milton'. But he also speculated that 'the actual coffin of the great Republican' might have been switched with someone else's during repairs to the church in 1682, by parish elders fearful that vengeful Royalists might be meditating 'some violation of the Poet's remains' – in which case, where Milton's real corpse and coffin might now be was anyone's guess.[18] Whatever might have happened to his body, Milton's spirit seemed to be abroad in more senses than one; and it is hardly surprising that the *St James Chronicle* should have reported that one of the men responsible for the disinterment was haunted for months afterwards by the feeling of being clutched by an icy hand.[19] Following the depredations of the souvenir-hunters, the gravediggers at St Giles' reburied much less of Milton (if it was he) than they unearthed; and from 1790 onwards Milton's books, Milton's body and quite possibly Milton's spirit were back in circulation.

He seemed to be especially active in France, where Mirabeau's translations of the *Defensio* and *Areopagitica* were reprinted twice and three times, respectively, between 1788 and 1792; the second reprinting of the *Defensio* was issued by the Jacobins, with a new preface stating explicitly that the same arguments Milton used to condemn Charles I could and should be used to condemn Louis XVI.[20] In 1792 Milton was one of an international group of eight 'friends of liberty' whose busts were commissioned to adorn the interior of the Jacobin Club in Paris; Helen Maria Williams, who was present when the busts were voted for, rejoiced to have hailed from the same country as so great a man (HMW I:2:113–14). Whether or not his head lay mouldering

under Cripplegate, it certainly stood frowning over the progress of the French Revolution, and it was perhaps as a kind of symbolic counter-spell that in the same year Samuel Whitbread commissioned another bust of Milton to stand over his violated tomb in London, as if to affirm that Milton's head was really with the English, not the French – however doubtful the doctors had found his skull to be.[21] But the French took no notice, and touring the front later in the same year, one Englishman found the Jacobin emissary Jean Louis Carra drawing upon the old Commonwealthman pantheon of 'Milton, Sydney, Harrington, and Locke' in order to educate the French troops in their revolutionary duty – perhaps using Mirabeau's translations of Milton to ease his task (HMW 1:3:68–9). For people who had been raised since childhood to revere Milton as, in Warton's phrase, 'one of the highest honours of his country', hearing of such things must have been disconcerting at the very least; and when they did hear them, Burke, Noble and the rest must often have wished that Milton could have remained decently dead and buried beneath St Giles'.

II

Thomas Warton did not live to hear of such things: he died in 1790. Among his papers were found the complete notes for a second edition of Milton's *Poems on Several Occasions*, which was duly published in 1791. In the end, he had managed to find Milton's will after all: it was a document dated fifteen days after the poet's death, purporting to contain the desires he had expressed in life for the division of his property, witnessed only by his estranged brother Christopher and signed only by the X of his illiterate serving maid Elizabeth Fisher. Unsurprisingly, his daughters – whom this questionable document had disinherited in favour of their stepmother – had mounted a legal challenge to it, which had eventually succeeded. Clearly, Milton's legacy had been confused, doubtful and disputed from the very beginning.[22]

After Warton's death the office of Poet Laureate was offered to William Hayley, who refused it; instead it passed to Henry Pye, who is best remembered today as the target of some lines in Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*.[23] Hayley worshipped Milton almost to idolatry, and considered him and his fellow Commonwealthmen to be the guiding stars of the Whig party, of which he was a devoted supporter. But he was not, by any means, a radical: he believed in constitutional monarchy, and held that the ideals of Milton and his fellows had been realised in the Glorious

Revolution. Initially he had welcomed the French Revolution, and the French had reciprocated his regard: in 1790, during the first flush of his revolutionary enthusiasm, Hayley had been hailed by the revolutionary Societé de 1789 as one of 'the two best poets in England', the other being the similarly pro-revolutionary Robert Merry.[24] However, Hayley's enthusiasm cooled rapidly once it became clear that the Jacobins would not be content with turning France into a British-style constitutional monarchy, and that they had rather more radical reforms in mind than those championed by moderate Whigs such as himself.

The years immediately following the French Revolution were difficult times for admirers of the old English republicans. As Hayley later recalled, it was:

> … a period when a very extraordinary panic possessed and overclouded many of the most elevated and enlightened minds of this kingdom – a period when the retired student could hardly amuse himself with perusing the nervous republican writers of the last century, without being suspected of framing deadly machinations against the monarchs of the present day …[25]

They were also, however, years in which interest in Milton was at an all-time high. Editions of Milton's works poured from the presses, with *Paradise Lost* alone being reprinted thirty-four times between 1790 and 1799. Gillray's 1792 cartoon of 'Sin, Death, and the Devil', whom he depicted as Queen Charlotte, William Pitt and Lord Thurlow respectively, also contained a side-swipe at the contemporary Milton industry in its caption, which read:

> N.B. The above performance containing Portraits of the Devil & his relatives, drawn from the life, is recommended to Messes. Boydell, Fuzelli & the rest of the Proprietors of the Three Hundred and Sixty Five Editions of Milton, now publishing, as necessary to be adopted, in their classick Embellishments.[26]

'Three Hundred and Sixty Five' was a comic exaggeration of the number of Milton editions then in preparation – eight would have been nearer the mark – but Gillray was quite right to recognise that Milton editions, especially

illustrated Milton editions, were being produced in unprecedented numbers; indeed, Gillray's choice of the number 365 suggests that a new one seemed to be appearing every day. They ranged from cheap duodecimos through luxury quartos and illustrated octavos, but one edition stood head and shoulders above them all: Josiah Boydell's three-volume luxury folio edition of the *Poetic Works*, published from 1794 to 1797.[27] Knowing of Hayley's reputation as a Milton scholar and enthusiast, Boydell commissioned Hayley in 1792 to write a book-length biography of Milton to act as an introduction to his great edition. Hayley accepted, seeing his biography as a chance to set the record straight about Milton's life after what he felt were the slanders and misrepresentations of the last major Milton biography, Dr Johnson's 1779 'Life of Milton'. Hayley felt that Johnson had allowed his political disagreements with Milton to prejudice his biography, leading him to depict his subject as a far less attractive and admirable person than Hayley was sure that he had really been, and now it fell to Hayley to establish the truth about his hero's life.

What Hayley produced, two years later, was both an impressive work of biographical scholarship and a monument to Hayley's adoration of his subject. Far from being 'surly and acrimonious', as Johnson had claimed, Hayley's Milton comes across as a living saint, a model of wisdom and honesty, masterfully steering his way through his troubled times with righteousness and virtue as his guides. Hayley is so carried away by his love of Milton, and his anger at those who have dared profane his memory, that he more than once fantasises about Milton returning to life to rebut his detractors:

> [Milton's] attachment to truth was as sincere and fervent as that of the honest Montaigne, who says: 'I would come again with all my heart from the other world to give any one the lie, who should report me as other than I was …'
>
> Could [Milton] revisit earth in his mortal character, with a wish to retaliate, what a picture might be drawn by that sublime and offended genius of the great moralist [i.e. Johnson] who had treated his with such excess of asperity …[28]

Had Hayley merely limited himself to hagiography, he would have been on safe ground; he was, after all, hardly the first person to idolise Milton in print. But rather than glossing over Milton's political career as so many other

biographers had done, he devoted the central third of his *Life* to it, praising Milton throughout for the wisdom and virtue he displayed even when he was working for the Commonwealth. This was an extremely risky step for Hayley to take, and Boydell, alarmed by his recklessness, cut several sections from the *Life* as too politically sensitive for the tenor of the times.[29] His concerns were raised by passages such as this:

> The odium which [Bradshaw] justly incurred in the trial of Charles seems to have prevented even our liberal historians from recording with candour the great qualities he possessed [...] He regarded it as meritorious to have pronounced sentence on his king [...] Whatever we may think of his political tenets, let us render justice to the courage and the consistency with which he supported them. – The mind of Milton was in unison with the high-toned spirits of this resolute friend ...[30]

This passage may seem balanced and moderate enough. Indeed, when the still-radical Coleridge read it in 1796, he exploded with rage at Hayley's temerity in calling Bradshaw's odium 'justly incurred': 'Why *justly?* What would the contemptible Martyr-worshippers (who yearly apply to this fraudulent would-be-despot the most awful phrases of holy writ ...) what would even these men have?' (Coleridge's annotations to Hayley's *Life of Milton*: C 12:2:970). But for Boydell, it was dangerously extreme. To praise the moral character of a regicide is dangerously close to praising regicide itself, and to associate Milton with such people was to risk placing him beyond the pale of what was politically acceptable in 1794 – perhaps especially among the sort of wealthy bibliophiles who comprised Boydell's target audience. It is possible that Hayley wrote this passage, and others like it, in 1792, before Louis XVI lost his head; but to keep it in 1794, by which time the French royal family had been virtually exterminated, must have appeared to Boydell an outrageously impolitic move, and he insisted on the removal of all such passages from Hayley's *Life*.

Hayley grudgingly accepted Boydell's cuts, but he also had the *Life of Milton* published independently by Thomas Cadell as a separate work; and when, in 1796, it reached its second edition, he restored the excised passages. He must have felt some qualms about doing so, however, because he also added a new dedication to his *Life* – a dedication addressed to none other than Joseph Warton, the elderly, impeccably respectable clerical brother of the late poet

laureate. This dedication, which seems to be addressed as much to the dead Thomas Warton as to his living brother, justifies the study of Milton's prose works and political career in terms like these:

> Mr [Thomas] Warton had fallen into a mistake, which has betrayed other well-disposed minds into an unreasonable abhorrence of Milton's prose; I mean the mistake of regarding it as having a tendency to subvert our existing government … His impassioned yet disinterested ardour for reformation was excited by those gross abuses of power, which that new settlement of the state [i.e. the 1688 Revolution] very happily corrected.[31]

This was the claim that Whigs had been making since the 1690s; that Milton was never opposed to monarchy as such, only to monarchy as it then existed. In his dedication Hayley argues over and over again for Milton's harmlessness, his visionary unworldiness and the inapplicability of his ideas to the political landscape of the 1790s; he emphasises Milton's moral excellence rather than the soundness of his politics, which he often deplores, and makes abundantly clear that he himself is a believer in constitutional monarchy, with no desire to see Britain transformed into a Miltonic commonwealth. He dismisses concerns about the subversive potential of Milton's prose works as 'prejudices' produced by 'a very extraordinary panic', and goes on to write:

> The panic which I alluded to has speedily passed away, and a man of letters may now, I presume, as safely and irreproachably peruse or reprint the great republican writers of England, as he might translate or elucidate the political visions of Plato …[32]

To write this in 1795 was, as Phillip Cox puts it, 'either naïve or an attempt to deny [Milton's] relevance'.[33] Probably it was the latter; Hayley knew that by publishing his *Life* unabridged he was treading on dangerous ground, and thus used his Dedication to pre-emptively reassure his readers that however alarming some of the material that followed might sound, it presented no threat to the modern British government. He was carefully disassociating himself from those who used Milton's works for overtly political ends, insisting instead that he viewed them with as much scholarly detachment as the works of Plato, and his readers should do the same. Given that Hayley

wrote his Dedication in the same year that Pitt's Government passed the Two Acts, tightening the laws against seditious libel to make it easier to prosecute the authors of radical publications, he may have felt that such manoeuvring was the only prudent thing to do.[34]

Such concern was very much a sign of the times. In the prefatory biography to his variorum edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1749 – the centenary of Charles's execution – Thomas Newton had been able to write of Milton's regicidal leanings in terms like these:

> The Presbyterians declaiming tragically against the King's execution, and asserting that his person was sacred and inviolable, provoked [Milton] to write the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, proving that it is lawful to call a tyrant to account and to depose and put him to death, and that they who of late so much blame deposing are the men who did it themselves: and he published it at the beginning of the year 1649, to satisfy and compose the minds of the people.[35]

Newton felt no need to add any disclaimers to this, to apologise for Milton's actions or to make clear how much he disapproved of them. Similarly, he gives a matter-of-fact account of Milton's *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, which Hayley did not even dare to comment on, except to assure his readers that it was 'a work not approved of even by Republican writers'.[36] Newton was not by any means a radical; in fact, as a liberal Whig supporter of constitutional monarchy, his politics were very similar to Hayley's. But he lived in an age where such regicides seemed to belong firmly in the past, and could thus be contemplated with equanimity; whereas for Hayley, the execution of kings lay not in the comfortably remote region of History, but in the dangerously pressing domain of current affairs. The French Revolution had made the events of 1649 much more topical in 1796 than they had been in 1749.

Nor was Boydell's edition of Milton the only one to be affected by the mood of caution that now surrounded the merest mention of Milton's political career. Reading the biographies of Milton that often prefaced editions of his work in the 1790s, one often feels that their authors are trying to play it safe, to steer clear of contentious issues in an attempt to alienate as few potential readers as possible. Fenton's biography remained popular in the cheap duodecimo editions, probably because its brevity made it cheaper to

print, but perhaps also because it paid so little attention to Milton's political activities that it was unlikely to offend any section of the wide audience such editions aimed at. Even Fenton's biography was not short or inoffensive enough for George Cawthorn, who in 1797 published *Samson Agonistes* with a prefatory 'Life' that reduced Milton's political career to this:

> For (at the age of forty-one) he was now grown famous by his polemical writings of various kinds, and held in great favour and esteem by those who had power to dispose of all preferments in the state. Although the spoils of his country lay at his feet, neither his conscience nor his honour could stoop to gather them: for it is affirmed, that he lived always in a frugal retirement …[37]

From here the author hurries on into conventional Milton hagiography, evidently glad to have left the dangerous ground of political history behind him. This edition was produced as part of the 'Bell's British Theatre' series, which aimed at a wide and popular audience, and Cawthorn – who seems to have tended towards conservatism in any case, publishing works such as Jean Baptiste Duvoisin's anti-revolutionary *Examination of the Principles of the French Revolution* (1796) and Robert Bisset's conservative *Life of Edmund Burke* (1798) – must have been keen to avoid courting controversy. Similar tactics can be seen in other editions of the 1790s: a 1795 edition of *Paradise Lost* published 'at a price which may render its reception general', in the publication of which the radical publisher Joseph Johnson was involved, reprinted Fenton's biography alongside Dr Johnson's critical remarks on *Paradise Lost* and a eulogy on Milton's moral character taken from Hayley's *Life of Milton*.[38] Both the Hayley and Johnson pieces were extracts from longer works which were anything but silent about Milton's politics, but the book's editors kept only these apolitical fragments, perhaps because they feared that either Johnson's attacks or Hayley's praise of Milton's political life might have made its reception less general than they hoped. John and Henry Richter's luxury illustrated quarto of 1796 was most cautious of all, as it had need to be: John Richter was an active member of the radical London Corresponding Society, one of those arrested for high treason in 1794 and released following the acquittal of Thomas Hardy and John Horne Tooke.[39] Henry Richter, the younger of the two brothers, was an artist, and an acquaintance of William Blake, notable for painting portraits of the men imprisoned in the Tower of

London while awaiting trial for treason; he provided thirteen illustrations for his brother's edition of *Paradise Lost*, which may indeed have been intended from the start as a platform for him to showcase his artistic talents.[40] Their edition was dedicated, 'with his permission', to the Prince of Wales, and evaded the sticky situation of having a suspected traitor praise the life of a defender of regicide in a work dedicated to a member of the royal family by simply including no biography whatsoever.[41]

Finally, in 1801, Henry John Todd's great edition of Milton's *Poetical Works* appeared. While admitting that Milton had been a 'thorough republican', Todd's prefatory biography went out of its way to dismiss the idea that Milton had anything in common with the contemporary radical movement.[42] Taking it as given that radicalism was inseparable from immorality and irreligion, Todd reassured his readers that Milton was a good Christian, and would thus never have supported the French Revolution:

> When modern Republicanism pretends to consider Milton as her auxiliary, let her remember, with shame, the sanctity of manners which his pages breathe, and the Christian lessons which they inculcate. To *him* 'sight more detestable' than the object of her hopes could not possibly be presented. The designs of the crafty sensualist, and of the besotted ungrateful atheist, it was *his* constant endeavour, not to promote, but to overthrow.[43]

As a whole, the Milton industry in the 1790s tried hard to follow Warton's advice of the decade before, and teach its readers to forget Milton the politician. In many cases, they doubtless succeeded, and throughout the period many readers of Milton probably remained as oblivious as ever to his political career, believing that his legacy had been purely poetic. But there were also printers and booksellers in London who saw Milton's political works as resources to be tapped, not embarrassments to be avoided; and during the 1790s they took it upon themselves to bring Milton's political pamphlets once more before the eyes of the public.

III

As discussed in Chapter One, in the eighteenth century most of Milton's prose works were not easy to obtain. Milton's *Tractate on Education* had been readily available, and his *Areopagitica* had been reprinted in pamphlet

form at least twice, in 1738 and 1772.[44] *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* had remained popular among the dissenters, with pamphlet editions being published in 1717, 1723, 1736, 1743 and 1787, as well as the American editions of 1770 and 1774 that appeared on the eve of the American Revolution. But these three tracts were the only ones which were reprinted in any numbers. Hollis had sponsored the printing of the century's only edition of *Eikonoklastes* in 1770, and in 1715 a single edition had been printed of Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. But for the most part, Milton's political tracts remained buried in the great folio editions of his prose compiled by Toland (1698), Birch (1738) or Baron (1753). All were forbiddingly expensive even when first printed, and by 1790 the most recent of them had been out of print for almost forty years. In 1808 Coleridge paid three guineas for a copy of Birch's edition, a price that for most readers was well out of reach (Coleridge's annotations to Birch's *Milton*, C 12:3:883).

In his *Life of Milton*, Hayley tells us that 'Gibbon himself … held it hardly compatible with the duty of a good citizen to re-publish, in these present times, the prose of Milton, as he apprehended it might be productive of public evil'.[45] Given Gibbon's well-known opposition to the French Revolution in the last years of his life, 'these present times' must refer to the early 1790s; yet, in spite of this warning from one of the elder statesmen of British letters, at least six Milton tracts were republished as pamphlets in the 1790s.[46] One appears to have been lost: Benjamin Flower, in his *French Constitution* of 1792, refers to an edition of *Areopagicita* 'lately published in duodecimo by Dilly', an edition of which I have been unable to locate any surviving copies.[47] Of the remaining five, one was published anonymously. But the five known publishers span the political spectrum: R. Blamire, John Deighton, Charles Dilly and Joseph Johnson were, respectively, a Tory, a moderate Whig, a liberal Whig and a pro-reform radical, while James Ridgway was an associate of the Whigs who was a committed radical during the 1790s.[48] Yet all five reprinted 150-year-old tracts by Milton, not as literary works, but as pamphlets intended to sway readers to their causes. That Milton was resurrected in this way, to fight new battles with old words, speaks volumes for his cultural authority. But it also says a great deal about the changing light in which his political works were being seen. They were no longer just remnants of an obsolete political movement, espousing ideals no sensible person still believed, or honourable but harmless ancestors of contemporary liberalism, addressing

problems long since solved by the cure-all of constitutional monarchy; they were works of immediate relevance, with important messages concerning the most pressing issues of the day.

The first of these pamphlets was *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, printed and sold by Joseph Johnson in 1790. Johnson was at the heart of London's radical intelligentsia; he printed works by Wollstonecraft and Paine, and invited both – along with various other radical luminaries such as William Godwin – to his famous literary dinners. His pamphlet was dedicated to 'Rev. Richard Price, D.D. L.L.D. F.R.S., Fellow of the American Philosophical Societies at Philadelphia and Boston':

> This manual of John Milton is now most justly inscribed, as the assertor and protector of the civil and religious rights of mankind … [Milton] maintained those principles which at present enlighten the world, and give assurances that human nature will be improved to the utmost of its faculties, resting with deity alone to fix their boundary.[49]

This is Milton re-invented as a 1790s liberal, the kind of man who, like Price, might join American philosophical societies and talk about 'the civil and religious rights of mankind'.[50] The claim that Milton's principles 'at present enlighten the world' elides the gap between the 1650s and the 1790s, making Milton and Price companions in the same cause, and concealing the historical and ideological differences between a seventeenth-century Puritan arguing for freedom of Protestant dissent and an eighteenth-century Unitarian arguing for universal religious toleration. (As we have seen, Price himself had used the same device in his *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* the year before.) This was a common manoeuvre among Whig admirers of Milton in the eighteenth century; but the dedication to Price makes clear that this tradition *also* includes the French and American Revolutions, both of which Price had championed in print. Thus, while the chief purpose of the pamphlet is to bring the authority of Milton's name to bear on the question of religious freedom, it also serves a secondary aim: to align Milton, even if only implicitly, with the cause of the Revolution.

Two more of Milton's tracts appeared as pamphlets in 1791: *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, printed for James Ridgway, and *Areopagitica*, printed for John Deighton. Deighton was a Whig, and at this stage he was generally publishing works sympathetic to the French

Revolution; however, like many Whigs, after the Terror he changed his views and began to print hair-raising works like William Cobbett's *Annals of Blood*, a catalogue of atrocities 'committed by the authors and abettors of the French Revolution'.[51] Deighton's *Areopagitica* was dedicated to Charles James Fox, and its dedication proper reads as follows:

> To the/Right Hon. Charles James Fox,/this work is dedicated/as a/Mark of Respect,/for/his parliamentary endeavour/to secure/the liberty of the press;/by/The Author.[52]

This is a classic Whig appropriation of Milton; indeed, by putting Fox's name on its title page, it ensured that it could not possibly be mistaken for anything else. In 1791 the liberty of the press was much discussed in parliament, in debates that would lead ultimately to the passing of Fox's Libel Act of 1792. As with Johnson's *Treatise,* this *Areopagitica* clearly aimed not only to bring Milton's arguments to bear on a contemporary debate, but also to influence it by aligning Milton with one of the debate's participants in the minds of its readers, showing that they fought for the same cause. The title page also bears a quotation from *Areopagitica* itself, beginning: 'And now the time in special is by privilege to write and speak what may help to the farther [*sic*] discussing of matters in agitation.'[53] Milton was writing about 1644, but the title page implies that his words are just as relevant to 1791 – and thus, implicitly, that if Milton were alive in the 1790s, he would be supporting Fox in his battle for the liberty of the press. Charles Dilly's lost edition of *Areopagitica* was probably very similar to Deighton's, and may well have been published for the same reason, for Dilly was also a Whig, and a member of the Society for Constitutional Information: exactly the kind of man who might invoke Milton to help Fox defend the constitutional liberties of England.

James Ridgway, for whom *The Ready and Easy Way* was printed the same year, was much more radical than Deighton or Dilly. Originally a printer, blackmailer and pornographer close to Sheridan and his circle, in 1791 he was, like Deighton, printing works in support of the French Revolution; but the paths of the two men diverged rapidly thereafter, for while Deighton turned away from the Revolution in horror, Ridgway became more and more involved with the British radical movement.[54] He joined the London Corresponding Society (LCS), and spent the years 1793–7 in Newgate Prison for publishing Paine's *Rights of Man* and other seditious texts; according to

government spies within the LCS, he also masterminded a planned Newgate jailbreak in 1794.[55] He was involved throughout the 1790s in the publication of works like *A Voyage to the Moon Strongly Recommended to All Lovers of Real Freedom* (1793) or the pro-French *Explanation of the Conduct of the French Government* (1798), before finally returning to a more mainstream Whig position around 1800.[56] Nor was this pamphlet Ridgway's only foray into the republication of seventeenth-century works; in 1792 he republished Colonel Titus's infamous 1657 justification of tyrannicide, *Killing No Murder*, and warned the kings of the world in its Dedication that 'those whom the law cannot reach, the dagger can'.[57] (Small wonder William Hayley complained it was impossible to read seventeenth-century republican works without being suspected of plotting against monarchy, when such works were being reprinted with prefaces encouraging their readers to carry out political assassinations!) Thus, while more moderate printers invoked Milton's cultural authority to defend freedom of religion, or the freedom of the press, Ridgway did so to attack the institution of monarchy. The Advertisement of his *Ready and Easy Way* mentions the scarcity and general neglect of Milton's prose works:

> The prose works of that writer [i.e. Milton] are in possession of much less celebrity than it might be supposed their high merit must have insured them. Whether his fame, as a poet, may have overshadowed that which belongs to him as a prose writer, whether the prejudices many among us foolishly indulge, against the age in which he wrote, or whether the size of his works, which seems to exclude them from the attention of common readers, have been the most powerful cause of this neglect, no attempt will here be made to decide …[58]

All of these were, indeed, factors in Milton's neglect – although, in 1791, only a radical would have described a dislike of the English Commonwealth as a foolish prejudice. The mention of 'common readers' being excluded by 'the size of his works' emphasises how strongly Milton's prose works were associated with the gigantic Toland, Birch and Baron editions: huge, expensive, unobtainable tomes that might very well deter 'common readers'. Part of the purpose of pamphlets like Ridgway's was precisely to get Milton's ideas out of the folios and onto the bookstalls, into the hands of the common readers who, in Ridgway's view, most needed to hear Milton's republican message.

That Ridgway intended the pamphlet as an immediate intervention into contemporary politics is clear from the Advertisement, which continues:

> [This tract] furnishes a rational and satisfactory answer to the splendid sophistry of Edmund Burke. On this ground the editor introduces it to public attention; and if it shall contribute, in the smallest degree, to enlarge the general stock of political information, or kindle a sentiment of liberty in the breast of an individual in the community, his wishes will be completely fulfilled.[59]

This language of 'liberty' is similar to that used in Deighton and Johnson's pamphlets, but its context gives it a different, specifically anti-monarchical, significance. To say that the *Areopagitica* will encourage 'liberty' is to associate liberty with free speech; to make the same claim for the *Ready and Easy Way* is to associate liberty with republicanism. The *Ready and Easy Way* is full of attacks on the 'abjur'd and detested thraldom of kingship', and the reference to Edmund Burke makes clear the editor's desire that it will act as an antidote to Burke's recent defences of monarchy, both in England and France.[60] It was a significant development: Johnson and Deighton's liberal Whig Milton, defender of freedom and friend of constitutional monarchy, was a figure familiar to the eighteenth century, but Ridgway's radical Milton, champion of republicanism, was a newer and much more threatening arrival.

In 1792, a second *Areopagitica* was printed for Blamire. He was no radical publisher – his output in this period included the anti-democratic *Thoughts on Equal Representation* (1783), the anti-radical *Liberty and Equality* (1792) and the anti-French *Thoughts on the Theory and Practice of the French Constitution* (1794) – but belief in English liberty and the freedom of the press was by no means the exclusive preserve of radicals, and Blamire (or the pamphlet's editor) was plainly willing to invoke Milton's name and enlist his aid when he found it possible to do so. The author of its (unsigned) preface writes:

> Milton's *Areopagitica* has not, I believe, been ever reprinted separately from his other prose works; at least it is not now to be met with in the Booksellers shops. As it is a treatise in every respect worthy of its author, I need make no apology for giving it in this form to the Public.[61]

This is intriguing, because it is incorrect. Aside from its original 1644 publication, *Areopagitica* had been published separately at least three times, in 1738, 1772 and – as we have just seen – in 1791, not to mention Dilly's 'lost' edition. It is unsurprising that the author should have been unaware of the earlier two, which probably had relatively small print runs, but that he should also not have known about its publication in the same city just the year before is a testament to the low profile Deighton's *Areopagitica* must have had. Probably none of these pamphlets were widely known or circulated; they may well have been sold only in the shops of the men who printed them. The author's claim that he need not apologise for republishing the *Areopagitica* because 'it is a treatise in every respect worthy of its author' implies that he is motivated purely by the love of literature, but he goes on to write:

> The circulation of every thing which can explain the true principles of the liberty of the press, which is the watch and guardian of all other liberty, must be always useful; and is at this period peculiarly necessary.[62]

It is this passage that makes the author's intention clear. This edition of the *Areopagitica* was not intended merely for scholarly and literary reading; rather, like Deighton's edition the year before, it was a contribution to current debates on censorship and the liberty of the press. Again, it makes the claim that Milton's prose is 'peculiarly necessary' to the age. It was certainly topical: for as well as witnessing the passage of Fox's Libel Act, which was in all likelihood the peculiar necessity which Blamire had in mind, 1792 also saw one of the most momentous free speech trials in British history, in which Thomas Erskine defended Paine against a charge of seditious libel brought against him *in absentia* by the government. At that trial, Erskine quoted from *Areopagitica* in defence of the principle of free speech, and it is ironic that he could have checked his quotation before the trial in an edition recently published by a man who was almost certainly no friend of Paine himself.

Finally, in 1797, a duodecimo edition of Milton's *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* was printed in Edinburgh. This pamphlet is a strikingly anonymous publication; its title page lists no printer or publisher, its preface is unsigned and it has no dedication. Its preface is very blandly written, claiming that the tract has been republished simply because it had 'now become exceeding scarce', and because 'the *subject,* and the *author* … will be inviting enough to any curious

and unprejudiced reader'.[63] This claim of scarcity should again alert us to just how rare Milton's prose works were at the time: if five eighteenth-century editions had not been enough to keep the *Considerations* from growing 'exceeding scarce', how swiftly must the single editions of *Eikonoklastes* or *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* have vanished from sight? But the editor's subsequent claim that they had republished it simply because they thought it might be of interest to a 'curious and unprejudiced reader' seems disingenuous. Some of the material in this brief tract was incendiary:

> Our ministers think scorn to use a *trade*, and count it the reproach of this age, that *tradesmen* preach the gospel. It were to be wished they were all *tradesmen;* they would not then so many of them, for want of another *trade,* make a *trade* of their *preaching* … they themselves are the worst *tradesmen* of all.[64]

To republish this at a time when fears of political and religious 'enthusiasm' among workers and tradesmen were running high seems unlikely to have been the disinterested work of literary endeavour the preface implies.[65] Perhaps the blandness and anonymity of the pamphlet were intended to be deceptive; those who knew Milton only as 'the author of *Paradise Lost*' (as the title page calls him) might be drawn by his name to purchase it, and would find no hint of its radical nature until they began to read the work itself. Perhaps they merely stemmed from the extreme caution of the publishers, to make it harder to trace to them – and easier for them to deny any seditious intentions even if they were. Either way, it seems unlikely that the pamphlet's republication was not politically inspired. Edinburgh was a centre of Scottish radicalism, the birthplace of the Scottish Friends of the People and the site of the ill-fated National Convention of 1793, and it is easy to see how this slender pamphlet could have formed part of a broader radical campaign.[66]

What do these pamphlets tell us about Milton's political significance? They show his name and works were being deployed by British liberals and radicals, either implicitly or explicitly as responses to the contemporary political situation. However, they also suggest that he was still primarily being invoked by the Whig liberal elite, men like Dilly and Deighton who believed in toleration of dissenters and freedom of speech, but had little sympathy for projects such as the abolition of the monarchy. Of the five, only Ridgway's *Ready and Easy Way* could really be called a radical publication: the sole

attempt to resurrect Milton's republican legacy, and attach his name to a clearly revolutionary cause. Furthermore, they show that the liberals were willing to take advantage of Milton's high cultural status to enhance the impact of his political works. Of the five surviving pamphlets, three appeal to Milton's reputation: Johnson's *Treatise,* Blamire's *Areopagitica* and the Edinburgh *Considerations* all state, more or less, that people should pay attention to them because they are by Milton, with the implicit assumption that their readers know that Milton was a very great man, and whatever he had to say on these matters was probably worth reading. Intriguingly, Ridgway's *Ready and Easy Way* makes no such appeal, suggesting that Milton may not have enjoyed the same status among the lower-class radicals who formed Ridgway's target audience – presumably because, unlike their liberal Whig superiors, they had not been taught to revere his poetry from childhood onwards. This may be the key fact in explaining why Milton's republican writings seem never to have been deployed to any great extent by British radicals in the 1790s: the sections of the British radical movement most in sympathy with their ideals were also those least likely to be aware of their existence, or to attach any particular importance to them when they did come across them. For the Society for Constitutional Information, most of whose members were educated men, it was worth printing Milton's opinions on free speech and religious toleration rather than (say) another edition of Priestley's because of the talismanic power that Milton's name had among them. For the average member of the London Corresponding Society, however, there was probably nothing in Milton's *Ready and Easy Way* or *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* that could not be learned from Paine's *Rights of Man,* which also had the advantages of being more famous, easier to read and much, much easier to get hold of.

Six pamphlets, probably each with a small print run, and none of which seem to have run into a second edition, represent a drop in the ocean of the pamphlet wars of the 1790s. In all likelihood, their combined print runs only totalled a few thousand copies, in a decade when Burke was counting his sales by tens of thousands and Paine by hundreds of thousands. That their circulation and impact were probably extremely limited is suggested by an examination of Thomas Spence's *Pig's Meat,* a miscellaneous collection of radical and anti-monarchical texts sold for a penny an issue, with the intention of supplying literate but uneducated lower-class radicals with the ideas and quotations they needed to reinforce their arguments and clarify

their political thinking. Spence admired the seventeenth-century republican tradition, and across the three volumes of *Pig's Meat* he reprinted large sections of Harrington's *Oceana,* as well as the entirety of a vanishingly obscure pamphlet of 1659, *A Modest Plea for an Equal Common-wealth against Monarchy* by the minor republican author William Sprigg. He never reprinted any of Milton's polemics; but he did reprint Erskine's defence of Paine, which included substantial quotations from Milton's *Areopagitica*. Spence thought these quotations worthy enough of interest to give them separate entries in the volume's index, so that his readers could find – and, presumably, quote – 'Milton on the Liberty of the Press' or 'Milton's Vision of a Rousing Nation' without having to flick through the whole of Erskine's lengthy speech.[67] This suggests to me that Spence recognised the potential value of Milton's prose works for his cause, both for their ideas and for the cultural authority carried by Milton's name, and the only reason I can think of for why he did not reprint more of them was that he simply could not get hold of them. If he thought even Sprigg's defence of republicanism was worth reprinting, he would surely have reprinted Milton's if he could. But, by the time he started publishing *Pig's Meat* in 1794, the ephemeral tracts of 1791 and 1792 had probably already vanished from sight, and Hollis and Baron's edition of Milton's prose would have been well beyond his means.

With such limited range, the direct influence of these pamphlets could not have been great. They are significant, not because of their immediate effect on contemporary politics (which was probably negligible), but as signs of Milton's changing cultural status. After decades of gathering dust on Whig bookshelves, revered but unread relics of battles long since won, Milton's political works were starting to be read seriously again. Nor were they now the exclusive ideological property of respectable Whigs, or even of idealistic Commonwealthmen. Instead they were finding their way into the hands of people, both in England and France, who had much more radical agendas. For the first time since the seventeenth century, Milton's name was being linked with groups who were actively anti-monarchist, even regicidal. In such a context, it is clear why Boydell made cuts to Hayley's *Life of Milton*, and the editors of Milton editions vied with one another to produce the most politically bland prefatory biographies possible.

Tellingly, I have been unable to trace a single surviving copy of Ridgway's *Ready and Easy Way* in Britain; all nine surviving copies of which I am aware are presently located in the United States.[68] The cover of the copy I have seen,

which resides in the Public Library of Cleveland, Ohio, is signed 'Thomas Brand Hollis'. Thomas Brand, who took the name Hollis after being made the heir of the venerable Commonwealthman of that name, was an admirer of the American republic, and as a founder member of the Revolution Society he would probably have been in the audience when Price made his 1789 speech in praise of the French Revolution. Initially he, too, believed that the French Revolution would be a force for good in the world, but he rapidly disassociated himself from it as it diverged from the course that the Americans had taken. By 1791, when he presumably picked up Ridgway's pamphlet, he had resigned from the Society for Constitutional Information – a political club that he had helped to found – on the grounds that it had become too radical for him.[69] He probably bought Ridgway's pamphlet because it had Milton's name on it, and for him, as for his mentor Thomas Hollis, Milton was a matchless hero of liberty; but he must have felt little sympathy for Ridgway's wider political programme. One can imagine Brand Hollis, a Whig Commonwealthman of the old style, distastefully picking his way between copies of *Rights of Man* and other seditious material in Ridgway's shop in order to purchase his Milton pamphlet, and then proprietorially writing his name on its cover the moment he got home, as if to counteract the taint of Ridgway's radicalism. In such a scene, one can see how much and how swiftly the French Revolution had changed the ideological company that Milton kept.

IV

In 1792, Thomas Paine was tried *in absentia* for writing Part II of *Rights of Man*. Defending him was the famous advocate Thomas Erskine, a leading Whig and a supporter of the French Revolution.[70] Paine, Erskine argued, had not called for the overthrow of the British government; he had merely expressed his opinions on how nations in general should best be governed, which as a free citizen of Britain he had a perfect right to do. Freedom of debate on such matters, Erskine maintained, was essential; and a free press, far from weakening the state by reducing it to anarchy, would in fact reinvigorate the nation. In support of this viewpoint, he quoted Milton's *Areopagitica:* 'Methinks I see, in my mind, a noble and puissant nation rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.' 'Gentlemen', Erskine continued, 'what Milton only saw in his mighty imagination, I see in fact; what he expected, but which never came to pass, I see now fulfilling …'.[71] Milton, in other words, had been a prophet, and his prophecy

was only now being fulfilled: Britain, with the aid of its free press, was rising upwards into glory, 'shaking her invincible locks'. It was hard to miss the implication that Milton, were he still alive, would have viewed the political discussions and pamphlet wars of the 1790s with approval: that he would have been, if not quite on Paine's side, then at least opposed to the government's attempts to silence him.

Edmund Burke, however, read Paine's *Rights of Man* as a much less favourable omen of things to come. It was, he wrote in 1796, 'a portentous comet … ("which from its horrid hair shakes pestilence and war", and "with fear of change perplexes monarchs")' (*Letter to a Noble Lord*: EB 9:151). The quotations are from Milton; the latter line so alarmed the Royalist censors of 1667 that they almost refused to allow *Paradise Lost* to be published.[72] I find it suggestive that both Erskine and Burke should have reached for Milton quotations to describe *Rights of Man;* suggestive both of the possibly subconscious links in both men's minds between Paine and Milton as prophets of revolution, and of the cosmic scale of the events they felt were now at hand. Possibly Burke had Erskine's 'invincible locks' in mind when he mentioned the 'horrid hair' of the comet. And both men may have been thinking of some other 'horrid hair': the clumps of hair torn from Milton's skull when his grave was broken open in 1790, and sold to collectors or admirers by the lock. Supply being unable to keep up with demand, enterprising sellers of relics soon began selling fakes, so that Milton's horrid hair was soon proliferating as fast as splinters of the True Cross – or, indeed, copies of *Rights of Man*.[73] Prophets have always had difficulty staying dead, and the Miltonic views that Erskine admired and Burke feared certainly seemed to have escaped from their coffin that year, spreading as rapidly and irrecoverably as the fragments of Milton's body itself. Both the strong man rising from his sleep, and the portentous comet striking fear into monarchs, seem apt images for the role of Milton in this troubled time, and Burke, for one, was afraid that the war-bringing hair of this comet would prove not just horrid but invincible. In his last years he became gloomily convinced that the radicals would sweep all before them; and when he died in 1797 he left instructions that his place of burial should be kept secret, to ensure that his grave would not be desecrated after the inevitable revolution.[74]

The trope of Milton's return or resurrection appeared repeatedly in the 1790s. Newlyn notes that in 1792 Cowper, who at the time was struggling to write a commentary on *Paradise Lost,* wrote to Hayley about his frustrations

at not being able to make better progress: 'Milton especially is my grievance, and I might almost as well be haunted by his ghost, as goaded with continual reproaches for neglecting him.'[75] By 1793 there was no longer any 'almost' about it, and the figurative haunting had become actual: Cowper had a dream in which Milton confronted him face to face, and promptly wrote again to Hayley to tell him everything. 'My first thought was wonder, where he could have been concealed so many years', Cowper wrote; 'my second, a transport of joy to find him still alive …'.[76] The key idea animating Cowper's dream was that Milton was *still alive,* still active in the world: Cowper did not dream of a meeting with Milton's soul in heaven, but an encounter with him on Earth, to which he had returned after spending a century in concealment. Similar ideas can be seen in Coleridge's 1795 article *The Plot Discovered,* in which he reacted furiously to the limits that Pitt's Government wished to impose on freedom of assembly and the freedom of the press. Pointing out that Pitt's laws against seditious publications would logically require the suppression of many classic works of political philosophy, including those of Milton, Coleridge wrote:

> Sages and patriots that being dead do yet speak to us, spirits of Milton, Locke, Sidney, Harrington! that still wander through your native country, giving wisdom and inspiring zeal! the cauldron of persecution is bubbling against you – the spells of despotism are being muttered! Blest spirits! assist us, lest hell exorcise earth of all that is heavenly! (*The Plot Discovered:* C 1:290–1)

For Coleridge, as for Cowper, Milton's spirit seemed to be a real, immediate presence in those years. If Pitt had his way, it would be exorcised; but if the Revolution won out, it could expect a more glorious fate. In his *Religious Musings,* Coleridge imagined that the French Revolution might usher in the Millennium:

> The SAVIOUR comes! While as the THOUSAND YEARS
> Lead up their mystic dance, the DESERT shouts!
> Old OCEAN claps his hands! The mighty Dead
> Rise to new life, whoe'er from earliest time
> With conscious zeal had urg'd Love's wondrous plan,
> Coadjutors of God. To MILTON'S trump

> The high Groves of the renovated Earth
> Unbosom their glad echoes …
> (*Religious Musings,* ll. 359–66*:* C 16:I:1:188)

Here, Milton is imagined as the first of the 'mighty Dead' restored to life at the first resurrection, and his 'trump' is presumably the poetry that the resurrected Milton recites in the regenerated world. But Coleridge's language leaves open the possibility that 'MILTON'S trump' is actually the Last Trumpet itself, the signal of the resurrection, a reading which would make Milton angelic, if not divine. Either way, Coleridge imagines that the first effect of this revolutionary resurrection will be Milton's triumphant return. No wonder Burke feared for the safety of his bones.

Milton was reappearing in other places as well. Every good ghost story of the late eighteenth century featured sinister paintings, and Milton's was no exception, for in the 1790s artists filled entire galleries with paintings of both Milton himself and of scenes from his works. As Marcia Pointon notes, 'the sudden increase in illustrated editions and the noticeably greater number of artists painting subjects from Milton in the years around 1795 is very remarkable'.[77] Works on Miltonic subjects were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1782, 1785, 1786, and then every year from 1790 to 1796, often with multiple Miltonic paintings by different artists appearing in the same year; an edition of Milton featuring a new set of illustrations was published in 1792, two more in 1794, another two in 1796 and yet another in 1800.[78] In the 1780s, the Royal Academy offered prizes for the best works on subjects drawn from *Paradise Lost*.[79] James Barry, Professor of Painting at the Academy from 1782 to 1799, produced many designs and drawings on Miltonic subjects; but even his enthusiasm for Milton was eclipsed by that of the Academy's next Professor of Painting, Henry Fuseli, who painted no less than forty-seven huge canvasses of Miltonic scenes in rapid succession.[80] Gathering these together, Fuseli brought a decade of Milton painting to an appropriate climax with the opening of his Milton gallery in 1799: an entire exhibition devoted to his paintings of scenes from the poet's works. Fuseli had become famous as the great master of the gothic and the macabre, and his Milton exhibition did not disappoint, with relatively sober paintings of Milton himself placed alongside paintings such as 'Sin and Death' (which depicted Death's rape of Sin), 'Lapland Orgies' and a disproportionate number of pictures of Satan. One contemporary reviewer of the gallery praised Fuseli's ability 'to embody

the imagery of our great heroic Bard, to render his thoughts visible, and to give to airy nothings "a local habitation and a name"': in other words, to make Milton and his creations seem visible, concrete and immediately present once more.[81] Had that airy nothing, Milton's ghost, decided in about 1800 to take up a local habitation, stepping down from his portrait in the true gothic style, he could hardly have asked for a more appropriately sinister location in which to manifest himself than Fuseli's Milton gallery.

The Milton painting and publishing industries mutually reinforced one another: a publisher who could obtain a new set of illustrations for his edition had something with which to distinguish it from those of his competitors, while an artist who could find a publisher interested in printing his works was, if he drove a good bargain, guaranteed a decent rate of payment for his designs. As a result, by 1796 anyone who regularly visited the Royal Academy's exhibitions or perused the latest illustrated luxury books would find depictions of scenes from Milton among them, and even those who had never read the epic itself could have gained some familiarity with its key scenes simply by browsing through the print shops and art galleries of London.

All these things – the paintings, the pamphlets, the prints, the dreams, the invocations, the *Life of Milton,* the illicitly traded relics, the newly carved bust over Milton's recently desecrated grave – testify to the extraordinary power that he exercised over the imagination of the 1790s. Partly, this was due to the resurgence of the political causes that Milton had championed in life, with all the anxieties attendant upon it. But many of the participants in the Milton cult of the 1790s – the men and women who bought editions of his works, or fragments of his bones, or prints and paintings of scenes from his epics, men and women without whose custom and participation the phenomenon could never had attained the scale it did – probably had little sense of Milton's political relevance to the times. The most overtly political manifestations of the Milton phenomenon were also the most marginal: few of the subscribers to Boydell's edition of Milton, or visitors to Fuseli's Milton gallery, or purchasers of spurious locks of Milton's hair, can have been primarily motivated by their admiration for Milton as one of England's great republicans. Instead, they bought Miltonic paintings, read Milton's poems and saw Milton's ghost because of their powerful sense that they lived in Miltonic times.

If Milton's name meant anything to the great majority of people in England it stood for the poet of cosmic drama, of the war in heaven and the lords of hell. In much the same way as Dante was (and is) associated by most people

almost exclusively with his *Inferno*, so Milton was primarily associated with the idea of the universal struggle between superhuman forces of good and evil, and such a struggle was felt by many people to be exactly what they were living through. The political writings of the time were laced with hysteria, decrying either the French republic or its royalist enemies as utterly, unspeakably evil, if not literally demonic: many observers felt that they were witnessing a gigantic, possibly even eschatological, clash between good and evil, and it is hardly surprising that, as Garrett has demonstrated, many people believed the end of the world was imminent, or that, as Paley has shown, the artists of the period increasingly turned their talents towards such subjects as the Deluge and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.[82]

Milton's works, with their warring angels and cosmic evils, resonated with such apocalyptic fears; indeed, his Satanic scenes seemed only too applicable to contemporary affairs. Satan had been almost as active as Milton in 1790s Britain: in 1791 the self-declared prophet Richard Brothers had seen the Evil One 'walking leisurely into London … dressed in White and Scarlet Robes', while in 1802 Brothers's prophetic rival Joanna Southcott spent seven days battling and disputing continually with the Devil, eventually triumphing over all his assaults.[83] In 1794, Isaac Cruikshank drew a cartoon entitled 'A Picture of Great Britain in the Year 1793', which depicted the Temple of the Constitution being attacked by a demon brandishing a trident labelled 'reform' and saying as it does so: 'Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven'.[84] Other Miltonic quotations appear elsewhere in the cartoon: to the reformers are attributed the words of Milton's fallen angels, resolving that 'to do ought good shall never be our task', while the on-looking conservatives quote Milton's God:

> … So bent they seem
> On desperate Revenge, that shall Redound
> Upon their own rebellious Heads.

It was against the backdrop of that 'Britain in the Year 1793' that Nelson is said to have instructed his midshipmen: 'You must hate a Frenchman as you do the devil.'[85] Taking such a view of the conflict at hand, surrounded by enemies who seemed to be living demons and fighting, they hoped, on the side of the angels themselves, it is hardly surprising that so many readers turned in these years to *Paradise Lost,* or desired – and, in many cases, actually felt – the renewed presence of its author among them.

CHAPTER THREE

Milton and the Sublime of Terror

I

'I am sick of hearing of the sublimity of Milton', declared Mary Wollstonecraft in 1787 (*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 'Reading': MW 4:21). It is easy to understand why. In the 1712 *Spectator* essays that ensured Milton's place at the pinnacle of the English literary canon, Addison had repeatedly stressed how sublime Milton was: '*Milton*'s chief Talent, and indeed his distinguishing Excellence, lies in the Sublimity of his Thoughts'.[1] Even Hume, who had serious reservations about Milton's poetry, was willing to concede that it was 'the most wonderfully sublime of any poet in any language'.[2] Later critics repeated the view that sublimity was the characteristic quality of Milton's poetry so frequently that, by 1819, Byron could remark in *Don Juan* that 'the word Miltonic mean[s] Sublime'.[3] He was not exaggerating: Milton was so firmly established as the ultimate model of poetic sublimity that whenever a writer desired a sublime effect they reached for their copy of *Paradise Lost*.

This identification of Milton as the paradigmatic example of sublimity was reinforced by Burke's influential aesthetic treatise of 1757, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, which distinguished carefully between beauty and sublimity:

> Sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent … beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. (*Enquiry*, part 3, section 27: EB 1:281–2)

Beautiful objects, Burke contended, create feelings of pleasure and protective love in their viewers, while sublime objects inspire feelings of awe and terror. The beautiful is small, pretty, weak and implicitly feminine; the sublime is huge, strong, fearsome and implicitly masculine. Searching for examples with which to illustrate his concept of sublimity, Burke turned repeatedly to Milton, and especially to the first two books of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's Death,

he wrote, is 'sublime to the last degree'; his description of hell 'raises a very great degree of the sublime', and 'we do not any where meet a more sublime description' than that of Satan (*Enquiry*, part 2, section 3; part 5, section 7; and part 2, section 5: EB 1:232, 1:318, 1:234). The vastness and darkness of Milton's scenes, and the deliberate obscurity of his attempts to describe the indescribable, made him a perfect exemplar of the Burkean sublime. As a result of the popularity of Burke's theories, Milton became inextricably linked to the very concept of the sublime, so that by Wollstonecraft's time – let alone Byron's – the sublimity of Milton had become a cliché. It even became a kind of honorific, with writers referring to 'the sublime Milton' in much the same way that they might refer to 'the Honourable Member for Hull'.[4]

In both literature and the visual arts, the version of sublimity articulated by Burke became increasingly popular during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Books like Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and Macpherson's *Ossian* appealed to the contemporary taste for the ghostly, the gloomy and the spectacular, while dark, dramatic images such as Henry Fuseli's nightmare scenes and Joseph Wright's paintings of Vesuvius in eruption began to appear in British galleries with increasing regularity. But why should such terrifying scenes – of ghosts, battles, volcanoes, Satan, hell and so on – give the reader or observer any pleasure? Burke's answer was that the appreciation of sublimity, as an aesthetic response to the terrible, was only possible if one remained at some distance from its source: thus a volcanic eruption, for example, is sublime for the onlookers some distance from the mountain, but never for the unfortunate mountaineers caught in the path of the lava flow. As Burke put it in the *Enquiry*:

> When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience. (*Enquiry*, part 1, section 7: EB 1:217)

These 'distances' and 'modifications' are what the reader of Milton has, but the damned soul does not, allowing the former to appreciate hell as a sublime spectacle while the latter finds it 'simply terrible'. In this case, the 'distances' are provided by the fact that the former only reads about what the latter actually experiences; the 'modifications' are provided by Milton's skill as a writer, which allow him to forcefully communicate terrible things without

simply repelling and disgusting his readers with litanies of horrors. This was his 'distinguishing Excellence': the ability to first conjure up immense and terrifying scenes, and then to place his readers at the proper distance from them, allowing them to appreciate their scale and majesty without being overwhelmed. In this lay the essence of his sublimity.

Influential as Burke's views on the sublime were, they did not represent the only school of thought on the subject during the eighteenth century. When someone like Hayley described Milton as 'sublime', they did not just mean that he was large, powerful and potentially frightening; they also meant that he was a morally and spiritually excellent human being. This was the word's older meaning, the one that had been current in Milton's day: in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first citation for 'sublime' meaning 'of high intellectual, moral, or spiritual nature' is from 1634, while the first citation for 'sublime' meaning 'affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power' is from 1700. Among Milton's liberal and Commonwealthman admirers – especially those of them that would go on to play leading roles in the American and French Revolutions – this form of moral sublimity was particularly associated with the inhabitants of free states, for they liked to claim that it was only in such invigorating political climates that true sublimity of mind and soul could flourish.[5] The idea of a distinctively revolutionary or republican sublime goes back as far as Longinus's *On the Sublime*, the foundational text of the aesthetics of sublimity, where it is attributed to 'a philosopher' and presented as if it were a cliché even then. In one popular eighteenth-century translation, the passage runs:

> May we believe at last that there is Solidity in that trite Observation, That Democracy is the Nurse of true Genius; that fine Writers will be found only in this sort of Government, with which they flourish and triumph, or decline and die? Liberty, it is said, produces fine Sentiments in Men of Genius, it invigorates their Hopes, excites an honourable Emulation, and inspires an Ambition and Thirst of excelling.[6]

Longinus does not wholly endorse this view, arguing that the real issue is not whether one lives under a monarchy or a democracy but whether or not one's society is corrupt: it is corruption, not lack of political freedom, which prevents 'Men of Genius' from reaching sublime heights, by shackling them down to the contemplation and pursuit of sordid ends. However,

the idea that only a republican society could produce true sublimity had a long and influential history. David Norbrook has argued for the existence of a distinctively republican sublime in the works of Milton and his fellow Commonwealthmen; and it is worth noting that the first English translation of Longinus was published in 1652 by John Hall, a great admirer of Milton and one of his colleagues under the Protectorate, who argued in the Dedication to his translation that the contemporary 'crisis of eloquence' was due to the fact that 'the corruption of time hath diseas'd most Governments into *Monarchies*'.[7] Few eighteenth-century writers on aesthetics were willing to claim that to create sublime art it would first be necessary to overthrow the monarchy, but the persistent citation of the republican heroes of antiquity as the most sublime of men ensured that the conceptual link between moral sublimity and classical republicanism remained intact. Thomas Reid, for example, wrote in 1785:

> When we contemplate the character of Cato, his greatness of soul, his superiority to pleasure, to toil, and to danger, his ardent zeal for the liberty of his country; when we see him standing unmoved in misfortunes, the last pillar of the liberty of Rome, and falling nobly in his country's ruin, who would not wish to be Cato rather than Caesar in all his triumph?[8]

'Caesar in all his triumph' here stands for the monarchic, military-imperial sublime: the sublime of external greatness, of wealth, power and mastery of organised violence. Cato stands for the republican sublime, the sublime of internal, moral greatness that allows a conquering emperor less sublimity than a single defeated old man. The republican sublime was a sublime of virtue, usually defined in stoic rather than Christian terms; its heroes were Cato, Cicero, Leonidas and Epictetus, and its values were fortitude, courage, patriotism, justice, moral purity and, above all, love of liberty. Among the moderns its exemplar was, inevitably, John Milton, although later in the century he was joined by George Washington and a few other revolutionary heroes. When the sublime was invoked in revolutionary France – by Robespierre, for example – it was usually this version of sublimity that was referred to. But it is important not to overstate the difference between the Burkean and republican sublimes, which in the aesthetic writings of the period were often jumbled together interchangeably, with writers discussing the sublimity of Cato in one paragraph and the sublimity of cyclones in the

next. They were compatible because both were still aesthetics of awe and power: the sublime Burkean tyrant inspires awe through his absolute power over others, while the sublime republican patriot inspires awe through his absolute control over himself. Both hold themselves sternly aloof from the inferior crowd, standing upon the distant mountaintops of absolute purity or absolute power; the one shrouded in concealing darkness, the other haloed with an unbearable brightness of light.

As I have discussed, over the course of the eighteenth century Milton became 'the sublime Milton'. He was not just recognised as the greatest master of the sublime in poetry: he was actually identified with the quality of sublimity itself, described in ways that made him as much an object of sublime appreciation as any of his poetic creations, as Lucy Newlyn notes:

> It has become clear from my study of the reception of *Paradise Lost* that Milton stands in his readers' minds both for the capacity to express the inexpressible and for the inexpressible itself: he is, in other words, at once the vehicle of sublimity and himself a sublime phenomenon.[9]

In his *Life of Milton*, Hayley even stated explicitly that Milton himself was more sublime than anything in his poetry:

> In contemplating the variety of his sufferings, and his various mental atchievements [*sic*], we may declare, without any extravagance of praise, that although sublimity is the predominant characteristic of Milton's poem, his own personal character is still more sublime.[10]

For his eighteenth-century devotees, Milton was a huge figure, to be approached with awe and fear: a man capable of creating such astonishing things that he was himself a cause for astonishment. I have already discussed the ways in which Milton came increasingly to be viewed as a kind of saint or prophet, a man of exemplary ability and goodness whose epic poetry revealed either superhuman talent or actual divine inspiration. Sometimes he was even imagined as being divine himself. After reading *Paradise Lost*, John Adams wrote of Milton in amazement:

> Reading Milton. That mans [*sic*] Soul, it seems to me, was distended as wide as Creation. His Powr [*sic*] over the human mind was absolute and

> unlimited. His Genius was great beyond Conception, and his Learning without Bounds. I can only gaze at him with astonishment, without comprehending the vast Compass of his Capacity.[11]

Here, Adams credits Milton with attributes usually reserved for God alone. His language is that of hugeness extended to infinity: thus Milton's soul is as large as the whole created universe put together, while 'the vast Compass of his Capacity' is so immense that Adams cannot even comprehend its gargantuan scale. (Adams may well be thinking here of God's golden compasses in *Paradise Lost*, which He uses at the moment of Creation to draw a circle around the circumference of the universe.) Milton's 'Learning', 'Genius' and 'Powr over the human mind' are all imagined as similarly gigantic, if not actually infinite. Given that, as Burke reminds us, 'sublime objects are vast in their dimensions', so huge a genius cannot but be sublime, and indeed Adams's final line precisely describes the reaction of a man confronted by an embodiment of awesome sublimity, so that Adams regarding Milton starts to sound like Adam regarding God: 'I can only gaze at him with astonishment, without comprehending'.

But sublime things, as Burke reminds us, can be properly appreciated only at a distance. As the eighteenth century progressed, Milton – or rather the figure of Milton, the *idea* of him, which had increasingly little in common with the man who had once written Latin correspondence for Cromwell – was invested with more and more formidable meanings, coming to stand for artistic sublimity, poetic genius, divine inspiration, British liberty and occasionally even acting as a kind of stand-in for God Himself. Thus, as Milton became increasingly sublime, he necessarily also became increasingly elevated, set apart from history and politics: commentators and biographers glossed over his engagement with worldly matters, emphasising instead his virtue and piety, and stressing the great gulf that separated his age from their own. Milton the revolutionary was transfigured into Milton the Patriarch: distant, inactive, impersonal and holy, far enough removed from the here and now to be safely appreciated as sublime. But, as I have discussed in the previous two chapters, by the century's end Milton no longer seemed distant at all; instead, he had become a dangerously immediate presence, and his reappearance would have important consequences for the aesthetics of sublimity.

II

At the outbreak of the American Revolution, propagandists on both sides were swift to compare their adversaries to Milton's devils: for the Tories, the revolutionaries resembled Satan's cohorts in their wicked rebellion against their lawful sovereign, while for the revolutionaries the truly Satanic rebels were the British, who in their view had rebelled against both the laws of their own constitution and the laws of God. As Schulman has shown, both sides explicitly drew upon Milton in order to demonise their foes; but the matter was complicated by the fact that some of the revolutionaries clearly *did* identify, consciously or otherwise, with Milton's Satan.[12] Writing in *Common Sense* on the impossibility of reconciliation with Britain, Paine stated:

> For, as Milton wisely expresses, 'never can true reconcilement grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep'.[13]

It was an interesting phrase to have floated to the top of Paine's mind, for the speaker is Satan on Mount Niphates, resolving never to seek reconciliation with God; indeed, it comes just a few lines before Satan's famous conclusion: 'Evil, be thou my good.' Perhaps Paine did not recall the source of his quotation – the passage that contained it was, after all, a favourite among compilers of anthologies – or realise that, by using it, he was casting the American revolutionaries as demons and himself as Satan.[14] But Jefferson could hardly have had any illusions as to what he was doing when, as a student at William and Mary College, he copied several of Satan's defiant, rebellious speeches into his commonplace book: 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven', 'Courage never to submit or yield' and so on.[15] Jefferson was consciously, and Paine probably subconsciously, recognising a spiritual kinship between Milton's Satan and the revolutionary cause, a kinship underlined by Satan's possession of the qualities of courage and fortitude which were so important to the republican sublime. Of course, the similarities they felt were not those attributed to them by the Tory writers who so gleefully compared both men to Satan himself: they identified with Satan's sense of justified grievance with authority, and his determination never to surrender no matter how much suffering is heaped upon him, while their enemies thought that they resembled him in tyranny, malice and guile. Both versions, however, ended up giving the revolutionaries the high ground of the sublime – and it was here that the rather tangled political consequences of Burke's aesthetic

legacy began to emerge. Burke's description of Milton's demons as sublime meant that to cast oneself as a sublime figure was, uncomfortably, to court comparison with Milton's Satan as well as Milton's God, while to describe someone else as demonic was, even more uncomfortably, to imply that they might also be sublime. The comparison cut both ways.

In any case, identifying oneself with Satan was not necessarily the absolute transgression that it had been in Milton's day, for in free-thinking circles like those in which Paine and Jefferson moved the belief in the literal reality of the Evil One was on the wane. Both men were deists, inheritors of the demystified, demythologised version of Christianity produced by the eighteenth-century crusade against 'superstition' of which Satan, in his role as active force for evil, had been one of the major casualties. Rationalist theologians bent on making Christianity as clear and logical as possible found no place for a diabolic archangel and his baroque court of infernal monsters; they smacked too much of pagan superstition and medieval darkness. In their simplified systems of universal order and benevolence, it made little sense for God to allow Satan and his demons to rampage around His perfectly organised, mathematically elegant Creation; and in a universe where God personally called all the shots, Satan was left with precious little to do. Furthermore, the idea of hell itself was coming under attack in some quarters, with some moralists arguing that punishment could only be justified if it enabled reform rather than merely inflicting pain, and accordingly condemning the cruelty and pointlessness of eternal damnation. In *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*, Phillip Almond cites several writers who denied that the damned would suffer eternally, among them John Locke and the astronomer William Whiston.[16] Hume thought the very idea of hell barbaric: 'Punishment without any proper end or purpose', he wrote, 'is inconsistent with *our* ideas of goodness and justice; and no end can be served by it after the whole scene is closed'.[17] Several universalist sects arose in the eighteenth century, claiming that the death of Christ had won salvation for everyone rather than just an elect and virtuous few; and at least one such sect, under the leadership of Elhanan Winchester, was active in late eighteenth-century London.[18] Nor was universalism restricted to fringe groups such as Winchester's; Tillotson's enemies accused him of denying 'the eternity of hell torments', and many Unitarians, including Priestly, came to hold universalist beliefs, concluding that a truly benevolent God would redeem everyone in the end, thus abolishing hell and leaving the Devil

homeless as well as unemployed.[19] By the time of the American Revolution, criticism of the doctrine of eternal damnation had become so commonplace that clergymen preaching on hell often included counter-arguments in their sermons, and Whitefield devoted an entire sermon to proving from scripture both that hell's torments existed, and that they would last forever.[20]

Such a shrunken, demythologised Satan was easier to think of as a mere fictional character than his terrifyingly real seventeenth-century predecessor; and if, like Paine or Jefferson, one did not believe in the literal existence of Satan or hell, then to compare oneself to Milton's Satan was not necessarily the rash and blasphemous act it would have been a century earlier. It could even be a radical gesture, for one of the things from which deist revolutionaries such as Jefferson and Paine set out to deliver the world was irrational religion founded on the fear of hell, which they saw as having been imposed upon the populace by priestcraft in order to bolster the power of the ruling elite. Later in his life Paine would become the most infamous demythologiser of his generation by publishing his sweeping attack on Biblical literalism, *The Age of Reason*; but in this he was very much part of the broader enlightenment project to sweep away the old myths and superstitions, as Manuel describes:

> The French and English *philosophes* had wanted to cast off every last remnant of primitivism. Christianity and Judaism were great evils to the rationalist radicals because they were still imbued with a primordial religious spirit; they were survivals from the mythic age of mankind. Identities and conformities among all religions proved that they had a common source in terror-stricken mankind.[21]

Of all Judeo-Christian myths, it was the myth of hell that most obviously bore the stamp of its origins 'in terror-stricken mankind', and hence the myth it was most important to discredit in order to rob the priesthood of its power. For radicals such as Paine and Jefferson, treating Milton's Satan as a mere fictional character to be quoted from or alluded to as one might quote or allude to, say, Shakespeare's Caliban, may have been a deliberate gesture of defiance and disbelief in his literal reality as lord of hell.

Important though Milton and Satan were to political writers on both sides of the American Revolution, the frequency with which they appeared was as nothing to the torrent of Miltonic language unleashed by the French Revolution. The predictable comparisons were made: anti-revolutionary

writers compared the revolutionaries to Milton's demons and Paris to Pandaemonium, while the radical Dissenter Gilbert Wakefield compared both Burke and the Bishop of Rochester to Milton's Satan – the Bishop for his malice, and Burke for his apostasy from the revolutionary cause.[22] Burke himself, however, avoided all such language. In his *Reflections on the Revolution*, published in 1790, he dismissed the Revolution as neither sublime nor beautiful, belonging instead to the mixed low form of the grotesque:

> All circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world. The most wonderful things are brought about in many instances by means the most absurd and ridiculous; in the most ridiculous modes; and, apparently, by the most contemptible instruments. Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies. (*Reflections*: EB 8:60)

The result was a 'monstrous tragi-comic scene', inspiring 'alternate scorn and horror'. Burke kept to this line throughout the *Reflections*, remaining determined not to grant the Revolution the dignity of sublimity; thus he cast the revolutionaries not as demons, who are awesome and sublime, but as wild beasts or murderous clowns, worthy only of contempt. This may be another reason why Burke never draws directly upon Milton in the *Reflections*; to draw the obvious comparison between Paris and Pandaemonium would be to credit the revolutionaries with a Satanic sublimity he was eager to withhold from them. In *Representations of Revolution*, Ronald Paulson writes that 'Burke's Paris is Milton's hell', and cites in support Burke's Commons speech of 11 April 1794, where Burke said:

> The condition of France at this moment was so frightful and horrible, that if a painter wished to portray a description of hell, he could not find so terrible a model, or a subject so pregnant with horror, and fit for his purpose. Milton, with all that genius which enabled him to excel in descriptions of that nature, would have been ashamed to have presented to his readers such a hell as France now has, or such a devil as a modern Jacobin; he would have thought his design revolting to the most unlimited imagination, and his colouring overcharged beyond all allowance for the licence even of poetical painting.[23]

Paulson is quite correct to say that Burke equates France with hell, but he does not equate it with *Milton's* hell. In my view, Burke is treading carefully here, distinguishing between Milton's hell, which he had always held up as sublime, and the hell the Jacobins have created in France, which is merely grotesque. Milton would have been 'ashamed' to describe a hell like modern France, because if he had it would not have been sublime at all, just disgusting. He is determined not to dignify the revolutionaries by comparing them to anything as grand as Milton's demons.

In opposition to the macabre absurdity of the revolutionaries, Burke depicted in his *Reflections* a French *ancien régime* founded on 'ancient chivalry':

> Without force, or opposition, [chivalry] subdued the fierceness of pride and power; it obliged sovereigns to submit to the soft collar of social esteem, compelled stern authority to submit to elegance, and gave a domination vanquisher of laws, to be subdued by manners. (*Reflections*: EB 8:127)

This, in Burke's terms, is a description of sublimity submitting to beauty. On one side, he places the sublime forces that he contends were contained by chivalry: fierceness, pride, power, sovereigns, stern authority and vanquishers of laws. On the other side, he places the beautiful measures by which he claims chivalry was able to contain them: through obligation, elegance and manners, which made them 'submit to the soft collar of social esteem' without the use of 'opposition' or 'force'. Given that the entire passage is saturated in the language of chivalric romance, and comes just after Burke's rapturous description of Marie Antoinette, the image that inevitably rises to mind is that of a chivalric warrior submitting to a lady – or an enchantress. The passage casts the entire system of feudal chivalry, upon which Burke claims the *ancien régime* was based, in a soft and feminine light: as a system of 'pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal'. With the Revolution, however, 'all the decent drapery of life is to be torn off', to be replaced by 'a barbarous philosophy … as void of solid wisdom, as it is destitute of all taste and elegance' (*Reflections*: EB 8:128).

This depiction of elegant, decently draped monarchy in danger of being ravished by rough, barbarous, naked revolution constantly risks sliding into an opposition between the sublime and the beautiful. It is a

problematic slippage, as in his *Enquiry* Burke credited the sublime with being the more manly and powerful of the two aesthetics, and Burke's opponents were swift to exploit it, playing on Burke's words in order to depict monarchy as an effeminate system of beautiful illusions designed to keep the sublime, manly people of France (or Britain) from exercising their true power. Monarchy could thus be aligned with trickery and weakness, and revolution with solidity, strength and truth. Paine, famously, wrote in *Rights of Man*:

> [Burke] is not affected by the reality of distress touching his heart, but the showy resemblance of it striking his imagination. He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird.[24]

Paine was not much taken with sublimes of any sort; he prided himself on his down-to-earth realism, exactly the sort of viewpoint that Burke castigated as 'the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings'. From Paine's perspective, Burke's versions of the sublime and the beautiful both lacked real value, as both were founded on illusion and obscurity. In *The Age of Reason*, he wrote:

> The sublime of the critics, like some parts of Edmund Burke's *sublime* and *beautiful*, is like a windmill just visible in a fog, which imagination might distort into a flying mountain, or an archangel, or a flock of wild geese.[25]

Paine's taunting mention of windmills plays upon the contemporary caricatures of Burke as Don Quixote, for ever since he lamented in his *Reflections* that 'the Age of Chivalry is gone', Burke had been ridiculed as a latter-day Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance.[26] But it is also targeted specifically at Burke's praise of Milton's description of Satan in his *Enquiry*, where he writes:

> Here is a very noble picture; and in what does this poetical picture consist? In images of a tower, an archangel, the sun rising through mists, or in an eclipse, the ruin of monarchs, and the revolution of kingdoms. The mind is hurried out of itself, by a croud [*sic*] of great and confused images … (*Enquiry*, part 2, section 5: EB 1:234)

This passage shows how easily the Burkean sublime could be applied to revolutionary purposes, and why Burke had to fight so hard to maintain that the ruin of monarchs, revolution of kingdoms and crowds of great and confused images unfolding across the channel were grotesque and ridiculous instead of noble and sublime. But this was an issue that Paine had no interest in exploiting; to use Burke's passage to insist on the sublimity of the Revolution would have been to invite another comparison of the Revolution to Satan, and Paine may have been somewhat touchy about the number of times he had been compared to that personage already – little knowing that *The Age of Reason* would soon give him a more Satanic appearance in the public eye than he had ever had before. Instead, he played upon the way that Burke made obscurity and confusion into virtues. Paine had no time for obscurity, necessary or otherwise, and would never have agreed with Burke's claim that 'a clear idea is another name for a little idea' (*Enquiry*, part 2, section 5: EB 1:235); his aim was always to express his ideas as clearly and simply as possible. Here, as elsewhere, Paine implied that Burke's sublimity – and, by extension, Burke's monarchism and Christianity, both of which Paine saw as systems of deliberate mystification intended to trick and mislead the people into acting against their own best interests – was merely a quixotic worship of mystery and obfuscation for their own sakes, the tendency to imagine things to be grand and wonderful simply because they were confused and obscure.

Other writers, however, swiftly made the connection between the French Revolution and the Burkean sublime. The Revolution was huge, overwhelming and increasingly violent and terrifying as well: thus, some argued, it was clearly a perfect example of Burkean sublimity. Anti-revolutionary writers who disagreed with Burke about what constituted sublimity used this to discredit him: by his standards the French Revolution was sublime, but it clearly wasn't, so he *must* have been wrong. Richard Payne Knight, for example, believed that neither terror nor obscurity could give rise to sublimity, and claimed that the obscurity of Milton's description of Death made it less, not more, sublime. Although generally a supporter of the French Revolution, he abhorred the violence of Robespierre's brief reign, and when he attacked Burke's aesthetic theories in his *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* he made much of the fact that the revolutionary Terror, despite being extremely terrifying, had not been at all sublime.[27] More mischievously, he suggested that if Burke himself had gone out with no breeches and a loaded blunderbuss, he would have been both astonishing and terrifying, but not sublime.[28] Knight's image

of Burke as a crazed *sans-culotte* is comic, but other writers took more seriously the idea that Burke and Robespierre had similar notions of how to create sublime effects; after all, Robespierre himself was very fond of the word 'sublime', and often employed the hyperbolic language that was one of the hallmarks of Burkean sublimity. At the trial of Louis XVI he declared:

> A people does not judge as does a court of law. It does not hand down sentences, it hurls down thunderbolts; it does not condemn kings, it plunges them into the abyss …[29]

The people, in other words, judge not like a magistrate but like a wrathful deity: the most awesome and terrifying, and thus most sublime, being imaginable. They exercise their power by executing their sovereign, which is exactly the kind of event Burke had held up in the *Enquiry* as more sublime than any work of art:

> Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy. (*Enquiry*, part 1, section 15: EB 1:223)

If one such execution could outweigh 'the most sublime and affecting tragedy', did it not follow that the Terror, in which Robespierre and his comrades executed 'state criminal[s] of high rank' by the dozen, was more sublime still? Furthermore, like Burke, Robespierre held that the ultimate aim of all these sublime goings-on was the inculcation of awe and fear. The execution of Louis XVI, he stated, was meant not only to punish the King for his misdeeds; it was also intended to 'nourish in the spirits of tyrants a salutary terror of the justice of the people'.[30] On 5 September 1793, the National Convention – of which Robespierre was president – infamously voted that 'Terror is the Order of the Day'. What, according to Burke's aesthetics, could be more sublime than that?

In 1794, writing less than a month before Robespierre's downfall and death, Wakefield took this line of thinking to its logical conclusions by actually comparing Robespierre with Milton. Praising Robespierre's courage in the National Assembly, Wakefield wrote:

> That extraordinary man just mentioned, to borrow his own comparison, conceived with the genuine sublimity of Milton the republican, may be truly said to 'bestride a volcano'.[31]

By claiming that Robespierre's metaphor possesses 'the genuine sublimity of Milton the republican', Wakefield is praising more than just Robespierre's rhetorical abilities. He is suggesting that as well as sharing the capacity for sublime language associated with Milton the poet, Robespierre also shares the capacity for sublime action associated with 'Milton the republican'. No other writer went quite so far as that, but the idea of Milton and Robespierre as the two ultimate masters of the Burkean sublime of fear does run through the political writings responding to the Terror. (How could it not, when so many writers claimed that Robespierre's Paris and Milton's Hell were virtually indistinguishable?) As early as 1795, English writers, including Burke, had started referring to the Jacobins as 'terrorists', men whose chief objective was the creation of fear; and from there it was only a small step to suggesting – as George Mason did in the same year – that the Terror itself had been an exercise in Burkean aesthetics.[32] 'The majority of thinking and of learned men', he wrote, 'are as well persuaded of terror's being the cause of the *sublime*, as that Tenterden steeple is of Goodwin Sands'; however, 'I have heard, indeed, that the well-known *Enquiry* into the origin of these ideas was in highest estimation with the deep philosophers of France …'.[33]

A year earlier, Coleridge and Southey had written a tragedy – *The Fall of Robespierre* – in which the events of the Terror were described in terms redolent of the Burkean sublime, complete with ghosts, demons and veritable oceans of blood. As Roe notes, their Robespierre is a very Miltonic character; his description is modelled on that of Satan, he speaks in Miltonic blank verse, and the 'disastrous lustre' which hangs over his name is strongly reminiscent of the 'disastrous twilight' of the monarch-perplexing eclipse to which Milton compares his fallen archangel (*Fall of Robespierre*, Dedication: C 16:3:1:12; *Paradise Lost*, book 1, ll. 594–9: M 20).[34] Like Milton's Satan his boast is that 'I durst oppose'; but, as Smith notes, the person he really

seems to identify with is Milton's God, claiming to have 'hurl'd down' the 'foul apostate' and actually quoting Milton when he describes his enemies as those who 'durst defy Omnipotence'[35] (*Fall of Robespierre*, Act 2, ll. 19, 24, 26, 28–9: C 16:3:1:25–6). Like Knight and Mason, Coleridge and Southey recognised a kinship between Burke's version of the sublime, whose ultimate exemplars were the infernal books of Milton, and the events of the Terror. The difference was that while Knight and Mason used the comparison to discredit Burke, the young Southey and Coleridge used it to give a Miltonic grandeur to the events of Robespierre's brief reign. This was the danger of Burke's aesthetics: they invited comparisons between revolutionaries like Robespierre and such grand figures as Milton's Satan and Milton's God. They could be used to condemn such men – and Southey and Coleridge's portrayal of Robespierre is hardly complimentary – but they could not be used to belittle them. Monsters they might have been, but in Burke's terms they were *sublime* monsters, and the more monstrously they were depicted, the more sublime they became.

By 1796, as his anti-revolutionary rhetoric reached new heights, even Burke began describing the Revolution in unashamedly Miltonic language. Although he seldom used the kind of direct comparisons so common in other writers, Paulson is, in my view, quite correct to see 'another version of Milton's Death' in Burke's description of the French 'Republick of Regicide' as 'a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre' in his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*.[36] In his *Letter to a Noble Lord* Burke described the Revolution as 'sprung' from 'that chaotic anarchy, which generates equivocally, "all monstrous, all prodigious things"' (*Letter to a Noble Lord*: EB 9:156) – from Milton's hell, in other words, the description of which in *Paradise Lost* is the source of Burke's quote – and elsewhere he imagines what would have happened if the doctrine of the rights of man had appeared in Britain in 1782:

> Astronomers have supposed, that if a certain comet, whose path intersected the eliptick, had met the earth in some (I forget what) sign, it would have whirled us along with it, in its eccentrick course, into God knows what regions of heat and cold. Had the portentous comet of the rights of man (which 'from its horrid hair shakes pestilence and war' and 'with fear of change perplexes monarchs') had that comet crossed upon us in that internal state of England, nothing human could have prevented

> our being irresistibly hurried, out of the highway of heaven, into all the vices, crimes, horrours and miseries of the French revolution. (*Letter to a Noble Lord*: EB 9:151)

This passage is dense with Miltonic allusions. The quotations are from *Paradise Lost*, and furthermore they both come from passages which Burke had singled out for their sublimity in his *Enquiry*; the first from the confrontation between Death and Satan, in which Satan is compared to a comet, and the second from Satan's initial rallying of the fallen angels, in which he is compared to the sun in eclipse. But the 'regions of heat and cold' also recall Milton's hell, where the damned are dragged 'From beds of raging fire to starve in ice', and the fall from 'the highway of heaven' to 'vices, crimes, horrours and miseries' is precisely the path followed by the rebellious angels in *Paradise Lost*. Taken together, Burke's implicit meaning seems to be that Britain is heaven, revolutionary France is hell, and the doctrine of the rights of man is the Satanic force capable of compelling the fall from one to the other. But if the Revolution is Death, or Satan, then must it not also be sublime?

For Burke, the answer was still 'no'; the events unfolding in France were *not* sublime, because they lacked what Paulson calls 'aesthetic distancing': they were just *too close*.[37] In his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, Burke argues that the British cannot afford to regard the Revolution with the detachment necessary for sublimity; instead, they should resist it with all the energy necessary for survival. In his *First Letter*, he writes:

> Have the Gentlemen [...] no idea of the different conduct to be held with regard to the very same evil at an immense distance, and when it is at your door? [...] I can contemplate, without dread, a royal or a national tiger on the borders of Pegu. I can look at him, with an easy curiosity, as prisoner within bars in the menagerie of the Tower. But if, by *Habeas Corpus*, or otherwise, he was to come into the lobby of the House of Commons whilst your door was open, any of you would be more stout than wise, who would not gladly make your escape out of the back windows. I certainly should dread more from a wild-cat in my bed-chamber than from all the lions that roar in the desert behind Algiers. (*First Letter on a Regicide Peace*: EB 9:258–9)

Paulson sees this passage as evidence that 'Burke could come to terms with the revolution by distancing it as a sublime experience'. I read it somewhat

differently: Burke is claiming that while he could, perhaps, regard the Revolution as safely sublime if it were sufficiently far away, here and now he cannot, because no such distance exists. The revolutionary danger is not in some distant part of the world; it is not even as far away as Calais, separated from him by the width of the Channel, for as his reference to tigers imprisoned in the Tower makes clear, Burke sees it embodied not only in the French Jacobins but also in home-grown British radicals, between whom he sees little or no distinction. The danger is all around them: it is 'at your door' – and 'your door [is] open'. Burke implies that by allowing British radicals to exercise their rights of *habeas corpus*, rather than imprisoning them indefinitely without trial, the government has unleashed a pack of revolutionary tigers into the streets of London.

As Paulson hints, sublimity can be used as a containment mechanism, allowing one to deal with terrifying or horrific scenes by applying 'aesthetic distancing' and viewing them as sublime. By shifting the focus from the terrifying event itself to the aesthetic effect it has on the mind of the spectator who observes it, the concept of sublimity can be used to contain dangerous and disruptive forces; viewed as sublime spectacles, fallen angels, destroying heroes and ravenous tigers shrink into mere objects for our aesthetic contemplation. But this process only works if the sublime object can be kept at a distance: if the tiger is in a cage, the hero just an actor on a stage, the angel only a character in a book. When confronted with immediate presences, the mechanism breaks down. Tigers, revolutionary or otherwise, may be very sublime when seen behind bars, or at a distance, but aesthetic appreciation is not an option when they are actively attempting to eat you.

With this in mind, we can turn again to the problem of Milton's presence, and the question as to why, in the 1790s, so many people started to feel that Milton was close and active, rather than distant, passive and safe. For the best part of a century, 'the sublime Milton' had been aesthetically distanced from worldly matters; however, as I have shown in Chapter Two, events in the 1790s rendered this solution increasingly problematic. As Milton began to be invoked in political contexts, and as politics itself came to be seen in Miltonic terms, the sense of a safe distance separating Milton from his readers began to evaporate. The horrors of Milton's hell were not sequestered in some shadowy otherworld: instead, they lay just across the Channel, if not closer. Milton's republican politics were no longer a quaint and harmless relic of another age: they had become an active force

in world affairs. The Revolution was sublime, and the word sublime meant Miltonic. Milton was the master, if not the embodiment, of sublimity; the sublime was the aesthetic of terror, and the master of (the) Terror was the Satanic Robespierre. It was as if Milton's works had somehow come down off the shelves and become tangled up with the daily news: an impression that could only have been reinforced by the regular appearance of adverts for new Milton editions in the newspapers of the time.[38] These identifications of Milton with political movements implied that he was no longer a distant, benign father-figure, but a living power at work in the world, and one writer after another accordingly expressed a sense of Milton's immediate or imminent *presence*. The mechanisms of aesthetic distancing were breaking down, and Milton, despite having been dead for over a century, was becoming increasingly entangled with the unfolding revolution.

III

In the summer of 1790, the poet and novelist Helen Maria Williams sailed for France, eager to arrive in time for the celebrations of the first anniversary of the Bastille's fall. She was full of hope in the Revolution: it seemed to her to be magical, magnificent and above all *sublime*. 'We contemplate the deliverance of millions with a sublime emotion of wonder and exaltation', she wrote in her *Letters from France*, and she regarded with awe 'that sublime federation of an assembled nation which had nobly shaken off its ignominious fetters' (HMW I:2:1, II:2:87). What Williams means by the word 'sublime' in these sentences, and in the others like them that can be found throughout the *Letters*, is somewhat different to the definition used by Burke in his *Enquiry*. Clearly, she is not saying that the French people are 'huge, dark, and terrifying', which was Burke's primary meaning; instead she is drawing upon the tradition of republican sublimity, rooted in moral excellence rather than terror. Like other radical writers of the period, she constructs a sublime of light (and enlightenment) rather than Burkean darkness, and the gloomy sublime of Burke's *Enquiry* is systematically associated by Williams with the old, feudal order, which she describes in gothic terms: for her, the symbols of the *ancien régime* are the Bastille, the 'many labyrinths' beneath the Abbey of St Michel, and the secret cage which the Duc D'Orleans hacks apart in a fit of righteous indignation, thereby (in Williams's view) allowing him to 'claim the glory of having, even before the demolition of the Bastille, begun the French revolution' (HMW I:1:40–1). 'The old constitution', she wrote,

'is connected in my mind with the image of a friend confined in the gloomy recesses of a dungeon, and pining in hopeless captivity' (HMW I:1:72). The 'friend' is both Williams's acquaintance Monsier Du Fosse, whom the Revolution had helped to restore to liberty, and France itself, both of which Williams depicts as emerging from the gloom of tyranny into the sublime daylight of the Revolution.

However, while the sublimity which Williams wishes to attribute to the revolution is certainly not that of Burke's monarchic sublime, it is not quite the traditional republican sublime, either; instead it is a softer, more domestic version. Her very choice of phrase indicates this: 'the gloomy recesses of a dungeon' stand, conventionally enough, for the sublime of the *ancien régime*, but the revolutionary sublime is represented not by some imprisoned patriot or stoic philosopher bravely enduring their suffering, but by the sentimental image of 'a friend … pining in hopeless captivity'. Against the gothic sublime of the *ancien régime*, Williams pits a revolutionary sublime of a different kind: a softened version of traditional republican sublimity, moderated by the conventionally feminine virtues of beauty and humanity. Hers is a sublime in which the lamb of sentimentality can lie down with the lion of revolution. Burke had claimed that beauty and sublimity were opposites, but Williams insists that the Revolution can be both at once: 'The French revolution is not only sublime in a general view, but is often beautiful when considered in detail' (HMW I:2:22). Williams's contention seems to be that the sublime and the beautiful are only opposed to one another so long as one insists that only roughness, darkness and the capacity to inspire terror are truly sublime. Once one accepts that sublimity does not have to be founded on fear, and that people or nations may be strong without also being cruel, then it becomes possible for an event such as the French Revolution to be beautiful as well as sublime. The Burkean sublime could only be safely appreciated so long as one held it at arm's length; if it was close enough to be 'considered in detail' as well as 'in a general view', then it was almost certainly too close. But Williams's sublime is safe at any range, which is why she can stand in the middle of the revolutionary festivals, the very heart of revolutionary sublimity, and emerge unscathed. She was well aware of the potential dangers of an aesthetic that glorifies strength and violent activity, as she showed when writing about Henry IV:

> I prefer [Henry IV of France] to all the Alexanders and Frederics that ever existed. They may be terribly sublime, if you will, and have great

> claims to my admiration; but as for my love, all that portion of it which I bestow on heroes, is already in Henry's possession. (HMW I:1:93)

The problem with Frederic and Alexander is precisely that they are *terribly* sublime: they are exemplars of the gothic sublime of awe and fear enforced through the threat of violence, the version of the sublime symbolised by the Bastille. Unlike the despotic kings they have replaced, her high-minded revolutionaries temper their strength with kindness: as a result they are not just physically, but also *morally*, sublime, and frequently beautiful to boot. Burke's sublime, like his *Reflections* – which Williams abhorred – was the product of a malfunctioning society, whose aesthetic sense had been deformed by its worship of violence and power. Now, with the coming of the Revolution, Williams looked forward to the rise of a better society with truer, more humane notions of what constituted sublimity: one that would not have to be admired from a safe distance, but could and should, like the beautiful, be appreciated at close range. But in her emphasis on the beauty and sentimentality of revolutionary sublimity, Williams also broke from the main tradition of the republican sublime; Reid's Cato is, in his own way, as unapproachable as his Caesar, but Williams's Henry IV is a man of feeling, entirely unlike the grim, murderous 'Frederics and Alexanders' with whom he is compared.

Unsurprisingly, given her background as a poet and novelist, Williams frequently drew upon Milton to illustrate her account of the unfolding Revolution. Almost all her Miltonic references are to his infernal scenes, and they appear chiefly when she wished to associate someone or something with the gothic version of the sublime of which Burke's *Enquiry* had made them the epitomes. Initially, she drew the obvious link between the retreating counter-revolutionary forces and Milton's demons: 'These unhappy fugitives … made their unfortunate condition still worse, like Milton's fallen angels, by railing accusations and mutual ill offices' (HMW I:3:120). She was also perceptive enough to pick up on the Satanic resonance of Burke's description of Marie Antoinette as the Morning Star, whom she describes, like Milton's Satan, as being 'shorn of her beams' (HMW I:4:142). Later, with the onset of the Terror and her own imprisonment, she began to use the same language to describe the Jacobins: Hebert and his fellow ultra-revolutionists, squabbling in the 'darkness visible' of their prison, are 'like the fallen spirits in Milton'; Robespierre is a 'foul fiend', the 'high priest of Molock'; the Jacobins are worse

than Milton's demons, because '"Devil with devil damned/Firm concord holds;" but here, as the supremacy was to be undivided, no two parties could exist on equal terms', and so on (HMW II:2:18, 21, 90, II:3:73). Such straightforward demonisation of one's political enemies was commonplace at the time, and as such is of relatively little interest. But there are times when Williams's Miltonisms seem to go against the grain of her argument, such as when she writes:

> The passage from despotism to liberty is long and terrible – like the passage of Milton's Satan from hell to earth, when
>
> 'His ear was peal'd
> With noises loud and ruinous …
> … As if this frame
> Of heav'n were falling, and these elements
> In mutiny had from her axle torn
> The steadfast earth.'
>
> When the French have passed the 'wild abyss', then will Europe discern and judge whether the produce of their new political creation be happiness or misery … (HMW I:4:72)

This is Burke's argument about the Revolution's lack of aesthetic distance seen from the other side. Williams acknowledges that, like Burke's tiger, the Revolution may presently seem 'terrible'; however, she insists that the closeness of events makes it impossible to judge them properly, and it is only once a sufficient temporal distance has been established that 'Europe' will be able to 'discern and judge' whether it has caused 'happiness or misery'. As the violence of the Revolution increased, this was an argument that its British sympathisers deployed with increasing frequency. In the Revolution's early days, Williams had claimed that it was both 'sublime in a general view' and 'beautiful when considered in detail', something that one could appreciate without having to hold it at arm's length. Later, with the onset of the Terror, it was generally acknowledged that the details of the Revolution did not bear examination. But those who kept their faith in the Revolution as a whole insisted that so long as one kept one's eyes on the 'general view' – so long, in other words, as one could maintain one's aesthetic distance from the

actual events on the ground, the severed heads in baskets, the blood on the streets – the overall effect could still be regarded as sublime.

But the passage Williams chose to illustrate her point is rich with unintended ironies. The journey through chaos shows Satan at his most adventurous and heroic, and it may have been the connotations of order established through heroic struggle that brought it to Williams's mind. But it also shows him at his most malevolent, for the objective of his journey is the destruction of all humanity: the 'produce' of his expedition will be the apple that brings about the Fall. Presumably, Williams chose the passage that she quoted because it contains an example of unwarranted alarm: when Satan sets out into chaos, it sounds as though the mutinous elements have torn the earth from its axle, just as the anti-revolutionary writers thought that the rebellious French had destroyed the very foundations of civilised life, but in fact when he gets to the far side of the 'wild abyss' the earth is as stable as ever, just as Williams wishes to imply that France will be once all the tumults of the Revolution have settled down. In the end, however, Milton's earth *is* tilted off its axis, as one of the consequences of the Fall: not because of the mutiny of the elements, but because of the mutiny of Satan, as a direct result of the very journey to which Williams compares the French Revolution.

Why did Williams choose this Satanic journey to illustrate the progress from despotism to liberty? Her own words suggest a much less problematic Miltonic comparison that she could have made: she could have compared the 'new political creation' of the revolutionaries to the Creation itself, which was also a progress from chaos to order, with none of the unfortunate associations of Satan's journey through chaos. Was Williams unconsciously expressing her doubts about the revolutionary project? Or was she just being careless? Either is possible, but it seems to me most likely that in these passages Williams is running into the same reflexive Satanism that bedevilled the entire revolutionary movement, examples of which we have already seen in Paine and Jefferson. Thanks to Burke's *Enquiry*, Milton's depiction of Satan's rebellion had been established as the most sublime battle imaginable, and for those who thought – as Williams clearly did – that there was something sublime about the French Revolution, some level of identification with Milton's Satan was almost inescapable. Even though Williams's revolutionary sublime was no longer founded on darkness and fear, it was still intimately involved with ideas of size and vastness (as with her descriptions of the crowds at the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille,

or her evocation of the nation under arms) and ideals of heroic struggle (as with her account of the heroic self-sacrifice of the martyrs of the Revolution in its struggles with its royalist enemies). As a result, her model of sublimity remains haunted by the figure of Satan: for what could be more sublimely vast than Milton's Hell and Chaos, or more sublimely heroic than Satan's struggle across them? The fact that this identification of Williams's beloved Revolution with Satan appears, like Paine's, to have been largely unconscious, only goes to further demonstrate the ubiquity of this particular series of ideas in the writings of the time. Where the sublime was, there Milton was also; and where Milton was, Satan was not far behind.

The stubbornly Satanic nature of sublimity, especially revolutionary sublimity, was understood much more clearly by one of Williams's fellow Englishwomen in Paris, Mary Wollstonecraft. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft wrote:

> Similar feelings [of tenderness] has Milton's pleasing picture of paradisiacal happiness ever raised in my mind, yet, instead of envying [Adam and Eve], I have, with conscious dignity, or Satanic pride, turned to hell for sublimer objects. (*Rights of Women*, chapter 2: MW 5:94)

Wollstonecraft's choice of words here is significant: she rejects Eden for hell, not because it is happier or morally superior, but because it is more *sublime*. To choose hell over Eden is, in Burke's terms, to choose the sublime over the beautiful, the manly over the effeminate. It meant a rejection of the feminine domain of domesticity in favour of the masculine realm of politics and heroic strife. 'Domestic trifles', Wollstonecraft explains, are capable only of inspiring sentimental, sub-rational 'tenderness', 'an emotion similar to what we feel when children are playing, or animals sporting'; to inspire 'admiration' or 'respect' requires something very different, namely 'the contemplation of the noble struggles of suffering merit' (*Rights of Women*, chapter 2: MW 5:94). Both sides of the equation are heavily underwritten by Burke's reading of Milton: beauty is associated with the happy but trivial life of Eve in Eden, while sublimity is the domain of Satan, enduring tremendous suffering as he struggles heroically across hell. To choose sublime suffering over domestic beauty thus, inescapably, meant identifying oneself with Milton's Satan; but for Wollstonecraft, as for Jefferson, the identification may have been natural in any case. Adriana Craciun points out that in

Wollstonecraft's semi-autobiographical novel *The Wrongs of Woman*, the imprisoned heroine Maria – herself guilty of a revolt against the established order, embodied in her case in the form of her brutish husband – insists that 'my mind is freed, though confined in hell itself'; an echo of Satan's speech in book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, which Jefferson had copied into his commonplace book more than thirty years before.[39] Like Jefferson, Wollstonecraft seems to have felt Milton's Satan to be something of a kindred spirit: her reference to 'the noble struggles of suffering merit', coming so soon before her declaration of 'Satanic pride', implies that she considered Satan rather than God to be the wronged party in *Paradise Lost*. The resemblance was certainly not lost on her enemies: as Craciun has shown, Wollstonecraft was frequently compared to Satan by her critics, who saw her as a demonic tempter luring women away from the Eden of domestic happiness into the realm of sublime political action and Satanic pride – or, as Wollstonecraft herself would have called it, 'conscious dignity'.[40] Craciun even quotes one such critic, Anne Grant, describing Wollstonecraft in clearly sublime and Satanic terms:

> There is a degree of boldness in her conceptions, and masculine energy in her style, that is very imposing. There is a gloomy grandeur in her imagination, while she explores the regions of intellect without chart or compass, which gives one the idea of genius wandering through chaos …[41]

Craciun correctly notes that Grant depicts Wollstonecraft as 'the wandering Satan traversing chaos', but she does more than that: by attributing to Wollstonecraft 'boldness', 'masculine energy' and above all 'gloomy grandeur', she makes Wollstonecraft, like Satan, an embodiment of Burkean sublimity. For Grant, Wollstonecraft's sublimity was proof of how far she had deviated from the expected norms of her gender, her embrace of the sublime acting as evidence of her Satanic fall into distinctly unfeminine worlds of evil and power.

For her part, Wollstonecraft was deeply dissatisfied with Burke's profoundly sexist account of beauty and sublimity. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, her response to Burke's *Reflections*, she wrote that 'truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful' (*Vindication of the Rights of Men*: MW 5:7). These are the aesthetics of the republican sublime: manly, rational, temperate and austere. Like Williams, Wollstonecraft associated revolutionary sublimity

with light, which reveals the truth, and enlightenment, which comes with knowing it: she did not seek the 'gloomy grandeur' which Grant attributed to her, and she had little sympathy for the 'tyrants', grand or domestic, who leave their subjects 'groping in the dark' (*Rights of Women*, Dedication: MW 5:67). But she also objected to Burke's definition of the beautiful – with which Williams largely seems to concur – as 'small', 'smooth', 'polished', 'light' and 'delicate' (*Enquiry*, part 3, section 27: EB 1:281–2). Applying this definition of beauty to women, Burke stated explicitly that women are made more beautiful by 'weakness and imperfection', which allowed them more easily to inspire the feelings of protective love which he saw as the natural response to beauty:

> Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty. Blushing has little less power; and modesty in general, which is a tacit allowance of imperfection, is itself considered as an amiable quality … (*Enquiry*, part 3, section 9: EB 1:270)

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft furiously attacked this passage, pointing out that to claim that women's excellence lay in imperfection was as much as to say that they should avoid the cultivation of virtue, for fear that the acquisition of 'fortitude, justice, wisdom, and truth' – a significantly non-Christian, classically republican list of virtues – would render them less beautiful and hence less feminine (*Vindication of the Rights of Men*, MW 5:45). If love of women is only love of weakness, she goes on, 'Plato and Milton were grossly mistaken in asserting that human love led to heavenly, and was only an exaltation of the same affection; for the love of the Deity, which is mixed with the most profound reverence, must be love of perfection, and not compassion for weakness' (*Vindication of the Rights of Men*, MW 5:46). For Wollstonecraft, all love should be love of virtue, preferably of virtue in the grand republican mode. We should love our leaders, and our lovers, because they are good; the chivalric ideals which would teach us to love them simply because they are pretty or because they happen to be our social superiors, regardless of how weak or foolish they may be, serve only to encourage ignorance, prejudice and vice.

In this passage, Wollstonecraft invokes Milton against Burke; but when, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she made Burke's version of the beautiful one of her main targets, it is Milton who becomes her chief antagonist. Milton's Eve becomes an example of Burkean womanhood, all pretty weakness and imperfection:

> Thus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man … How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes! (*Rights of Women*, chapter 2: MW 5:88–9)

Wollstonecraft accuses Milton of inconsistency for having Adam describe Eve as an equal, 'fit to participate/All rational delight', even though elsewhere Eve places herself far below him, telling Adam that 'God is thy law, thou mine; to know no more/Is Woman's happiest knowledge and her praise' (*Rights of Women*, chapter 2: MW 5:89). 'It would be difficult to render [these two passages] consistent', she writes, remarking that 'into similar inconsistencies are great men often led by their senses', as if Milton had intended to make Eve fully equal to Adam, only to be carried away by his false (Burkean) ideas of beauty, which tricked him into depicting her as weak and inferior in the mistaken belief that he was thereby making her more beautiful. In fact, contrary to Wollstonecraft's claim, it is not at all difficult to make the two passages of Milton that she quotes consistent. The standard eighteenth-century reading would be that Eve is qualitatively Adam's equal insofar as she is a fellow rational creature, allowing him to enjoy 'fellowship' and 'rational delight' with her as he cannot with the animals, but that she is quantitatively weaker than Adam in both mind and body, and hence entrusted to him for instruction and protection: her fall comes when he foolishly allows her to stray out of his sight. Perhaps Wollstonecraft preferred to think that Milton – like the Rousseau of *Emile*, the other major target of the *Vindication* – was essentially a believer in equality who had simply let his taste for soft, weak-looking women get the better of him; that way, even if Milton's 'senses' were against her, she could

still claim his mind and soul for her cause, as she had in the *Vindication of the Rights of Man*. Such passages, however, make clear why Wollstonecraft was so uncomfortable with Milton's Edenic scenes, and so eager to leave his 'pleasing picture of paradisiacal happiness' in favour of the 'sublimer objects' of hell. Shortly after completing her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she put her principles into practice by leaving dull, domestic London for the 'sublimer objects' of revolutionary Paris, a place that most of her countrymen were convinced now resembled nothing so much as Milton's Pandaemonium.[42] One of the people whom she hoped to meet there was Williams, in whose footsteps she was now following, and whose words she was, knowingly or not, virtually quoting: for in June 1790, Williams too had declared her intention to leave England 'for the sublimer delights of the French Revolution'.[43]

In December 1790, Wollstonecraft had reviewed the first volume of Williams's *Letters from France*. While praising the *Letters* for helping to dispel English prejudices against the Revolution, her review also reveals Wollstonecraft's ambivalence over this most feminine of female writers:

> Women have been allowed to possess, by a kind of prescription, the knack of epistolary writing; the talent of chatting on paper, in that easy immethodical manner, which renders letters dear to friends and amusing to strangers. … The interesting unaffected letters which this pleasing writer had now presented to the public, revived these reflections, and gave new force to them, at the same time as they confirmed the very favourable opinion we have entertained of the goodness of the writer's heart. … As the destruction of the Bastille was an event that affected every heart – even hearts not accustomed to the melting mood, it was natural to suppose that it would particularly touch a tender one – and every page of Miss W's book tells us, in an unequivocal tone, that her's is true to every soft emotion. (Review of Helen Maria Williams's *Letters*, in the *Analytical Review*, volume 8, December 1790, article 16: MW 7:322–3)

Williams's letter-writing ability is not a skill but a mere 'knack', 'the talent of chatting on paper'; her letters are 'immethodical' but 'amusing', 'pleasing' and above all 'truly feminine'. She embodies, in other words, all those conventionally feminine qualities from which Wollstonecraft wishes to distance herself: unsystematic thought, eagerness to please and over-reliance

on sentimentality. Her letters display 'the goodness of the writer's heart': indeed, they positively parade it, for 'every page of Miss W's book tells us, in an unequivocal tone, that her [heart] is true to every soft emotion'. But Wollstonecraft seems to imply that they tell us little about the quality of her mind.

As Wollstonecraft may well have been aware, much of this was protective camouflage. As a woman entering the traditionally masculine field of political writing, Williams could only make her works acceptable by writing them in a strongly, even hyperbolically, feminine voice, thereby demonstrating that she had not been 'unsexed' by her interest in politics. Although she was in fact deeply involved with French politics throughout the revolutionary period and beyond, for Williams to have engaged in reasoned political analysis would have given the game away: instead, everything had to be communicated on an emotional level, through sentimental set-pieces and the language of the heart.[44] To take an objective view was held to be a masculine position; so for Williams everything had to be personal, a record of what one individual *felt*, not of what people in general should *think*. Wollstonecraft recognised the potential advantages of this mode; by shunning serious political discussion, it had a chance to penetrate into those sentimental fiction-reading circles which no serious political treatise – especially not one by a woman – could ever reach. She writes:

> Her reflections on the French Revolution are truly feminine, and such an air of sincerity runs through the descriptive part of her letters, as leads us to hope that they may tend to remove from some polite circles, a *few* of the childish prejudices that have the *insignia* of raw-head and bloody-bones to sink them deeper in the vacant mind. (Review of Helen Maria Williams's *Letters*, in the *Analytical Review*, volume 8, December 1790, article 16: MW 7:322)

For her own part, however, Wollstonecraft disdained such a role. She had no intention of pandering to 'polite circles', in the hope of gently removing 'childish prejudices' from 'vacant minds': instead, she wrote with all the force and rationality that Williams denied herself, drawing upon the masculine fields of 'philosophy, legislation, geometry, and politics' to give to her argument rigour and strength. Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* proclaimed itself to be precisely what Williams's

Letters were not: a reasoned and systematic examination of the Revolution in general, rather than an impressionistic account of those parts of it that had happened to pass before the author's eyes. Its very title underlines its author's concern with the larger picture, as to take a 'historical and moral view' of an event as large as the French Revolution, surveying its broad historical context and overall moral tendencies, one must take a very elevated vantage point indeed. Wollstonecraft's interest was in the general case, not the details; whereas Williams wrote about the effects of individual events on individual human beings, Wollstonecraft was forever writing about states in general, making vast generalisations about human nature and the whole course of human history. Her *Historical and Moral View* is dotted with passages such as this:

> The revolutions of states ought to be gradual; for during violent or material changes it is not so much the wisdom of measures, as the popularity they acquire by being adapted to the foibles of the great body of the community, which gives them success. – Men are most easily led away by the ingenious arguments, that dwell on the equality of man, and these are always employed by the different leaders of popular governments. (*Historical and Moral View*, book 4, chapter 1: MW 6:166)

This is the voice that Wollstonecraft cultivated and Williams avoided: manly rather than effeminate, rational rather than sentimental, and above all *distanced*, able to look upon events coolly and objectively, rather than compromised by direct emotional involvement.

The test case was their ability to deal with revolutionary violence, of which – in the pre-Terror days in which Wollstonecraft wrote her *Historical and Moral View* – the September Massacres were the pre-eminent example. In spite of her claims that 'the passage from despotism to liberty is long and terrible', Williams had recoiled from the Massacres in horror, insisting in her *Letters* that they could only have been the work of a conspiracy of criminals and formed no part of the Revolution proper. But other observers, such as the Jacobin deputy Claude Basire, drew different conclusions:

> Mirabeau said that there is nothing more lamentable or revolting in its details than a revolution but nothing finer in its consequences for the regeneration of empires. That may well be, but courage is needed to be

> a statesman and keep a cool head in such upheavals and such terrible crises. … A feeling man must simply cover his head with his cloak and hurry past the cadavers to shut himself up in the temple of the law.[45]

Basire's view of the massacres – that they were simply ghastly details in what would eventually prove to be an overwhelmingly positive process – is essentially the same as Williams's argument about the need for Europe to withhold from passing judgment on the Revolution until its 'passage from despotism to liberty' is complete, the difference being that Basire extends the argument further than Williams is willing to allow. He can do this because he has 'courage' and 'a cool head'; the courage and coolness necessary to 'hurry past the cadavers', holding them at an emotional distance despite their physical proximity, writing them off as acceptable collateral damage in the pursuit of an ultimately righteous cause. One recalls Coleridge's analysis of the character of Robespierre:

> Robespierre … possessed a glowing ardour that still remembered the *end*, and a cool ferocity that never either overlooked, or scrupled, the *means*. What that *end* was, is not known: that it was a wicked one, has by no means been proved. I rather think, that the distant prospect, to which he was travelling, appeared to him grand and beautiful; but he fixed his eye on it with such intense eagerness as to neglect the foulness of the road. (*Conciones ad Populum*, Introductory Address: C 1:35)

Like Basire, Coleridge's Robespierre keeps his eyes fixed upon 'the distant prospect' and ignores the foulness he wades through to get there. Neither man is emotionless: Basire is 'a feeling man', and Robespierre 'possessed a glowing ardour' for his 'grand and beautiful' (i.e. sublime) objective. But this warm, empathic, implicitly feminine side of their personalities is tempered by masculine coolness: 'cool ferocity' in Robespierre, 'courage' and 'a cool head' in Basire. As a result, they do not shrink from the ugly means required by their beautiful ends, justifying the occasional massacre as necessary for the general good. This quality, according to Basire, is essential to the revolutionary statesman; and its possession, according to Coleridge, is what set Robespierre apart from his predecessor Brissot, who 'was rather a sublime visionary, than a quick-eyed politician' (*Conciones ad Populum*, Introductory Address: C 1:35). For Coleridge's Brissot the Revolution's ends,

though sublime, remained 'visionary': unlike Robespierre, he was unable or unwilling to tread the foul path that appeared necessary to turn them into practical realities.

The courage and coolness of Basire are the masculine attributes which Williams – a supporter of Brissot and the Girondins – denies herself, and Wollstonecraft embraces. Although Wollstonecraft does not, like Basire, merely shrug off the September Massacres as 'details', her perspective is still sufficiently emotionally distanced to, in her words, 'coolly and impartially' explain (if not excuse) the violence of the mob. On the massacres themselves, she writes:

> Thus had France grown up, and sickened on the corruption of a state diseased. But, as in medicine there is a species of complaint in the bowels which works it's own cure, and, leaving the body healthy, gives an invigorated tone to the system, so there is in politics: and whilst the agitation of it's regeneration continues, the excrementitious humours exuding from the contaminated body will excite a general dislike and contempt for the nation; and it is only the philosophical eye, which looks into the nature and weighs the consequences of human actions, that will be able to discern the cause, which has produced so many dreadful effects. (*Historical and Moral View*, book 5, chapter 4: MW 6:235)

For Williams, violence was always horrific, inexcusable and nigh-incomprehensible; it could be understood only as the work of villains and monsters, not (as in Wollstonecraft) of ordinary men and women avenging their ancestral grievances as part of a grand historical process. Williams's account of the Terror – during which she was imprisoned, and could easily have been executed – is written in the language of gothic nightmare, a phantasmagoria of horrors presided over by demonic Jacobins, in which the feminised sublime of the Revolution has somehow reverted to the dreadful gothic sublime of the *ancien régime*. Her Jacobins, like her evil aristocrats, are marked out as villains by their lack of the feminine virtues of empathy and humanity: they inhabit 'the summit of the Mountain, that elevated region, where, aloof from all the ordinary feelings of our nature, no one is diverted from his purpose by the weakness of humanity, or the compunction of remorse' (HMW I:4:1–2). The coolness commended by Basire as necessary to anyone who has a revolution to run becomes in Williams the mark of the

Beast, proof of how far its possessors have strayed from what she saw as the true principles of the Revolution. For their parts, the Jacobins would doubtless have seen Williams as a classic Girondin: an enthusiast for the Revolution in theory, but throwing up her hands in horror once the necessary steps are taken to actually put it into practice. Committed to a feminine discourse of beauty and emotional attachment, Williams could not attain – and did not desire – the manly intellectual detachment necessary to see the Revolution as sublime in general even after its details became grotesque.

When one considers what Milton's Satan represented in this period – grand rebellion, heroic struggle and terrible sublimity – it becomes easy to see why Wollstonecraft was willing to deliberately do what Williams did only subconsciously, and identify both herself and the Revolution with Satan. For Williams, it was not enough for the Revolution to be 'sublime in general view': any Frederic or Alexander could claim that much for themselves. It also had to be 'beautiful in detail'; its implicit model was the happy domesticity of Milton's unfallen Eden, where sublimity and beauty, in the persons of Adam and Eve, live side by side. As a result, as soon as its details were no longer beautiful, she could no longer regard it as sublime. But for Wollstonecraft, who had no interest in Burkean beauty or Miltonic domestic life, the 'general view' was everything: what mattered was the grand historical narrative, the importance of striking a blow against tyranny, whether in the person of Milton's God or the King and nobility of France. If one became too closely mixed up with the events on the ground, the general view would become obscured by a mass of ghastly details, and the effect of sublimity would be lost. But if one could maintain sufficient intellectual detachment to look clearly and rationally at events, to consider what they meant for human history as a whole rather than for individuals in particular, then internal, mental detachment could take the place of external, physical distance, and the Revolution could still be viewed as sublime, no matter how close it (or its embodiments, Milton and Satan) might come to the spectator. This clear-eyed, manly, rational and unflinchingly truthful perspective was for Wollstonecraft a sublime attainment in and of itself, as it allowed the viewer to see through the confusions and obfuscations upon which priestcraft and tyranny depended – among which, in all likelihood, she numbered the belief in the literal existence of hell and Satan – and was thus an essential prerequisite for the attainment of true liberty. It was also, not coincidentally, the kind of perspective that radical writers often credited Milton with having possessed.

Wollstonecraft's belief in a republican sublime of liberty founded on clarity, rationality and truthfulness was shared by her future husband, William Godwin. Godwin also idolised Milton and sympathised with his Satan, and his *Political Justice*, published in 1793, featured an interpretation of Milton's Satan who bore more than a passing resemblance to the contemporary revolutionaries:

> Poetical readers have commonly remarked Milton's devil to be a being of considerable virtue. It must be admitted that his energies centred too much on 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 as 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 proved with a small diversity of situation![46]

This is Milton's Satan re-imagined as a rationalist revolutionary, rebelling against the *status quo* because he cannot find rational grounds for supporting it. There is no mention of Satan's pride or malice, his lust for power, or his willingness to harm others to spite his enemies; there is no consideration that perhaps the excuses given by the Prince of Lies for his own rebellion should not be taken at face value, and the word 'sin' does not appear to be part of Godwin's vocabulary. Godwin admits that Satan is vengeful, but suggests that his revenge, if not justified, is at least an understandable response to his sufferings. It is the Satan with whom Jefferson sympathised, the fearless foe of tyrants, undefeated even in hell: a Satan with 'the feelings of an Epictetus or a Cato', a figure in whom the Burkean sublime of power and terror unites with the republican sublime of righteous defiance. Godwin's parting

remark – 'How beneficial and illustrious might the temper from which these qualities flowed have proved with a small diversity of situation!' – seems to me an invitation to make the obvious link between Milton's Satan and the contemporary revolutionaries, just as Godwin seems to be inviting a comparison between Milton's Satan and the persecuted British radicals of the 1790s when, in his novel *Caleb Williams*, the unjustly imprisoned hero paraphrases Satan's motto 'the mind is its own place' to console himself in his prison cell: 'The mind is master of itself; and is endowed with powers that might enable it to laugh at the tyrant's vigilance'.[47] A Satanic temper may not have been entirely appropriate in Heaven; but with a 'small diversity of situation', perhaps replacing the revolt against God with the revolt against Louis XVI or William Pitt, it could have brought forth the most 'beneficial and illustrious' results. By 1793, Godwin must have seen hundreds of counter-revolutionary caricatures and polemics depicting leading revolutionaries such as Paine as the devil's agents, if not devils themselves. This passage of *Political Justice* is, I think, his response; his suggestion that perhaps some Satanic spirit might be just what the modern world required.

Jefferson, Paine, Williams, Wollstonecraft and Godwin: all five supported the revolutionary project, and yet all five implicitly or explicitly compared the revolutionaries to Milton's Satan. There are a number of conclusions to be drawn from this. The first is that it provides yet further evidence of the extent to which Milton's works and ideas were 'in the air' at the time; writing about political situations in Miltonic terms was so common that it could be done casually, even accidentally. Secondly, they show *Paradise Lost* being read in an increasingly secular and politicised way, especially among that class of readers most disposed to see hell and Satan as myths rather than eternal realities. Aside from Williams, none of these writers seems to be interested in *Paradise Lost* as a religious text; they write about God and Satan as if they were fictional or historical characters, rather than spiritual beings from before the dawn of time. Nor was such an attitude to Satan limited to radical writers: in 1783, James Beattie considered the question '[I]f Satan in *Paradise Lost* is a sublime idea, does it not follow, that we must be both astonished at his character, and pleased with it? And is it possible to take pleasure in a being, who is the author of evil, and the adversary of God and man?' He answered:

> Though we know there is an evil spirit of this name [i.e. Satan], we know also, that Milton's Satan is partly imaginary; and we believe, that those

> qualities as so in particular, which we admire in him as great; for we have no reason to think, that he had really that boldness, irresistible strength, or dignity of form, which the poet ascribes to him. So far, therefore, as we admire him for sublimity of character, we consider him, not as the great enemy of our souls, but as a fictitious being, and a mere poetical hero.[48]

Beattie, writing from within a Christian paradigm, did believe in the existence of 'an evil spirit' called Satan – a belief not shared by the atheist Godwin or the deists Jefferson and Paine. However, he was willing to think of Milton's Satan and the real Satan as entirely different figures, of whom Milton's was by far the more sublime. Already present in Beattie's argument are the germs of subsequent radical readings of Milton: by decoupling *Paradise Lost* from scripture, reducing Milton's Satan to 'a mere poetical hero', he opens the way for him to be judged in literary and moral rather than religious terms. So long as the reader is, first and foremost, a Christian, that judgment is still likely to be damning; but for a devotee of the classical republican sublime, for whom 'sublimity of character', 'boldness', 'dignity' and 'irresistible strength' are more important than obedience to the dictates of one's superiors, it was possible to be much more positive. Satan no longer had to remain merely a sublime monster; he could become a hero, even a political role model, whose sublime struggle against arbitrary authority could set an example to the would-be revolutionary. By dragging Milton into politics, they compel his story to be read in earthly, human terms, as if the revolt of Lucifer against God the Father Almighty was directly comparable to a mortal rebellion against a mortal king. Comparison is a double-edged sword; if Robespierre is to be inflated into Satan, a transcendent embodiment of evil, then Satan must shrink down into Robespierre, a fallible human politician grappling with forces beyond his control, in whom questionable means and good intentions are hopelessly intermixed. Within such a secular, humanised reading of *Paradise Lost*, it becomes possible to judge the characters by ordinary moral standards, an action that would scarcely be feasible while still reading it from a religious perspective: one may or may not approve of Satan, the defeated revolutionary, but one is likely to find him easier to sympathise with than Satan, the Great Red Dragon, father of Sin and Death. As I have argued, these political readings of Milton by Godwin, Wollstonecraft and the rest may have been carried out in a spirit of enlightenment demythologisation, aiming to strike a blow against

'priestcraft' by refusing to take its bogeymen as seriously as it demanded; but they may also have helped to clear the way for the psychological readings of Milton by Wordsworth and the later Romantics over the decades to come.

All these Miltonic allusions associate Satan with the Revolution. For Jefferson, Godwin or Wollstonecraft, this could have been a deliberate gesture of defiance; for Paine, an unconscious echo of fellow-feeling, and for Williams probably something like a Freudian slip. But this recurring pattern requires explanation, and I believe that it is largely to be found in the discourse of the sublime, especially as articulated by Burke; for, ironically, it was the champion of counter-revolution who inscribed the discourse of sublimity so indelibly with the image of the arch-rebel Satan that it became nigh-impossible to invoke one without the other. The older meanings of the word 'sublime', such as 'admirable', 'morally excellent' or 'of elevated character', blurred together with its new meanings, 'dark', 'powerful', 'fearsome' and 'Satanic', until they merged in such fusions as Wollstonecraft's evocation of Satan's 'noble struggles of suffering merit' or Godwin's image of Satan as a stoic philosopher. There is a curious logic to such an image: no-one could be more noble and elevated than Cato, or more dark and fearsome than Satan, and thus Satan with the spirit of Cato was the most sublime of all possible beings. I do not suggest that such was Godwin's deliberate intention: merely that in the forty years since Burke wrote his *Enquiry* the different meanings of the word 'sublime' had become so jumbled together that the concept simultaneously evoked stoics and Satan. (One recalls John Wesley's gloss on Satan's famous declaration, 'the mind is its own place', which would so inspire Wollstonecraft and Jefferson: 'This is a fit rant for a stoic or a devil'.[49]) This doubly sublime, stoically struggling, stoically suffering Satan, the product of linguistic confusion and an extremely questionable reading of *Paradise Lost*, was also a reflection of their idealised image of Milton as both a saintly philosopher and a heroic champion of revolution – an image which they projected, somewhat uncomfortably, onto his greatest literary creation. This version of Satan became in the works of these writers something of a mascot for the Revolution, to which he bore more than a passing resemblance; for, like him, the Revolution was at once glorious and terrifying, capable of both exalted virtue and hideous atrocities. All of them, aside perhaps from the stubbornly level-headed Paine, believed in the sublimity of the revolutionary project; and thanks to Burke, where the sublime was, Milton and Satan were never far behind.

Burke claimed that, although Satanic in its evil, the French Revolution lacked the aesthetic distance necessary to make it sublime. In the Revolution's early phases, Burke's radical opponents contested his definitions of sublimity, insisting that truly sublime things (such as the French and American Revolutions) were characterised by moral purity and enlightenment rather than darkness and terror, and could thus be appreciated as sublime even at close range. But as it became apparent that the Revolution was not exactly averse to terror, their argument shifted; true, the Revolution was both terrifying and close at hand, but it could still be seen as sublime provided it was viewed with sufficient emotional and intellectual objectivity. The necessary distance was psychological, not external: one had to be willing to stand back, to see the big picture, rather than obsessing over shocking but ultimately irrelevant details. To be able to see the sublimity of the Revolution was itself a sublime act, for it called for the kind of clarity, honesty and enlightened virtue that formed the foundations of revolutionary/republican sublimity. This argument was underwritten by Milton *at every stage*: not only was Milton the most sublime of artists, whose creations were perfect emblems for the Revolution, but he was also the most sublime of men, an exemplar of both the morally sublime revolutionary and the intellectually sublime observer of revolutions, whose enlightened clarity in viewing and describing the revolutions of his own day served as a model for his latter-day admirers. If anyone had ever had the 'cool head' and 'courage' that Basire recommended to the 'statesman' who was to view the horrors of revolution without being overwhelmed, then surely it had been Milton; and if anyone had ever understood that if one is going to strike a blow against tyranny one can't be too picky about the means one employs, then surely it had been Milton's Satan. It is thus unsurprising that, in the 1790s, both Milton and his most famous creation became intermixed in the radical imagination with the process of revolution itself, and that men like Coleridge were able to call for Milton's resurrection without fear for the consequences of summoning so sublime a being into one's immediate vicinity. Warton might have feared the reappearance of the sublime Milton, who in his view had become safe only at a distance of 100 years; but for Coleridge and his fellow radicals, so long as one maintained a suitably sublime, detached perspective, there was nothing to fear and everything to hope for from Milton's apparent failure to remain dead.

IV

Given the overwhelming popularity of *Paradise Lost* compared to his other poems, it is hardly surprising that the idea of Milton's terrible sublimity should have focussed on the figure of Satan and the landscape of Milton's Hell. However, the writers of the 1790s were also haunted by another sublime Miltonic figure, who simultaneously embodied the hopes and fears bound up with the French Revolution: Milton's Samson, the ultimate revolutionary strongman.

As Wittreich has shown, Samson was adopted in Milton's day as a symbol of the puritan revolution 'by puritan apologists who, through his figure, exalt the commonfolk as the bearers of the real strength, the true nobility, of the nation … and by those like John Lilburne who extol Samson as hero and patron saint of the revolutionaries'.[50] However, it has not yet been sufficiently noted that the same symbol reappeared in the political writings of the 1790s as a symbol of the Revolution. This identification was made much easier by the fact that the best known version of the Samson story in English, aside from that in the Bible, was Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, which gave the story a much more radical inflection than its original. In Judges, the carnage inflicted by the dying Samson on his captors is indiscriminate: we are told that 'all the lords of the Philistines were there', but there is no suggestion that most of the thousands of 'men and women' with whom 'the house was full', let alone the 'three thousand men and women' on the roof – all of whom die along with Samson – were anything other than gawping bystanders. His revenge is directed against the entire Philistine population.[51] In *Samson Agonistes*, however, Milton made a small but significant alteration to the story:

> … those two massie Pillars
> With horrible convulsion to and fro,
> He tuggd, he shook, till down they came and drew
> The whole roof after them, with burst of thunder
> Upon the heads of all who sate beneath,
> Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, or Priests,
> Their choice nobility and flower, not onely
> Of this but each *Philistian* city round,
> Met from all parts to solemnize this Feast.
> *Samson*, with these inmixt, inevitably
> Pulld down the same destruction on himself;

> The vulgar only scap'd who stood without.
> (*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1648–59: M 388)

What Milton's Samson accomplishes is not a general massacre but a decapitation strike, which exterminates the top echelon of Philistine society while leaving the common folk unharmed. Like the rest of Milton's revolutionary heritage, this passage was mostly ignored in the eighteenth century; Handel's hugely popular oratorio version of *Samson Agonistes*, the libretto for which went through thirty-six editions between its first performance in 1743 and 1800, did not include these lines. But it was clearly Milton's version of Samson's story that Paine picked up on in Part II of *Rights of Man*, where he wrote:

> Mr Burke, in his first essay, called aristocracy, *'the Corinthian capital of polished society*'. Towards compleating [*sic*] the figure, he has now added the *pillar*; but still the base is wanting; and whenever a nation chuses to act a Samson, not blind, but bold, down go the temple of Dagon, the Lords and the Philistines.[52]

'Not blind, but bold': the phrase is an adaptation of Andrew Marvell's poem 'On Paradise Lost', often printed in the prefatory matter of eighteenth-century editions, which begins with the lines: 'When I beheld the Poet blind, yet bold,/In slender Book his vast Design unfold …' (M 2: ll. 1–2). There, Marvell writes specifically that he *fears* Milton will act like Samson, using his strength to avenge his blindness in an indiscriminate act of destruction. But Paine imagines the nation not lashing out blindly, but deliberately targeting its oppressors, like the Samson of *Samson Agonistes*: 'down go the temple of Dagon, the Lords and the Philistines'. The identification of Britain with Samson was an idea that Paine could have found elsewhere in Milton, for in *Areopagitica* Milton wrote:

> Methinks I see, in my mind, a noble and puissant nation rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks … (*Areopagitica*: MP 2:557–8)

The allusion is to an earlier point in Samson's story, before his blinding; possibly, by insisting that the nation is '*not* blind, but bold', Paine is conflating

the two scenes. Like Samson, the nation has the strength to topple the pillars of oppression; but unlike Samson, they have not been blinded and enslaved, and thus – presumably – they have the power, unlike Samson, to destroy their oppressors without destroying themselves in the process.

Paine was tried *in absentia* for writing Part II of *Rights of Man*, and at his trial Erskine – who was defending him – quoted this very passage of *Areopagitica*.[53] The trial was widely publicised, with transcripts of it – and especially of Erskine's speech – rapidly appearing in several editions; and between the popularity of the trial and of *Rights of Man* itself, the figure of Samson as a symbol for social change entered into general currency. Williams probably had Erskine's quotation in mind when she described revolutionary France, rousing itself to repel its attackers, as a Samson:

> As yet the strong man has been bound only 'with green withes and new cords, and his hair woven with the web;' for we behold him aroused from his sleep only to shake his locks, each time becoming more invincible; and we have not yet had the address to find out where his real strength lies, which it seems we are only taking measures to increase. But let us suppose it discovered, though to me the secret is impenetrable, the comparison will hold even to the catastrophe; for if the present coalition of all the powers of Europe succeed to betray or overwhelm the French, the principle cannot die; and at the appointed time, if the struggle should crush themselves with their tyrants, their country and children will be free. (HMW I:4:121–2)

In her novel *Desmond*, written in 1792, Charlotte Smith combined the two allusions. The novel's hero, Lionel Desmond, visits France and finds himself deeply sympathetic to the goals of the unfolding Revolution; not coincidentally, he is also a self-described 'incessant reader' of Milton, whom he views as a precursor of the revolutionaries.[54] Reading a copy of *Rights of Man*, he comments:

> These writers have told us what, I apprehend, Locke, and Milton, and Bacon, and (what is better than all) common sense has told us before, that government is not for the benefit of the governors, but the governed.[55]

Naturally enough, when this incessant reader of Milton first witnesses the glories of revolutionary France, the first thing that springs into his mind

is 'that energetic, and in regard to this country, *prophetic* sentence of our immortal poet'.[56] The sentence in question, of course, is the very one which Erskine quoted and Williams (whom Smith drew upon for her descriptions of revolutionary France) paraphrased: 'Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself like the strong man after sleep; and shaking her invincible locks ….'[57]

Other, less sympathetic, writers were quick to pick up on the same imagery. The satirical poet George Huddesford wrote mockingly in 1793 that:

> [Priestley's] Birmingham thunder shall 'wake
> Those blind Watchmen your Bishops suffragan,
> And the pillars of MONARCHY shake;
> PAINE calls it the Temple of Dagon:
> Like a Sampson he lustily strains
> To pull down that Pile Antichristian
> Which shall tumble, and beat out the brains
> Of each aristocratic Philistine.[58]

Two years later, the anonymous author of *The Times, a Poem: Written in the Year 1795* took the same threat much more seriously:

> A frantic multitude in turn appears,
> Its tow'ring head and form gigantic rears;
> Opposes all authority, thought just,
> And levels all distinction in the dust.
> Like him of Israel, with furious heat
> Grasping each massy pillar of the state,
> Rock'd to and fro the mighty building bends
> In one vast crash with pond'rous weight descends;
> Affrighted Nature feels the wild uproar,
> While mingled shouts and cries fill the resounding shore.[59]

All these passages are united by the figure of the people – or, at any rate, the revolutionary mob – as a giant/Samson figure, hugely strong and bent upon destruction. (This association may have been underlined by the contemporary activities of another Samson: Charles Henri Sanson or Samson, chief

executioner of Paris during the Terror, who by the end of his career may well have slaughtered as many 'Lords, ladies, captains, counsellors, or priests' as his Biblical namesake.)[60] However, none of them imagine the destruction as indiscriminate: all envisage it as specifically targeting the government and aristocracy, whether they describe it as 'the lords and the Philistines', the 'tyrants', the 'aristocratic Philistine[s]' or 'all authority, thought just'. All these Samsons are recognisably *Milton's* Samson, rather than the Samson of the Book of Judges or Handel's oratorio.

Being big, strong, rough, hairy and capable of terrifying acts of violence, Samson is clearly a sublime figure in Burkean terms, and thus an inviting symbol for writers who wished to emphasise the strength and sublimity of the Revolution. But, as Wittreich has shown, he has always been a morally ambiguous figure, with Biblical commentators divided between those who saw him as a righteous warrior of God and those who regarded him as heroic but fatally flawed by his vices of intemperance, gullibility and bloodlust.[61] In the seventeenth century he was identified as a type of both Jesus and Satan, so it is not too surprising to find him identified in the 1790s with their contemporary equivalents, the heroic, redemptive revolutionary of radical hopes and the crazed, murderous Jacobin of conservative fears. Radicals could describe the Revolution as being like Samson, the divinely sent deliverer of his country, while conservatives could describe it as being like Samson, the weak-willed, mindlessly destructive and ultimately suicidal failed saviour. It was this duality in the figure of Samson that Coleridge played upon in his *Conciones ad Populum*, penned in 1795, where he wrote:

> Like Samson, the People were strong – like Samson, the People were blind. Those two massy pillars of Oppression's Temple, the Monarchy and Aristocracy,
>
> > With horrible convulsion to and fro
> > They tugg'd, they shook, till down they came and drew
> > The whole Roof after them, with burst of Thunder
> > Upon the heads of all who sat beneath,
> > Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, and Priests,
> > Their choice Nobility!
> >
> > (Milton, Sam. Agon.)

> There was not a Tyrant in Europe, who did not tremble on his Throne. Freedom herself heard the Crash aghast! (*Conciones ad Populum*, Introductory Address: C 1:34)

For Coleridge, Milton's Samson embodies the ambivalence he feels about the Revolution. Its targets are the right targets, the 'pillars of Oppression's Temple', and the way in which it goes about destroying them is certainly effective, striking fear into every 'Tyrant in Europe'. (One recalls Robespierre's claim that the execution of Louis XVI would 'nourish in the spirits of tyrants a salutary terror of the justice of the people'.[62]) But the people who accomplish all this are 'blind', by which Coleridge presumably means that they do not truly understand what they are doing or why they are doing it, and as a result their destruction is so indiscriminate that it terrifies not just their enemies, but everyone: 'Freedom herself heard the Crash aghast!' Throughout the Terror, Robespierre had insisted that the People always knew exactly what they were doing and who their real enemies were, and that as a result no-one but an enemy of the People had any cause to fear their justice. But Coleridge lacked Robespierre's faith in the intuitive righteousness of the revolutionary mob, and used the figure of Milton's Samson to articulate why he found them both inspiring and terrifying. In his 1798 poem 'France: an Ode', Coleridge returned to the idea of France as Samson as a way of expressing his disappointment at the willingness of the French republic to move from defensive to aggressive warfare against its neighbours. Revolutionary France is figured as a giantess, who 'in wrath her giant-limbs upreared' and 'said she would be free'. But she is also a Samson-analogue, as Coleridge makes clear when he writes:

> When, insupportably advancing,
> Her arm made mock'ry of the warrior's ramp;
> While timid looks of fury glancing
> DOMESTIC TREASON, crush'd beneath her fatal stamp,
> Writh'd, like a wounded dragon in his gore;
> Then I reproach'd my fears that would not flee …
>
> ('France, an Ode', 1798 text, ll. 53–8: C 16:2:1:589.)

As the words 'insupportably advancing' and the otherwise bizarre reference to 'the warrior's ramp' make clear, these lines are a rewrite of a passage

from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, where the Israelite chorus recall Samson's past glory:

> When insupportably his foot advanc't,
> In scorn of their proud arms and warlike tools,
> Spurnd them to death by Troops. The bold *Ascalonite*
> Fled from his Lion ramp, old Warriors turnd
> Their plated backs under his heel;
> Or grovling soild thir crested helmets in the dust.
> (*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 136–41: M 350)

In alluding to these lines, Coleridge implies that he sees the newly warlike France in much the same way that the Israelites see the newly captured Samson: as a fallen saviour, a champion of righteousness brought low not by the strength of its enemies, but by its own weaknesses. In this poem, Samson/France is not a straightforwardly positive or negative figure, but one whose virtues are undermined by equally powerful vices. Good or bad, however, Samson/France is *dangerous*: a giant-like engine of destruction, crushing tyrants, traitors, patriots and innocents with equal ease. Accordingly, the emotion that he arouses is *fear*: in the early days of the revolutionary wars the poem's speaker 'reproached my fears that would not flee', but subsequent events have made it clear that he had ample reason to be afraid of this embodiment of the Burkean sublime.

The symbolism of Samson was further complicated by his persistent association with Milton himself. Marvell must have had the negative interpretation of the Samson story in mind when he praised Milton for *not* being like Samson and lashing out indiscriminately in revenge for his blindness, 'the world o'erwhelming to avenge his sight' (M 2, l. 10). But Hayley was clearly thinking of the positive interpretation when he wrote in his *Life of Milton*:

> We must remember, that the lot of Milton had a marvellous coincidence with that of his hero, in three remarkable points; first … he had been tormented by a beautiful but disaffectionate and disobedient wife; secondly, he had been the great champion of his country, and as such the idol of public admiration; lastly, he had fallen from that height of

> unrivalled glory, and had experienced the most humiliating reverse of fortune:
>
> His foe's derision, captive, poor, and blind.
>
> In delineating the greater part of Samson's sensations under calamity, he had only to describe his own.[63]

In this passage, Hayley makes a considerable effort to make Milton's life seem as much like Samson's as he possibly can. Milton may have got on badly with his wife, but Mary Powell was hardly a Dalila; and in any case, by the time Milton wrote *Samson Agonistes* she had been dead for nineteen years. Milton's job as Cromwell's Latin Secretary does not quite fit Hayley's description of him as 'the great champion of his country', and it is only by a great stretch of the imagination that his place in the Cromwellian civil service can be called a 'height of unrivalled glory', the occupation of which made him 'the idol of public admiration'. (Hayley seems to imagine Milton, after a hard day's pamphlet-writing, being fêted by adoring crowds as if he were Samson returning home after killing 10,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass.) I believe that the reason Hayley wished to emphasise the similarities between Milton and Samson was that they reflected his own, extremely elevated, view of Milton, for Hayley saw Milton as a figure of Old Testament magnitude, the holy defender of his nation: Milton, Judge of England, as it were. Milton himself, as Hayley was surely very well aware, had identified Samson with Britain, and by stressing the parallels between them Hayley was able to reinforce his claim for Milton's sacred and national significance. If Britain was Samson, and Samson was Milton, then so much the better for Hayley's bid to establish Milton as Britain's national poet.

Hayley was hardly the first person to make the connection between Samson and Milton. Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, with its blind hero, had long been seen as at least partially a self-portrait of its author, although commentators generally shied away from the consequent implication that what the aged Milton may have really wanted to do was not to write epic poetry but to single-handedly exterminate the Anglican clergy and the House of Lords. In the 1790s, the tangle of associations gathered around the figure of Samson reinforced his identification with Milton even further. The three texts hovering in the background of all these invocations of Samson are Milton's *Areopagitica*,

Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Marvell's poem about Milton. Milton was the most terribly sublime of authors; Samson was the most terribly sublime of men. The French Revolution resembled Milton's Samson, and Milton's Samson resembled Milton himself. Milton and Samson were both identified with the nation. The fact that Paine adapted Marvell's description of *Milton* in order to tell the nation how to behave like *Samson* indicates how far the identification had gone. For Samson, read Milton, throughout.

This network of ideas takes on a heightened significance when it is recalled that Samson's story is, among other things, a legend of reawakening. Samson's enemies repeatedly believe him to be vanquished, only to be proven catastrophically wrong when he rises from sleep and shakes his invincible locks; and even when he seems truly defeated, he turns out to be able to inflict one last terrible blow against his foes. Samson, in other words, repeatedly appears to be beaten only to come surging back, more dangerous than ever. Given the identification of Samson with Milton, and the frequent contemporary references to Milton's return or reawakening, it seems highly suggestive that all of the references to Samson that I have mentioned refer to these moments of resurgence. Samson/Milton, who in all these cases stands for the people and their capacity for revolution, had been sleeping but had now awoken; had been weak, but had now become terribly strong once more, and seemed this time to be set on overwhelming the entire established order to avenge its sight.

Faced with a Milton who was not sublimely distant but terrifyingly present, a Milton who was felt in some obscure way to embody the hopes and horrors of the age, writers attempted in various ways to restore the aesthetic distance they required. The attempts by conservative writers from Thomas Warton onwards to disassociate Milton from current affairs have already been discussed; Burke's reluctance to deploy Miltonic language in his *Reflections*, discussed in this chapter, served a similar purpose. This approach was based on the denial of Milton's contemporary relevance, whether through argument (as for Hayley and Todd) or through selective silence (as in many of the prefatory biographies of Milton attached to the cheap editions of his works), and was favoured by editors and critics. Radicals such as Godwin, Wollstonecraft and (to a much lesser degree) Williams aimed to restore the necessary distance by calling for a reasoned detachment from events: Milton might be raging reincarnate through Britain and France, but if one could only take a step back and see things in general terms then their inherent sublimity

would become apparent once more, and Milton's return could be welcomed rather than feared. But many of the poets of the same period employed a different strategy: they would distance Milton by rewriting him.

I do not suggest that this was a deliberate movement, the fruit of a meeting of British poets sitting down around a table to decide what to do about Milton's ghost; in the case of some poets, it may not even have been a conscious process. But I do not think it coincidental that the years in which so many people felt Milton's renewed presence also saw the production of a glut of sub-Miltonic epics, many of them fairly transparent attempts to rewrite Milton from a specific ideological angle. Using Milton's poetic machinery and style as a kind of ventriloquist's dummy through which to express their own opinions, they produced a series of epics which I am inclined to see as so many attempts to turn Milton's threatening presence into something easier to handle: by writing poems of Miltonic stature, but without the problematic associations of *Paradise Lost*, they would defuse his dangerous presence by channelling it through themselves, rendering him harmlessly inert once more. It is these epics that form the subject of my next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Milton's Heirs

I

In his 1782 *Essay on Epic Poetry*, Hayley addresses Homer thus:

> And haply Greece, the Wonder of the Earth
> For feats of martial fire and civic worth,
> That glorious Land, of noblest minds the nurse,
> Owes her unrivall'd race to thy inspiring Verse;
> For O, what Greek, who in his youthful vein
> Had felt thy soul-invigorating strain,
> Who that had caught, amid the festive throng,
> The public lesson of thy patriot Song,
> Could ever cease to feel his bosom swell
> With zeal to dare, and passion to excel.[1]

In other words, it was not Greece that made Homer; it was Homer who made Greece. It was by hearing Homer that the Greeks were inspired to achieve all that would make them famous in later years; if Homer had not sung, then Pericles would not have spoken, Plato would not have written, Leonidas would not have stood and fought. Alexander, the legend goes, slept with a dagger and an *Iliad* under his pillow. It hardly matters whether there was any truth in this. What counted was the idea: good epics make good nations.

The old Renaissance commonplace had been that good epics made good *men*, and if Homer and Virgil had been able to form the minds of the ancients, then they could form the minds of the moderns, too. But in the intervening years, with all their highly visible modernisation and change, a strong sense had grown up of the cultural and technological *otherness* of antiquity. Renaissance-era printers had happily depicted Aeneas, Achilles and the other epic heroes as sixteenth-century knights, but to an eighteenth-century artist it would have seemed absurd to draw them as contemporary soldiers, red coats and all.[2] In his 1735 *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of*

Homer, Thomas Blackwell had concluded that the modern world was simply too civilised to give rise to Homeric poetry:

> Neither indeed does it seem to be given to one and the same Kingdom, to be thoroughly civilised, and afford proper subjects for [epic] Poetry. The *Marvellous* and the *Wonderful* is the nerve of the Epic Strain: But what marvellous Things happen in a well ordered State?[3]

Thus, with the rise of historicist criticism in the writings of scholars such as Blackwell and Lowth, an uneasy sense arose that Homer and Virgil's works might no longer be applicable to their modern British readers. Hayley writes:

> What! Can the British heart, humanely brave,
> Feel for the Greek who lost his female slave?
> Can it, devoted to a savage Chief,
> Swell with his rage, and soften with his grief?[4]

This is not meant as a criticism of Homer, although it is a criticism of Homeric Greece; rather, it is a recognition that Homer's world and Hayley's are not the same, that indeed the historical and cultural gap between them might now be so large as to make it difficult for modern readers to sympathise with Homer's heroes at all. Hayley was not alone in feeling this: as far back as 1715, Terrasson had complained about how little sympathy he had for 'so very vicious a man as Achilles', and Addison had expounded on the unsuitability of ancient Greek or Roman models as behavioural or political guides for modern Britons.[5] But the need for epic inspiration remained as pressing as ever, and if the old ones were no longer suitable, then new epics were needed to do for Britain what Homer had done for Greece.

It was not just cultural difference that made a national epic such a pressing necessity: it was also national pride. As the eighteenth century progressed, and Britain rose to become a world imperial power, the achievements of Greece and Rome came to seem less like inimitable wonders to be marvelled at and more like templates to be followed, or even rivals to be outdone.[6] A British national epic would simultaneously prove that the British were the equals of the Ancients in poetry, and inspire the British to equal and exceed them in other ways. Hayley's *Essay* continues:

> And shall it [i.e. 'the British heart'] not with keener zeal embrace
> Their brighter cause, who, born of British race,
> With the strong cement of the blood they spilt,
> The splendid fane of British freedom built?
> Blest Spirits, who, with kindred fire endued,
> Thro' different ages this bright work pursued,
> May Art and Genius crown your sainted band
> With that poetic wreath your Deeds demand![7]

The need for such a British epic, written by a British poet about British heroes, had long been felt. Every classically educated critic knew that a national literature was supposed to consist of one epic, a few dozen plays and a few hundred poems; that was the form in which both Greek and Latin literature had come down to them, so why should English literature be any different? By Dryden's day, let alone Hayley's, there were English poems and plays in abundance – but where was the heart, the keystone, the great English national epic that would be for Britain what Homer and Virgil had been for Greece and Rome?

The situation could have been very different. In his 1642 pamphlet *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton had declared that although 'time servs [*sic*] not now', once he had sufficient leisure he intended to write a poem 'for the honour and instruction of [his] country': a work 'of highest hope and hardest attempting', in 'that Epick form whereof the two poems of *Homer*, and those other two of *Virgil* and *Tasso* are a diffuse, and the book of *Job* a brief model' (*Reason of Church Government*, Book 2: MP 1:810–13). It was to be a patriotic epic about a 'K[ing] or Knight before the [Norman] conquest', whom he would use as 'the pattern of a Christian *Heroe*': in other words, it would be exactly the sort of poem Hayley would long for in 1782 (MP 1:813–14). But the epic Milton actually published, twenty-five years later, did not follow this plan: it took the book of Genesis rather than the history of England as its source, and its principal actors were Adam, Eve and Satan rather than the knights and kings of ancient Britain. Perhaps the intervening years of civil war had lessened Milton's faith in the redemptive power of heroic violence; perhaps, disgusted with his nation's willingness to welcome back its kings, he no longer felt that British history was any fit place to look for 'the pattern of a Christian hero'. Whatever the cause, Milton's decision to write on a Biblical rather than a historical subject meant that

Britain entered the eighteenth century in the strange situation of both having and not having a national epic. They had an epic poem in English, certainly, and from Addison onwards eighteenth-century critics fell over one another to heap it with praise. But it was not an epic about Britain, in the way that the *Aenead* was an epic about Rome: its themes were not national, but cosmic. Hayley worshipped Milton, but he could not find material in his epic with which to stir up the young men of Britain as he imagined that Homer had stirred up the young men of Greece.

So, from the late seventeenth century onwards, one poet after another attempted to write Milton's missing epic, the poem he had promised but never delivered. Dryden planned an Arthurian epic, but never wrote it, turning instead to an English translation of Virgil.[8] Pope left his *Alcander* unfinished, and his *Brutus* un-begun; instead he translated Homer, and wrote mock-epics like *The Rape of the Lock* to demonstrate the unheroic temper of the times.[9] Sir Richard Blackmore wrote four national epics, *Prince Arthur* (1695), *King Arthur* (1697), *Eliza* (1705) and *Alfred* (1723), all of them full of scenes and characters borrowed wholesale from *Paradise Lost*; but they were little read and less respected, and are now remembered chiefly from Pope's lampoons on them in *The Dunciad*.[10] The only epic sub-genre that flourished in eighteenth-century England was the religious epic, in which a single section of the Bible was expanded out to epic length, in more or less obvious imitation of Milton.[11] Meanwhile, Voltaire wrote a *Henriade* for the French, and Macpherson 'discovered' a Scottish national epic in the form of *Fingal*.[12] If great national epics made great nations, then England was in serious danger of falling behind.

Hayley wrote his *Essay* at a historical moment when the danger seemed particularly acute. Britain's fortunes in 1782 were at low ebb; the previous year had seen the British army surrender at Yorktown, while parliament had just seen the collapse of one ministry and would witness the collapse of another within a year.[13] Neither 'martial fire' nor 'civic worth' seemed much in evidence in Hayley's Britain, and it is understandable that he should have longed for a national, patriotic epic around which the nation could rally; an epic that could show them who and what they were, and teach them what they should do. He addressed his *Essay* to William Mason, then famous for his tragedy on the ancient British hero Caractacus, and ended it with a plea that the venerable poet might pen such a work.[14] But Mason died without an epic to his name.

One problem with Hayley's Britain was that, as Paul Langford puts it, 'There was much less certainty [among Englishmen] by the 1780s about who precisely they were.'[15] The war with America had shaken many of Britain's assumptions about itself: that it was a land of liberty, an enemy of tyranny, an invincible nation of free men. For decades, Britain had been fighting and winning wars against what it saw as the tyrannical absolutist monarchy of Bourbon France, allowing the British to pride themselves on both the 'martial fire' of their victories and the 'civic worth' of their opposition to foreign despotism. But now they had been defeated, losing their first major war in more than a century; and their primary vanquishers were not the hated French but their own rebellious colonists, who accused the British of being exactly the kind of tyrants they believed themselves to have been fighting all along.[16] The 1780s thus saw Britain deeply uncertain of itself, and painfully aware of the need to reform its creaking political institutions; when Pitt the Younger was appointed Prime Minister in 1783, he won wide popularity with his campaigns to reform parliament and reduce corruption.[17] A nation just emerging from a disastrous and unpopular war proved a poor breeding ground for poetic celebrations of national heroics, and it is entirely appropriate that the only national epics written during those years were *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785) – ostensibly about ancient Israel but with heavy (and explicit) echoes of contemporary America – and *The Vision of Columbus* (1787), by the Americans Timothy Dwight and Joel Barlow, respectively.[18]

It was only with the upheaval of the French Revolution that Hayley's call began to be answered. By 1793, when the French executed their king and declared war on Britain, there was a widespread sense that the new French republic was more dangerous and tyrannical a foe than the old Bourbon monarchy had ever been, and the great ideological backlash against the Revolution – the same backlash that transformed sometime reformers like Burke and Pitt into arch-conservative counter-revolutionaries – produced a great flood of epic poetry, aiming to rouse the 'martial fire' and 'civic worth' of the nation to face the terrors of the times. In the twelve years following the outbreak of the Revolution, Britain witnessed the publication of no fewer than *eight* national epics: James Ogden's *Revolution* (1790), William Hildreth's *Niliad* (1799), the anonymous *Britain Delivered* (1800), Joseph Cottle's *Alfred* (1800), Hannah Cowley's *Siege of Acre* (1801), Henry James Pye's *Alfred* (1801), John Ogilvie's *Britannia* (1801) and Sir James Bland Burges's *Richard the First* (1801), as well as Sarah Leigh Pyke's nationalistic

scriptural epic *Israel* (1795), Samuel Hull Wilcocke's unfinished *Britannia* (1797) and John Thelwall's fragmentary *Edwin of Northumbria* (1801). They also saw the publication of Robert Southey's anti-war epic *Joan of Arc* (1796), two attempts to extend Milton's *Paradise Regained* in the form of Richard Cumberland's *Calvary* (1792) and James Ogden's *Emmanuel* (1797), George Skene's short epic *Donald Bane* (1796) and three oriental epics: Lady Sophia Burrell's *Thymbriad* (1794), Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir* (1798) and Robert Southey's *Thalaba* (1801). Such an unprecedented outpouring of epic poetry – an outpouring that continued into the 1820s – demonstrated that it was a form whose time had come.

It is worth reflecting on what produced this extraordinary flood of epics. It was not just that Britain found itself engaged in a major war with France. The Seven Years War had generated plenty of patriotic bluster in print, but did not produce a single epic, even though in other fields it inspired works of art which rapidly became nationalistic icons, such as Benjamin West's painting of the death of Wolfe. Partly it must have been due to the number of British poets at the time who combined high productivity with low standards: so long as the blank verse was regular, or the couplets rhymed, why, that was poetry. For such poets, the writing of epics no longer seemed the overwhelmingly difficult task that it had once appeared. Milton had required nine or ten years to write the 10,565 lines of *Paradise Lost*, and Coleridge considered even that quick work: 'I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem' he wrote to Joseph Cottle in 1797.[19] Yet, heedless of Coleridge's words, Cottle – like Southey – proceeded to write 10,000-line epics every five years or so for decades.[20] But this, too, is not enough of an explanation, for mediocre poets were hardly unique to the 1790s. What was unique was their seemingly unanimous decision to turn their hands to epic poetry.

Why should this have happened? The obvious answer lies in the scale of the challenge confronting Britain in the years immediately following the French Revolution. After a century of limited wars fought for the expansion of commerce, or the protection of trade, or the defence of the 'balance of power' on the continent, the British state – like most of the other states of Europe – found itself suddenly fighting for its life, for its very right to continued existence in its present form. The French, first under Robespierre and then under Napoleon, tore up the rulebook of what was and wasn't politically possible in Europe, re-ordering their society from top to bottom and wiping nations off the map with the stroke of a pen. They were not interested in

merely weighting the existing system a little further in their favour; they aimed for permanent and total change.[21] They were not just a military threat: they were an *ideological* threat, a challenge of unprecedented magnitude to the entire established European social order, and as an ideological challenge they demanded ideological responses. As Trumpener has demonstrated, many novelists of the period turned to writing national (and nationalistic) works, which juxtaposed good and bad social systems in order to articulate visions of what Britishness (or Englishness, Irishness or Scottishness) was, or should be, or could become.[22] What was true of these novels was also, *a forteriori*, true of the period's epics, which presented the clash between good and bad societies, the righteous and the wicked, in much more overt terms. Many of these epics were clearly intended to be the contributions of their various authors to the national cause, written in the hope of stirring up some 'martial fire and civic worth' among the British before it was too late.

As Linda Colley has shown, the French Revolution prompted a period of ideological reorganisation and retrenchment in Britain. Threatened with revolutionary danger, the British governing classes reinvented themselves, changing themselves profoundly even as they claimed to be protecting the nation from change; they became more militaristic, more xenophobic, more ostentatiously patriotic, more aggressively British, self-consciously constructing a national mythology potent enough to resist the one being belligerently exported across the Channel.[23] Furthermore, the effort of fighting the French required the military and ideological mobilisation of Britain on an unprecedented scale; when the French threatened to invade Britain men were recruited into the militia by hundreds of thousands, an immense effort which both required and contributed to the spread of this newly militaristic nationalism through lower and wider social strata.[24] Many of these epics can be understood as part of this project to construct and disseminate a new, warlike national mythology, and there is some indication that they were understood as such at the time. In Scott's novel *The Antiquary*, written in 1816 but set in the 1790s, Jonathan Oldbuck gives some advice to a man he believes to be an aspiring poet:

> Let me see – What think you of a real epic? The grand old-fashioned historical poem which moved through twelve or twenty-four books – we'll have it so – I'll supply you with a subject – The battle between the Caledonians and Romans – The Caledoniad; or, Invasion Repelled – Let

> that be the title – It will suit the present taste, and you may throw in a touch of the times.[25]

Given that the whole action of *The Antiquary* takes place under the shadow of a possible French invasion, and culminates with an invasion scare, it is easy to see why Oldbuck believes that an epic poem like his projected 'Invasion Repelled' should find a market. It will 'suit the present taste' precisely because it includes 'a touch of the times'; for, as Oldbuck implies, it was the anxieties of the age that created its taste for encouragingly nationalistic epic poetry in the first place.

The French Revolution looms large in these poems, no matter what their ostensible subject matter may be; faced with a fearsome enemy, and the very real possibility of a French invasion of England, many of these poets constructed epic formulations of anti-revolutionary Britishness or Christianity around which their compatriots could rally. They seldom mentioned the Revolution openly, but the significance it held for them is usually not hard to detect. It lurks behind Ogden's comparison of Satan with a 'fierce Ottoman … or Democrat', and his decision to break off in mid-epic to pray: 'Shield, Lord, our Church and King from this foul fiend,/In his worst form by Democrats now loos'd,/To spoil thy heritage …'.[26] It explains why Burges depicted Richard I contending with an infernal spirit of 'False Philosophy' who 'Monarchs from their mould'ring states impell'd/And law and faith o'erthrown, her impious triumph swelled'.[27] It accounts for the desire, not just of Ogden's William III, but also of Pye's Alfred the Great, to establish a constitution that avoids both despotic and democratic extremes; and it explains why Cumberland feels it necessary to stop halfway through *Calvary* to harangue those who dare to seek external evidence for the events described in the Bible.[28] It lurches into view in Pyke's *Israel*, which begins and ends with prayers for Britain to be protected from invasion and civil war, and draws an explicit parallel between Pharaoh's massacre of the Israelite children and the massacre at Nantes carried out during the reign of Robespierre, whom Pyke calls 'a modern Pharaoh'; and it looms up suddenly in *Joan of Arc*, where Southey draws obvious parallels between events in Paris in 1418 and 1793, and laments that the city is 'one day doomed to know the damning guilt' of executing those 'martyr'd patriots' Brissot and Madame Roland.[29] It is implicit in Wilcocke's insistence that the Druids, though superstitious pagans, at least never led the ancient Britons into 'Parisian massacres'; and even Skene's short epic *Donald Bane*, despite

being little more than an extended Ossianic battle scene, culminates with its rebellious hero submitting to the principle of royal legitimacy.[30] Above all, it is present in all those visions of the future in which various prophetic figures disclose Britain's future greatness to the heroes, in imitation of book 6 of the *Aenead* and books 11 and 12 of *Paradise Lost*. Such visions are usually highly nationalistic, depicting Britain's history as a rising arc of military greatness abroad and prosperity and liberty at home, and ending with fulminations on the horrors of the French Revolution and the glories of Britain's resistance to it. In Ogilvie's *Britannia*, for example, a Druid shows Locrinus a vision of Britain's future in which the last two scenes revealed to him are the September Massacres and the Battle of the Nile, which are presented as the ultimate culminations of foreign evil and British courage, respectively.[31]

The heroes of the national-historical epics – Ogilvie's Brutus the Trojan, Burges's Richard I, Cowley's Sidney Smith, Ogden's William of Orange, Pye's Alfred the Great – serve as embodiments of royal British virtue, champions one and all of orthodox Christianity and a rather aristocratic interpretation of the British constitution. All of them are the chosen servants of heaven, and in both Ogden's *Revolution* and Burges's *Richard I* they find themselves fighting against French kings who are not just despotically minded but actually demonically inspired, while in Cowley's *Siege of Acre* demons rise from hell to march alongside Napoleon's troops and angels protect the British from French gunfire.[32] The parallels with contemporary events are not quite as obvious in the religious epics, but both Ogden and Cumberland leave their readers in little doubt which side of the current war their amazingly conservative Christs would support: Ogden's Christ even numbers among his miraculous powers the ability to discern between 'idle vagabonds' and 'the industrious poor', and only dispenses charity to the latter.[33] In all these cases, the poets aimed to create heroes who could act as exemplars of anti-revolutionary orthodoxy, around whom the embattled nation could rally in its defence of property and Protestant Christianity. The sudden outpouring of patriotic epics at this period suggests that the need for such exemplars was keenly felt.

Conservative poets, however, did not have a monopoly on the epic form. Southey's anti-national *Joan of Arc* reversed their formula: Burges and Ogden wrote of divinely inspired English kings fighting (literally) demonic Frenchmen in defence of the glorious British establishment, so Southey wrote of a divinely inspired French peasant girl fighting an evil English king in defence of French liberty. In both cases, the relevance of the epic to current

affairs was bluntly obvious – just as it was not hard to guess Barlow's political sympathies when he depicted George Washington being cheered on by angels in *The Vision of Columbus*. Landor's *Gebir* was somewhat more oblique, but between his denunciation of war-mongering kings and his offhand mention that Corsica will one day produce 'a mortal man above all mortal praise', his Bonapartist politics are not hard to discern.[34] The one epic poet who tried to keep his work relatively clear of contemporary politics was Cottle, whose *Alfred* pushed historical and cosmic drama into the background in favour of religious moralising and sentimental romance. But even in this case, the basic scenario – England invaded by foreign infidels, who are defeated by a virtuous, patriotic and above all Christian English king – has such obvious resonance with the national situation in 1800 that it becomes a political statement almost by default, even if that statement is nothing more than 'we should forgive our enemies – once we have defeated and converted them'.

The French Revolution and the wars that followed it formed one obvious landmark in the background of these poems; John Milton was another. All of these poets knew that, by the mere act of writing epics on the history of Britain or the later life of Christ, they were picking up where Milton left off, and thereby inviting comparison with a man whom the critical consensus of their day considered the greatest epic poet since Virgil. Unsurprisingly, many of them felt that the safest thing to do in such circumstances was to imitate Milton as closely as they possibly could. Witness the opening lines of Book VI in Ogden's *Emmanuel:*

> Hail, Contemplation, placid, friendly pow'r,
> To mortals, undisturb'd with anxious cares,
> Whether thy magic mirror things presents,
> Fittest for recollection; or new scenes
> Opens into the Intellectual world –
> Or the mind's eye, if thou shoulds't inward turn,
> To know itself – Of knowledge far the best –
> Thee frequent wooing, at the early hour
> Of day-spring, while the lark his matin-song
> Attunes; or when umbrageous shades at noon,
> Offer a shelter from the solar heat;
> Or when the time of ev'ning cool excites
> Musing – Be thou propitious to my song.[35]

In Ogden's case, as in Cumberland's, the imitation of Milton is so slavish as to border on parody. The torturous syntax, the almost endlessly delayed main verb and the eccentric diction ('attunes', 'umbrageous') are all obviously employed simply because Milton employed them, rather than because they serve any real poetic purpose, and the entire passage does not so much allude to *Il Penseroso* and the third book of *Paradise Lost* as borrow from them wholesale. The historical poets fared a little better, as they were not obliged to follow so closely in Milton's footsteps; several of them rejected his blank verse style in favour of the heroic couplets of Dryden and Pope, and Burges even wrote in Spenserian stanzas. But many of the epic poets still insisted on adopting Milton's machinery of angels and demons; some of them even borrowed his specific *cast* of angels and demons, so one finds such figures as Moloch, Belial, Gabriel, Ithuriel, Death and Mammon strutting around Ogden's *Emmanuel*, Cumberland's *Calvary*, Ogilvie's *Britannia* and Burges's *Richard I*. Miltonic scenes and images proliferate: cubic phalanxes of angels fly around Ogden's *Revolution*, Satan presides over a council of devils in Cumberland's *Calvary*, God explains his plans in Miltonic terms to an audience of applauding angels in Pyke's *Israel*, Sidney Smith's confrontation of Napoleon is compared to Abdiel's confrontation of Satan in Cowley's *Siege of Acre*, and the whole of Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* is essentially an extended adaptation of Adam's vision of the future in *Paradise Lost* combined with Christ's vision of the kingdoms of the earth in *Paradise Regained*. This self-conscious Miltonism reaches its bizarre, self-reflexive height in Pye's *Alfred*, when a prophetic bard actually tells the Saxon king what a pity it is that Milton will never get round to writing his promised historical epic about him. If Milton would:

> Fill with the magic of his mighty hand
> That outline his creative fancy plann'd,
> Then should a monument eternal rise,
> Worthy of Alfred's glory, to the skies.[36]

But, the bard continues, he never will, so the job will be left to Pye instead. The two couplets cited here, which are pretty representative of Pye's verse, demonstrate just how unfortunate for Alfred this really was.

These poets faced multiple problems in adapting Milton to their purposes. Most, if pressed, would probably have said that they believed

God organised human history along a providential plan; but the sense of the active intervention of supernatural beings and forces in human affairs, so prevalent in Milton's day, had disappeared, and as a result their use of Miltonic machinery falls flat. Ogden's *Revolution* uses the Homeric trope of gods imitating men to infiltrate angels and demons into the events of 1688: thus we learn that James II's advisors were really demons in disguise, as was the gunner who fired at William of Orange before the Battle of the Boyne – and would have killed him, had the guardian angel of England not deflected the shot. Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* was minimal in its use of supernatural machinery, but the expanded version he published in 1807 as *The Columbiad* added a great deal more, such as the god of the River Delaware rising up to thwart the revolutionary armies only to be subdued by Hesper, guardian angel of America. *The Niliad* attributed Nelson's Egyptian victory to the intervention of Classical deities.[37] These scenes verge on the ludicrous because they are so clearly tacked on to poems that do not need them, simply because their authors felt that some kind of supernatural machinery was necessary to an epic. They do not appear because the plot requires them; after all, contemporary historians had no difficulty narrating the events of the Glorious Revolution or the American War without recourse to the supernatural. Still less do they appear because their authors believed that angelic or demonic hands actually turned the wheels of human history. Their angels and demons are mere literary devices, jumped-up metaphors tricked out in borrowed Miltonic finery, and as a result resembling nothing so much as the sylphs and gnomes of Pope's mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock*. When Milton wrote of Satan unleashing Sin and Death upon the world after the Fall, he was being deadly serious: for him Satan was real, the Fall was real and Sin and Death really were its consequences. Burges was probably trying to be equally serious when he wrote of Belial unleashing False Philosophy upon England. But he almost certainly did not believe that Belial was real, or that he (or some equivalent evil spirit) was directly responsible for the success of False Philosophy: his Belial is too obviously a mere paper demon, a fashionable literary trope rather than a fallen angel, and as a result the scene, like so many others in these epics, is not sublime but absurd. In them we see, in Curran's memorable phrase, 'a demythologised age fearlessly threatening itself with satanic legions made of cardboard'.[38]

If Milton's machinery presented these poets with one set of problems, his politics presented them with another; John Milton, stalwart republican and

polemical defender of regicide, was always going to be a rather uncomfortable ally for epic poets attempting to bolster the British establishment against the ideological inroads of the revolutionaries. Faced with Milton's problematic politics, the epic poets did what English critics had already been doing for a century: they ignored them. In his 'vision of Britain's future' scene, Pye deplores the evils of Cromwell's government while, elsewhere in his epic, praising Milton to the heavens; Ogilvie, in his equivalent 'vision' scene, praises Milton while skipping over the Civil War altogether, the narrative of his prophetic Druid leaping straight from Elizabethan England to the mid-eighteenth century. Neither Pye nor Ogilvie gives any hint that Milton ever did anything other than write religious poetry.[39] Drawing upon the depoliticised 'sublime Milton' of the eighteenth century rather than the revolutionary Milton invoked by some of their contemporaries, one epic poet after another happily borrowed everything from Milton except his politics.

Why were these poets so willing, even eager, to invite comparison with Milton? Curran notes that 'unlike the eighteenth century, which had generally dodged possible comparison, no anxiety of influence bars the dozens who, starting in the 1790s, set their eyes on the high slopes of Parnassus'.[40] Why? Curran points to the influence of Hayley's *Essay*, which had explicitly recommended that would-be epic poets should seek inspiration in Milton. But what Hayley actually wrote was that future poets should draw inspiration from Milton's refusal to let adverse personal circumstances prevent the composition of his epic. On the subject of using Miltonic *material* he was less encouraging:

> Apart, and on a sacred hill retir'd,
> Beyond all mortal inspiration fir'd,
> The mighty MILTON sits – an host around
> Of list'ning Angels guard the holy ground;
> Amaz'd they see a human form aspire
> To grasp with daring hand a Seraph's lyre,
> Inly irradiate with celestial beams,
> Attempt those high, those soul-subduing themes,
> (Which humbler Denizens of Heaven decline)
> And celebrate, with sanctity divine,
> The starry field from warring Angels won,
> And GOD triumphant in his Victor Son.[41]

These are hardly lines to encourage poets to follow closely in Milton's footsteps. Milton, we are told, is a poet 'apart', 'beyond all mortal inspiration', who attempts things that even other 'Denizens of Heaven' consider to be beyond their abilities. He is 'holy' and 'sacred', and his poetry is marked by 'sanctity divine' – carrying the strong implication that tampering with it might well be blasphemy. In any case, Hayley had counselled against mere imitation, suggested turning towards the then novel mythologies of Asia as a new source of epic material, and advised against the use of supernatural machinery in modern epics. No-one could have risen from the *Essay* thinking that what Hayley really recommended was a national epic in a Miltonic style, complete with Miltonic machinery and as much recycled Miltonic material as possible – and yet that is what these poets repeatedly delivered. Hayley may well have played a powerful role in inspiring them to write their epics in the first place, but an explanation of their often painfully sub-Miltonic character must be sought elsewhere.

The problem faced by these poets – the radicals Barlow, Landor and Southey, and the liberal Cottle excepted – might be stated thus. The British, they felt, needed a national, anti-revolutionary epic around which they could rally in defiance of the French. Milton had written an epic in English, but it was neither national nor anti-revolutionary. If anything, it was quite the reverse: as I have discussed, Milton and his epic were increasingly coming to be identified with the unfolding Revolution, and the French revolutionaries and their British radical allies were keen to claim him as one of their own. If only he had written the poem he had promised, an uncomplicated celebration of the royal British values of an Arthur or an Alfred, such appropriations would have been nigh-impossible. But instead he had written the disturbingly ambiguous and multivalent *Paradise Lost*; and while for the best part of a century his epic had been successfully assimilated to elite literary culture, under the stresses of the 1790s that process of assimilation was increasingly coming unstuck. For the most part, these poets had probably grown up certain that they knew exactly what Milton and his epic stood for; educated in the mainstream eighteenth-century literary tradition, they would have learned to see him as a champion of Protestant orthodoxy and British liberty. But now a chorus of disturbing voices was claiming that he had meant something else entirely.

These poets, I would suggest, responded to the contemporary struggle over Milton's meanings by attempting to write the epic that Milton *should* have

written. The reason they followed Milton so closely in machinery and style was that each of them was trying to *become* Milton: not Milton as he had been, but Milton as they felt he should have been, pious, nationalistic and anti-revolutionary. Dedicating his 1751 edition of *Paradise Lost* to King George II, John Marchant had excused Milton's political activities on the grounds that 'The Times he lived in, were Times of Violence', and that 'had it been *Milton's* good Fortune to have liv'd a Subject of Your Majesty, he would have been [...] far from desiring to see this Monarchal changed into a Republican Form of Government'.[42] That, more or less, is what these poets seem to have wanted to believe: that Milton's radicalism had been a historical accident, and that had he lived in other times – their own, for example – he would have been as conservative as they could have wished. Thus their slavish imitation of Milton in everything other than his politics: the whole point was to produce something that, in all other ways, was as Miltonic as possible, something that they hoped Milton himself might have written, had he been living at that hour. Such a work would not only be useful in and of itself; it would also help them to claim Milton for themselves and their ideological allies, and cut away the ground from those, such as Coleridge and Godwin, who were trying to claim him for the opposition. By borrowing Milton's epic machinery and appropriating his epic voice they could claim to speak for him, like shamans donning the regalia of a tribal hero in the hope of acquiring his power and wisdom, or a line of priests taking turns to conceal themselves within a statue of their deity and shout to their congregation through his brazen mouth. In so doing, they pre-empted the need for a re-examination of Milton himself. There was no need for Milton to stir in his grave: they already knew what his unquiet spirit would have wanted to say. He could go safely back to sleep.

However unreadable these epics seem today, several of them enjoyed considerable contemporary success. In America, Dwight was hailed as a worthy successor to Milton.[43] Cottle and Pye's *Alfred*s found enough readers to go through three editions each. Most successful of all was Cumberland's *Calvary*, which proved popular with the large market of readers of religious poetry; described by one contemporary reviewer as being 'imbued with the genuine spirit of Milton', it went through seven editions by 1811; and in 1814 this inveterate imitator of Milton was himself imitated by Charlotte Eliza Dixon, whose *Mount of Olives* continued his *Calvary* just as it, in turn, had continued *Paradise Regained*.[44] Clearly there was a market for this kind of epic, and to a large extent it was probably the same market that, over the

same period, absorbed dozens of editions of *Paradise Lost*. In the mood of heightened national anxiety created by the French Wars, people wanted to hear stories about the triumph of good over evil, and the fact that these writers made such heavy use of familiar Miltonic trappings probably made them that much more acceptable to readers looking to be comforted and reassured. Blake's *Milton* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which were being written at the same time as these epics, may have been incomparably greater works of art; but they could hardly provide the same encouragement as a work like Pye's *Alfred*, with its comforting message that even in times of darkness the forces of Goodness, Christianity and Englishness will prevail in the end.

Assuming a substantial cross-over between the audience for these epics and the audience for *Paradise Lost* – assuming, that is, that many of the people who bought copies of Cumberland's *Calvary* were also in the market for new editions of Milton – it does not seem improbable that the messages of these epics should have been read back into Milton by their readers. Just as someone who reads the Old Testament as part of a Christian Bible, bracketed by a Christian introduction on one side and a New Testament on the other, will be inclined to interpret it differently to someone who reads it as a complete and independent Jewish religious text in its own right, so someone who reads and sympathises with Cumberland's *Calvary* and then turns to Milton's *Paradise Regained* will be predisposed to read Milton in the light of Cumberland; to assume that their two Christs are one and the same, and that Milton, like Cumberland, was as religiously and politically orthodox a writer as one could wish. The fact that they employ the same language, the same characters and so on, should only heighten the effect. Similarly, if one reads about Ithuriel and friends defending Britain against villainous foreigners in *Britannia* or *The Revolution*, and then turns to *Paradise Lost*, the fact that one has already got used to thinking of the Miltonic angels as friendly, patriotic figures will make it that much harder to see them as anything very different in their original context. Coupled with a suitably bland introduction to one's edition of Milton's *Poetical Works*, assuring its readers that Milton had been a saintly man with few real interests except writing religious poetry, defending 'liberty', and loving God, the net effect must have been to powerfully distance Milton from the revolutionary turmoil of the present. Instead, it could be taken for granted that his authority underwrote the conservative, patriotic epics that were now being written; indeed, it could even be insinuated (as in

Pye's *Alfred*) that he himself would have written them, if only he had been able to find the time.

The authors of the pro-revolutionary epics, although fewer in numbers, presumably hoped to accomplish much the same thing in reverse. Convinced that Milton had, in fact, been on *their* side, they set out to write the sort of unambiguously revolutionary epics that *they* felt Milton should have produced; poems that, unlike the frustratingly ambiguous *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, could not possibly be harmlessly assimilated by the anti-revolutionary establishment. After reading the sub-Miltonic language of *Joan of Arc*, or seeing the pro-revolutionary angels of the *Columbiad*, one would be that much more disposed to read Milton himself in a radical light, especially if one had also been reading Hayley's *Life of Milton* or some of Milton's recently reprinted political pamphlets. Both sets of epics aimed to direct the interpretation of Milton, to encourage their readers to see him as entirely committed to either the pro- or anti-revolutionary cause; and in each case they formed part of broader ideological projects attempting to associate or disassociate Milton and contemporary events. Whatever their political sympathies, however, the net effect of the epics was always to distance Milton himself, interposing themselves between him and history, speaking in his voice so that he would not have to speak at all. Milton remained present – indeed, his presence was reinforced – but only at one remove, and thus far enough away to still be considered as sublime.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Urania I Shall Need Thy Guidance’: The Case of William Wordsworth

I

The year 1800 saw Coleridge in a state of high excitement. He believed the search for the modern Milton was finally over: he had found the right man for the job at last. A few years earlier he and Southey had tried to take on the role by writing their sub-Miltonic, pro-revolutionary epic *Joan of Arc*; but rather than rousing the revolutionary fervour of a new generation, *Joan* had sunk largely without trace. Now he had found someone better qualified for the role, as he explained in two letters to Thomas Poole:

> I do not hesitate in saying that since Milton no man has *manifested* himself equal to Wordsworth ….
>
> Have I affirmed anything miraculous of W[ordsworth]? Is it impossible that a greater poet than any since Milton may appear in our days?[1]

Coleridge and Wordsworth first met in 1795.[2] At that time, Coleridge had finished his contribution to *Joan* and was making plans for a second epic, to which he had given an overtly Miltonic working title: ‘The Origin of Evil, an Epic Poem’.[3] By 1798, however, Coleridge had become convinced that Wordsworth rather than himself was the man to pen this new *Paradise Lost*, and was bombarding him with plans for the grand philosophical poem that he now insisted Wordsworth was to write.[4] Wordsworth, he was sure, was to be the new Milton. All he needed to do was to write his epic.

Wordsworth himself was hardly averse to the idea of taking up Milton’s mantle. Like most educated men of his generation, he had grown up venerating Milton as one of the greatest of poets: his father encouraged him to memorise ‘large portions’ of Milton at the age of five, and he may well have studied Milton’s works at school.[5] At Cambridge his idolatry of Milton

appears to have reached embarrassing heights, as he later recalled in *The Prelude*:

> Yea, our blind Poet, who, in his later day,
> Stood almost single, uttering odious truth,
> Darkness before, and danger's voice behind;
> Soul awful! if the earth hath ever lodg'd
> An awful Soul, I seemed to see him here
> Familiarly, and in his Scholar's dress …
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 3, ll. 284–9: P 1:142)

Wordsworth did not just 'see' Milton wandering around Cambridge; he also went to visit him, going to the room where Milton was said to have lived as a student and drinking so many toasts to his memory that he became (by his account) more deeply drunk than at any other point in his life. Looking back on his youthful failings in *The Prelude*, he framed his account of these events as an admission of weakness to Milton's spirit, opening with his address to Milton as a 'temperate Bard' and ending with 'Ye will forgive the weakness of that hour'.[6] These passages are a classic example of eighteenth-century Milton-worship: Milton is imagined as a uniquely powerful and holy figure, a 'Soul awful! if the earth has ever lodged/An awful Soul', who acts as a moral role model, his own status as a 'temperate Bard' implicitly rebuking Wordsworth's drunken intemperance. He is a figure to be worshipped: Wordsworth describes his drinking to Milton's memory as a pouring out of 'libations', as if he were sacrificing to some pagan spirit or god. And when, like Wordsworth, we fail to live up to the standards that Milton sets for us, the proper response, it seems, is to confess our sins to Milton's spirit and pray that he 'will forgive the weakness of that hour'. Wordsworth's Milton, in other words, bears a strong resemblance to Jesus Christ; and like Jesus, his presence lives on long after death, especially in those places sanctified by his actions during life.

Such Miltonolatry was not unusual among the literary men of the period, especially among those on the Whiggish side of the political spectrum. What set Wordsworth apart was not the depth of his devotion to Milton, but the height of his poetic ambition, which led him to believe that he had the potential to become Milton's successor. We have his later testimony that as a young man he feared poetic comparison only with 'Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare,

and Milton', and in his poetry he was comparing himself to Milton as early as 1794, in lines added to his earlier poem, *An Evening Walk:*

> In dangerous night so Milton worked alone,
> Cheared by a secret lustre all his own,
> That with the deepening darkness clearer shone.[7]

The 'dangerous night' here must be an allusion to Milton's description of himself as being 'with darkness and with dangers compassed round' while he wrote *Paradise Lost*, a reference both to his blindness and his precarious political situation after the Restoration. Wordsworth, obviously, was not blind, but in 1794 he was still a self-identified republican, opposed to the war with France and, according to Nicholas Roe, part of 'the mainstream of contemporary protest'; and these lines suggest that he saw himself as being, like Milton, a revolutionary poet who had to somehow continue his work even in a time of anti-revolutionary reaction.[8] When he met Coleridge the following year, the younger poet fully accepted this comparison. Wordsworth was to be Milton's second coming; and just as Milton's epic had illuminated his own dark time, so Wordsworth's epic would bring light to the troubled years at the end of the eighteenth century.

In about 1800 Wordsworth wrote (but did not publish) a verse 'Prospectus' for his forthcoming epic, which he had named *The Recluse*. It would not be an epic of arms and the man, like *Joan of Arc* and the other epics of the 1790s; instead it would be an epic of a new, philosophical kind, as innovative as Milton's had been in its day. Just as Milton had declared his intentions to surpass Homer and Virgil, writing 'things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme', so Wordsworth's Prospectus declared his intention to surpass Milton in turn:

> 'Fit audience find though few!' Thus prayd the Bard
> Holiest of men. Urania I shall need
> Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
> Desend to earth, or dwell in highest heaven.
> For I must tread on Shadowy ground, must sink
> Deep, and ascend aloft, and worlds
> To which the Heaven of heavens is but a veil.
> All strength, all terror, single, or in bands
> That ever was put forth by personal Form

Jehovah, with his thunder, and the choir
Of shouting Angels, and Th'empyreal Thrones
I pass them unalarm'd. The darkest pit
Of the profoundest hell, night, chaos, death
Nor aught of blinder vacancy scoop'd out
By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon me often when I look
Into my soul, into the soul of man
My haunt, and the main region of my song.[9]

Harold Bloom has cited this 'Prospectus' as evidence of 'Wordsworth's deepest obsession as a monstrously strong poet … to be an influence, and not to be influenced'.[10] Wordsworth proposes to achieve so much that he, not Milton, shall henceforth be looked up to as the poet who went highest, deepest and furthest; he will not be content for people to say that he is almost as sublime as Milton, looking forward instead to the day when it shall be said that Milton was almost as sublime as he is. If Milton had gone beyond the pagan heaven and hell of Homer and Virgil, so Wordsworth will go beyond the Christian heaven and hell of Milton. Milton required a greater muse than Homer's, namely Urania, the Holy Spirit; Wordsworth claims to need an even greater muse than her. When he declares that 'the main region of my song' is more fearsome and awesome than 'aught of blinder vacancy scoop'd out/By help of dreams', Wordsworth is clearly referring, rather uncharitably, to Milton: Milton, though blind, claimed to have written *Paradise Lost* with the help of inspiration brought in dreams, but Wordsworth declares that whatever Milton's imagination managed to 'scoop' out of his 'blinder vacancy', he will be able to go one better. And he promises to achieve all this even though Milton (and not, as one might expect, Jesus) was the 'holiest of men', the man in whom divine inspiration was stronger than in anyone else who has ever lived. Perhaps it was displays of awesome self-confidence such as this that convinced Coleridge 'that since Milton no man has *manifested* himself equal to Wordsworth'; or perhaps they were for Coleridge's benefit, attempts on Wordsworth's part to live up to his friend's exalted opinion of him. For the truth was that, in spite of all his bluster, Wordsworth had not finished *The Recluse*; in fact he never finished it, and after wrestling with it for more than half a century he died in 1850 leaving it incomplete.

In 1802, having made little progress with *The Recluse*, Wordsworth had another encounter with Milton's spirit; perhaps his first since he saw him 'familiarly' at Cambridge. Lee M. Johnson writes:

> The figure of Milton … benevolently haunted Wordsworth throughout his career. More precisely, one might say that the Miltonian haunting took definitive form in May, 1802, when, after listening to Dorothy read Milton's sonnets, William 'took fire' from their character and ultimately became the most prolific sonneteer of all the major English poets. What happened to Wordsworth on that occasion was probably something akin to a conversion experience based, in this case, on the intuiting of the presence of Milton's sensibility in the very form of his sonnets.[11]

Wordsworth's 'conversion experience' – which must have happened within a few months of Blake's vision of Milton falling from heaven to awaken Albion – had an immediate effect upon him, and he began to compose sonnets almost at once. One of them expressed his frustration at the failure of the French Revolution to produce any great leader or theorist, let alone an epic poet or a prophet:

> Great Men have been among us; hands that penn'd
> And tongues that utter'd wisdom, better none:
> The later Sydney, Marvel, Harrington,
> Young Vane, and others who call'd Milton Friend.
> These Moralists could act and comprehend:
> They knew how genuine glory was put on;
> Taught us how rightfully a nation shone
> In splendor: what strength was, that would not bend
> But in magnanimous meekness. France, 'tis strange,
> Hath brought forth no such souls as we had then.
> Perpetual emptiness! unceasing change!
> No single Volume paramount, no code,
> No master spirit, no determined road;
> But equally a want of Books and Men![12]

Sidney, Marvell, Harrington and Vane was a very politically charged list of 'great men' for Wordsworth to have come up with, for they were the

republican heroes of the English Commonwealthman tradition. By 1802 – the year in which Napoleon was declared 'first consul for life' – France only notionally remained a republic; but as Todd's 1801 'Life of Milton' makes clear, conservative opinion in England still saw 'republicanism' as its enemy, and could only be reconciled to historical republicans once suitably reassured that they had nothing in common with their modern counterparts.[13] This is not a reassurance that Wordsworth's sonnet offers, for his references to contemporary France explicitly frame Milton and his friends as ideal revolutionary leaders, the sort of men the French Revolution should have produced, and had not. The central figure in Wordsworth's sonnet is Milton, not only because it follows Milton's example in applying the sonnet form to a political subject, but also because he is imagined as the very hub of this constellation of the English Commonwealth's 'Great Men', who are linked together by having 'call'd Milton friend'; but this, clearly, is a version of Milton who keeps rather dangerous company, quite unlike the safe, republican-but-not-*that*-kind-of-republican Milton presented by Todd the year before. France, in its 'perpetual emptiness' and 'unceasing change', recalls Milton's Chaos, awaiting the hand of some 'master spirit' or God to shape it into worlds, while Wordsworth's closing lines, 'No master spirit, no determined road;/But equally a want of Books and Men!' recall Milton's *Areopagitica*, which he had read in revolutionary France:

> Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Booke is the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life. 'Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof perhaps there is no great losse; and revolutions of ages doe not oft recover the losse of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole Nations fare the worse. (*Areopagitica:* MP 2:492–3)

An age without master spirits will thus also be an age without good books, which is exactly what Wordsworth claims that France is now experiencing. As Milton predicted, its 'revolutions of ages' have failed to 'recover the loss of a rejected truth', and accordingly 'whole nations fare the worse'. As the political situation in France spirals out of control, Wordsworth laments the age's lack of Sidneys, Vanes, Marvells and Harringtons, patriots, philosophers and political theorists wise and brave enough to steer their way through the tumult of events; but he strongly implies that it also needs a new Milton, a master

spirit for the new, revolutionary era. The fact that Wordsworth's republican heroes are historically distanced – a group of long-dead Englishmen rather than a group of contemporary Frenchmen – makes this poem less obviously radical in tone, but it does not alter the fact that what Wordsworth mourns here is specifically the failure of the French Revolution to produce, not just adequate leaders, but adequate *republican* leaders. A new Milton, it is implied, would not just write epic poetry; through the power of his 'master spirit', he also would impose order on France's chaos, getting the Revolution back on track and fulfilling the glorious hopes that had been raised at its outset a decade before. In putting himself forward as a potential modern Milton, then, Wordsworth was setting himself a very high, and very radical, target; one might even say that he was offering himself up as an alternative to Napoleon, a 'master spirit' whose 'determined road' this sonnet implicitly rejects. But it demonstrates, again, why the Milton-worship of men like Wordsworth made them at once desperate for a new Milton and totally unable to produce one. If Milton truly was the God-like figure this poem suggests, at once bard, prophet, revolutionary leader and political redeemer, then it is unsurprising that the age would have been better off with a Milton than without one. But how could anyone, even Wordsworth – perhaps *especially* Wordsworth – possibly take on such an ambitious role?

It was not just France that needed a new Milton, as Wordsworth made clear in another of his sonnets of the same year, *London, 1802*:

> Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour;
> England hath need of thee: she is a fen
> Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
> Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
> Have forfeited their ancient English dower
> Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
> Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
> And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
> Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart:
> Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
> Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
> So didst thou travel on life's common way,
> In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
> The lowliest duties on itself did lay.[14]

The language here is that of the Second Coming. The returning Milton is credited with almost god-like powers, able to single-handedly 'raise [England] up' and restore her 'manners, virtue, freedom, power'. He is angelic, 'pure as the naked heavens'; he is 'like a Star', long identified with angels, and like God Himself he 'dwelt apart' from other men; yet, Christ-like, he condescended to 'travel on life's common way/In cheerful godliness', and take on 'the lowliest duties' of life. Clearly, Wordsworth had lost none of his undergraduate reverence for Milton in the eleven years since he left Cambridge. Indeed, F. M. Todd has suggested that the intervening years of revolutionary hope and failure may have heightened it:

> A revived interest in Milton the English republican was common among the disillusioned supporters of the French Revolution at the turn of the century. … Now that France had failed the liberals, they turned perforce to England, though, naturally enough, to England's past rather than her present. So with Wordsworth; he looked back, not to the eighteenth century, not to the 'fair Albion' of the 'Glorious Revolution', but to the English republic of the seventeenth century, and to its champions, Milton, Sidney, Marvell, and Vane.[15]

Todd could also have cited Coleridge's marginalia to his copy of Milton's prose works, purchased in 1808, in which he expressed the hope that by studying Milton's prose the English would be able to avoid degenerating into Frenchmen (Coleridge's annotations to Birch's *Milton*, C 12:3:884). Men like Coleridge and Wordsworth had seen so many champions of the French Revolution metamorphose into tyrants or traitors that it is easy to see how they might have come to prefer their revolutionary heroes to be safely dead: at least they could rely on Vane or Milton not to suddenly change sides. From this position of security, they could look down on the French for their failure to produce any equivalent 'master spirit'. This sneering tone, obvious in Coleridge, is also present in Wordsworth's 'Great Men Have Been among Us': if its first line is read with the stress upon the word *us*, meaning the British, as opposed to *them*, the French, then it becomes a poem that mocks as well as laments France's inability to match the greatness of the Commonwealthmen. But such a tone was less the result of deep-seated hostility than profound disappointment. 'When we had *our* revolution', these erstwhile Jacobins might have said, '*our* heroes remained heroic. Why couldn't yours have done the same?'

The trouble was that dead men, even those as great as Milton, exercised only very limited power over current affairs. Milton should have been living at that hour, but he wasn't, and the need for him was growing by the year; for while France might not have been able to produce a Milton, under Napoleon it rapidly developed a military machine that would have put Cromwell's New Model Army to shame. Fears of French invasion ran high, especially after the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens in 1803.[16] Seeking to reassure himself and his countrymen that Britain could weather the coming storm, Wordsworth wrote:

> In our Halls is hung
> Armoury of the invincible Knights of old:
> We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
> That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
> Which Milton held …[17]

Here, Shakespeare's tongue and Milton's faith and morals stand alongside the 'armoury of the invincible Knights of old' as so many guarantees that the British 'must be free or die' – an echo of the old revolutionary slogan, 'liberty or death!'[18] The language is that of inheritance; for Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Milton *are* two of the 'invincible Knights of old', and their language, faith and morals *are* part of the 'armoury' that they have left to their successors. But inherited weapons, be they ever so fine, are valueless without a worthy wielder, and Wordsworth's readers might have been forgiven for wondering whether any such worthy successor to Milton really existed. Were the British of 1802 any more capable of using Milton's 'faith and morals' effectively than they were of wielding the 'armoury' of their ancestors? Read alongside the many clumsy contemporary attempts to adapt Milton to nationalistic ends, Wordsworth's lines unavoidably conjure up images of Pye, Ogden and the rest stumbling out in their rusty and oversized Miltonic armour to be mown down by Napoleon's guns.

So where was Milton's successor – the 'master spirit' able to write the 'single volume paramount' which both France and England required – to come from? Where was the man in whom Milton, who should be living at that hour, could live again, demonstrating to the faithless French the true meaning of revolutionary heroism? A few years earlier Wordsworth had felt that he might fulfil such a role; that he could become both epic

poet and revolutionary leader, as he imagined Milton would have done, writing the poem that would usher in the millennium. But now, with the bold, supposedly Milton-surpassing *Recluse* still no more than a mass of fragments, he was no longer so sure of his poetic destiny; and even after he 'took fire' from the touch of Milton's spirit, he was able to write Miltonic sonnets but not Miltonic epics. Doubtless there were many reasons for this, both personal and poetic, but I wish to suggest that one explanation may lie in an earlier phase of Wordsworth's relationship with Milton: in his brush with the aesthetics of revolutionary sublimity during the traumatic years of the Terror.

II

On 26 December 1792, Louis XVI was carried to the National Convention to be tried for treason. In Paris, Jacobin booksellers were translating and publishing Milton's defence of the trial and execution of Charles I to justify the proceedings about to ensue.[19] From a high window in a rented house, Wollstonecraft watched the king being led through the streets under military guard. That afternoon, she wrote to Joseph Johnson, her publisher and friend in London:

> An association of ideas made the tears flow insensibly from my eyes, when I saw Louis sitting, with more dignity than I expected from his character, in a hackney coach, going to meet death, where so many of his race have triumphed. My fancy instantly brought Louis XIV before me, entering the capital with all his pomp, after one of the victories most flattering to his pride, only to see the sunshine of prosperity overshadowed by the sublime gloom of misery. I have been alone ever since; and, though my mind is calm, I cannot dismiss the lively images that have filled my imagination all the day. – Nay, do not smile, but pity me; for, once or twice, lifting my eyes from the paper, I have seen eyes glare through a glass-door opposite my chair, and bloody hands shook at me. Not the distant sound of a footstep can I hear. – My apartments are remote from those of the servants, the only persons who sleep with me in an immense hotel, one folding door opening after another. – I wish I had even kept the cat with me! – I want to see something alive; death in so many frightful shapes has taken hold of my fancy. – I am going to bed – and, for the first time in my life, I cannot put out the candle.[20]

Wollstonecraft was not a woman to suffer from weak nerves. By 1792 she had seen and suffered much, without succumbing to these kinds of terrors; but now, alone in a Paris hotel, she was tormented by nightmares that could have come straight from the canvases of her one-time idol, Henry Fuseli. Her letter emphasises how uncharacteristic of herself she felt her fears to be: 'for the first time in my life, I cannot put out the candle'. But France, in those years, was nothing if not a place of fear. In 1789 the nation had been swept by the Great Fear, a wave of mass panic that had sent countless people fleeing for their lives, convinced that imaginary armies of brigands or invaders were about to descend upon them.[21] The year 1793 would witness the beginning of the Reign of Terror, in which anyone suspected of opposing the Jacobin Republic of Virtue could be arrested, tried and guillotined, without once being allowed to speak in their own defence.[22] Between the two lay years of paranoia and simmering hysteria, with foreign armies on the borders and conspiracies and plots at home. Revolutionary France could be an extremely frightening place to live.

Sitting in her room that December, watching the king pass beneath her windows, Wollstonecraft came too close to the revolutionary sublime for comfort. For all her rationalisation of the Revolution, its sublime was still 'the sublime gloom of misery', and when exposed to it, even someone as level-headed as herself began seeing Burkean spectres: ghostly kings, bloody hands and staring eyes. Perhaps they were phantoms of guilt, for Wollstonecraft had written in support of the Revolution, and thus played a part in making it possible for Louis XVI to be led to his death. But first and foremost, they were phantoms of fear: the fear that was everywhere in those revolutionary years. 'Nay, do not smile, but pity me … Death in so many frightful shapes has taken hold of my fancy …'

> The other shape,
> If shape it might be calld that shape had none
> Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
> Or substance might be calld that shadow seemd,
> For each seemd either – black it stood as Night,
> Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,
> And shook a dreadful Dart; what seemd his head
> The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on.
> (*Paradise Lost*, book 2, ll. 666–73; M 43)

Behind Wollstonecraft's phrase, whether she was aware of it or not, lay another phantom king: the King of Terrors, Milton's frightful, many-shaped and yet shapeless Death, the embodiment of Burke's terrible sublime. In the same letter, Wollstonecraft writes that 'For the first time since I entered France, I bowed to the majesty of the people'. The Revolution had made the people of France its king; now, they would play the part of King Death for the hapless Louis XVI. The sublime of terror stalked the streets of Paris; and from the bookstalls its greatest master, Milton, proclaimed its grim necessity.

Two months earlier Wordsworth had arrived in Paris, on his way back to England.[23] When he had first arrived in France he, like Williams and Wollstonecraft, had enthusiastically embraced the Revolution: looking ruefully back from 1805, he wrote that he had 'approach'd, like other Youth, the Shield/ Of human nature from the golden side', believing instinctively in 'What there is best in individual man/Of wise in passion and sublime in power' (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 662–3, 666–7: P 1:284). But in October 1792, having missed the September Massacres by just a few weeks, he took a more fearful view of the revolutionary sublime. Describing the scene in the 1805 *Prelude*, he wrote:

> With unextinguish'd taper I kept watch,
> Reading at intervals; the fear gone by
> Press'd on me almost like a fear to come.
> I thought of those September Massacres,
> Divided from me by a little month,
> And felt and touch'd them, a substantial dread …
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 61–6: P 1:269)

Sitting up at night in revolutionary Paris, Wordsworth, like Wollstonecraft, was too afraid to put out his candle. What he feared was fear itself, 'a substantial dread' that 'pressed' against him like a premonition of the 'fear to come', the revolutionary Terror waiting just around the corner of history. Wordsworth in Paris was the very epitome of the man who had come too close to the sublime. 'When danger or pain press too nearly', Burke had written back in 1757, 'they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible'. Wordsworth may have had those words in mind when he wrote of how the fear 'press'd on me', close enough for it to be 'felt and touch'd', leaving him unable to place any aesthetic distance between himself and it, just as Burke's distinction between the tiger behind bars – which

is sublime – and the escaped tiger roaming the streets – which is merely terrible – may have inspired Wordsworth's famous description of his room in Paris as being 'defenceless as a wood where tigers roam' (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, l. 82: P 1:270). The phrase 'the fear gone by/Press'd on' suggests the breathless momentum of the fear as well as its suffocating closeness; it presses on inexorably, its ceaseless progress underlined by the enjambment of these lines, which enact the same pauseless onward motion which Wordsworth attributes to his fear. It presses against him, even as it presses on towards its own horrible objectives; he has neither the time nor the space required to put any kind of safe distance between himself and his fear, and as a result, his fear is not delightful or sublime, but 'simply terrible'.

As critics have frequently noted, Wordsworth always preferred to keep objects and events at a distance, where they could more easily be seen, appreciated and understood. John Ogden writes:

> Distance serves this purpose for Wordsworth: it simplifies objects and events, and grants him fuller perception and truer evaluation. Distance enables him to see real life as poetry, and to find the basis for esthetics in the act of perception.[24]

Lack of distance, conversely, prevented true perception and evaluation, forcing reasoned thought to give way to unreasoning dread. Worst of all was lack of distance from other people. Even in London, Wordsworth had been uncomfortable with 'the press and danger of the crowd', which he had described in terms of Milton's chaos and hell:

> … what a hell
> For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din
> Barbarian and infernal! 'tis a dream
> Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound …
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 7, ll. 659–62: P 1:209)

Radical republican though he was at the time of his stay in London, Wordsworth, like Milton and the other classic republican authors he admired, was sceptical and fearful of the mob. Now, in Paris, there was no possibility of distance: just as the dangerous, 'infernal' crowd had pressed on him in London, so now the fear of another dangerous crowd 'press'd' against him like

'a substantial dread'. For Wordsworth as for Wollstonecraft, the Burkean/Miltonic 'terrible sublime' suffused the progress of the Revolution, to which it was unwise to come too close. Faced with the proximity of revolutionary violence they reached out, knowingly or instinctively, for the language of the sublime of fear.

According to the account given in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's terror lasted much longer than his stay in Paris – much longer, indeed, than the Terror itself. His reaction to it was so extreme that many critics and biographers have conjectured that Wordsworth must have seen or done something in France of which he later suppressed all trace: something even more traumatic than his abandonment of Annette Vallon and their daughter, Caroline.[25] For decades it was believed, based on Carlyle's report of a conversation with Wordsworth many years later, that he had secretly visited France in 1793 and witnessed the Terror in full swing; however, Juliet Barker has shown this to be extremely improbable.[26] Noting the sense of inexpiable guilt that fills Wordsworth's 1797 tragedy *The Borderers*, Bromwich speculates that Wordsworth may have 'once been in the thick of a conspiracy and seen someone badly hurt or killed on information from himself'.[27] But such biographical fantasies seem to me unnecessary: even if Wordsworth was never directly exposed to revolutionary violence, he came close enough to it to feel it and fear it, and that fear – coupled with the shock of separation from Annette and Caroline, the wreck of his hopes for the Revolution and the deaths of his Girondin friends – seems enough to explain the psychological turmoil which Wordsworth evidently suffered in the mid-1790s. Of his state of mind after his return to England, he wrote:

> Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!
> Were my day thoughts, my dreams were miserable;
> Through months, through years, long after the last beat
> Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth
> As if to thee alone in private talk)
> I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep,
> Such ghastly visions had I of despair,
> And tyranny and implements of death,
> And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
> Before unjust Tribunals …
>
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 368–77: P 1:277)

The Terror in France ended after Thermidor, but the Terror in Wordsworth's mind just would not stop, filling his thoughts by day and his dreams by night. 'Long after the last beat/Of those atrocities' died away in history, they continued to live on in the 'beat' of his poetry, where the long litany of horrors – despair, tyranny, implements of death, unjust tribunals – echoes the apparently endless series of 'ghastly visions' from which he suffered. Even after separating himself from it in time and space the Terror still seemed to be 'press'd' against him, a horror too close for any kind of aesthetic distancing to take place. Perhaps most horrible of all for a poet, Wordsworth's Terror appeared to be immune to language, for its 'unjust Tribunals' simply ignored the 'long orations' in which he pleaded with them in his nightmares, and there seemed to be nothing he could say that would make it relent, step back and grant him the breathing space which he so desperately required. This, again according to the *Prelude*, was the second time in his life that Wordsworth suffered from recurring nightmares: the first had occurred in childhood, after the famous episode in which he stole a boat and rowed across Ullswater, only to look up and see with terror that the mountain called Black Crag appeared to be chasing him across it. For days afterwards, he wrote:

> … huge and mighty forms that do not live
> Like living men moved slowly through my mind
> By day and were the trouble of my dreams.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 426–8: P 1:117)

In the *Prelude*, Wordsworth described his Lakeland home as a region of 'mountain liberty' – perhaps with Milton's famous line about 'The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty' in mind (1805 *Prelude*, book 9, l. 242: P 1:238, 'L'Allegro' l. 36: M 421). Mountains, then, should stand for the republican sublime, the sublime of liberty, rather than the sublime of fear; but in these two scenes the mountain/republic turns threatening, becoming a Burkean destroyer, not to be approached without risking terror and even madness. As a child, Wordsworth had been terrified by the idea that the mountain was pursuing him; did Robespierre, architect of the Terror and leader of the *Montaine* faction in the National Assembly, stalk after him like Black Crag through his nightmares as an adult?

The Jacobins were very fond of mountains, having – like Wordsworth – inherited from Rousseau the idea that the simple, rugged lives of the Swiss

mountaineers made them natural republicans. In the National Assembly they called themselves the *Montaine*, and at the Festival of the Supreme Being in 1794, Robespierre had David construct an immense artificial mountain in the middle of Paris for the climax of the festivities.[28] From up on their mountain-top, Williams argued, the Jacobins could order any atrocity, having entirely separated themselves from the rest of mankind:

> The faction of the anarchists desired that the French king should be put to death without the tedious forms of a trial. This opinion, however, was confined to the summit of the Mountain, that elevated region, where, aloof from all the ordinary feelings of our nature, no-one is diverted from his purpose by the weakness of humanity, or the compunctions of remorse; where urbanity is considered as an aristocratical infringement of *les grandes principes*, and mercy as a *crime de leze-nation*. (HMW I:4:1–2)

For Williams, the division between *Gironde* and the *Montaine* mirrors the division between sentiment and rationality; the Girondins, down among the people, were able to feel for them and empathise with them, while the Montagnards, up on their chilly heights, felt nothing for their victims, having emotionally distanced themselves from normal human life. The Girondins embodied her ideal of the republican sublime, in which sublimity and beauty, reason and sentiment, went hand in hand, while the Montagnards stood for that harder, more aggressive version of the revolutionary sublime that was forever verging on the Burkean sublime of terror.

Quite possibly some of the Jacobins did believe in the importance of lifting themselves above ordinary concerns, distancing themselves from the horrors they inflicted. But for Robespierre, this mountainous elevation served a different purpose. His version of the revolutionary sublime did not depend on distancing: instead, it was entirely predicated on the *lack* of distance. In Burke's eyes, the whole edifice of civilisation was based upon things keeping their proper distance from one another: it was right and proper that a certain distance should exist between ruler and ruled, public and private, sacred and profane, and if civilisation were to endure those distances had to be maintained, by force if necessary. The sublime Burkean king stands a distance from his subjects; the sublime Burkean priest ensures that his religion remains mysterious to the multitude. But in Robespierre's sublime

republic of virtue, no such distances were to exist. There were to be no barriers or secrets between citizen and citizen, between crime and judgment, between representatives and those they represented; all would be light, truth and perfect transparency. No-one would need to maintain their distance from anyone else; indeed, no-one would be *able* to maintain their distance from anyone else, and anyone who tried would be viewed with profound suspicion, for who but a traitor could wish to hide anything from their fellow citizens, or object to their patriotic investigations of one's affairs? Burke had made much of the value of secrecy:

> Those despotic governments, which are founded on the passions of men, and principally upon the passion of fear, keep their chief as much as possible from the public eye. The policy has been the same in many cases of religion. Almost all the heathen temples were dark. (*Enquiry*, part 2, section 3: EB 1:231)

Robespierre, however, sought a mountain-top perspective, not because he wished to distance himself from his people like some Burkean monarch, but because he wished to see and be seen: to gain a position of maximum visibility. Dart writes:

> [Robespierre] sometimes made it seem as if he alone was capable of commanding a general prospect of the Revolution, as if he alone could trace its true trajectory … In the eyes of his political enemies this detachment from the blood and strife of the main revolutionary struggles was indicative of a suspicious and cowardly nature. For his supporters, however, it bespoke an enabling detachment, a perspective which allowed him to see the Revolution with far greater clarity, and with a sympathy that was all the more pure.[29]

Like the Masonic eye at the top of the pyramid, which stared down from so many Revolutionary paintings and icons, he would see all: he could watch everyone's every move, and they in turn could watch his. For Robespierre, who famously had no private life, the realisation of this ideal was a victory of light and truth over the darkness and deception of the *ancien regime*.[30] But for many of those who lived through it, it was a nightmare of totalitarian terror, in which no part of life was safe from the intrusion and inspection of

the state. Robespierre's sublime was not Burke's, but the republican sublime of Wollstonecraft and Godwin, of light and truth as opposed to darkness and obscurity: accordingly he shunned Burke's gothic stage-props, preferring a sublime of complete abstractions such as 'the Supreme Being' and 'the General Will'. Burke's sublime is mysterious because it is dark and shadowy; Robespierre's is mysterious because it is invisible, reaching ultimately – as Marie-Hélène Huet has argued – beyond representation itself.[31] The social embodiment of Burke's sublime was the English common law: a tangle of precedents, exceptions, loopholes, arcane terminology and ancient privileges, built up piecemeal over the centuries, from which – through some mysterious process, incomprehensible to any individual human intellect – justice emerged. The social embodiment of Robespierre's sublime was the law of 22 Prairal: no lawyers, no formal procedures, just a suspect brought before a jury embodying the General Will of the people, who would instantly evaluate – or intuit – their inherent moral purity or impurity and accordingly pronounce a sentence of either liberty or death.[32] If Burke's dark sublime was the sublime of Milton's Satan, Robespierre's was the sublime of Milton's God: omniscient, omnipresent and abstract as light itself.

Wordsworth's visit to Paris occurred before Robespierre's rise to power, and by the time he came to write about it in *The Prelude* Robespierre was long dead, having passed – like so many of his victims – through the hands of Samson, the Revolution's chief executioner.[33] But his time in Paris had given him a glimpse of a sublime which did not keep its distance, but instead pressed right up against him: not a visual spectacle but a tactile one, a 'substantial dread' that is 'felt and touched' as if it filled the very air, like 'the press and danger of the crowd' in London (1805 *Prelude*, book 7, l. 658: P 1:209). It did not stand to be admired like some far-off mountain; instead it stalked forwards to crush and smother, just as Black Crag had advanced vengefully across Ullswater instead of keeping its proper distance. It was an experience that, I believe, altered his attitude towards Miltonic sublimity forever.

Returning from France in a state of emotional turmoil, Wordsworth set out on a walking tour of the West Country: he walked across Salisbury Plain, where he was tormented by terrifying visions of ancient atrocities, and on into Wales, heading up into the Wye Valley.[34] Five years later, in a much calmer mood, he revisited the same region, and wrote his famous 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'. By 1798, Wordsworth was trying hard to

put his experiences in France behind him, and although his poem mentions his previous visit of 1793, it makes no mention of its biographical context: 'I cannot paint/What then I was', he writes of his earlier self.[35] (One might be tempted to ask: cannot, or *will not?*) But what he does say about his earlier tour is extremely revealing:

> I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
> Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
> Wherever nature led; more like a man
> Flying from something that he dreads, than one
> Who sought the thing he loved.[36]

Of Wordsworth's 'self-representation' of his younger self, Stephen Gill writes:

> Factually it is not true. It is not surprising that Wordsworth should have erased what he was in 1793 – tormented by his impotent hostility to his own country's policies, by his responsibility to Annette and their child, by lack of direction and of financial independence. But it is surprising that he should present 1793 as the time when Nature was 'all in all' and 1798 as the moment when he felt most at one with the cause of humanity, for in 1793 Wordsworth had been a radical patriot, his heart given to the people and to the French cause, whereas in 1798 he was hymning Nature's power to 'feed this mind of ours,/In a wise passiveness'.[37]

In other words, Gill sees 'Tintern Abbey' as misrepresenting Wordsworth's five-year journey from humanity to nature as a five-year journey from nature to humanity, precisely inverting the actual trajectory of his intellectual development during the mid-1790s. Such an inversion would indeed be 'surprising'; but it relies upon the idea of 'nature' and 'humanity' as incompatible absolutes, whereas what Wordsworth seems to me to describe in 'Tintern Abbey' is a movement from one concept of nature and humanity to another. I accept that Wordsworth is carefully keeping his radical past hidden in this poem, but I am not sure that we need discount everything he says about his younger self as 'factually not true' because of this, or that the union with nature he claims to have experienced on his first visit to Tintern Abbey is incompatible with the radical political views we know that he held

at the time. Wordsworth may have equated Nature with 'wise passiveness' in 1798; but what did Nature mean to him in 1793?

Marjorie Levinson's famous essay on the hidden historical and biographical context of 'Tintern Abbey', 'Insight and Oversight', has surprisingly little to say about Wordsworth's 1793 visit, being more concerned with reconstructing the circumstances of the 1798 tour during which the poem was supposedly composed. She writes:

> Wordsworth's unhappy separation from Nature ended in 1793 but this return, fondly recalled in 'Tintern Abbey' (ll. 66–83) could not have been so renewing nor so unambivalent as he later chose to suggest, given the state of his personal life and of national affairs.[38]

That Wordsworth conceals a good deal about his past in this poem is not something I would contest. But Levinson seems to assume both that Wordsworth fell away from 'Nature' in 1792/3 and that he claimed in 'Tintern Abbey' to have experienced a 'renewing', 'unambivalent' return to it during his 1793 tour, neither of which seem to me to be the case. I see nothing in 'Tintern Abbey' to suggest that Wordsworth's sense that 'nature …/ To me was all in all' was something he had lost in France and only just regained in 1793; instead, his identification of it with 'the coarser pleasures of my boyish days' (l. 74) suggests that it was a feeling that had been with him since childhood, was still with him in 1793, and fell away from him only in the five years leading up to his second visit to Tintern in 1798. On this reading, rather than being ruptured by his involvement with French radical politics, Wordsworth's union with 'Nature' was coterminous with it; perhaps it was even dependent upon such activities, for it faded only after his turn away from politics in the later 1790s. Furthermore, Wordsworth's union with nature in 1793 does not seem as 'unambivalent' as Levinson suggests; as he wrote, he threw himself into it:

> … more like a man
> Flying from something that he dreads, than one
> Who sought the thing he loved.[39]

It is here that the biographical context of that earlier visit, which Wordsworth keeps out of view in the poem, comes into play; the reason that Wordsworth

in 1793 was 'like a man/Flying from something that he dreads' is because he *was* one, as if *The Prelude* is to be believed he must have visited the Wye whilst still in the grip of the nightmares and mental disturbances which afflicted him during and after the Terror. For this reason, many critics have expressed scepticism about Wordsworth's claim to have been interested only in nature, not politics, in 1793. 'Nature then', he writes, 'To me was all in all': an assertion that seems demonstrably false when placed alongside either his own writings from the time, such as his politically radical *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, or his later account of that year in *The Prelude*. Yet it is worth noting the way Wordsworth describes the effect that the Wye landscape had on him in 1793:

> The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite: a feeling and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, or any interest
> Unborrowed from the eye.[40]

The Wordsworth of 1793, in other words, was haunted by the sublimity of nature, and especially with sublime mountain scenery – precisely the kind of scenery of which the Jacobins were so fond, and which, in both the (earlier) *Descriptive Sketches* and the (later) *Prelude*, Wordsworth associated with revolutionary politics and 'mountain liberty'. Wordsworth's claim in *The Prelude* to have spent this period in a haze of Terror-induced dread is thus not incompatible with his claim in 'Tintern Abbey' to have spent it absorbed in the sublimity of nature, as on the evidence of his poems they seem at this point in his life to have been profoundly tangled up in his mind.

When it is recalled that Wordsworth initially considered the Revolution to be part of 'nature's certain course', it becomes possible to see how he could truthfully have said in 1793 that, to him, nature was 'all in all'. What seems improbable is that his interest in nature could have lacked 'any interest/ Unborrowed from the eye': that the mountain could not have reminded him of the Montagnards, and that the cataract should have 'haunted' him on a purely aesthetic level. As Alan Liu and others have argued, Wordsworth's imagery and ideology of nature often conceal displaced political and historical

concerns, concerns which haunt his works by the conspicuousness of their absence in the very places where one might most expect them to appear: 'Adequate reading of Wordsworth's texts in their historical context', Liu writes, 'requires not so much positivistic method as a deflected or denied positivism able to discriminate absence'.[41] Thus Liu claims that Wordsworth's account of crossing the Simplon Pass in *The Prelude* is a displacement of Napoleon's recent march along the same route, in which Wordsworth attempted to suppress the historical trauma of Napoleon's crossing of the Alps and all it stood for – the betrayal of the French Revolution represented by Napoleon's military expansionism, the threat to Britain represented by his continued military success – by refusing to mention it, even though his first readers would have thought of it the moment the Simplon Pass was named.[42] Just as Liu sees Napoleon being written out of *The Prelude* – and creeping back in through possibly unintentional verbal echoes – so I think Wordsworth deliberately writes his revolutionary sympathies of 1793 out of 'Tintern Abbey', only to have them resurface in the form of the (terribly) sublime natural scenery with which they were so relentlessly associated. In the 1793 edition of *Descriptive Sketches*, in lines he cut from later versions of the poem, Wordsworth described the Revolution as a flood:

> Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride
> Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride,
> To break, the vales where Death with Famine scow'rs,
> And dark Oppression builds her thick-ribb'd tow'rs …[43]

As Theresa Kelley has pointed out, describing the Revolution as a sublime flood or deluge was a commonplace in the 1790s, used by everyone from Burke to Napoleon.[44] In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth disclaims any connection between the poetry of nature and the poetry of politics. But given that he later claimed to have been Terror-stricken at the time, could 'Freedom's waves … sublime' – waves that could easily have drowned him had he remained in France, and actually were drowning his Girondin friends while he rambled around the West Country – really have been entirely absent from his mind when he was 'haunted' by the cataracts of the Wye? It is in his assertions that in youth nature meant nothing more than hills and rivers to him – and that even hills and rivers appealed to him on an entirely non-intellectual level – that Wordsworth appears to me to protest too much. I would suggest that

Wordsworth's elemental union with Nature in 1793 need not be written off as an invention of his later self, eager to conceal his radical past; instead, it can be seen as both a symptom and a displacement of his historically documented immersion in the politics of terror, which at this point filled his writings (such as his *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, which defended the use of violence in the defence of the Revolution), his visions (such as his Salisbury Plain 'reverie') and, as we know from *The Prelude*, his 'day-thoughts' and dreams.[45] In his 1793 *Descriptive Sketches*, Wordsworth equated union with Nature with union with the Revolution, and the directness with which he claimed in 'Tintern Abbey' to have experienced the sublime mountain scenery of the Wye is reminiscent of the directness with which, in *The Prelude*, he claims to have experienced the proximity of the revolutionary sublime in Paris. Both loving and hating the mountain/*Montaine* which towered over him, preaching the necessity of revolutionary violence even while having nightmares about its effects, it is no wonder that he flung himself into Wales 'more like a man/ Flying from something that he dreads, than one/Who sought the thing he loved'. (l. 73)

Some insight into Wordsworth's shifting attitudes towards natural and revolutionary sublimity can be gained from his tragedy *The Borderers*, composed in 1796–7. In it, the villain Rivers explains how he broke away from ordinary morality to arrive at a higher revolutionary rationalism, in which the glory of one's ends could easily justify the deaths of innocents along the way. He declares:

> Oft I left the camp
> When all that multitude of hearts was still
> And followed on through woods of gloomy cedar
> Into deep chasms troubled by roaring streams,
> Or from the top of Lebanon surveyed
> The moonlight desart, and the moonlight sea;
> In these my lonely wanderings I perceived
> What mighty objects do impress their forms
> To build up this our intellectual being,
> And felt if aught on earth deserves a curse,
> 'Twas that worst principle of ill which dooms
> A thing so great to perish self-consumed.
> – So much for my remorse.

'Oh, my poor friend!' Mortimer interrupts, but Rivers plunges on:

> When from these forms I turned to contemplate
> The opinions and the uses of the world,
> I seemed a being who had passed alone
> Beyond the visible barriers of the world
> And travelled into things to come.[46]

Rivers, it seems, learned his Jacobinical creed by exposing himself to the sublime of nature in its most awesome and terrifying aspects: 'deep chasms', 'roaring streams', 'the moonlight desart and the moonlight sea' and literally above all 'the top of Lebanon', a mountaintop locale made doubly sublime by its Biblical associations. Traditional theorists of the sublime had argued that such 'mighty objects' should teach us to fear and obey God, by reminding us of His power and our own smallness; but Rivers seems to have learned an entirely different lesson, namely that men like him are too important to be allowed to 'perish self-consumed' in agonies of regret for their actions, and thus that remorse is unnecessary and useless. Having concluded this, he considers himself free of the normal moral and social obligations that bind other men, and now believes any judgment they may pass upon him is simply irrelevant: 'to be truly the world's friend/We must become the object of its hate', because:

> Benevolence that has not heart to use
> The wholesome ministry of pain and evil
> Is powerless and contemptible.[47]

The extent to which he has internalised this sublimity is suggested by his name, Rivers: he has become an elemental being, rushing remorselessly on, like 'Freedom's waves to ride sublime' – or like the waters of the Loire, in which the Jacobins carried out mass drownings of suspected counter-revolutionaries in 1794.[48] He embodies the terrible sublime of the *Montaine*, and his promise is that, by following his example, Mortimer can make himself 'more awful and sublime': after all, he says, 'it is/In darkness and in tempest that we seek/The majesty of the Almighty'.[49] Mortimer ultimately rejects him, just as Wordsworth rejected Robespierre; but in rejecting Rivers, Mortimer also abandons his career as a fighter against injustice, devoting himself to penance and solitude instead. Unlike Mortimer, Wordsworth did not (so far

as we know) have the deaths of any innocent men on his conscience, and thus does not seem to have felt any need to devote himself to a life of penance. But he did turn away from active engagement in revolutionary politics; and in doing so, he also turned away from the grand sublime of force and terror with which, for Rivers and Robespierre, such politics went hand in hand.

In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth insists that he – the Wordsworth of 1798, the author of the poem – is very different to the Wordsworth of 1793. 'That time is past', he writes, 'And all its aching joys are now no more':

> For I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
> The still, sad music of humanity,
> Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
> To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man …

In a passage of *The Prelude* addressed to his sister Dorothy, Wordsworth makes much the same claim:

> Even to the very going out of youth,
> The period which our Story now hath reach'd,
> I too exclusively esteem'd that love,
> And sought that beauty, which, as Milton sings,
> Hath terror in it. Thou didst soften down
> This over sternness: but for thee, sweet Friend,
> My soul, too reckless of mild grace, had been
> Far longer what by Nature it was framed,
> Longer retain'd its countenance severe,
> A rock with torrents roaring, with the clouds
> Familiar, and a favorite of the Stars.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 222–32: P 1:318–19)

In both passages, Wordsworth describes his abandonment of the grand sublime of terror: the sublime of the *Descriptive Sketches*, but also, crucially, the sublime of Rivers, Robespierre and the French Revolution. 'Wordsworth's 1798 poem celebrating a return to the Wye', Kelley writes, 'surreptitiously uncelebrates the revolutionary sublime'.[51] I do not mean to imply anything so crude as 'when Wordsworth writes about renouncing the grand sublime, he's really writing about renouncing revolutionary politics'; but I do not think it coincidental that Wordsworth rejected the politics of terror in the very years in which he also turned away from the terrible sublime. In youth, he wrote, he was devoted to 'that beauty which, as Milton sings,/Hath terror in it', and his surviving early poetry bears out his claim: his juvenile poem 'The Vale of Esthwaite', written in 1785–8, is a compendium of sublime gothic terrors, the work of one who could justly claim that 'the world of shades is all my own'.[52] But later in life he turned to a softer, gentler version of the sublime, a 'sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused', embodied not by stars and crags but by water, sunlight and air. Wordsworth's soul had been 'a rock with torrents roaring', until Dorothy 'didst plant its crevices with flowers'; imagery that recalls Williams's description of her ideal revolutionary sublime as being 'not only sublime in a general view, but often beautiful when considered in detail' (HMW I:2:22). As Dart puts it, 'The false and bloody sublime of the Montagnards … has been replaced by the true and healthful sublime of the Lakeland mountains, which represents its softer and yet more lasting embodiment'.[53] According to 'Tintern Abbey', this change took place between 1793 and 1798 – the very years in which, according to *The Prelude*, Wordsworth was suffering from the 'ghastly visions' induced by the Terror. I believe that these two facts are connected; that Wordsworth's encounter in Paris with a revolutionary sublime of terror that refused to keep its distance led him to abandon it for a gentler sublime, one that could be appreciated at close range without going insane. Not coincidentally, these were also the years in which Wordsworth increasingly abandoned revolutionary politics in favour of nature mysticism and local concerns. In Burkean terms, he turned from the sublime to the beautiful.

In the process he also turned his back on one aspect of Milton. It was not accidental that, in *The Prelude*, he described the sublime he rejected as 'that beauty which, as Milton sings,/Hath terror in it': thanks to Burke, the sublime of terror was inevitably also *Milton's* sublime. Wordsworth's 'as' can be read in two ways: the obvious reading is 'Milton sings that this beauty has terror

in it', as indeed he does in *Paradise Lost*, book 9, but it could also be read as meaning 'this beauty has terror in it *while (or because) Milton sings*'; Milton, like Robespierre, sings sublime terrors into being. The comparison is not too far-fetched; as Fink has speculated, Wordsworth may well have first come across Milton's prose works in revolutionary France, which – if true – must have powerfully cemented his identification of Milton with the unfolding Revolution.[54] Like many other contemporary writers, Wordsworth employed Miltonic language to describe the French Revolution: his description of the Jacobins as 'the atheist crew' is a quotation from Milton (who applies it to the fallen angels), his description of them as 'the foul tribe of Moloch' alludes to *Paradise Lost*, book 2, and when he heard of the death of Robespierre he rejoiced 'in vengeance and eternal justice' in language straight out of *Paradise Lost* (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 457, 468, 540: P 1:279, 1:281; *Paradise Lost*, book 1, l. 70: M 7). The Revolution, and especially the Terror, were bound up with Milton's poetry and prose; the Miltonic sublime was the sublime of the Revolution, the sublime of terror embodied by Black Crag, the *Montaine* and the September Massacres, and by rejecting one he inevitably rejected the other. Milton's 'soul was like a star', but Wordsworth no longer wished to be 'a favourite of the stars', a being of incarnate sublimity: he wanted to come back down to earth. By the time Coleridge met Wordsworth in 1795, and began enthusing about the possibility of his becoming a modern Milton, it was, in a sense, already too late: and for all his boasts in his 'Prospectus' about his mastery of 'all strength, all terror', 'fear and awe', 'hell, night, chaos, death' and the rest of the Miltonic arsenal, Wordsworth had taken a decisive step away from the Miltonic sublime and all that went with it. Over the course of his long poetic career he would go on to write innumerable poems of great power and beauty, including many Miltonic sonnets almost the equals of Milton's own. But he would never write his planned Miltonic epic.

III

The freezing winter of 1798 saw Wordsworth pacing the walls of Goslar in a mood of bitter self-reproach. He, Dorothy and Coleridge had travelled to Germany together; but while Coleridge whirled around the university towns, attending lectures and apostrophising his hosts in broken German, Wordsworth was left in Goslar so that he could concentrate on writing his epic.[55] It was not going well: pace though he might, he seemed further than ever from realising the greatness that he was sure was his poetic destiny.

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams?[56]

Wordsworth seems to have penned these lines in a spirit of self-accusation. Had he enjoyed all nature's blessings in childhood only to end in failure? As usual, it was Milton against whom he was measuring himself, and it was Milton's voice he borrowed to express his fears:

For this did th' Angel twice descend? for this
Ordaind thy nurture holy, as of a Plant,
Select and Sacred, Glorious for a while,
The miracle of men: then in an hour
Ensnar'd, assaulted, overcome, led bound,
Thy Foes derision, Captive, Poor, and Blind,
Into a Dungeon thrust, to work with Slaves?
(*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 361–7: M 356)

The lines are from *Samson Agonistes*, spoken by Samson's father Manoah when he sees his son defeated and enslaved. Wordsworth believed himself, like Samson, to have been specially chosen, and that his childhood had been 'holy, as of a Plant/Select and Sacred'; but, again like Samson, he had failed to live up to the promise of his birth. Just as Samson had failed to become an epic hero, so Wordsworth seemed to be failing to become an epic poet; and in echoing these lines he may have imagined his poetic father-figure, the Manoah-like John Milton, looking disapprovingly down on his would-be successor's lack of progress.

Then again, perhaps Wordsworth was trying to comfort himself. Milton's Samson was, as I have discussed, often taken to be a self-portrait by Milton of his life after the Restoration, when he too lived 'Captive, Poor, and Blind', questioning the providence of God that had brought him from such noble beginnings to such a lowly end. But while they both lived to see the defeat of their respective causes, neither Milton's nor Samson's life ended in total failure. Samson was not blessed in childhood so that he could die in shame;

he was blessed in childhood so that he could destroy the Temple of Dagon with his last breath. Milton was not favoured as a youth so that he could die in obscurity; he was favoured as a youth so that, as an old man, he could become the greatest epic poet Britain had ever seen. By alluding to these lines Wordsworth may have been signalling his hope that he, too, could still accomplish the great work that Coleridge expected from him, however bleak things currently appeared. If so, it became, in a sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy; for just as Milton, by the very act of writing *Samson Agonistes*, demonstrated that his active life was anything but finished, so Wordsworth used these self-reproaching lines as the kernel of what was to become *The Prelude*, his own great epic and his answer to *Paradise Lost*.

The Prelude was not in itself intended to be the 'single volume paramount' for the new age: that honour was to be reserved for *The Recluse*, the great work that, unfinished and unfinishable, weighed down Wordsworth's mind and desk for more than fifty years. That he wished it to be viewed as an epic in its own right is clear from its division into thirteen (later fourteen) books; however, as the name given to it after Wordsworth's death implies, *The Prelude* was intended to be nothing more than a preface to *The Recluse*, which was to be a macro-epic so huge as to require an entire epic poem as an introduction. *The Prelude* did, however, represent a crucial step in Wordsworth's renegotiation of his epic ambitions, and hence of his relationship with Milton. In it he mapped out a new kind of epic, one that did not rely upon the sublime of awe and terror from which he had turned away in the years following the Terror. The epics of his contemporaries had all kept to the familiar territory of armies, angels and apocalypses, and even Coleridge's *Religious Musings*, which was the closest he ever came to writing his planned philosophical epic, had dealt with large-scale political and spiritual upheavals. But *The Prelude*, like *The Recluse*, was to be a more personal, peaceful, introspective work, charting the mental and spiritual development of an individual man rather than the destinies of nations, and hence better suited to the gentler aesthetic Wordsworth had adopted in the later 1790s. *The Prelude* was the testing-ground for this new form of epic poetry, and it was thus essential for Wordsworth to establish that it was a true epic, a work of Miltonic stature; for if he could claim epic status for such a poem, it would be potentially possible for Wordsworth to take his desired place as Milton's successor without having to return to the terrible sublime.

In Book I, Wordsworth lists all the gifts that an epic poet should possess, and asserts that he has them all; but despite this, the task proves not to be without its difficulties. Like Milton, Wordsworth attests to his epic credentials by claiming prophetic inspiration:

> … to the open fields I told
> A prophesy; poetic numbers came
> Spontaneously, and cloth'd in priestly robe
> My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
> For holy service.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 59–63: P 1:108).

Here again Wordsworth presents himself as the chosen one, 'singled out' for 'holy service' as a prophet – although the cautious, deflating clause 'as it might seem' suggests his ongoing uncertainty about his own prophetic status, and thus casts doubt on that status itself, for what kind of prophet is unsure whether or not he is inspired? One possible reason for his uncertainty is the form his 'poetic numbers' seemed to be taking, for his 'prophesy' did not, like Homer's or Milton's, take the form of a Classical or Biblical epic. He considered, like so many of his contemporaries, writing a national epic on 'some British theme, some old/Romantic tale, by Milton left unsung'. He considered writing a radical epic:

> I would record
> How in tyrannic times some unknown Man,
> Unheard of in the Chronicles of Kings,
> Suffered in silence for the love of truth.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 202–5: P 1:111–12)

Most of all, he thinks of the 'philosophic song' that he promised to Coleridge in 1798, and which he had been attempting to write ever since. But he finds himself unable to produce any of these works:

> But from this awful burthen I full soon
> Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust
> That mellower years will bring a riper mind
> And clearer insight. Thus from day to day

I live, a mockery of the brotherhood
Of vice and virtue, with no skill to part
Vague longing that is bred by want of power
From paramount impulse not to be withstood,
A timorous capacity from prudence,
From circumspection infinite delay.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 236–45: P 1:112–13)

These lines, as Simpson notes, show Wordsworth's anxiety at his failure to single-mindedly devote himself to poetic labour, as he imagined Milton to have done.[57] Frustrated by his 'infinite delay', he returns to the Miltonic question, 'Was it for this …?', and then on to the scenes of his childhood and youth he had written about in Goslar. The relevance of these childhood episodes to the epic ambitions he has just described remains unclear until the very end of the first book, where he writes:

One end hereby, at least hath been attain'd –
My mind hath been reviv'd, and if this mood
Desert me not, I will forthwith bring down,
Through later years, the story of my life.
The road lies plain before me; 'tis a theme
Single and of determin'd bounds, and hence
I chuse it rather, at this time, than work
Of ampler or more varied argument.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 665–72: P 1:124)

These lines form a defensive apology for the poem that Wordsworth has written, instead, of the 'work/Of ampler or more varied argument', that Coleridge had been expecting from him. 'I chuse it rather at this time', he writes, implying that he might still write the projected epic which Coleridge had demanded at some future date. But for now, he had written *The Prelude* – and what was that? By 1805, 'the story of my life' – or rather, the story of his life up to the mid-1790s – had become a blank verse poem in thirteen books, comparable in length to *Paradise Lost*; but the crucial question was whether the resulting work was a 'real' epic, or just another symptom of the 'infinite delay' that was preventing him from realising his Miltonic destiny. The mere fact of having written a lengthy poem in blank verse, subdivided into books,

did not make one an epic poet. Thompson's *Seasons* was not an epic, and nor was Cowper's *Task*, so why should Wordsworth's *Prelude*, dealing as it did with similarly domestic material, be any different?

One of the ways in which Wordsworth staked out his claim to epic status for *The Prelude* was through the use of Miltonic echoes and allusions. On the very first page, he wrote:

> The earth is all before me: with a heart
> Joyous, nor scar'd at its own liberty
> I look about, and should the guide I chuse
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud
> I cannot miss my way.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 15–19: P 1:107)

As almost every reader then and since has noticed, this passage echoes the closing lines of *Paradise Lost:*

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
> They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
> Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way.
> (*Paradise Lost*, book 12, ll. 646–9: M 281)

The message could hardly be clearer: Wordsworth intended to take up where Milton had left off. (This commitment is restated at the end of the first book, in the line already quoted: 'the road lies plain before me'.) Just as Milton had claimed that his religious poem was at least as suitable a subject for epic as 'wars, hitherto the only argument/Heroic deemed' (*Paradise Lost*, book 9, ll. 28–9), Wordsworth asserts that to describe the development of his own mind 'is in truth heroic argument' (1805 *Prelude*, book 3, l. 182: P 1:140). In *Paradise Lost*, it is Adam and Eve who ultimately discover that 'the world was all before them'; so accordingly, as Matthew Biberman has pointed out, in *The Prelude* Wordsworth repeatedly positions himself as Milton's Adam, as when he quotes from Adam's morning prayer in order to describe his feelings in the Simplon Pass.[58] Biberman may well be right in seeing this as a republican gesture on Wordsworth's part – Adam had been used as a symbol of republican equality since at least the seventeenth century – but it

also acts to validate Wordsworth's claim to be as suitable a subject for epic poetry as Milton's Adam, and to grant his account of how his 'imagination' was 'impaired and restored' a suitably epic grandeur through its association with Milton's story of Adam's spiritual fall and regeneration (1805 *Prelude*, book 11, title: P 1:295). Yet Wordsworth must have known that one obvious objection to *The Prelude*, had it ever been published, would have been that it was the story not of a hero but of a nobody, an observer rather than an actor on the stage of history. In France he had, by his own account, briefly considered involving himself in revolutionary politics, but had decided not to: instead of immersing himself in the epic world of war, power and bloodshed, he had returned to England in mental turmoil, while his friend Beaupuy marched for the front and his Girondin acquaintances went to the guillotine. How could so peripheral a figure as William Wordsworth ever be epic material? And how could telling the story of such a life ever mark its author out as the kind of inspired poet-prophet that Wordsworth so desperately desired to be?

'Poets, even as Prophets', Wordsworth writes in the penultimate book of *The Prelude*, are each 'enabled to perceive/Something unseen before'. It is, in other words, the distinguishing mark of the poet/prophet that they are able to perceive and express some new idea or truth, thereby displaying a creative 'power like one of Nature's' (1805 *Prelude*, book 12, ll. 301, 304–5, 312: P 1:311). In the same passage, Wordsworth articulates what he feels his own original insight to be:

> Nature through all conditions hath a power
> To consecrate, if we have eyes to see,
> The outside of her creatures, and to breathe
> Grandeur upon the very humblest face
> Of human life.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 12, ll. 282–6: P 1:311)

Up on his mountaintop, Milton's Adam was granted the insight to see the sublime plan of God working itself out through the chaos of human history. Wordsworth's insight after his return from France was, he claims, even wider: he saw how Nature had the power to bring sublime blessings, not only out of grand and remarkable events, but also from the ordinary and everyday, 'the very humblest face/Of human life'. This insight serves to justify *The Prelude* on several levels. Firstly, by the very act of articulating this new

vision, Wordsworth demonstrated – at least to his own satisfaction – that he belonged to the 'band' of inspired poet/prophets, and thus had the authority to write a new kind of epic, whilst simultaneously reassuring the reader that his prophetic vision does not, like the radical reading of Milton's, take the form of an alarming revolutionary manifesto. Secondly, Wordsworth's assertion that Nature can 'breathe Grandeur' upon both normal human life and apparently pointless misery reinforced *The Prelude's* claim to epic status; for then even as seemingly unpromising a life story as Wordsworth's own could become epic material, 'if we have eyes to see'. Wordsworth's poem was a sublime epic because it articulated a vision of epic sublimity in which it was itself included; *The Prelude* provided its own justification, and in this at least it was similar to that previous mould-breaking, self-justifying epic, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Probably the similarity was intentional: for the purpose of the entire exercise had been to demonstrate that Wordsworth was a worthy successor to Milton, and that the *Prelude* had a perfect right to begin where *Paradise Lost* left off.

As I have mentioned, the epic hero to whom Wordsworth most frequently alluded in *The Prelude* was Milton's Adam. As Simpson notes, Wordsworth articulates the events of the French Revolution in terms of the plot of *Paradise Lost*, and works hard to assimilate his own experience of them to Adam's role in that plot: he had entered the Edenic world of France in 1791, but there had been a Fall, precipitated by the Satanic Robespierre and his demonic Jacobins, and he had been cast back to England, where like the exiled Adam outside Eden he had experienced a spiritual crisis culminating in his escape from a 'universe of death' (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, l. 141: P 1:317) – Wordsworth borrows Milton's exact phrase – and the discovery of a paradise within him, happier far.[59] By describing the French Revolution in Miltonic terms, and casting himself as Milton's Adam, Wordsworth was able to depict himself as standing at the heart of the Revolutionary drama, rather than on its edges. Even if Nature could 'breathe/Grandeur' upon 'the very humblest', rendering everyday things sublime, Wordsworth could still hardly claim to have been an Aeneas or an Achilles; but he could and did claim to have been an Adam, for Adam had long been taken as representative of all men. Attempting to frame the story of his life in appropriately epic terms, he insisted that it had not been a mere succession of false starts and accidents: instead it had been an epic journey which, ultimately, had led him to a kind of enlightenment, a prophetic insight and inspiration similar to that of Milton or of the prophetic

Adam in the last books of *Paradise Lost*. Comparing himself to 'the ancient Prophets', Wordsworth wrote:

> So did some portion of that spirit fall
> On me, to uphold me through those evil times,
> And in their rage and dog-day heat I found
> Something to glory in as just and fit,
> And in the order of sublimest laws.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 409–13: P 1:278)

Wordsworth's choice of the word 'sublimest' here is significant, for the specific enlightenment that he claimed to have gained was that of enhanced perspective, the ability to look upon the chaotic events of his age as part of a grander scheme in which they were 'just and fit', so that the (terribly) sublime events of his 'evil times' are reconciled with a (morally) sublime scheme of transcendent 'laws':

> Wild blasts of music thus did find their way
> Into the midst of terrible events,
> So that worst tempests might be listen'd to:
> Then was the truth received into my heart,
> That under heaviest sorrow earth can bring,
> Griefs bitterest of ourselves or of our Kind,
> If from the affliction somewhere do not grow
> Honour which could not else have been, a faith,
> An elevation, and a sanctity,
> If new strength be not given, or old restored,
> The blame is ours not Nature's.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 419–29: P 1:278)

What the prophetic 'spirit' allows Wordsworth to do, then, is to hear the music in the tempest, the hidden patterns and harmonies that govern human history and bring otherwise unachievable opportunities for good out of the worst of evils. His perspective, once more, is Adam's: but if in France he had been the Adam of the Edenic books, here he is the Adam of Book 12, to whom all of history has been revealed, along with the divine plan that guides it towards the ultimate triumph of good over evil. In the 1850 version of

The Prelude, Wordsworth rewrote this passage to make it even more reminiscent of Adam's mountaintop vision; rather than just crediting himself with having achieved 'an elevation', he described himself as 'borne aloft/In vision' and 'uplifted from the vantage-ground/Of pity and sorrow', raised, like Adam, far enough above the chaos of history to be able to appreciate it as sublime.[60] *The Prelude*, then, is not only the story of the loss and regaining of paradise; it is also the story of the loss and regaining of *distance*, for the elevated Wordsworth of its last books has regained the safe, distanced perspective of which he was deprived in revolutionary Paris, allowing him access once more to the elevated vision proper to the prophet or the epic poet. Having gained this perspective, he is able to see that an epic order lies beneath the apparent chaos of events, and thus that the story of his own life really 'is in truth heroic argument', just as he had asserted it to be back in book 1 (1805 *Prelude*, book 3, l. 182: P 1:140). The epic of Wordsworth's life tells the story of how Wordsworth came to realise that his life was epic material.

Wordsworth's famous statement, 'I felt a kind of sympathy with power', appears in the context of this passage. This line has often been read as a confession of fellow-feeling with Robespierre and the Jacobins, who elsewhere in *The Prelude* are condemned unequivocally, and it is true that the sublime, prophetic stance which Wordsworth attributes to himself here has more than a little in common with Robespierre's *Montaine*-top perspective, or the perspective of Rivers in *The Borderers*, in which human death and suffering are much less important than the sublime possibilities for social and moral regeneration they bring with them.[61] However, the 'power' that the surrounding lines refer to is not mortal political power but the supernatural power of Nature or Heaven, the secret, sacred organising force beneath and behind human history. 'Sympathy', in this case, carries its older, magical meaning of an occult connection between two things: Wordsworth's sympathy with the power of Nature is what allows him to detect and understand its operations, hearing its 'music' through the tempest of events. What sets him apart from Rivers is the fact that, whereas Rivers saw in the sublime of nature a justification for inflicting sublime terrors on his fellow men, Wordsworth is led by Nature to abandon violent political action rather than to embrace it. That Wordsworth understood the danger of the line being misread is clear from the 1850 version, where his 'kind of sympathy with power' became 'daring sympathies with power,/Motions not treacherous or profane': a defensive rewriting aiming to make clear that the

power with which he sympathised was not that of the French (which would have been 'treacherous') nor that of any other earthy political faction (which would have been 'profane'), but something altogether higher, the power of Nature which gives shape and meaning to human affairs.[62] Such a reading would fit in with Wordsworth's broader claim for his own prophetic status, a claim repeated at intervals throughout *The Prelude*.[63]

Furthermore, it serves to explain how Wordsworth could be an epic hero or prophet at all. Power – whether the martial power of heroes, the political power of nations or the divine power of gods and angels – is the traditional subject-matter of epic; yet, by his own account, Wordsworth never wielded any real power in his life. Unlike epic heroes, he had not changed the world through his prowess in battle; and unlike the 'ancient prophets' to whom he compares himself – probably thinking of Milton as much as Moses or Jeremiah – he had not led his people to righteousness, or risked his life by speaking sacred truths to kings. Several critics have noted that there is much of the would-be soldier in Wordsworth; Simon Bainbridge writes that he 'always fancied that he had a talent for command, and he at one time thought of military life', and quotes in support some lines from 'Home at Grasmere', written by Wordsworth at much the same time as *The Prelude:*[64]

> I heard of danger met
> Or sought with courage, enterprize forlorn,
> By one, sole keeper of his own intent,
> Or by a resolute few, who for the sake
> Of glory fronted multitudes in arms.
> Yea, to this day I swell with like desire;
> I cannot at this moment read a tale
> Of two brave Vessels matched in deadly fight
> And fighting to the death, but I am pleased
> More than a wise Man ought to be; I wish,
> I burn, I struggle, and in soul am there.[65]

In soul, perhaps; but in reality Wordsworth had scrupulously avoided his chance to assume the sublime roles he dreams of here, and never came any closer to military service than his decision to join the Grasmere Volunteers in 1803.[66] He had not stood forth, like a Biblical prophet, as 'one, sole keeper of his own intent'; he had not, like an epic hero, led 'a resolute few' who 'fronted

multitudes in arms'. He claimed that he should have been a great epic poet, that he could have been a great leader of men, that he would have been a martyr of the Revolution – but, in the event, he was none of these things. His republican call-to-arms, the dangerously radical *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, was never published, and his one brush with revolutionary power, in France, seems to have almost driven him insane. But if it is not God or politics but Nature that shapes human history, then contemplation of and communion with Nature is not a retreat from power, but a connection to it; a connection that may lead ultimately to a 'sympathy with power' capable of granting the sublime insights that, Wordsworth contends, enable him to take his place alongside the 'ancient prophets'. Milton, Adam, Aeneas, Achilles and Moses had all sought epic greatness and 'sympathy with power' in high places, in the affairs of angels, gods and kings; but, with the help of Nature, Wordsworth claimed to have been able to attain it merely by staying home at Grasmere.

The Prelude, then, becomes the story of how one man attained sublime prophetic insight into human history, proving himself in the process to be as suitable an epic protagonist as the sublime, prophetically inspired Adam and as suitable an epic poet as the sublime, prophetically inspired Milton. Yet, as I have discussed above, it is at the same time the story of a retreat from the sublime world of epic action into a gentler, more domestic realm. This rhetorical balancing act was necessitated by the very terms of Wordsworth's project to write a non-epic epic poem, a work that would, like *Paradise Lost*, provide a new kind of 'heroic argument' for a new age. His seemingly paradoxical claim that one can attain sublimity by retreating from the sublime is no more than a restatement of his initial claim that one can write an epic poem even while shunning all normal epic subject matter. Wordsworth's was to be a new kind of epic, leading to a new kind of sublimity: not Milton's sublime of hideous ruin and combustion, but the gentler sublime of something far more deeply interfused, articulated in *The Prelude*, 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Home at Grasmere'.

One problem that Wordsworth faced in doing this was how to disentangle his version of the natural sublime from the terrorist aesthetics of Jacobins like Rivers and Robespierre, who also claimed to draw inspiration from nature. Wordsworth had to demonstrate that his sublime of nature would not, like the revolutionary sublime of terror, lead to madness and disintegration, either of the self or of society. Unfortunately, the sublime of terror was deeply

embedded in the sublime of nature, and always had been; mountains, argued aesthetic theorists from Dennis onwards, were sublime because they were terrifying, so how could an appeal to nature, of all things, allow Wordsworth to escape from the terrible sublime?[67] Wordsworth did not deny that nature can be terrible, and describing his hike up into the 'narrow chasm' of the Simplon Pass in *The Prelude*, he vividly evoked the natural sublime at its most fearful:

> The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
> The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
> And every where along the hollow rent
> Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
> As if a voice were in them – the sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
> The unfetter'd clouds and region of the heavens,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great Apocalyps,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first and last, and midst, and without end.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 6, ll. 556–72: P 1:190)

This is physically and psychically dangerous territory. It is sublime because it is 'immeasurable', too huge to comprehend; but rather than standing at a distance, it pushes forwards 'close upon our ears', like the fear that 'press'd' on Wordsworth in revolutionary Paris, or like Black Crag, which chased him across Ullswater, and which surely reappears here in all its uncanny aliveness in the form of the 'black drizzling crags that spake' on the sides of the pass. Insanity seems written into the very landscape: the winds are 'bewildered and forlorn', the 'raving stream' is a 'sick sight' and a 'giddy prospect', the rocks 'mutter'd' in Wordsworth's ears, and the entire effect of the scene reminds him of the 'workings of one mind' lurching between 'tumult and peace'.

Nature and Terrorism seem here to be dangerously alike: huge, fearful and destructive, bringing madness to all who come too close. Yet Wordsworth asserts that there is a higher order behind all this, and that even the 'gloomy straight' of Simplon is in fact part of a greater pattern,

> Characters of the great Apocalyps,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first and last, and midst, and without end.
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 6, ll. 570–2: P1: 190)

Here, as throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth attributes prophetic status to himself, for an apocalypse is a revelation, which is what prophets are granted. But he has a specific prophet in mind, for 'first and last, and midst, and without end' alludes to Adam and Eve's morning prayer in *Paradise Lost*, where they call upon all created beings to praise God, 'Him first, him last, him midst, and without end'; Wordsworth is once more positioning himself as Adam, the prophet-hero of *Paradise Lost*, who was granted a vision of human history from his own day all the way to the great apocalypse at the end of time. Under Wordsworth's inspired gaze, the terrifying sublime chaos of nature resolves itself into 'characters', 'types' and 'symbols of Eternity': the muttering of the rocks, the speaking of the crags and the raving of the stream are not just incipient madness, but a potentially intelligible language speaking divine truths, if one can only understand it. Wordsworth does not specify exactly what pattern he sees behind the chaos of nature, but his allusion to Adam's prayer implies that it is a benevolent one; a reading borne out by the other passages I have discussed, in which Wordsworth claims to hear the music in the tempest and see in even the worst of events 'the order of sublimest laws'. Even at its most terrifying, Wordsworth asserts, Nature 'never did betray/The heart that loved her', and is at heart friendly rather than inimical to humanity.[68] Rivers and Robespierre saw 'sublimest laws' behind the apparent chaos of nature, and used them to inspire and justify acts of political terrorism; but Wordsworth insists that the order he sees in Nature is not like theirs, and that the 'face' which his prophetically inspired eyes can see behind the crags of Simplon wears the gentle smile of a friend rather than the stern frown of relentless revolutionary virtue.

But as Thomas Weiskel has suggested, these Alpine passes cold remained a site of potential trauma, so charged with Revolutionary and Miltonic echoes

that their sublimity could never be entirely separated from the terrorist aesthetic.[69] The exorcism of the revolutionary sublime required a final counter-spell, which was best uttered from much safer ground; so, at the very end of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes his ascent of Mount Snowdon. Chronologically, it made no sense for this episode to come last, for the excursion it describes took place in 1791, years before the events Wordsworth narrates in the books leading up to it. But thematically, it had to come last: in order to succeed Adam, or contend with Rivers or Robespierre, Wordsworth has to end his epic standing, like them, on a mountaintop, looking down from his prophetic perspective over the world below. Wordsworth ascends Snowdon through the midnight darkness 'as if in opposition set/Against an enemy' (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 30–1: P 1:314), seemingly conscious that this is to be a struggle of his version of sublimity against the Miltonic and Robespierrist sublimes of terror embodied in the dark mountain scenery around him. At last he emerges into the moonlight, and looking down over the illuminated world he has a mountaintop vision of his own:

> A meditation rose in me that night
> Upon the lonely Mountain when the scene
> Had pass'd away, and it appear'd to me
> The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
> Of one that feeds upon infinity,
> That is exalted by an under presence,
> The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
> Or vast in its own being; above all
> One function of such mind had Nature there
> Exhibited by putting forth, in midst
> Of circumstance most awful and sublime …
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 66–76: P 1:315)

This passage functions as a kind of checklist of sublimity. The mind Wordsworth describes is 'mighty'; it is comparable to a 'lonely mountain'; it 'feeds upon infinity'; it is 'exalted'; it has a 'sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim/Or vast'; and its function is revealed in 'circumstance most awful and sublime'. It is, in short, the sublime mind of the prophet-hero; the kind of mind that was attributed to Milton and Robespierre by their respective admirers. But the 'function' of such a mind that is 'exhibited' here, in

the 'perfect image' of the moonlit mountaintop, is not republican virtue, heroic power or divine prophetic inspiration, but the power of creative imagination, which Wordsworth specifically defines as the capacity to see the great in the small, to 'build up greatest things/From least suggestions' (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 98–9: P 1:316), as the flood of moonlight turns random rubble into objects of beauty. Of those who possess such a capacity, he writes:

> They need not extraordinary calls
> To rouse them, in a world of life they live
> By sensible impressions not enthrall'd,
> But quicken'd, rouz'd, and made thereby more fit
> To hold communion with the invisible world.
> Such minds are truly from the Deity,
> For they are Powers; and hence the highest bliss
> That can be known is theirs …
>
> (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 101–8: P 1:316)

What Wordsworth realises on his mountaintop is that the truly sublime mind does not need mountains at all, because it can see sublimity in everything, 'every image' and 'every thought'. In order to become sublime 'powers' able to 'hold communion with the invisible world' and attain 'the highest bliss/That can be known', prophets and heroes usually had to pass through extraordinary events; but Wordsworth insists that all these can be obtained without experiencing any such 'extraordinary calls', simply by living in the ordinary, everyday 'world of life'. On their mountaintops, Wordsworth implies, Rivers and Robespierre got the wrong idea, for the ultimate message of the vast and terrible is that vastness and terror are unnecessary for sublimity: in nature, in politics and in life. Instead of seeing the sublime landscapes of Snowdon and Simplon as symbols for some even more sublime landscape – Heaven, or Hell, or the Republic of Virtue – Wordsworth asserts that the revelatory apocalypse that lies behind them is no more or less than the mind of man, a mind that can attain sublime heights even if it never engages in the kind of actions associated with the traditional epic. In this way, even though he had met no angels and led no revolutions, Wordsworth could claim to have achieved the sublime heights required to mark him out as Milton's true successor.

The Recluse, had Wordsworth ever managed to finish it, was to have been the final expression of this insight. In 'Home at Grasmere' – written by Wordsworth between 1800 and 1806, and intended by him to be the first book of the first part of that never-completed epic – he retold once more the story of how 'while yet an innocent little-one' he had been a creature of 'wild appetites and blind desires', fond of 'deep pools, tall trees, black chasms, and dizzy crags', sea battles, military heroism and other sublime spectacles, until Nature 'tamed' him and taught him to 'be mild, and love all gentle things':

> Thy glory and thy happiness be there.
> Yet fear (though thou confide in me) no want
> Of aspirations which have been – of foes
> To wrestle with and victory to complete,
> Bounds to be leapt and darkness to explore.
> That which enflamed thy infant heart – the love,
> The longing, the contempt, the undaunted quest –
> These shall survive, though changed their office, these
> Shall live, it is not in their power to die.[70]

Here, yet again, is the confirmation – spoken, this time, by Nature herself – that Wordsworth could still live a life of epic heroism despite his turn away from all the martial and terrifying scenes and activities he loved when he was young. Curiously, the hero that Nature seems to be reassuring him that he can still be is not Milton's Adam but Milton's Satan: 'the longing, the contempt, the undaunted quest' all sound like distinctly Satanic attributes, and the 'bounds to be leapt and darkness to explore' recall Satan's overleaping of the boundaries of Eden and his exploration of Hell and Chaos, respectively. Yet there is a certain logic to this: as discussed in Chapter Four, Milton's Satan was held to be the ultimate example of the sublime, which is precisely the quality that Nature is attempting to convince Wordsworth that he can still possess. Thus comforted, Wordsworth tells us, he learned to put aside 'the Warrior's Schemes' and 'the hope to fill/The heroic trumpet' (i.e. to write traditional epic poetry), and turned instead to his personal, rural and domestic subjects.[71] He writes:

> Paradise and groves
> Elysian, fortunate islands, fields like those of old

> In the deep ocean – wherefore should they be
> A History, or but a dream, when minds
> Once wedded to this outward frame of things
> In love, find them the growth of common day?[72]

This is Wordsworth at his most ambitious, asserting that his everyday world of 'common day' is not just equally suitable as epic material when compared to the worlds of the traditional epic poets, but actually superior to them, for in it Milton's 'Paradise', Virgil's 'groves Elysian' and Homer's 'fields … in the deep ocean' are realised not just as 'a history, or but a dream' – as they implicitly are in the works of those poets – but as real, immediate truth, if only we can learn to wed our minds to 'this outward frame of things/In love'. In a passage written in clear and obvious imitation of the opening of *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth asserts that 'this is my great argument', to be written with the aid of the 'prophetic Spirit' whose 'Temple [is] in the hearts/Of mighty Poets'; like Milton, Wordsworth calls this holy spirit down into himself, asking 'that my verse may live and be/Even as a Light hung up in hearts to cheer/Mankind in times to come!' Yet the predominant note remains hesitant and conditional, expressed in a series of 'ifs'; *if* 'more lowly matter' and the 'little realities of life' can thus be made to stand alongside and express 'highest things', then Wordsworth asks God to help him make his account of his own life 'express the image of a better time'. 'Be with me and uphold me to the end', he implores – and with that line the invocation to the Prophetic spirit comes to an end, along with the poem itself.[73] The rest of *The Recluse* was never written, although the poem eventually published as 'The Excursion' was originally intended to have formed another part of it. Throughout 'Home at Grasmere', Wordsworth asserts that his move away from the traditional epic material he loved as a child was an advance, rather than a retreat. But he never appears entirely confident of it; and, if the results of his invocation are anything to judge by, it would seem that the 'Prophetic spirit' that he called upon shared his doubts on the matter.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom uses Wordsworth's relationship with Milton as an example of the process he calls *askesis*, whereby a poet 'yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor'.[74] 'This *askesis*', Bloom writes, 'yields up a Wordsworth who might have been a greater poet than the one he became, a more externalised maker who would have

had a subject beyond that of his own subjectivity'.[75] Whether Wordsworth really had no subject other than 'his own subjectivity' is open to debate; but in the course of his struggle to establish himself as Milton's true heir, he certainly yielded up the world of traditional epic. In his 'Prospectus' he claimed that his own subject – 'the mind of man' – was in fact much bigger and more sublime than the one he had renounced, but in some ways it was obviously also a much smaller subject than the political and martial events of the Homeric epics, let alone the cosmic visions of Milton. Eighteenth-century criticism had praised Milton for the scale of his imagination, sweeping over whole universes of space and 6,000 years of time; Wordsworth's vision, which he claimed was even greater, covered only thirty-odd years in the life of a single private individual. Bloom argues that this radical shrinkage was needed in order to give Wordsworth a poetic territory of his own, somewhere Milton had not already been before him, allowing him to 'separate himself from ... the precursor [i.e. Milton]', and he frames this retreat in terms of immutable artistic and psychological laws, arguing that any 'strong poet' in an analogous situation would have to do the same in order to avoid an unwinnable battle with their invincible poetic predecessor. Yet even if this were so, Wordsworth's most talented contemporaries seem to have felt no compulsion to shrink back to the domestic and internal worlds: Blake's epics toss infinities around like juggling balls, while Shelley and Byron would write their epics about individual heroism and large-scale political events. It was only Wordsworth who moved away from them, just as it was only Wordsworth, of all the major Romantic poets, who made a deliberate decision to renounce the grand (terrible/Miltonic) sublime. But then, the rest of the British Romantics experienced the breaking-through of the terrible sublime into history, which later writers and survivors would go on to refer to simply as 'the Terror', at a safe distance: Blake and Coleridge were in England at the time, Byron and Shelley were only a few years old, and Keats had not even been born. Only Wordsworth came close enough to have 'felt and touched it', and his consequent retreat from Terror – in poetry, in politics, in Milton – imposed upon him an *askesis* more extreme than any of his contemporaries. Having rejected the Miltonic sublime, Wordsworth was compelled, as Blake, Byron and Shelley were not, to carve out a new kind of epic: one that would allow him, both as a poet and as an epic subject, to maintain a safe distance from the sublime of terror.

IV

In his later years, Wordsworth seems to have become more, rather than less, concerned with comparisons with Milton. If Hazlitt is to be believed, it became something of an obsession for him: 'Milton is his great idol', he remarked in his essay on Wordsworth, 'and he sometimes dares to compare himself with him …'.[76] While willing to grant that his sonnets 'have something of the same high-raised tone and prophetic spirit' as Milton's, Hazlitt seems mostly to have found Wordsworth's habit of constantly comparing himself with the incomparable Milton rather tiresome. 'Why must a man be for ever mouthing out his own poetry, comparing himself with Milton, passage by passage, and weighing every line in a balance of posthumous fame which he holds in his own hands?' he asked irritably in his essay 'On People with One Idea'.[77] Or, as he put it elsewhere: 'It would be no niggard praise to Mr Wordsworth to grant that he was either half the man or half the poet that Milton was.'[78] In Hazlitt's (not overly sympathetic) view, Wordsworth could never be a poet of Miltonic stature, and his repeated attempts to claim that he was served only to demonstrate his own shortcomings by comparison. A much stranger, but equally revealing, perspective on Wordsworth's continuing obsession with Milton is to be found in the *Recollections* of his disciple Thomas De Quincey. There De Quincey tells the story of how upon obtaining a copy of the portrait frontispiece to Richardson's commentary on Milton – the portrait of Milton which, according to De Quincey, was said to be truest to life – he was astonished to discover 'a likeness nearly perfect of Wordsworth, better by much than any which I have since seen' ('Lake Reminiscences from 1807 to 1830', number 1, 'William Wordsworth': DQ 11:59). A comparison of this portrait with surviving portraits of Wordsworth suggests, at least to my eye, that they did resemble one another, but De Quincey's anecdote implies much more than that; it suggests that De Quincey thought (or wished to believe) that Wordsworth was more like Milton than he was like himself. If Wordsworth's self-identification with Milton was anything like as powerful as Hazlitt suggests, then De Quincey, during his years of close association with him, would certainly have picked up on it: and given his reverence for Wordsworth, he could easily have absorbed and amplified the idea that Wordsworth was a second Milton until the two poets became irrevocably mingled in his mind. The same thing may have happened to other members of Wordsworth's circle; tellingly, when De Quincey went to the Wordsworth

family with his amazing discovery, none of them disagreed with his opinion that his portrait of Milton was a perfect likeness of Wordsworth 'at the height of his powers' ('Lake Reminiscences from 1807 to 1830', number 1, 'William Wordsworth': DQ 11:60).

In completing *The Prelude* Wordsworth may have felt that he had, at least partially, lived up to the challenge of becoming a modern Milton. As his fame spread, a growing number of his contemporaries began to think so too, even though almost none of them had yet read the unpublished *Prelude*. In 1816, Haydon sent Wordsworth a poem by the young John Keats, which described Wordsworth in terms almost identical to those which he had used to describe Milton fourteen years before:

> Great spirits now on earth are sojourning;
> He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,
> Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
> Catches his freshness from archangel's wing ...[79]

Weighing up their respective merits as poets in a letter of 1818, Keats confessed to 'an uncertainty' over 'whether Wordsworth has in truth epic passion', but ultimately concluded: 'I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton – though I think it has depended more upon the general and gregarious advance of intellect, than individual greatness of Mind'.[80] It is an equivocal judgement: Wordsworth is the deeper poet, but the lesser mind, and it is perhaps his lack of obvious sublime genius on a Miltonic scale that leaves the truth of his 'epic passion' open to question in a way that the truth of Milton's is evidently not. Furthermore, despite his poetic successes, Wordsworth had emphatically failed to achieve Miltonic stature as a political figure, for while Keats may have believed that Wordsworth was a worthy poetic heir to Milton, he still felt that Milton lacked a true political successor, and in an 1818 letter to his brother George he virtually quoted Wordsworth's 1802 sonnet 'Great Men Have Been among Us' by writing despairingly: 'We have no Milton, no Algernon Sidney ...'.[81]

To Keats's more politically engaged contemporaries Shelley and Byron, Wordsworth had not just failed to become the radical Miltonic poet-philosopher he had once aspired to be; he had consciously and deliberately abandoned his chance to succeed, turning his back on the ideals of his youth. In 1816 Shelley, who idolised 'the sacred Milton' as 'a republican, and a

bold inquirer into morals and religion', wrote a bitter sonnet entitled 'To Wordsworth' about the older poet's betrayal:

Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty, –
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.[82]

Shelley's description of Wordsworth as 'a lone star' evokes Wordsworth's description of Milton: 'Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart'. Likewise, Shelley's description of Wordsworth's early life – 'In honoured poverty thy voice did weave/Songs consecrate to truth and liberty' – is reminiscent of Wordsworth's account of Milton's Christ-like life, his 'cheerful godliness' and his acceptance of 'the lowliest duties' of 'life's common way'. In this poem, then, Shelley mourns for Wordsworth as a failed Milton, one who took up the Miltonic burden only to drop it again. Byron, indiscriminately attacking Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey in the Dedication to *Don Juan*, was more brutal:

If fallen in evil days on evil tongues,
  Milton appeal'd to the Avenger, Time,
If Time, the avenger, execrates his wrongs,
  And makes the word '*Miltonic*' mean 's*ublime*',
He deign'd not to belie his soul in songs,
  Nor turn his very talent to a crime –
He did not loathe the sire to laud the son,

But closed the tyrant-hater he begun.
Think'st thou, could he, the blind Old Man, arise
  Like Samuel from the grave, to freeze once more
The blood of monarchs with his prophecies,
  Or be alive again – again all hoar
With time and trials, and those helpless eyes,
  And heartless daughters, worn, and pale, and poor,

Would *he* adore a sultan? *he* obey
The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh?[83]

Here, yet again, is the trope of Milton's resurrection, his return to judge the present from beyond the grave. For Byron, Milton's life is the standard by which Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey are judged and found wanting: unlike him, they had failed to remain true to their ideals in the face of 'time and trials', and were thus unable – and unworthy – to become his successors. Both Byron and Shelley condemn Wordsworth for lacking the moral fortitude that was the hallmark of the republican sublime, of which Milton was the ideal type. As J. G. A. Pocock has shown, the ability to maintain unfailing *virtu* in the face of the bewildering shifts of *fortuna* that govern the world of politics was generally understood to be the defining characteristic of republican excellence: Cato, Milton and Robespierre, like the stars and mountains to which they were compared, were unchanging and inflexible, and while the tide of history might batter and even drown them it could not divert them from their course.[84] This was the ideal that Byron and Shelley set themselves, and accordingly both men lived and died without ever much altering their political views. Wordsworth's opinions, however, did change, and one of the symptoms of that change was a shift from the inflexible republican sublime of stars and mountains, in which change is only a sign of weakness, to a more fluid sublime of air, water and growing things, in which change is part of the process of life. This aesthetic was not inherently worse or weaker than the one it replaced, but it was a great deal less Miltonic; and in the fragments of *The Recluse* that Wordsworth was still wrestling with, the Heavenly Muse was invoked only to give praise for Lakeland landscapes and Dorothy's companionship.

If Milton *had* returned in 1819 – or, indeed, in 1820, when Shelley 'dreamed that Milton's spirit rose' – he would probably have shared Byron's disdain for his would-be successor William Wordsworth.[85] By then comfortably installed in a minor nook of the British establishment, he had become a man of property and a defender of constitutional monarchy. Probably worst of all, to Milton's eyes, would have been the fact that he had become an *Anglican*; and not just a normal Anglican, but a *high-church* Anglican, much given to praising the memory of Milton's old enemy Archbishop Laud in print.[86] Wordsworth's career as a sonneteer had begun in 1802, when he 'took fire' from the spirit of Milton's sonnets: now, in 1820, he turned his

Miltonic gift of sonnet-writing to the most un-Miltonic purpose imaginable, by writing a 102-sonnet sequence on the glorious history of the Church of England. He had come full circle; his views on Milton were now, in all likelihood, very similar to those of his more conservative teachers back in the 1780s, for while he still admired Milton's poetry, he had come to consider him lamentably mistaken in his political opinions. In his 1821 'Vision of Judgment', Southey – now Poet Laureate, and fresh from condemning the new 'Satanic school' of poetry being written by Byron, Shelley and their ilk – gave Milton's spirit a place in his Royalist heaven on one condition:

> Milton's severer shade I saw, and in reverence humbled
> Gazed on that soul sublime: of passion now as of blindness
> Heal'd, and no longer here to Kings and to Hierarchs hostile ...[87]

One recalls the lines of Nahum Tate, himself about to become Poet Laureate, in 1691: 'For common-wealths no more his Harp he strings/By Nassau's virtue Reconcil'd to Kings'.[88] Southey's poem is a much greater exercise in wishful thinking than Tate's: given that hatred of bishops was one of the defining features of Milton's life, it is rather easier to imagine his spirit converting to constitutional monarchism – or, indeed, to Islam – than it is to imagine it no longer 'to Heirarchs hostile'. But it was a wish that Wordsworth, with his new passion for Anglicanism, must have shared; as Milton had never changed or wavered in life, they were reduced to hoping that he had proved less inflexible after death. It was the old eighteenth-century refrain come back again: 'Why *wouldn't* Milton understand that Anglicanism was the one true way? Let us hope he knows better now, wherever he is ....'

In the same year as Southey wrote his 'Vision of Judgment', Wordsworth dedicated the better part of one of his 'Ecclesiastical Sonnets' to Milton. Entitled 'Latitudinarianism', it demonstrates how much their relationship had changed since 1802, when Wordsworth had last written about Milton in sonnet form:

> And One there is who builds immortal lays,
> Though doomed to tread in solitary ways,
> Darkness before, and danger's voice behind!
> Yet not alone, nor helpless to repel
> Sad thoughts; for from above the starry sphere

> Come secrets – whispered nightly to his ear;
> And the pure spirit of celestial light
> Shines through his soul – 'that he may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight'.[89]

'Darkness before, and danger's voice behind': Wordsworth had used that line before, in *The Prelude*, when he described the aged Milton as standing 'almost single, uttering odious truth'. Even that had been a development of his earlier lines on Milton from 1794, when he had written: 'In dangerous night so Milton worked alone'. But now Wordsworth revised his earlier views: although 'doomed to tread in solitary ways' Milton is 'not alone', being instead attended by 'the pure spirit of celestial light' – which is to say, by God. This small self-revision suggests a large change in Wordsworth's view of Milton – and, given the power of his identification with Milton, perhaps also of himself. The Milton of 1794, like the Wordsworth of that year, is primarily a political figure; he is alone because his political movement has been defeated, and most of its adherents have abandoned it, leaving only Milton to go on in star-like constancy. The Milton of 1821, like the Wordsworth of *that* year, is primarily a religious figure; he is not alone, because God is with him. The 'awful' Milton of *The Prelude*, like the Milton of *Don Juan*, utters odious truths to those in power; the gentler Milton of 'Latitudinarianism' 'builds immortal lays' instead. Wordsworth had regressed from the dangerous, radical Milton he discovered in revolutionary France to the safe, pious Milton of his schooldays in Hawkshead and Cockermouth. Having come too close to the sublime for comfort during the 1790s, he was now keen to put a safe distance between 'the sublime Milton' and himself: like so many others, he had come to prefer a distant and otherworldly Milton to one disturbingly alive and active in current affairs.

In 1837, Wordsworth – now sixty-seven years old – visited the abbey of Vallombrosa in Italy, which the monks there assured him that Milton had also visited two centuries before.[90] Wordsworth wrote a poem about his visit, dwelling on the Miltonic associations of the place, although by this stage in his life political radicalism had become so repugnant to him that he felt obliged to add an explanatory note to his poem:

> I have spoken of the author of 'Paradise Lost' in a strain of panegyric scarcely justifiable by the tenor of some of his opinions, whether

> theological or political, and by the temper he carried into public affairs in which, unfortunately for his genius, he was so much concerned.[91]

One recalls Thomas Warton's disapproving comments in 1785: 'Those years in which imagination is on the wing, were unworthily and unprofitably wasted on temporary topics … Smit with the deplorable polemics of Puritanism, [Milton] suddenly ceased to gaze on *such sights as youthful poets dream*' (TW xi). The young Wordsworth could easily have read Warton's edition of Milton, either at Hawkshead or Cambridge; now, the aged Wordsworth echoed Warton's opinions, lamenting that such a great poetic genius as Milton had stooped to involve himself in politics. In his poem 'At Vallombrosa', Wordsworth constructs a version of Milton with no discernible 'theological or political' opinions at all, a man wholly concerned with art and God. Far from involving himself in 'public affairs', Wordsworth's Milton is a virtual hermit: the poem depicts him keeping 'lonely vigils' in his 'sequestered Retreat' at Vallombrosa, and then skips over the entire middle section of his life to show him once more alone, living through 'a desolate time' in his old age. There is no hint as to why 'darkness and danger had compassed him round', no suggestion of what Milton had done with all those years between his lonely meditations in Italy and those in London. In fact, Wordsworth seems to imagine that Milton never truly left Vallombrosa at all:

> The Monks still repeat the tradition with pride,
> And its truth who shall doubt? for his Spirit is here;
> In the cloud-piercing rocks doth her grandeur abide,
> In the pines pointing heavenward her beauty austere;
> In the flower-besprent meadows his genius we trace
> Turned to humbler delights, in which youth might confide,
> That would yield him fit help while prefiguring that Place
> Where, if Sin had not entered, Love never had died.[92]

Milton's spirit, then, is coterminous with the landscape of Vallombrosa itself: an Edenic landscape where beauty and sublimity mingle, its 'cloud-piercing rocks' offset by 'flower-besprent meadows'. If, as Wordsworth claims, Vallombrosa is Milton's true spiritual home, then it follows that the true Milton is the young Milton of Vallombrosa, the saintly hermit whose cell the

monks point out with pride, rather than the more threatening Milton of later years. Wordsworth continues:

> When with life lengthened out came a desolate time,
> And darkness and danger had compassed him round,
> With a thought he might flee to these haunts of his prime
> And here once again a kind of shelter be found.[93]

By imagining the older Milton comforting himself with memories of Vallombrosa, Wordsworth's implicit claim is, once again, that what Milton truly loved was not public life but scenic retirement. Having first imagined a young Milton who passes the days of his Italian tour in 'lonely vigils' and contemplation of flowery fields – as opposed to visiting Galileo in prison and having theological arguments with Catholics, which is what Milton himself boasted of having spent his time in Italy doing – Wordsworth then asserts that this (imaginary) retreat from the world was the happiest part of Milton's life; so much so that in times of adversity he would recall, not his glory days under the Commonwealth, but his 'sequestered Retreat' in Italy. 'At Vallombrosa' enacts a very literal process of distancing, taking Milton away from 'public affairs' and placing him instead in a cell in an Italian abbey, completely cut off from the world, free to write religious poetry and contemplate God in silence and peace. Wordsworth's poem attempts to construct a Milton worthy of its own panegyric; one who, sequestered in his distant monastery, was as far removed from theological and political quarrels as possible.

When Wordsworth visited Vallombrosa, he had just had a quarrel of his own with his exasperated travelling companion Henry Crabb Robinson. Robinson had already seen Vallombrosa and was in no hurry to see it again, but Wordsworth would not be deterred; when his earlier tour of Europe was cut short in 1820, he had put Vallombrosa first in his list of places that he lamented not having had a chance to see, before Pompeii, Florence or even Rome.[94] Now, back in Italy after seventeen years in England, he was determined not to miss it again. He and Robinson argued, for the only time on their entire tour; sharp words were exchanged; and finally Wordsworth set off into the mountains on his own, leaving Robinson behind.[95] What was it that he was so eager to see at Vallombrosa? As his poem, and his notes on it, make clear, the only thing about the abbey and its surrounds that interested him were their (possibly mythical) associations with Milton. Yet that alone

was enough to compel him to go there, rising at five in the morning and riding up into the mountains at the age of sixty-seven, just so that he could stand where Milton might, perhaps, have stood 200 years before.[96] It was the gesture of a man still in thrall to Milton's legend, still following in Milton's footsteps, desperate to prove that he could match all Milton's achievements, do everything that Milton had done. In visiting Vallombrosa, the 'Valley of Shadows', Wordsworth demonstrated that he was as much haunted by 'Miltonian shades' as ever.[97] He was the most widely admired and respected poet in England, only a few years away from becoming Poet Laureate; but even though he was now older than Milton had been when he died, he had never finished his epic, and he was still standing in Milton's shadow.

> Vallombrosa! of thee I first heard in the page
> Of that holiest of Bards; and the name for my mind
> Had a musical charm, which the winter of age
> And the changes it brings had no power to unbind.[98]

Which 'changes' was Wordsworth thinking of in these lines? He must have known that Hazlitt, Byron and Shelley had all condemned him precisely because, unlike Milton, he had allowed himself to change with age. In 'At Vallombrosa', Wordsworth was not just constructing a version of Milton that would be politically acceptable to his readers; he was also constructing one with whom he could acceptably compare himself. If Milton is 'that holiest of Bards', the contemplative religious poet that so many of his admirers had always wanted him to be, then the 'Miltonian shades' that surround Wordsworth at Vallombrosa may yet be comforting presences, willing to look kindly upon their pious successor, rather than rising up against him like the terrifying, unanswerable accusers imagined by Byron in *Don Juan*. By 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's coronation, England was safe, republicanism had been vanquished, and Milton had apparently been thoroughly laid to rest; even the rediscovery and publication of his *De Doctrina Christiana* in 1825, proving his heretical Arianism once and for all, had little effect beyond making a few religiously orthodox readers transfer their loyalties to more theologically sound poets such as Wordsworth, instead. But in poems such as 'Latitudinarianism' and 'At Vallombrosa' Wordsworth seems still to be glancing over his shoulder at Milton, as if to make sure that he really was going to stay dead.

CHAPTER SIX

‘I Beheld Milton with Astonishment’: The Case of William Blake

I

Cowper saw Milton in a dream. Coleridge predicted his imminent arrival. Wordsworth repeatedly sensed his presence. But it was William Blake who actually encountered him one day in his back garden.

> And Milton collecting all his fibres into impregnable strength
> Descended down a Paved work of all kinds of precious stones
> Out from the eastern sky; descending down into my Cottage
> Garden: clothed in black, severe & silent he descended.
> (*Milton*, plate 38, ll. 5–8: E 138)

As I have discussed, most of the writers of this period responded to Milton’s reappearance, the uncanny renewal of his *presence* among them, by seeking ways to safely distance him once more. Milton, after all, stood for sublimity, and it was axiomatic that sublimity became merely overwhelming or terrifying if one failed to maintain a proper distance from it. The man watching an avalanche from afar can maintain the objectivity needed for aesthetic appreciation: he knows that *he* is the perceiving subject and *it* is the perceived object, and a very sublime one at that. But the man caught in its path can do no such thing: his mental and physical worlds disintegrate into an undifferentiated mass of terror and snow, and it is only if he is lucky enough to survive its onslaught that he will become capable of watching its further progress with the mental detachment required to appreciate it as sublime.

Only Blake maintained that grand events became *more* sublime, not less, as one got closer to them, became involved with them, *mixed up* in them. As Northrop Frye and, more recently, Saree Makdisi have argued, Blake had little respect for Lockean notions of subjectivity, with their insistence on a hard division between subject and object; instead, he celebrated such sublime events as revolutions for their capacity to smash the lock(e)s off people’s brains and compel them into a more fluid and interpenetrative

relationship with each other and with the external world.[1] Aesthetic distance was dangerous, a crutch for those who did not wish to look too closely at the 'minute particulars' of the world: from the high windows of his palace, the tyrant can behold his kingdom with equanimity. The truly sublime is not distant and unapproachable, but immediate, close to us, within us, all around us: thus, in *Jerusalem*, Jesus tells Albion that 'I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend;/Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me' (*Jerusalem*, plate 4, ll. 18–19: E 146). So it is only fitting that Blake's encounter with the sublime Milton took place at close range; that Blake should have met him not in a dream but in his own garden, and seen him not through a glass darkly, but face to face.

It was not their first meeting. In 1800, Blake explained to his friend John Flaxman that 'Milton lovd me in childhood and shewd me his face', and as G. E. Bentley Jr has written, there is no reason to think that Blake was writing metaphorically:

> When he says 'Milton … shewd me his face' and 'Ezra came to me with Isaiah the Prophet', he means it literally as well as figuratively. He told Crabb Robinson, 'I have seen him [*Milton*] as a youth And as an old man' …[2]

In later years, Blake had multiple encounters with Milton's spirit, as he described to Robinson and recorded in his poem, *Milton*. Given that Blake had visions even as a small child – he was only four years old when God pressed his face to the window and set him screaming – it is not impossible that this line in his letter to Flaxman is indeed a reference to another childhood visionary experience, in which he met Milton's spirit and felt himself to be beloved by him. If Blake *did* have such a visionary encounter with Milton's spirit as a child, it might go some way to explaining the extraordinary fascination that Milton held for him throughout his life.

We do not know when Blake discovered Milton's poetry, but it must have been early, for all his surviving poems show the marks of Milton's influence. We may imagine him, perhaps, aged eleven or so, clutching a second-hand edition of *Paradise Lost*, fighting his way through Milton's learned references and baffling vocabulary for the sake of his intoxicating language and the dizzying sweep of his imagination. What, apart from the author of the book in his hand, did the name 'Milton' mean to him? How much did he know about Milton's life and works? Quite possibly, the answer is 'almost

nothing'. He may never have guessed, from the bland biographies with which publishers liked to preface cheap editions of *Paradise Lost*, how contentious a role Milton had played in English history. He may have known nothing of Milton's religious or political opinions save what he was able to deduce from the poem. It may even have been some time before he discovered that *Paradise Lost* was not Milton's only work.

Blake probably learned of the existence of Milton's prose works during his apprenticeship to James Basire. Basire was an engraver for the Society of Antiquaries, of which Hollis was a member, and Blake may have met the old Commonwealthman when he came to consult with Basire about the engravings in his books.[3] There is no reason why Hollis should have taken the opportunity to lecture his engraver's apprentice on Milton's political legacy; but after Hollis's death in 1774 one of Blake's apprentice tasks was to help engrave the illustrations to Francis Blackburne's *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis*, and if he so much as skimmed the book itself he would have come across countless references to Milton's political writings.[4] Whether he actually read them, however, is another matter. He quoted Milton's poems continually, but in the whole corpus of his writings there is only one quotation from Milton's prose – an annotation to his copy of Reynolds's Third Discourse, in which he wrote:

> A work of Genius is a Work 'Not to be obtaind by the Invocation of Memory & her Syren Daughters. but by Devout prayer to that Eternal Spirit. who can enrich with all utterance & knowledge & sends out his Seraphim with the hallowed fire of his Altar to touch & purify the lips of whom he pleases'. Milton (Blake's annotations to *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Discourse 3, p. 50: E 646)

This is a misquote of a passage from Milton's *Reason of Church Government*, the inaccuracy of which further suggests that Blake may not have owned a collection of Milton's prose works. Blake's late, off-hand description of himself as 'believing with Milton the ancient British History' *could* indicate familiarity with Milton's *History of Britain*, but hardly proves it; he could have learned of Milton's interest in ancient Britain from any of his antiquarian friends.[5] The one prose work Blake probably did draw upon is *Areopagitica*: he never quotes it directly, but his concepts of 'mental fight', of the construction of a New Jerusalem in England and of the parallelism between England and Samson are all so close to the metaphors employed by Milton in this tract

as to make it their most probable source. However, all these references date from after Blake's stay with Hayley in 1801, during which he had access to one of the best-stocked Milton libraries in the country.[6] It seems quite possible that until then – which is to say, until he was forty-three years old – Blake's knowledge of Milton's prose was restricted to whatever he had gleaned from leafing through Blackburne's *Memoirs* as an apprentice.

Whatever Blake's familiarity with Milton's prose, it is clear that Milton's poetry influenced him profoundly from the very beginning of his own poetic career. The phrase 'Milton lovd me in childhood' suggests a parent–child dynamic to the early relationship between the two poets, and while later in life Blake would spell out his differences with Milton, in youth he seems to have been happy to follow the older poet's artistic guidance. The places to which that guidance led him can be seen in Blake's earliest surviving poems, the collection printed in 1783 as *Poetical Sketches by W. B.*; according to that edition's Introduction, Blake wrote them between the ages of twelve and twenty, which is to say from 1769 to 1778. They include a good deal written in Miltonic style, although Milton's influence on the poets of the eighteenth century was so great that it is not clear whether Blake took his Miltonisms direct from Milton, or derived them at second-hand from more recent poets such as Thomson. But some passages clearly show Milton's mark. The last lines of Blake's 'Memory, hither come' are straight out of Milton's *Il Penseroso*:

> And, when night comes, I'll go
> To places fit for woe;
> Walking along the darken'd valley
> With silent Melancholy.
> ('Song' ('Memory, Hither Come'), ll. 13–16: E 415)

Similarly, Blake probably had Milton in mind when he wrote the first stanza of 'To Winter':

> O Winter! bar thine adamantine doors:
> The north is thine; there hast thou built thy dark
> Deep-founded habitation. Shake not thy roofs,
> Nor bend thy pillars with thine iron car.
> ('To Winter', ll. 1–4: E 410)

Looming behind Blake's description of the roof and doors of Winter is Milton's description of the roof and doors of Hell:

> At last appeer
> Hell bounds high reaching to the horrid Roof,
> And thrice threefold the Gates: three foulds were Brass,
> Three Iron, three of Adamantine Rock …
> (*Paradise Lost*, book 2, ll. 643–6: M 42)

To say that the young Blake felt Milton was a poet worth reading, borrowing from and imitating is to say very little: every English poet in the 1770s felt the same. What is significant about these teenaged borrowings, compared to those from later in Blake's career, is that the young Blake seems not to have felt that Milton was also a poet who needed to be critiqued. In these poems, we see Blake looking to Milton for examples of how to write a poem in much the same way as he might have looked to his master Basire for examples of how to engrave a picture. For the Blake of the *Poetical Sketches*, Milton was still a guide to be followed rather than a rival to be grappled with.

II

During the years of the American war Blake wrote very little; indeed, between 1778 and 1784 he seems to have written nothing at all. He had other business to attend to: the completion of his apprenticeship, his training at the Royal Academy, his marriage and the establishment of his engraver's shop.[7] The arrival of the French Revolution seems to have energised him, and the year 1789 saw the appearance of *Tiriel, Songs of Innocence* and *The Book of Thel*. But Blake's grand project at the time was something far more ambitious: an epic poem called *The French Revolution*, telling the story of the Revolution so far in seven books, the first of which was printed by Joseph Johnson in 1791. The rest of *The French Revolution* was never published; its other six books were either lost, or – contrary to the claim on the first book's title page that 'the remaining Books of this Poem are finished' (E 286) – were never written at all. This epic was swiftly followed by the so-called 'continental prophecies', *America* (1793), *Europe* (1794) and *The Song of Los* (1795), all of which dealt with the events of the American and French Revolutions.

As I discussed in Chapter Four, Blake's *French Revolution* was only one of many epics, pro- and anti-revolutionary, that appeared in the 1790s. While it

cannot be proven that Blake read any of these other epics, or even that he was aware of their existence, some of their authors moved through circles very close to his own. Barlow, the author of *The Vision of Columbus* (which later became *The Columbiad)*, was in London between 1790 and 1792; there, he joined the Society for Constitutional Information and became notorious for his anti-aristocratic pamphlet *Advice to the Privileged Orders* (1792). This was printed by Joseph Johnson and seems to have been something of a bestseller, going through two editions in 1792 and a third in 1793, its sales doubtless boosted by the regular denunciation of Barlow as an arch-revolutionary by Burke and others; and as Johnson was Blake's major employer at the time, it seems likely that Blake would have been aware of it, although whether that awareness would have led to him reading the much longer, scarcer and less infamous *Vision of Columbus* is another question.[8] Blake's connection to Johnson could also have brought Ogden to his attention, as it was Johnson who printed his *Revolution* in 1790 – the very time at which Blake must have been starting work on his own epic, *The French Revolution*, which would be printed by Johnson the following year. It does not seem unlikely that Blake should have come across Ogden's epic in Johnson's shop; certainly there are few titles which would have been more likely to attract his attention than *The Revolution, an Epic Poem*.

If Blake did read *The Revolution* or *The Vision of Columbus*, they may have influenced his decision to write an epic of his own. But whereas the other epic poets – with the single exception of Barlow – had addressed contemporary events obliquely, through poems set in the (usually distant) past, Blake wrote directly about the American and French Revolutions. The nationalist poets had been driven back to antiquity partly because the present seemed so threatening to them, full of British defeats, rather than the glorious national victories required by the kind of epics they wanted to write; it was only after the first major British victory of the French Wars, the Battle of the Nile, that a nationalist epic on contemporary events appeared in the form of Hildreth's *Niliad*. The radicals had French victories enough on which anti-nationalistic epics could be based, but quite apart from the danger of prosecution for sedition that writing such a work could entail, writing an epic about (say) Miranda or Lafayette would mean engaging with the sheer *messiness* of French revolutionary politics. Southey and Landor, by writing about the legendary Joan of Arc and the completely fictional Gebir, respectively, were able to avoid having to write in defence of the

Terror, or explaining why the heroes of the Revolution kept defecting to join its enemies, as well as shielding themselves from potential prosecution. But there was a second reason for the preference of epic poets of all political persuasions for ancient subjects: they simply found them much more amenable to epic formulations. It was possible to imagine figures such as Alfred, Richard I or Joan of Arc as inhabiting a magical Romance world in which individual heroes, attended by their guardian angels, could carve their way through entire armies. But to depict George Washington, King William III or Commodore William Sidney Smith in such a way – as Barlow, Ogden and Cowley, respectively, attempted to do – risked sliding off into the absurd.[9]

In the years 1790–4, as he wrote *The French Revolution, America* and *Europe*, Blake developed a unique solution to these difficulties. The problem his contemporaries faced when writing about recent events was one of realism: they might invent speeches for their heroes, meddle with the details of chronology, and suchlike, but they were essentially committed to describing events as they really happened, and it was in the attempt to combine literal historical accuracy with the tropes of epic that they came to grief. Blake avoided the entire problem by refusing to make any such commitment. Instead of taking as his model Homer or Virgil – each of whom gives an ostensibly literal account of a series of historical events – he turned to the prophetic books of the Bible, such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, which describe historical events in symbolic rather than literal terms. Annotating Bishop Watson's *Apology for the Bible* a few years later, Blake wrote:

> I cannot conceive the Divinity of the <books in the> Bible to consist either in who they were written by or at what time or in the historical evidence which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another but in the Sentiments & Examples which whether true or Parabolic are Equally useful as Examples … (Blake's annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, Letter 3, p. 22: E 618)

In his poems, Blake took a similar attitude towards history. What was important was their 'Sentiments and Examples' not whether they kept within the boundaries of 'historical evidence'; and if the sentiments and examples were better served by 'Parabolic' descriptions than literal ones, then so be it.

Whether his poems agreed or disagreed with the accounts given of the same events in the history books – or, indeed, the daily newspapers – was of no consequence. After all, 'Nothing can be more contemptible than to suppose Public RECORDS to be True' (Blake's annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, Letter 2, p. 15: E 617).

Of all Blake's poems, *The French Revolution* comes closest to the conventional epic form; it was advertised in true epic style as 'a poem in seven books', and its characters are historical figures such as Necker and Louis XVI. But in style and sentiment it is very different from the works of Ogden and Barlow: it is written not in Miltonic blank verse or heroic couplets, adorned with the polite fictions of epic machinery, but in long, unrhymed lines whose rhythms and images are those of the King James Bible:

> Gleams of fire streak the heavens, and of sulphur the earth, from Fayette as he lifted his hand;
> But silent he stood, till all the officers rush round him like waves
> Round the shore of France, in day of the British flag, when heavy cannons
> Affright the coasts, and the peasant looks over the sea and wipes a tear;
> Over his head the soul of Voltaire shone fiery, and over the army Rousseau his white cloud
> Unfolded, on souls of war-living terrors silent list'ning toward Fayette,
> His voice loud inspir'd by liberty, and by spirits of the dead, thus thunder'd.
>
> The Nation's Assembly command, that the Army remove ten miles from Paris;
> Nor a soldier be seen in road or in field, till the Nation command return.
> (*The French Revolution*, ll. 278–86: E 298–9)

Blake's epic, like the Bible (in his interpretation), is, to use his own phrase, 'Parabolic': it takes real historical characters and transforms them into titanic figures, whose actions are charged with providential meaning and divine or satanic power. Sometimes they barely seem human: the Archbishop of Paris rises up, dragon-like, 'In the rushing of scales and hissing of flames and rolling of sulphurous smoke', while Louis XVI – referred to throughout simply as 'the King' – 'lean'd on his mountains' like a giant. When they speak, they sound more like Biblical prophets than eighteenth-century politicians:

Have you never seen Fayette's forehead, or Mirabeau's eyes, or the shoulders of Target,
Or Bailly the strong foot of France, or Clermont the terrible voice, and your robes
Still retain their own crimson? mine never yet faded, for fire delights in its form.
But go, merciless man! enter into the infinite labyrinth of another's brain
Ere thou measure the circle that he shall run. Go, thou cold recluse, into the fires
Of another's high flaming rich bosom, and return unconsum'd, and write laws.

(*The French Revolution*, ll. 187–92: E 294)

Throughout *The French Revolution*, Blake's language trembles between metaphor and literal description. When he writes 'the Nobles sat round like clouds on the mountains, when the storm is passing away', he is using a simile: the nobles look like receding storm clouds. When he writes of Aumont that 'a cold orb of disdain revolv'd round him, and covered his soul with snows eternal', he is using a metaphor; Aumont may be spiritually chilly, but he is presumably not actually, physically cold. But when he describes the Duke of Burgundy as being surrounded by a 'bright cloud of infant souls' that 'around him croud, weeping in his burning robe' (*The French Revolution*, ll. 199, 87–8: E 295, 290), it is not a simile or metaphor: it is a literal description of a symbolic reality, like Shelley's description of Castlereagh in 'The Masque of Anarchy'. And yet Burgundy, with his garment of burning babies, is not part of a vision or dream: he is a real presence in the King's court, sitting on Louis XVI's right hand.

As Steven Knapp has shown, eighteenth-century critics were extremely uncomfortable with this kind of slippage from the metaphorical to the literal. They might have a place in romances like *The Faerie Queene*, where all manner of fantastical things were permitted, but epics were expected to maintain what Knapp calls 'the principle of ontological decorum'; as Addison explained, personifications were permissible as 'Poetic Phrases', but as 'allegorical Descriptions' they were unacceptable.[10] Thus Addison, Kames, Johnson and Voltaire all objected to the way Milton allowed Sin and Death to alternate between being theological allegories and active characters, with

as much agency as Satan or Eve.[11] If Sin is a theological allegory, it makes sense for her to be able to open the gates of Hell: that, after all, is what Sin does. But if she is to be imagined as an actual demoness, it is somewhat odd that God should have given her the power to release Satan from his prison. Knapp's conclusion is that 'Milton was merely indifferent to the oscillation between literal and figurative agency that scandalised his eighteenth-century critics'; but his successors were not, and the epic poets of the late eighteenth century carefully maintained the division recommended by Addison.[12] In Barlow's *Columbiad*, there is a clear distinction between Hesper (who is a supernatural being capable of intervening in the action of the poem), and War (who is merely a metaphorical personification); similarly, when Death appears in Cumberland's *Calvary* he is clearly a spirit, not a metaphor. Only with Blake does the Miltonic ontological instability return; an instability which is, in turn, that of the Biblical prophets, who never tried very hard to make explicit whether the beings they saw in their visions were literal, metaphorical or both. Addison held up Virgil's Fame as an example of a personification that never ventured to be more than metaphorical; but Blake and Milton's personifications have more in common with Death in the Book of Revelations, whose ontological status is much more questionable. By refusing, as the Biblical prophets refused, to lay down clear limits between the 'real' and 'symbolic' in *The French Revolution*, Blake created a numinous atmosphere in which supernatural visions and visitations seemed entirely at home. As a result, the King's vision of the ghosts of his ancestors, the appearance of a weeping apparition in the Archbishop's dreams and the soul of Voltaire rising up like a flaming halo above the head of Lafayette seem less out of place in Blake's version of late eighteenth-century France than the legions of Miltonic demons do in Ogilvie's *Britannia* or Burges's *Richard I*. Yet those few among Blake's contemporaries who saw his poems dismissed them as the products of madness for precisely this reason; that they jumbled the literal and metaphorical together indiscriminately, in a manner entirely unacceptable to normal poetic practice. This was Southey's objection to Blake, as Robinson reported:

> Blake, he says, spoke of his visions with the diffidence that is usual with such people And did not seem to expect that he sho'd be believed. He showed S[outhey] a perfectly mad poem called Jerusalem – Oxford Street is in Jerusalem.[13]

As Mee writes, 'it seems to have been precisely this interpenetration of the eternal and temporal that decided Southey the poem was "perfectly mad"'.[14] On such a view, jumbling together the literal and the metaphorical was not sublime, only ridiculous. Yet unsympathetic though Southey was to Blake's artistic practice, he seems to have been oddly fascinated by him as well, and in a letter of 1830 he recalled the effect of seeing Blake and his paintings, years before:

> Some of the designs were hideous, especially those which he considered as most supernatural in their conception and likeness. In others you perceived that nothing but madness had prevented him from being the sublimest painter of this or any other country. You could not have delighted in him – his madness was too evident, too fearful. It gave his eyes an expression such as you would expect to see in one who was possessed.[15]

Southey's description of Blake as looking like 'one who was possessed' points to his feeling that Blake was someone in whom the literal and metaphorical, physical and spiritual, had become confused, for possession is a state in which the eternal and temporal *do* interpenetrate: a man possessed by an angel may be physically in Oxford Street, and spiritually in the New Jerusalem. Obviously, Southey did not believe Blake was literally suffering from spirit possession, only that he was 'fearful', uncanny and insane – and that only his insanity prevented him from being the most sublime artist in the world. But Southey's comments judge Blake by laws whose validity he did not accept. By the standards of conventional late-eighteenth-century criticism, Blake's designs were 'hideous', his poems 'perfectly mad' and Blake quite right to expect that 'he should not be believed'. But Blake had a system of his own – as Los famously asserts in *Jerusalem*, 'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans' (*Jerusalem*, plate 10, l. 20: E 153) – and according to its rules, sublimity did not require one to maintain the divisions between the literal and metaphorical that Southey regarded as essential to prevent one's works from becoming ridiculous and 'mad'.

Blake's indifference to Knapp's 'principle of ontological decorum' was in keeping with his attitude towards the sublime. The epic poets of Blake's day generally assumed a detached, mountain-top perspective to the action they described, the standpoint of an omniscient narrator looking down upon

events with a detachment and clarity denied to those who participate in them. Wordsworth's *Prelude* was, of course, subjective, but it wore its subjectivity on its sleeve, making no pretence to be more than an account of one man's experiences, hopes, fears and dreams. In Blake's *French Revolution*, however, things have become mixed up, with the objective and subjective, literal and symbolic all bleeding together. Stylistic differences aside, Wordsworth could have written of Lafayette that '*it seemed to me that* over his head the soul of Voltaire shone fiery': it would have been obvious that he was expressing a personal, subjective, metaphorical opinion. Barlow, had he written the scene, would have made clear whether the statement was literal or symbolic: whether Voltaire's soul was a supernatural character in the poem, like Hesper in the *Columbiad*, or whether he was merely making use of a metaphorical expression. But Blake seems to be simply uninterested in such distinctions; for him, the statements 'Fayette sprung from his seat saying "Ready!"' and 'Over his head the soul of Voltaire shone fiery' seem to belong in the same category, one no more subjectively or objectively true, literal or metaphorical than the other. (If it were objected that Lafayette saying 'Ready!' was a historical fact, a matter of public record, in a way that the appearance of the soul of Voltaire over his head was not, Blake would probably reply: 'Nothing can be more contemptible than to suppose Public RECORDS to be True.' (Blake's annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, Letter 2, p. 15: E 617).) In Blake's epics, the distinctions between subject and object, between things that exist only inside one's head and things that exist outside it as well, break down; 'real' events become dreamlike and visionary, while dreams and visions are presented as real, objective facts.

Coming too close to the sublime in revolutionary Paris, both Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft seem to have felt the barrier between the internal and external worlds beginning to give way. Wollstonecraft began to hallucinate, seeing 'eyes glare through a glass-door opposite my chair, and bloody hands shook at me'; phantoms that, instead of remaining inside her mind, insisted on projecting themselves into the world outside, onto the other side of her glass door.[16] Wordsworth experienced a kind of synaesthesia, in which internal emotion was experienced as physical, external pressure: confronted with his fears, he 'felt and touched them, a substantial dread' (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 66: P 1:269). This dissolution of subjectivity, which both Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft experienced as terrifying, was something that Blake welcomed, if not as the very purpose of revolutions, then at least as a highly desirable

by-product of them. Thus, rather than attempting to find a position above and beyond the events of the Revolution from which the objective truth about them might be discerned, Blake's epic embraces their very confusion, their capacity for mixing up the internal and external, the real and the visionary, just as they mixed up the rich and the poor, the sacred and the profane.

The characters in *The French Revolution* are still just about human. But when Blake turned to address the American Revolution in *America*, he took another step towards the 'Parabolic': the human participants were increasingly upstaged by gigantic symbolic (or perhaps 'Parabolic') figures, behind whom the literal historical events receded ever further into the background. In *The French Revolution* it would have been enough for George III to appear as 'a dragon form clashing his scales'; but in *America* he is merely a pawn of 'Albion's angel', who is in turn a minion of the arch-tyrant Urizen, while Washington and his confederates are supported by the thirteen rebellious angels of America, and ultimately by Orc, embodiment of revolution. In a cancelled plate from *America*, Blake allows himself a frustrated aside on the way people insist on erecting barriers between the literal and metaphorical, internal and external worlds:

> In opposition dire, a warlike cloud the myriads stood
> In the red air before the Demon; [*seen even by mortal men:*
> *Who call it Fancy, & shut the gates of sense, & in their chambers,*
> *Sleep like the dead.*]
>
> (*America*, cancelled plate C, ll. 20–3: E 59)

Everyone, Blake seems to be saying, knows that the Demon of Revolution is battling its way across the world. People talk and write about it all the time; but at the same time they insist that the demon is 'not real' or 'only metaphorical'. Wollstonecraft saw revolutionary demons with her own eyes in Paris, but she insisted that the haunting was due only to 'fancy', in the same way as Blake's 'mortal men' see the Demon but 'call it Fancy' and 'shut the gates of sense' against him; they dismiss him as merely imaginary or metaphorical, as if that meant he was of no importance and had no true reality. (Their 'chambers' here are probably not their bedrooms but their skulls; having shut the 'gates of sense' to their minds, which would have allowed them to grasp the world as it truly is, their lives become a sleep of living death.) Blake's project in works like *America* and *The French Revolution* is to encourage people *not* to

'shut the gates of sense', but to open them; to see the hard division between the mental and physical worlds for the oppressive lie it is. At the end of *America*, the 'ancient Guardians' of France, Spain and Italy attempt to 'shut the five gates of their law-built heavens': the five gates being the five senses, for the power of the Guardians depends on their subjects remaining trapped within a materialistic paradigm, perceiving nothing but the physical world. But 'the five gates were consum'd, & their bolts and hinges melted', for in the sublime moment of revolution the divisions between subject and object, sense perception and imagination, fall away and, as Blake says elsewhere, everything appears as it is, infinite (*America*, plate 16, ll. 16–22: E 57–8).

David Erdman has suggested that *America* was partly inspired by Barlow's *Vision of Columbus*, a hypothesis based chiefly on the similarities between the speeches each assigns to Washington.[17] In Barlow's *Vision*, Washington warns the Americans of the threat posed by the British, and says:

> With eager stride they tempt a nobler prize;
> These boundless empires feast their envious eyes;
> They see your fields to lordly manors turn'd,
> Your children butcher'd, and your villas burn'd;
> While following millions, thro' the reign of time,
> That claim their birth in this indulgent clime,
> Bend the weak knee, in servile chains confined;
> And sloth and slavery overwhelm mankind.[18]

In *America*, Blake writes:

> Washington spoke; Friends of America look over the Atlantic sea;
> A bended bow is lifted in heaven, & a heavy iron chain
> Descends link by link from Albions cliffs across the sea to bind
> Brothers & sons of America, till our faces pale and yellow;
> Heads deprest, voices weak, eyes downcast, hands work-bruis'd,
> Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of the whip
> Descend to generations that in future times forget. –
>
> (*America*, plate 3, ll. 6–12: E 52)

While it is not impossible that Blake drew upon Barlow for this passage, the debt is hardly self-evident. Both depict Washington warning the Americans

that if they do not resist the British, they and their descendants would be slaves. But Blake did not have to go to Barlow to encounter such sentiments, as they were commonplaces of pro-American propaganda: in *The American Crisis*, for example, Paine encouraged the Americans to endure the hardships of the Revolution by asking rhetorically, 'What are the inconveniences of a few months to the tributary bondage of ages?'[19] The case for Blake's debt to Barlow would be stronger if verbal or syntactical borrowings could be demonstrated, but there are none. In fact, they use completely different vocabularies: the kneeling and chains that define slavery for Barlow are absent from Blake's more graphic account, which focuses instead on the physical damage inflicted by forced labour and corporal punishment. Barlow's supposed debt to Blake is even more tenuous, hinging entirely on Barlow's addition of a demonic personification of War to *The Columbiad* who reminds Erdman of Blake's depictions of Orc, Albion's Angel and 'Albion's wrathful Prince'. The language they use is similar in places, but ultimately all that links them is their common reliance on imagery of blood, fire, storms, meteors and pestilence, all of which have been associated with war and demons for thousands of years. Erdman's claims that Barlow added something 'precisely at the point' where Blake did, or that a speech in Blake is 'paralleling' a speech in Barlow, implies that the two poems describe the same events in the same order, which they do not – as is obvious from the fact that Erdman draws parallels between a single passage in Barlow and a mass of scenes from various points in *America*.[20] In any case, it would be strange for Barlow to have based his personification of the unjust war he saw the British as having inflicted on America partly on Blake's description of the spirit of oppression, and partly on his spirit of revolution. Nor does Erdman explain how Barlow, whom there is no evidence that Blake ever met, could have gained access to one of the tiny handful of copies that Blake printed of *America*, especially given that Barlow had already left London by the time Blake began printing *America* in 1793.[21]

In many ways, Blake's *French Revolution* and *America* are much less Milton-haunted than the works of his contemporaries. They do not use Milton's metre, machinery or style; instead they bypass him entirely, going straight to his Biblical originals. They are not attempts to rewrite Milton, to extend his epics or to write the poems he should have written; Blake *was* busy rewriting Milton in these years, in the 'Bible of Hell' that he announced in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and began with *The Book of Urizen*,

but to begin with he kept that project separate from his 'prophecies' on contemporary events. They merged in 1794, when Blake wrote *Europe* – the sequel to *America* and, as has long been recognised, a rewrite of Milton's poem 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', whose resemblance to it becomes obvious from comparing their opening lines. After a verse Prelude, Milton's hymn begins:

> It was the Winter wilde
> While the Heav'n-born-childe
> All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies.
> ('On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', ll. 1–3: M 396)

Blake's prophecy, after a verse Preludium, opens with the lines:

> The deep of winter came;
> What time the secret child,
> Descended thro' the orient gates of the eternal day:
> (*Europe*, plate 3, ll. 1–3: E 61)

Blake's lines function as a signpost, an indication that we are to keep Milton's *Nativity* in our minds as we read *Europe*, just as the 'Sing, Muse!' invocation that opens so many of the contemporary epics tells the reader to bear in mind Homer, Virgil and Milton. Yet, rather than continuing or adapting Milton's 'Hymn', *Europe* systematically inverts it, just as Blake inverted *Paradise Lost* in *The Book of Urizen* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Milton's prelude celebrates Mary giving birth to Christ, and the descent of God into human form, 'a darksom House of mortal clay' ('On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', l. 14: M 395). But in Blake's Preludium, the 'nameless shadowy female' recoils from the process of incarnation; she gives birth not to the Prince of Peace but to 'howling terrors, all devouring fiery kings'. Here, the incarnation of the infinite into physical existence – to 'bind the infinite with an eternal band' and 'compass it with swaddling bands' – is not a triumph but a disaster (*Europe*, plate 2, ll. 4, 13–14: E 61). Milton's holy night of the nativity, in which the pagan gods flee across the earth, becomes in Blake the 1,800-year night of Christian history, in which the children of Enitharmon – who, in their acts and epithets, resemble Milton's pagan gods – engage in the 'sports of night'. It is only with the dawn, and the coming of the revolutionary

Orc, that 'every one fled to his station' (compare Milton's 'each fettered ghost slips to his several grave'). But whereas Milton upholds a strict division between the pagan gods (fallen angels, in his cosmology) who are banished by Christ's birth, and the angels who welcome it, in *Europe* the angels suffer the same fate as Milton's ghosts; at the rise of Orc the angelic hosts 'Fell thro' the wintry skies seeking their graves;/Rattling their hollow bones in howling and lamentation' (*Europe*, plate 13, ll. 7–8: E 65). Like Milton's spirits, they are driven into their graves by the coming of the new god, the 'rattling' of their bones recalling the chains of Milton's 'fettered' ghosts: Blake's Orc, unlike Milton's Christ, is decidedly not on the side of the angels. Milton's Christ brought peace:

> The hookèd chariot stood
> Unstained with hostile blood;
> The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng;
> ('On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', ll. 56–8: M 397)

But, rising up in 'the vineyards of red France', Orc brings war:

> The sun glow'd fiery red!
> The furious terrors flew around!
> On golden chariots raging, with red wheels dropping with blood;
> (*Europe*, plate 15, ll. 3–5: E 66)

In *Europe*, Blake wrote a nativity ode to the Revolution, turning Milton's Christian symbolism on its head in the process. Milton had celebrated the night of holy Christian peace; but Blake saw that as the night of Christian history in which everything had gone so terribly wrong, in which the forces of oppression had been triumphant and humanity had been taught a false doctrine of guilt and fear: 'Over the doors Thou shalt not; & over the chimneys Fear is written' (*Europe*, plate 12, l. 28: E 64). So, in *Europe*, he celebrated the coming of the dawn of revolutionary war, in which the old order would be destroyed and the counter-revolutionary angels would be cast from heaven. In the process, he played on the idea – so common in the contemporary epics – that the French Revolution was the work of demonic powers, if not of Antichrist himself. Poets like Burges and Ogden had depicted revolutionary ideals as the creations of Milton's demons; Blake merely took the idea and ran

with it, depicting the Revolution as bringing about the destruction of Milton's angelic order. *Europe* is the same story told from the other side; another of Blake's 'devil's accounts', a prophetic book from his ongoing Bible of Hell.

When Barlow, Ogden and their contemporaries attempted to write epics directly or indirectly about the events of their day, the results were mediocre at best. Even Wordsworth, a great poet by any standards, had to reinvent the epic and redefine the sublime before he could write an epic about his own times. Blake's plan sounds very similar to those of his contemporaries; like him, they described the French and American Revolutions in epic terms, depicted them as the battlegrounds of supernatural powers and, in most cases, aligned Milton with the existing order and his demons with the forces of revolution. Two crucial differences, however, separated him from them. First, poets like Ogden generally took a historical narrative and then tacked epic machinery onto it. They insisted on hard divisions between historical characters, supernatural characters and metaphorical personifications, and as a result their gods and angels are all too clearly *detachable*: their stories would make just as much sense without them. Blake, however, recognised no such distinctions; for him the historical *was* supernatural, and vice versa, and as such the supernatural and historical elements in *America* and *The French Revolution* are integrated in a way that they could never be in *The Columbiad* or *The Revolution*. Blake allows Orc and Washington to share the same stage; but Barlow has to keep Hesper and Washington in different categories, thereby highlighting Hesper's status as a mere literary device, and a disposable one at that.

The second difference lay in their attitudes to Milton. The epic poets wished to replace Milton, to speak with his authority and in his voice. Blake, however, wished to confront Milton, to dispute with him; he would later tell Henry Crabb Robinson of the many arguments he had had with Milton's spirit, and in works like *Europe* those arguments are carried on in print.[22] *Europe* effectively demands to have Milton's 'Ode' placed alongside it, to be read in parallel with it, so that its careful rewritings of Milton can be understood. Sub-Miltonic epics such as Cumberland's *Calvary* seem to discourage such synoptic readings; they borrow Milton's scenery and style in order to elide the difference between his epics and themselves, to reassure their readers that they were much like Milton and thus – more importantly – Milton was much like them. Cumberland writes as though he wanted his readers to believe that his (ideologically conservative) conclusions flowed naturally

from Milton's premises; he probably did not particularly want them to place *Calvary* side by side with *Paradise Lost* in order to check whether this was actually true. But Blake's *Europe* requires frequent close comparison with Milton, for instead of eliding their differences it highlights them, demanding that the reader compare them both and consider which they believe. As a result of his willingness to confront Milton, rather than just follow in his footsteps, and rewrite his poems overtly rather than covertly, Blake was able to write epics that were innovative rather than derivative, sublime rather than ridiculous. Nor was it coincidental that the one poet willing to challenge the sublime Milton was also the one poet who was unafraid to come too close to the sublime itself, rather than maintaining the safe distance proscribed by Burke. Believing that freedom and enlightenment as well as confusion and terror lay at the heart of the sublime moment, Blake plunged into it with a Satanic fearlessness that proved him a truer successor to Milton than any of his would-be acolytes and inheritors.

III

We have Blake's own word that he read Burke's *Enquiry* 'when very Young' – perhaps during his apprenticeship with Basire in the 1770s, or during his years at the Royal Academy (Blake's annotations to *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Discourse 8, p. 244: E 660). It is unsurprising that he did so, for by then the *Enquiry* had become a standard text on aesthetics, and probably formed part of every aspiring artist's reading list: as Morton D. Paley notes, 'by 1775 Burke's ideas were as generally familiar as Freud's are today'.[23] It might have been expected that Burke's praise of all that was dark, frightful and magnificent would have struck a chord with the young Blake's gothic imagination; yet Blake read Burke's *Enquiry* with 'Contempt & Abhorrence', and later described it as a work that 'mock[ed] Inspiration & Vision' (Blake's annotations to *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Discourse 8, p. 244: E 660). Blake did not specify what he had found so abhorrent about Burke's book, but it is probable that his objection was due partly to Burke's Lockean attempt to understand aesthetic experience in terms of physiology, and partly to a difference of opinion over what constituted the true sublime.

In his own artistic theory, Blake never accepted that mystery and obfuscation were essential to the creation of grand effects: 'Obscurity', he wrote, 'is Neither the Source of the Sublime not of any Thing Else' (Blake's annotations to *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Discourse 7, p. 194: E 658). Burke's shadowy

sublime is a despotic aesthetic, which terrifies beholders into submission through displays of force, and shrouds itself in darkness so that its viewers will imagine it to be even greater and more terrible than it really is. It is not coincidental that Burke chose hell (a prison), Death (a monster) and Satan (a tyrant) as the exemplars of his sublime: in Blake's view, it was always despots like Death and Satan who surround themselves with darkness, to strike fear into their subjects, and keep their enemies ignorant of the true limits of their power. Blake associated real grandeur with clarity of outline and strength of light: his visions were not 'cloudy vapour', but clear images with 'stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than [the] perishing mortal eye can see' (*Descriptive Catalogue*, number 4, 'The Bard, from Gray', p. 37: E 541). His model of the sublime was Milton's Adam, the strong man standing naked in daylight, clearly visible to all, rather than Satan, who spends his time skulking in shadows. As he wrote in his *Descriptive Catalogue*: 'The Strong Man represents the human Sublime' (*Descriptive Catalogue*, number 5, 'The Ancient Britons', p. 41: E 543).

However, as Vincent De Luca points out, the art Blake actually produced was not always in line with his theoretical position:

> While Blake's poetic and artistic practice is intellectually directed against Burkean assumptions and precepts, it often betrays a certain fondness for Burkean effects. Compared to Addison, for example, who finds the Roman Pantheon more sublime than a Gothic cathedral, Burke and Blake belong to the same camp: they are unavoidably allied as advocates of a problematic and agonistic sublime.[24]

A student of the gothic in all its forms since his apprenticeship, Blake litters his works with scenes of violence, darkness and terror, and, as De Luca says, 'Blake would not repair to these figures so obsessively if they did not retain some excitement for him'.[25] Nor does Blake invariably associate such scenes with evil and tyranny. Darkness, it is true, is *always* a bad sign in Blake, and anyone in his works who hides themselves in shadows is likely to be someone of whom Blake does not approve. But when, in *Europe*, Orc enters France and calls up 'golden chariots raging, with red wheels dropping with blood' (*Europe*, plate 15, l. 5: E 66), there is no clear sign that Blake disapproves of his actions. For someone so ardently opposed to war and physical punishment, Blake could be extremely enthusiastic about revolutionary violence, as the

Ninth Night of *Vala* amply demonstrates; and given his essentially positive portrayals of revolutionary frenzy in *Europe* (1794) and *The Song of Los* (1795) one might wonder how much truth there is in the story that when Blake heard of the September Massacres he tore off his revolutionary cockade, and never wore his *bonnet-rouge* again.[26] The fact that he continued throughout his life to fill his works with scenes of natural and unnatural disaster, violent torture and human sacrifice speaks volumes for his fascination with 'Burkean effects', whatever his antipathy to Burkean aesthetic theory.

Furthermore, despite his claim that 'Obscurity is Neither the Source of the Sublime nor of any Thing Else', Blake himself was a formidably obscure writer. As he explained to Dr Trusler in his letter of 1799, the obscurity of his works was not accidental:

> You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considerd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act. (Letter to Rev. Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799: E 702)

Trusler had accused Blake's works of being so obscure that they required outside elucidation, a light to illuminate their darkness. Blake's reply is that, due to their complexity, they *seem* obscure to 'Weak men', but they do not seem so to everyone: indeed, 'I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate my Visions' (Letter to Rev. Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799: E 703). The obscurity, in other words, is not in the works but in the readers: they seem dark only to the unenlightened, of whom the unfortunate Dr Trusler is evidently one. The difference between Blake's necessary obscurity and Burke's unnecessary, aesthetic obscurity can perhaps be understood as the difference between a detailed, complex symbolic painting – Blake's depictions of the Last Judgement, for example – and a painting of a very dark, shadowy scene, in which an air of mystery and uncertainty are created through the use of copious quantities of black paint. Both may be baffling to look at, but with sufficient effort the former can be elucidated, whereas attempting to elucidate the latter would be to miss the point: its shadows hide nothing in particular, having been painted in only to heighten the mood. Blake believed that such obscurity, which cannot be elucidated because there

is nothing in it to elucidate, could never be a true source of the sublime; and it was this aspect of Burke's aesthetic, much more than his fascination with power and violence – a fascination which Blake shared – that Blake reacted against so furiously, in both his artistic theory and his own artistic works.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the 1780s and 1790s witnessed a debate over the sublimity of the American and French Revolutions, a debate in which writers who wished to claim that the revolutions *were* sublime ran into difficulties because of the heavy association of the sublime with the tyrannical and the demonic. Blake, I think, must have been aware of this debate. It cannot be proven that he read Williams's *Letters* or Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, although he could easily have read either or both; but it would have been very strange for him not to have read Paine's pamphlets, and given his tendency to buy and read the works he most disagreed with, such as Reynolds's *Discourses* and Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, he probably read Burke's *Reflections*, as well. Given that political revolution and the aesthetics of sublimity were two of his favourite topics, I believe he must have been conscious of this struggle over the definition of sublimity, and over which aesthetic category – if any – the events of the French Revolution should be placed. He would doubtless have picked up on the implicit and explicit links made by contemporary writers between Milton's demons and the forces of Revolution; if nothing else, he was surely far too acute a reader of Milton to have missed Paine's quotation of Satan in *Common Sense*.[27] All these works formed the intellectual context to Blake's *America*, which I believe was meant to be, among other things, an intervention into those debates; an attempt to cut the Gordian knot of Burkean aesthetics which meant that to be sublime was to be demonic and to be demonic was to be sublime.

When Blake came to write about the American Revolution in *America*, he cut through the problem by slicing Burke's sublime in two. Burke had insisted that the sublime was characterised by two basic qualities: first, size and strength, and second, darkness and obscurity, and his chief examples of sublimity produced through the combination of the two came from the infernal books of *Paradise Lost*. For Blake, however, these two characteristics seldom went together. He associated heroic size and strength with the power of the people united, which he often represented as a giant; it was a democratic attribute, and displayed itself fearlessly in the light of day. Darkness and obscurity, however, were the allies of priestcraft and despotism: they hid the people

from the realisation of their own strength, and allowed their oppressors to appear more fearsome than they truly were, in order to terrify their subjects into submission. Thus, in *America*, Blake attributed size and strength to the revolutionaries: Orc, the spirit of revolution, is 'terrific' (meaning here both 'huge' and 'fearsome'), while Washington, Paine and Warren stand like giants 'with their foreheads rear'd toward the east', sheltering the children of America from lightning in the folds of their robes (*America*, plate 7, l. 7, plate 9, ll. 9–11: E 54). Darkness and obscurity belong to their enemies, the forces of repression: Urizen, the spirit of tyranny, is 'dark', conceals himself in his 'holy shrine', and endeavours to hide Orc – who is persistently associated with fire and dawn – in 'clouds & cold mists' so that 'Angels & weak men' can 'govern o'er the strong' (*America*, plate 16, ll. 13–14: E 57). In Burke's terms, both figures are sublime. Blake would probably have agreed that both are powerful and terrifying, but his division of Burke's characteristics between them allowed him to insist that the sublimity of the revolutionaries was of a very different nature to that of their opponents.

Having drawn this distinction, the next obvious rhetorical step would have been to align Milton's demons with the repressive sublime, thus allowing the Americans to be sublime without also being Satanic. But Blake was too careful a reader of Milton not to notice that, in fact, the Tories had a point: in their defiance of their king, the Americans *did* rather resemble Milton's Satan, as Jefferson and Paine had already recognised. Furthermore, in Blake's view the repressive imperialism of the British had a good deal in common with that of Milton's God, who loved to hide himself away in darkness: in his *Enquiry*, Burke had approvingly quoted a passage from *Paradise Lost* where God is depicted surrounding his throne 'with the majesty of darkness round', an image Blake borrowed for his description of Urizen (*Enquiry*, part 2, section 15: EB 1:249). This God of obscure darkness was, for Blake, the God of 'state religion' such as Anglicanism, and appears as such as early as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where he is 'the jealous king', 'the gloomy king', with 'his starry hosts' and 'his ten commands': and state religion, imposed from above and enforced by law, was one of the things against which the Americans had rebelled (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 26, ll. 15, 17, 18: E 44). Thus, rather than use his distinction between the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary sublimes – epitomised by strength and obscurity, respectively – to align the revolutionaries with Milton's angels, he used it to align Milton's demons with the Revolution.

In *America*, the forces of repression are led by the shadowy, tyrannical figure of Albion's Angel, who dwells in 'secret clouds' and leans upon the 'Stone of Night', which is the keystone of his empire. Albion's Angel is swift to label the revolution as demonic: in language strongly reminiscent of the more hysterical Tory denunciations of the American revolutionaries, he accuses Orc of being a 'Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, hater of Dignities,/Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of Gods Law' (*America*, plate 7, ll. 2, 5–6: E 53–4). But Orc does not refuse this appellation; instead, like Jefferson, he adapts it to his own purposes, announcing proudly that:

> I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree:
> The times are ended; shadows pass the morning gins to break;
> The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,
> What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness:
> That stony law I stamp to dust: and scatter religion abroad
> To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves;
> (*America*, plate 8, ll. 1–6: E 54)

Orc is perfectly happy to be called a demon, and indeed is even referred to as such by Blake himself. Surrounded by the 'cloudy terrors, banners dark and towers' of his angelic enemies, he gives off 'heat but not light', like the hell to which Milton's demons are banished by their vindictive God (*America*, plate 4, ll. 10–11: E 53). His comrades, in true Satanic fashion, are rebellious angels: the angels of the Thirteen Colonies, who refuse to answer when Albion's Angel calls them to war. He is associated with the sublime attributes of strength and light, but also with the demonic attributes of fire and destruction. By making these connections, Blake accepted that the Revolution was both sublime and satanic; indeed, it was sublime *because* it was satanic, a demonic rebellion against a repressive religious and political order. His Orc is a version of Milton's sublime Satan whom revolutionaries need feel no shame about identifying with, a Satan stripped of his trappings of tyranny and despotic darkness. Blake's method is not dissimilar to that of Williams, who appears to have felt that in some complex way both the revolutionaries *and* the counter-revolutionaries were Satanic, associating them with different parts of Satan's story, and different forms of sublimity; but while in Williams these associations seem to be made haphazardly, in Blake they are much more consistent, enabling him to systematically differentiate between the

energetic sublime of the heroic, revolutionary Satan-Orc and the dark sublime of the repressive Satan-Urizen.[28] I would thus argue that Blake's insistence that the revolutionaries were – and were right to be – on the side of the devils was no private antinomian caprice, but an intelligent response to the real and troublesome kinship that many contemporary writers, both radical and conservative, perceived between the revolutionaries and Milton's Satan.

Satan, however, was not the only Miltonic figure evoked by Blake's Orc. As I have discussed in Chapter Four, Samson was often used in this period as a symbol of popular revolution, especially by writers who wished to stress its destructiveness, its sublimity or both; so it is no surprise to discover that Orc, Blake's sublimely destructive revolutionary *par excellence*, is associated with the figure of Samson, too. As far back as 1780, Blake engraved the image now known as 'Glad Day', depicting a naked youth with arms outstretched. This design far predates the earliest references to Orc in Blake's writings, but when Orc did begin to appear in the Prophetic Books he was always described (and drawn) as being the very image of that youth: young, strong and naked, with fiery points of hair. Years later – no earlier than 1803, by Erdman's reckoning – Blake added a caption to his earlier engraving:

> Albion rose from where he labourd at the Mill with Slaves
> Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death
> (Inscription to 'Glad Day': E 671)

These lines are an adaptation of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, where Samson laments his imprisonment 'Eyeless in *Gaza* at the Mill with slaves' (*Samson Agonistes*, l. 41: M 348). The connection of these lines with the Orc-like youth of 'Glad Day' suggests that Orc is, among other things, a Samson-figure: he is, after all, forever pulling down temples and breaking chains. In *America*, when Orc speaks his voice 'shook the temple', calling out: 'Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:/Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air …' (*America*, plate 5, l. 7, plate 6, ll. 6–7: E 53).

Despite Blake's disentangling of the different elements of Burke's sublime, Orc's Miltonic sublimity remained a sublime of terror. In *America* Orc is referred to as 'the terror', 'the terrible boy' who stands before America

'rejoicing in its terror'; in *Europe* he is 'terrible Orc', who calls up 'furious terrors' in 'the vineyards of red France' (*America*, plate 2, l. 6, plate 5, l. 2, plate 12, l. 10; *Europe*, plate 14, l. 37, plate 15, ll. 2–4: E 52, 53, 55, 66). William Keach has pointed out that while, in *The French Revolution*, Blake applied the vocabulary of terror to symbols and representatives of the *ancien regime* such as the 'terrible towers' of the Bastille, in *America* and *Europe* it is chiefly used to describe the forces of revolution.[29] In this context, the dating of the three works becomes highly significant: *The French Revolution* was printed in 1791, before the word 'terror' had taken on much political significance, while *America* and *Europe* were printed in 1793 and 1794 respectively, the very years in which people were beginning to talk and write about the Jacobins' 'Reign of Terror' in France, and to describe Robespierre and his comrades as 'terrorists'. In other words, rather than ceasing to use words like 'terror' and 'terrible' to describe revolutionaries once the Terror itself got underway, Blake chose that very historical moment to begin doing so. This fact leads Keach to speculate that Blake may, in fact, not have been entirely opposed to the revolutionary violence occurring across the Channel. He writes:

> Blake was attracted to the force unleashed in the struggle for liberty; liberty without such force would have seemed to him not just impossible but undesirable. And while I do not mean to suggest that bloodshed in itself gave him pleasure, I do think that 'Terrors' – some kinds of 'Terrors' – did.[30]

Given Blake's enthusiasm for revolutionary terror, coupled with his gleeful evocations of revolutionary violence and war (in *Europe, Vala* and *Gwin, King of Norway*, for example), it seems entirely possible that Blake may in fact have greeted the news of the revolutionary massacres and the beginning of 'the Days of Terror' in France with joyous enthusiasm rather than the revulsion attributed to him by Gilchrist.[31]

Burke had claimed that the sublime of terror was sublime only from a distance, and in the very years Blake was writing *America* and *Europe* he was insisting that the Jacobin Terror could not be sublime, because it was too close at hand. Philosophical radicals like Godwin and Wollstonecraft had made claims for the continuing sublimity of the Revolution by creating mental distances between themselves and it, striving to keep the bloodshed

in proper perspective. As Blake alone felt that distance reduced rather than increased sublimity, it is perhaps characteristic of him that he should have been largely unfazed by revolutionary violence, feeling no need to impose either physical or mental distances between himself and the Revolution to continue to regard it as sublime. Whether he would have felt the same way if, like Williams or Wollstonecraft, he had actually been compelled to live through the Terror – or even if, like Wordsworth, he had narrowly escaped it – is a question that obviously cannot be answered. But it is worth remembering that Blake's Glad Day engraving – the possible prototype for Orc, 'the terrible boy' – was first drawn in 1780, the year Blake may have participated in the Gordon Riots that burned Newgate and left London for some days in the hands of the mob.[32] If he did, it would mean that, as Keach writes, 'Blake knew directly what it meant to participate in mass violence': Williams, unlike Blake, knew what it was like to fear for one's life amidst popular upheaval, but Blake, unlike Williams, may have known what it was like to be part of the mob on the streets, to experience the moment when 'all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire'[33] (*America*, plate 14, l. 19: E 56). When he wrote of the liberation of the sublime revolutionary moment, the dissolution of individual subjectivity into collective identity, he may well have known whereof he spoke. And given that Blake had no fear of revolution, and no fear of the sublime – and, it may not be irrelevant to add, no fear whatsoever of God – it should not surprise us to discover that he felt no holy dread of the sublime Milton, either, and was more than willing to confront his spirit face to face.

IV

With scenes from Milton appearing in books, galleries and political cartoons, it is somewhat surprising to discover that Blake produced only one Miltonic picture in the 1790s: 'The House of Death', painted in 1795 as an illustration of Adam's vision of the Lazar-House in book 11 of *Paradise Lost*. It was an unconventional choice, seldom depicted by Milton's illustrators, although Blake probably knew of his friend Fuseli's drawing on the same subject. But Blake was an unconventional artist, and whereas other artists – even Fuseli – mostly aimed only to illustrate the most spectacular scenes from *Paradise Lost* without deviating too far from Milton's text, Blake aimed to critique the epic itself. His choice of this scene was part of that critique.

In *Paradise Lost*, Adam is granted a vision of the future sufferings of his descendants:

> Immediatly a place
> Before his eyes appeard, sad, noisom, dark,
> A Lazar-house it seemd, wherein were laid
> Numbers of all diseas'd, all maladies
> Of gastly Spasm, or racking torture, qualmes
> Of heart-sick Agonie, all feaverous kinds,
> Convulsions, Epilepsies, fierce Catarrhs …
> (*Paradise Lost*, book 11, ll. 477–83: M 254)

These diseases, Michael explains to Adam, have not been inflicted wantonly upon them by God; instead, they have brought them on themselves through 'intemperance … in meats and drinks', which has disordered their bodies and destroyed their health. Intemperance, he claims, is the root of all disease, and thus responsible for more deaths than war, fire, flood and famine put together. It is one of the most puritanical moments in Milton's entire epic, and as such was hardly calculated to appeal to Blake, who had his own ideas about the origins of pestilence:

> Shall not the King call for Famine from the heath?
> Nor the Priest, for Pestilence from the fen?
> To restrain! to dismay! to thin!
> The inhabitants of mountain and plain;
> In the day, of full-feeding prosperity;
> And the night of delicious songs.
> (*The Song of Los*, plate 6, ll. 9–14: E 68)

Pestilence, for Blake, was something imposed upon people from above, rather than something that people inflict upon themselves. Along with famine and war, it is part of the arsenal used by the powerful to retain control of their subjects, by keeping the population down to manageable levels:

> Fayette beheld the Queen to smile
> And wink her lovely eye

And soon he saw the pestilence
From street to street to fly
(Blake's Notebook, p. 99: E 862)

Believing disease was caused by poverty and oppression, Blake was understandably unsympathetic to those who told the poor that they would be healthy if only they would be temperate, seeing such teachings as simply another form of social control.[34] In *Vala*, the doctrine of teaching the poor to be frugal and temperate, and attributing their sufferings to their lack of self-control, is recommended by Urizen as a means of breaking the will of the rebellious:

Preach temperance say he is overgorgd & drowns his wit
In strong drink tho you know that bread & water are all
He can afford Flatter his wife pity his children till we can
Reduce all to our will as spaniels are taught with art
('Four Zoas', Night the Seventh, p. 80, ll. 18–21: E 355)

Blake's disagreement with Milton over the origins of sickness comes through in his painting of 'The House of Death'. According to Milton, the presiding spirit in the lazar-house is Death himself:

And over them triumphant Death his Dart
Shook, but delaid to strike, though oft invok't
With vows, as their chief good, and final hope.
(*Paradise Lost*, book 11, ll. 491–2: M 254)

In Blake's painting, a figure hovers over the House of Death: an old man with a long white beard, his eyes closed, holding a long, outstretched scroll in his hands. This is not Death: it is God, holding the Scroll of the Law, according to which the sufferers are sinful and fully deserving of their fate. His closed eyes suggest that he refuses to look upon the effects that his judgments have upon his victims, remaining wilfully blind to the suffering he is inflicting. He is the very model of the temperance-preaching, poverty-enforcing priest or king, who sets impossible rules and then condemns people for failing to live up to them. By replacing Death with God, Blake renders bitterly ironic Milton's lines: '[He] delaid to strike, though oft invok't/With vows, as their chief good,

and final hope'. God is *supposed* to be their chief good and final hope, but instead of helping the sick he condemns them as deserving their sufferings, and will not even grant them the mercy of death, sadistically toying with their lives instead.

In 1795, Blake's attitude to Milton was largely a negative one. He was in the full flush of his Satanism, writing works like *America* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that celebrated the triumph of Satanic energy over divine restriction and law; the more nuanced picture of his later works, with their criticisms of Satan and reverence for Jesus, were still to come. Probably Blake chose 'The House of Death' as the subject of his only Milton painting for the decade because it stood for his least favourite elements of Milton: the puritanism, judgmental self-righteousness and barely repressed sadism that Blake saw as major elements of both Milton's Christianity and the Christianity of his own day. His painting puts back into the lazar-house what Milton has carefully left out of it: the God who must bear ultimate responsibility for the creation of such a world, who allows disease to run rampant and permits death to delay the strike of his 'Dart' so long. Like his rewriting of Milton in *Europe*, Blake's reimagining of Milton in 'The House of Death' is a painting of what he, in 1795, saw himself as fighting against, both in Milton and in the world at large.

After 'The House of Death', Blake painted no more scenes from Milton for six years. Fuseli's Milton gallery opened and closed; it was not a commercial success, and the collection was finally sold off by lottery to defray Fuseli's expenses.[35] Illustrated editions of Milton came and went, but Blake was never commissioned to work on one, either as a designer or an engraver: his designs for *Leonora* (1796) and *Night Thoughts* (1797) had given him a reputation for eccentricity, and publishers who simply wanted their editions of Milton adorned with a manly Adam, a pretty Eve, a fearsome Satan and some benevolent-looking angels were unlikely to risk commissioning an artist who produced such wild designs.[36] He was out of step with his time: as Pointon notes, 'Blake's real output of Milton subjects begins … between five and ten years after most of his associates executed their Milton illustrations'.[37] It was only in 1801 that Joseph Thomas commissioned Blake to execute a series of illustrations to *Comus*, and his artistic work on Milton began in earnest.[38] In visual style, Blake's illustrations were heavily influenced by Fuseli's Milton gallery, and like Fuseli, he painted Milton's characters in heroic, Michaelangeloesque fashion, standing in statuesque poses against indeterminate, often shadowy backgrounds. Fuseli had illustrated similes,

painting scenes such as the 'Lapland witches orgies' which only appear in *Paradise Lost* insofar as something in the poem – in this case, Sin – is described as being *like* them. Blake took this a step further by adding literal depictions of metaphors to his illustrations; when, for example, Milton writes in his 'Nativity Ode' that 'Nature in awe of him [i.e. Jesus]/Had doffed her gaudy trim', Blake's painting of the scene depicts Nature as a naked woman, seemingly every bit as solid as Mary or Christ. This willingness to take Milton's language literally – a procedure which Blake also applied to other sets of illustrations, such as those he drew for *Night Thoughts* – can be seen most spectacularly in Blake's illustrations to *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, in which almost every detail of Milton's text is brought to life, resulting in a set of paintings bursting with literalised metaphors and anthropomorphic personifications; the visual equivalents of Blake's 'Parabolic' poems, refusing to recognise any distinction between the metaphorical and the real.

As Irene Taylor and G. E. Bentley Jr have pointed out, Thomas's commission – coupled with Blake's move from London to Felpham under Hayley's patronage – seems to have precipitated Blake's second period of serious engagement with Milton's works.[39] After mounting his critique of Milton in 1794–5 – the period in which he wrote and painted *Europe, The Book of Urizen* and 'The House of Death' – he seems to have paid relatively little heed to him for the next six years or so. But Thomas and Hayley seem to have prompted Blake to revisit and reappraise Milton, for in the same years he painted several sets of Milton illustrations for Thomas, Blake was also at work on his first illuminated book since 1795: his great poem *Milton*. By identifying Milton's Christianity with the old, anti-revolutionary order in *Europe* (and, indeed, in Europe), Blake had implicitly made Milton himself what the conservative epic-writers had always wanted him to be; an exemplar of orthodoxy, whose works had to be written backwards in order to add up to anything radical. But even in the mid-1790s, Blake had not simply seen Milton as an enemy; their relationship was far more complex than that:

> The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 5: E 35)

Blake's evaluation of Milton is reminiscent of Marchant's claim that Milton was, or at any rate should have been, a monarchist; that his republicanism

was merely a result of the times he lived in, and in a more settled age a man of his character would have been a loyal supporter of the Crown.[40] Blake's claim has the same structure as Marchant's, even if its content is quite the reverse: he claims that Milton's punitive Protestant beliefs were merely an accident of his upbringing, overlaid on a man who was a Satanist at heart. Thus, just as his contemporaries attempted to rewrite and redeem Milton by trying to become so many modern Miltons in order to write the patriotic national epic he should have written, so in *Milton* Blake attempted to save Milton from himself by rewriting *Paradise Lost* as a kind of visionary antinomian epic. He would release Milton from his 'fetters', and show him the error of his ways.

Many of the writers I have discussed in this book attempted to make Milton keep his distance. Some, like Burke, Todd, Hayley and Warton, tried to pretend that he was not present at all; that he existed *out there* somewhere, in heaven, or in the pantheon of great poets, or in the heroic past, rather than here and now, in the impious England of the 1790s that had dared profane his dread sepulchral rest. The epic poets distanced him by appropriating his voice; implicitly claiming to speak for him by borrowing his epic machinery and style, they ventriloquised a tame Milton who toed the appropriate party line. Wollstonecraft, Godwin and their fellow radicals coped with his proximity through the creation of internal and emotional distances: the devil at your door need not terrify if you can retain enough perspective to see the big picture, the grand outline of which it is merely an unfortunate detail. Wordsworth, who felt Milton's presence more heavily than anyone other than Blake, attempted in true Bloomian fashion to create the necessary distance by replacing and surpassing him, substituting his own presence for Milton's and thereby pushing the older poet into the background. But Blake, who seems to have desired no distance and feared no proximity, called Milton to him, into his cottage garden, even into his own body:

> Then first I saw him [i.e. Milton] in the Zenith as a falling star,
> Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift;
> And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there …
> (*Milton*, plate 15, ll. 47–9: E 110)

The title of the poem, Blake's *Milton*, seems to maintain subjectivity intact: Blake is the subject who perceives and writes, and Milton is the object he describes. But when, in the course of the poem, Blake explains how Milton

has entered his body and become one with him, that division breaks down: if Blake's *Milton* is not by Blake at all, but by Blake/Milton, then it could equally well be called Milton's *Milton*, or even Milton's *Blake*. The boundaries between subject and object dissolve as one gets too close to the sublime.

One of Blake's objections to Milton seems to have been that he accepted the idea of 'a God afar off', a ruler of the universe who maintained his sublime distance between himself and his creations. Indeed, Milton's God actively *hides* from his creations, even from his angels: as Burke approvingly noted, he conceals himself and his throne 'with the majesty of darkness round' (*Enquiry* part 2, section 15: EB 1:249). In Genesis, God goes for an afternoon walk in Eden:

> And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.[41]

When Milton reaches this point in *Paradise Lost*, he has God send his son to do the job instead, whilst he remains withdrawn and hidden on his shadowed throne. Milton's God, unlike the God of the Bible, has no hands, feet or face; he does not stroll through gardens or meet prophets on mountaintops; he merely lurks in the darkness, shapeless and seemingly bodiless, a disembodied voice that threatens and warns. For Blake, this distancing of the divine was unacceptable. 'Seek not thy heavenly father then beyond the skies', Blake warns in *Milton*, and he accordingly opens *Milton* with a rewrite of Milton's invocation of his muse, locating her not 'on the secret top/Of Oreb, or of Sinai' but inside his own head. Calling upon the 'Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poets Song', he writes:

> Come into my hand
> By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm
> From out the Portals of my Brain, where by your ministry
> The Eternal Great Humanity Divine. planted his Paradise,
> (*Milton*, plate 2, l. 5–8: E 96)

This passage systematically subverts the traditional system of distancing that placed God and man, fallen Earth and unfallen Eden, poles apart. Blake's formulation, 'the Eternal Great Humanity Divine', collapses the distinction between man and God. God is not afar off, in heaven: he is here in us – indeed,

he *is* us. Eden is not in some indeterminate location in the Middle East: it is in our minds, inside our skulls. Divine inspiration does not reside on distant 'secret' mountaintops, but within our own brains. If God is man and Eden is inside the human mind, then *Paradise Lost* becomes a psychomachia, a description of the fall from mental unity into mental division, and all the gulfs of space and time that Milton uses to distance his characters from us and from one another become purely metaphorical. Distances dissolve; subject–object distinctions break down; God and Satan, Adam and Eve, Hell and Heaven, Eden and Earth all turn out to be different aspects of the same thing, 'the Eternal Great Humanity Divine'.

In *Milton*, this is the essential truth that Milton has to learn: his system of divisions, of total separation between saved and damned, God and man, heaven and hell, is untenable. At the opening of the poem, Milton sits in heaven, 'Viewing his Sixfold Emanation scatter'd thro' the deep/In torment'. This 'Sixfold Emanation' is identified with Milton's three wives and three daughters, whom he had accused of disobedience, and hence with Eve, the archetypal disobedient wife and daughter. Milton, having been virtuous in life, is in heaven, while his sinful Emanations (his disobedient wives and daughters; Eve; those who break God's laws) are in hell. His theology teaches him to accept this state of affairs as right and proper, so – 'unhappy tho in heav'n' – he does what he has always done in his dealings with God: like the loyal angels in *Paradise Lost*, 'he obey'd, he murmur'd not. he was silent' (*Milton*, plate 2, l. 18: E 96). But after hearing the song of the Bard, he realises his error, and the horror of the spiritual system of distances and divisions that he has helped to reinforce:

> What do I here before the Judgment? without my Emanation?
> With the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration[?]
> I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!
> He is my Spectre! in my obedience to loose him from my Hells
> To claim the Hells, my Furnaces, I go to Eternal Death.
>
> (*Milton*, plate 14, ll. 28–32: E 108)

Milton has come to understand that his sinful Emanation is part of him, just as Satan is his spectre, his own dark reflection. By insisting on his 'Selfhood' – his existence as a stable, Protestant, Lockean subject – and disowning all those parts of himself that do not fit in with his 'Selfhood',

he has himself become Satanic: he has become like the Accuser who is the God of this world, damning everything that he finds unacceptable. In *The Reason of Church Government* Milton had declared his preference for the Holy Spirit above 'Dame Memory and her Siren daughters' (*Reason of Church Government*, book 2, opening passage: MP 1:820); but by relying on powers external to himself rather than his own internal inspiration he has become dependent on memory, the faculty which orders our impressions of the external world. Now, having realised his mistake, 'he took off the robe of the promise, & ungirded himself from the oath of God', the symbols of his place among the spiritual elite of the Elect; leaving heaven, he goes 'down to self annihilation'. By insisting on hard distinctions between his virtuous Selfhood and his sinful Emanation, he has disowned the greater part of his own soul, leaving the fragments of his psyche 'scatter'd thro' the deep/In torment'. The boundaries of his Selfhood are the walls of their prisons, and consequently it is only through 'self annihilation' that he can free them from their hells and be united with his Emanation once more.

When Milton leaves heaven, intent on annihilating his Selfhood and rejoining his Emanation, he encounters Urizen: the 'God afar off' of *Paradise Lost*, who condemns the universe from his shadowed throne. Urizen's empire is the domain of distances and divisions, of total separation between one thing and another, man and god, subject and object, saved and damned. Milton and Urizen battle, 'one giving life, the other giving death':

> But Milton took of the red clay of Succoth, moulding it with care
> Between his palms: and filling up the furrows of many years
> Beginning at the feet of Urizen, and on the bones
> Creating new flesh on the Demon cold, and building him,
> As with new clay a Human form in the Valley of Beth Peor.
>
> (*Milton*, plate 19, ll. 10–14: E 112)

This scene reverses Genesis 2:7, with man making a body of clay for God. By building Urizen a body, Milton compels the 'God afar off' to be a god *here*, beneath his hands: a real presence, not an abstract nonentity hiding in the dark. In heaven, Milton was willing – however unhappily – to contemplate God above and the damned below with the appropriate aesthetic distancing, keeping them at arm's length and maintaining his Selfhood as something separate from both. But after hearing the Bard's song, he aims to abolish

all such separations, forcing God to join him even as he joins himself with his sinful Emanation among the damned. Plate 41 of *Milton*, illustrating the moment in which Milton is reunited with his Emanation, shows the now fully formed Urizen collapsing into Milton's arms.[42]

More than any other work of the period, *Milton* expresses the sense of Milton's continued presence: not just in Blake's back garden, or in his left foot, but in the world at large. Blake's Milton is 'Milton the Awakener', whose return begins to awaken Albion – who stands both for humanity in general and Britain in particular – from the sleep of history:

> Now Albions sleeping humanity began to turn upon his Couch;
> Feeling the electric flame of Miltons awful precipitate descent.
> (*Milton*, plate 20, ll. 25–6: E 114)

Nor is Milton's influence limited to Britain. The effect of his return is continent-wide: after he enters Blake's foot, Los sees 'the Cloud of Milton stretching over Europe' (*Milton*, plate 21, l. 36: E 116). Initially, the various supernatural beings who observe Milton's descent react to it with terror, fearing that he has come to destroy all boundaries and unleash hell on earth; and Rintrah and Palamabron, 'brooding in their minds terrible things', could almost be quoting Burke when they say to their father, Los:

> Whence is this Shadow terrible? wherefore dost thou refuse
> To throw him into the Furnaces! knowest thou not that he
> Will unchain Orc? & let loose Satan, Og, Sihon & Anak,
> Upon the Body of Albion?
> (*Milton*, plate 22, ll. 31–4: E 117)

This was the fear that had filled men's hearts since the 1780s; that Milton's return would mean the destruction of the entire established order, the collapse of civilisation into anarchy at the hands of the Satanic forces of revolution. (Orc, here as elsewhere in Blake, seems to be the embodiment of revolutionary energy.) Gibbon must have thought something very similar when he called for a halt to the reprinting of Milton's prose works: unless they were thrown 'into the Furnaces', they could 'let loose Satan [...] upon the body of Albion'. Once the returned Milton began demolishing the barriers between God and Man and Satan, Heaven and Earth and Hell, who

knew where it would end? But Los, who has already become 'One Man' with Milton/Blake, replies:

> O noble Sons, be patient yet a little
> I have embracd the falling Death, he is become One with me
> O Sons we live not by wrath. by mercy alone we live!
> I recollect an old Prophecy in Eden recorded in gold; and oft
> Sung to the harp: That Milton of the land of Albion.
> Should up ascend forward from Felphams Vale & break the Chain
> Of Jealousy from all its roots; be patient therefore O my Sons
> (*Milton*, plate 23, ll. 32–8: E 119)

This description of Milton as 'the falling Death' identifies him with his most sublime and terrible creations, Death, the King of Terrors and Satan, the fallen one. No wonder Rintrah and Palamabron fear his arrival; but Los, who instead of fleeing from Milton has 'embracd' and 'become One' with him, sees his return in its true light, realising that he has come to 'break the Chain/Of Jealousy' and usher in 'the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations'. Allowing their individual 'Selfhoods' to be absorbed into a greater whole, Los/Milton/Blake stand ready to confront Satan, the God of this world who insists, like Burke, on all things keeping their proper distances and maintaining their proper places.

Blake's *Milton* does not only describe Milton's immediate presence within its text: it requires his presence outside it, too. Rather than encouraging Milton to sink safely into the background, Blake's *Milton* continually drags him back into focus, insisting that his poems be re-read, reinterpreted and contested. In this way it maintains Milton's active presence much more strongly than works like Cumberland's *Calvary*, which simply assumed Milton's implicit approval with everything they had to say. Blake could well have said with Godwin that 'if there be such a thing as truth, it must infallibly be struck out by the collision of mind with mind'; and the process of reading Blake's *Milton* alongside, and against, Milton's *Paradise Lost* enacts a three-way collision between the minds of the reader, Milton and Blake.[43] This is the process of 'Mental fight' referred to by Blake in the Preface to *Milton*, a process championed by Milton himself in *Areopagitica* – the aim of which, Milton explained, was to allow the scattered fragments of the truth to be gathered together and reunified, in order to restore them to life.[44]

Milton is full of unexpected realignments of Miltonic material. For example, at the beginning of *Milton* Blake invokes his muse, then writes:

> Say first! what mov'd Milton, who walkd about in Eternity
> One hundred years, pondring the intricate mazes of Providence
> Unhappy tho in heav'n, he obey'd, he murmur'd not. he was silent
> Viewing his Sixfold Emanation scatter'd thro' the deep
> In torment! To go into the deep her to redeem & himself perish?
> What cause at length mov'd Milton to this unexampled deed[?]
> A Bard's prophetic Song!
>
> (*Milton*, plate 2, ll. 16–22: E 96)

These lines rewrite a passage from the opening of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton – having just invoked his muse – writes:

> … say first what cause
> Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,
> Favourd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
> From thir Creator, and transgress his Will
> For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?
> Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?
> Th' infernal Serpent …
>
> (*Paradise Lost*, book 1, ll. 28–34: M 6)

On one level, Blake is simply telling the story of what happened to Milton's spirit after death; he spent 100 years walking unhappily around heaven, pondering providence, until moved into action by the bard's song. But the parallel structure of Blake and Milton's lines invites us to compare Blake's Milton with Milton's Adam and Eve. Blake's 'unhappy tho' in heaven' is a response to Milton's 'happy state/favoured of heaven so highly', and thus implicitly questions whether the unfallen Adam and Eve – or, indeed, the unfallen Satan – were as happy as Milton says. Milton's activity in heaven, 'pond'ring the intricate mazes of Providence', is in *Paradise Lost* a favourite activity of the fallen angels in hell, who:

> … reasond high
> Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate,

> Fixt Fate, free Will, Foreknowledge absolute,
> And found no end, in wandring mazes lost.
> (*Paradise Lost*, book 2, ll. 558–61: M 40)

By attributing this futile demonic pondering to the apparently saved soul of Milton, Blake implies that Milton's version of Christianity is of no more help to him in understanding the universe than that of the demons was in hell. Despite being in heaven, Blake's Milton seems to be in a fallen state of unhappiness and ignorance, casting further doubt on the adequacy of his religious categories of salvation and damnation. Blake's 'What cause at length mov'd Milton to this unexampled deed/A Bard's prophetic song!' mirrors Milton's 'Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?/The infernal serpent …', calling attention to the parallel between the two falls. Milton, like Adam and Satan, abandons the paradise in which God has placed him and falls into a world of chaos and pain. But Blake makes clear that Milton's self-willed fall from Eternity is an admirable action, a rejection of the religion that places him in heaven and his Emanation in hell, and thus casts doubt on Milton's account of the Fall. Was it really a 'foul revolt' for Adam and Eve to seek knowledge of Good and Evil? Was the serpent really 'infernal' – was it not, in fact, inspired, even 'prophetic'?

When Blake depicts Milton leaving heaven to redeem his Emanation and awaken Albion, his action simultaneously echoes Adam leaving Eden for Eve, Satan falling from heaven for defying God, Satan leaving hell to bring Knowledge of Good and Evil to mankind, and Jesus leaving heaven to redeem humanity. By bringing these together, Blake forces the reader to consider them in a new pattern; not the familiar story of Obedience and Disobedience, which damns Adam and Satan and celebrates Christ, but a new story of the triumph of Love over Law, in which Adam, Satan and Jesus are all heroic figures, because all of them valued love and liberty more than the tyrannical laws that condemned them. Milton's epic had been the supreme expression of the first story; now, in *Milton*, Blake depicts him rejecting it for the second, and in so doing uniting in himself all that is greatest in the human, the satanic, and the divine. Throughout *Milton*, the evil powers combine the worst features of Milton's God and Milton's Satan, and when Milton confronts them he is at once echoing Satan confronting the tyrant God of *Paradise Lost* and Jesus confronting the tyrant Satan of *Paradise Regained*. In these, and other passages, Blake accomplishes the

redemption of Milton that, in the poem, Milton is able to achieve by entering Blake, allowing him to write *Milton* in the first place.

At the climax of Blake's poem, Milton confronts Satan in Blake's garden, 'upon mild Felpham shore' (*Milton*, plate 38, l. 13: E 139). With Satan appear 'Sin on his right hand Death on his left', as if in a purposeful challenge to all those who had criticised Milton for including such ontologically indeterminate beings in his poem at all (*Milton*, plate 39, l. 29: E 140). Facing his greatest creation, Milton acknowledges Satan as his own 'spectre', but refuses to fight against him:

> Thy purpose & the purpose of thy Priests & of thy Churches
> Is to impress on men the fear of death; to teach
> Trembling & fear, terror, constriction; abject selfishness
> Mine is to teach Men to despise death & to go on
> In fearless majesty annihilating Self, laughing to scorn
> Thy Laws & terrors, shaking down thy Synagogues as webs
> (*Milton*, plate 38, ll. 37–42: E 139)

Satan stands for the entire Burkean political/aesthetic order: indeed, he literally *embodies* it, for looking within his bosom Blake sees a hell-world of sublime scenery and slave labour, a realm of 'labour with blackend visages among its stupendous ruins' (*Milton*, plate 38, l. 21: E 139). Like all Burkean priests and kings, he inspires obedience through 'the fear of death', enforced by 'laws & terrors'; he maintains his power by remaining, as Milton made him, the master of the terrible sublime. As such, Milton declares his intention to overcome him not by fighting him, but by teaching 'Men to despise death & to go on/In fearless majesty', for once people are immune to the sublime of terror, they will no longer be afraid of Satan, and his power will be at an end. Satan teaches 'constriction' and 'abject selfishness', the latter probably with the emphasis on 'self'; he desires to keep people locked within their own sealed worlds, distanced both from one another and the world outside. Milton is in favour of 'annihilating Self', obliterating the barriers that keep things and people divided. They are the two sides of the sublime: the repressive sublime that enforces divisions, and the revolutionary sublime that tears them down. Satan threatens Milton and demands his submission, attempting to create yet another hierarchy founded on violence and fear; but Milton, refusing to strike down Satan, acknowledges him as part of himself,

renouncing the 'Selfhood' that kept them separate and distinct. If Satan is Milton and vice versa then the entire system of 'Selfhood' and 'selfishness', upon which both Milton's identity as a stable subject and Satan's power as God of this world depend, is revealed as an untenable absurdity.[45] In obliterating his Selfhood, Milton will also destroy all that is truly satanic about Satan, for no hierarchical system can endure if the judge is also the accused, or the master is also the slave; and in doing so fearlessly, he will demonstrate that the death with which Satan threatens his victims is in fact nothing to be feared, and thereby rob the sublime of terror of its power. Fox writes:

> [Milton] will annihilate not Satan but himself. In destroying what can be destroyed in his own being, he will necessarily destroy satanic falsehood. In being unafraid of that destruction he will expose the folly of the satanic priests who rule by fear of death; exposing them will expose the falseness of their god, who thus will cease to be a god. All of this he will accomplish not in battle but in sacrifice.[46]

The words in which Milton describes his sacrifice are important, for Satan and his children are not the only sublime Miltonic characters Blake has in mind here. 'In fearless majesty annihilating Self … shaking down thy Synagogues as webs': the allusion to Samson is unmistakable. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the figure of Samson, long identified with Milton himself, was frequently used in the 1790s to symbolise the Revolution: a double identification which troubled Milton's conservative admirers, but which suited Blake perfectly in its emphasis on self-obliteration. Thus Blake's Milton, too, is a Samson-figure: indeed, he is much more explicitly Samsonic than Orc is, and in Blake's illustrations to *Milton* its eponymous hero is depicted with long hair and bulging muscles. As Blake says, 'the Strong Man represents the human Sublime'; and in this scene, Milton takes on the role of the strong man, Samson, in order to challenge the embodiment of the anti-human, Burkean sublime: Satan, Milton's spectre and the god of this world (*Descriptive Catalogue*, number 5, 'The Ancient Britons', p. 41: E 543). In light of the network of associations that clustered around the figure of Samson in Blake's day, *Milton* becomes more comprehensible. Samson was Britain, bound and sleeping, but ready to wake and tear off its bonds; Samson was the embodiment of anti-aristocratic revolution, pulling down 'the lords and the Philistines'; Samson was the aged

Milton, blind and defeated, but awaiting the call of God to strike one last blow against the followers of Dagon. Samson and Milton were both exemplars of sublimity, the former in his person, and the latter in his poetry; Samson and Milton were both symbols of the English Revolution; Samson and Milton were both types of Christ. When one knows these things, it starts to become clearer why Blake should have depicted a Samsonic, Messianic Milton going to 'Eternal death' in order to awaken Albion to revolution.

Blake is at once the most and least representative example of the Milton-obsession of his age. As I have tried to show over the previous five chapters, everything that Blake did with regard to Milton – rewriting his epics, illustrating his poems, recruiting him for political causes, attempting to take his place – was also being done by many other people at much the same time. However, while he was typical in his decisions to approach Milton in these ways, he was unique in his way of doing so. No-one else took so radical an approach to Milton, facing him on his own terms, challenging him squarely rather than trying to pretend that Milton must have believed the same things as him all along. In his own day, Blake's works were totally unregarded: his poems and paintings found only the tiniest of audiences, and he ended his career still what he had declared himself to be at its beginning, 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness' (*All Religions are One*, sub-title: E 1). But, in an age swarming with would-be heirs to Milton, only Blake confronted and rewrote Milton with the same confidence and energy with which Milton himself had once confronted and rewritten Homer, Virgil and the Bible, and thereby established his claim to be perhaps Milton's truest successor. Later in life, Blake would tell Robinson of his arguments with Milton's spirit, many of which seem to have ended in stalemate: as Blake despairingly reported, 'I tried to convince him he was wrong, but I could not succeed. His tastes are Pagan; his house is Palladian, not Gothic'.[47] To persuade Milton – or even Milton's ghost – to change his mind about anything was perhaps too great a task even for Blake. But simply by daring to engage with Milton, rather than merely attempting to rebury him, Blake set himself apart from his contemporaries, and displayed that spiritual kinship with his poetic predecessor which had perhaps inspired Milton, all those years before, to love Blake in childhood and show him his face.

Epilogue: Milton and the Literature of Power

'Who and what is Milton?'

Then, on the next page, this time in desperate italics:

'Who and what was Milton?'

The year is 1839. Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron are dead: drowned, buried, burned, consumed by their various elements. But Milton's temporal and ontological status remains, it seems, open to doubt. His ghost was a tenacious one, and seemingly incapable of staying away from politics: just the previous year a pamphlet had appeared in London entitled *Areopagitica Secunda, or, Speech of the Shade of John Milton, on Mr Sergeant Talfourd's Copyright Extension Bill*, in which, as the *Monthly Review* put it, 'the Shade of John Milton puts forward in strenuous and elegant style the arguments which sergeant Talfourd and others have both in and out of Parliament advanced in support of the Bill in question'.[1] Faced with a man whose loquacity was apparently unimpeded by having been 160 years dead, the writer's confusion is understandable. Is Milton something that 'is' or something that 'was' – does he belong to the present or the past? Is he still here, or has he gone at last? And who or what was he – or *is* he – in any case?

The author of these rather frantic lines was Thomas De Quincey, in an essay on Milton he wrote for *Blackwoods Magazine* ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:435–6). Like his old friend Wordsworth, De Quincey was an admirer, even a worshipper, of Milton, and the aim of his essay was to defend Milton against the charges of pedantry and improper mixing of Christian and Classical material levelled against him by Johnson and Addison decades before. (The fact that De Quincey still felt the need to challenge these essays, sixty and 127 years after their respective publications, speaks volumes for their continuing importance – an importance that was largely due to their regular inclusion among the front matter of editions of Milton's works.) But before he could defend Milton, he felt that he had to *define* Milton. Why? What possible difficulty could there be in determining who or what Milton is or was? The obvious answer to the question would have been something like: 'Milton was an English poet and polemicist who

lived from 1608 to 1674, best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*'. But De Quincey's answer was something else entirely:

> Milton is not an author amongst authors, not a poet amongst poets, but a power amongst powers; and the *Paradise Lost* is not a book amongst books, not a poem amongst poems, but a central force amongst forces. ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:436)

Milton, then, turns out not to be a man at all, but a kind of abstract energy. (Possibly De Quincey means to imply that Milton is or was angelic: 'Powers' are, traditionally, the fourth rank of the angelic hierarchy, and appear as such in *Paradise Lost*.) The language of power and force recalls Newtonian physics, suggesting a Milton as impersonal and all-powerful as gravity. De Quincey goes on:

> Butler failing, there would have been another Butler, either in the same or in some other form.
>
> But, with regard to Milton and the Miltonic power, the case is far otherwise. If the man had failed, the power would have failed. In that mode of power which he wielded, the function was exhausted in the man – species was identified with the individual – the poetry was incarnated in the poet. ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11: 436–7)

Here De Quincey is clearly thinking of Milton as a Christ figure. He is historically unique: like Christ, but unlike lesser authors such as Butler, there is no-one else who could have taken his place, because he alone possesses 'the Miltonic power' which he requires to fulfil his 'function'. As with Christ's mission, there could be no second chance: 'If the man had failed, the power would have failed'. But the man did not fail, and 'the poetry was incarnated in the poet'. In John Milton, poetry became flesh and dwelt among us; his 'power' exerted a 'force' upon the world, and the world was changed forever.

What is going on here? Why does De Quincey ask such a strange question – 'Who and what *is* Milton?' – and then give such a strange series of answers? My view is that the question is not as rhetorical as it first seems: as this book has described, there had been a real debate over who and what Milton is or

was. De Quincey asks the question in order to give himself an opportunity to answer it, to say what Milton was – and, perhaps more importantly, what he was not. The purpose of a definition is to include some things and exclude everything else, and if Milton was a force, a power, an angel, an incarnate poem, then he could not also be anything so mundane as a radical political hero. There is nothing strange about De Quincey's rhetorical tactics here: as I have shown, they had been used (with minor variations) for at least a century already. But the direction in which De Quincey took his argument was to have major consequences for the future study of literature.

Milton as angel; Milton as Christ or God; Milton as poetry incarnate; Milton as abstract Power or Force – De Quincey defines Milton in terms of a series of awesome indefinables. Unsurprisingly, he soon finds himself reaching for the language of the sublime:

> We may affirm that there is no human composition which can be challenged as constitutionally sublime – sublime equally by its conception and by its execution, or as uniformly sublime from first to last, excepting the *Paradise Lost*. In Milton only, first and last, is the power of the sublime revealed. In Milton only does this great agency blaze and glow as a furnace kept up to a white heat – without intermission and without collapse. ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:437–8)

Byron quipped that 'the word Miltonic mean[s] sublime'. For De Quincey, the word 'sublime' means 'Miltonic'; Milton is not just the most sublime of poets, he is in fact the *only* truly sublime poet who has ever lived, the alpha and the omega of sublimity: 'In Milton only, first and last, is the power of the sublime revealed'. It was thus necessary for De Quincey, like many a critic before him, to keep the Sublime Milton at a safe distance by placing him on a suitably lofty pedestal. As he put it in his 1832 'portrait' of Milton:

> That sanctity which settles on the memory of a great man, ought upon a double motive to be vigilantly sustained by his countrymen; first, out of gratitude to him, as one column of the national grandeur; secondly, with a practical purpose of transmitting unimpaired to posterity the benefit of ennobling models …. To the benefit of this principle, none amongst the great men of England is better entitled than Milton, whether as respects

> his transcendent merit, or the harshness with which his memory has been treated. ('Milton', in *The Gallery of Portraits*: DQ 8:211)

De Quincey wishes to preserve Milton's 'sanctity', to ensure that he remains 'transcendent', a 'column of the national grandeur'. He needs to do this because of 'the harshness with which his memory has been treated': because people keep inconsiderately dragging the transcendent Milton back down into the gutter of history. (De Quincey is probably thinking chiefly of Dr Johnson here, but he would have been no more sympathetic to the radical attempts to claim Milton as a hero of the Revolution.) He is aware that keeping Milton's 'sanctity' intact is a constant struggle, and one that must be 'vigilantly sustained'; for 'the Miltonic power', which should serve the 'practical purpose' of providing 'ennobling models', is always in danger of being harnessed for less exalted ends. De Quincey's 'portrait' was part of that struggle; so was his essay of 1839. But his greatest contribution to it lay back in the 1820s, in the form of his distinction between the Literature of Knowledge and the Literature of Power.

De Quincey outlined this concept several times, but it first appeared in print in his 1823 articles, 'Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected'. There, he wrote:

> The word *literature* is a perpetual source of confusion; because it is used in two senses, and those senses liable to be confounded with each other. In a philosophical use of the word, literature is the direct and adequate antithesis of books of knowledge. But in a popular use, it is a mere term of convenience for expressing inclusively the total books in a language. ('Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected', number 3: 'On Languages': DQ 3:69)

According to the OED, the word 'literature' had been used to mean 'literary production as a whole' – what De Quincey calls its 'popular use' – since about 1812. Some sense that 'literature' could also be used to refer specifically to the best examples of literary production was also in the air. De Quincey's 'philosophical' definition of literature as 'the direct and adequate antithesis of books of knowledge', however, was entirely his own invention; no one had hitherto suggested that 'literature' and 'books of knowledge' might in any way be mutually exclusive, an idea that must have seemed bizarre in an age

abounding in scientific and historical literature. Yet De Quincey argues that such a definition is essential if true literature is to be distinguished from 'a parliamentary report, a system of farriery, a treatise on billiards, the court calendar, &c', and all other works 'in which the matter to be communicated is paramount to the manner or form of its communication' ('On Languages': DQ 3:69–70). Such books are not literature but 'anti-literature': 'All that is literature, seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge' ('On Languages': DQ 3:71).

De Quincey claims to derive the idea that the purpose of true literature is the communication of power from Wordsworth, who once stated that a poet 'has to call forth and communicate *power*'; but as he goes on to explain and illustrate his concept of the literature of power it is not Wordsworth but Burke who comes chiefly to mind.[2] De Quincey's examples – the storm scenes from *King Lear*, the court of Chaos from *Paradise Lost*, some gothic fragments from Wordsworth's poem 'Yew-Trees' – are all classic instances of Burke's terrible sublime, itself very much an aesthetic of power. 'When I am thus suddenly startled into a feeling of the infinity of the world within me', De Quincey writes, 'is this power? Or what may I call it?' ('On Languages': DQ 3:71) Burke, surely, would have replied: 'You may call it the Sublime'.

Having set out his antithesis, De Quincey applies it at once to Milton:

> In which class of books does the Paradise Lost stand? … Now, if a man answers, among those which instruct – he lies: for there is no instruction in it, nor could be in any great poem, according to the meaning which the word must bear in this distinction, unless it is meant that it should involve its own antithesis. ('On Languages': DQ 3:70)

> I presume that I may justly express the tendency of the Paradise Lost, by saying that it communicates power; a pretension far above all communication of knowledge. ('On Languages': DQ 3:71)

In these lines, De Quincey reduces the entire 150-year struggle to keep Milton's ghost in its grave to the simplicity of a couple of syllogisms:

1. A book may communicate power or knowledge, but never both.
2. *Paradise Lost* communicates power.
3. Therefore *Paradise Lost* does not communicate knowledge.

1. All books which instruct their readers about the phenomenal world are books that communicate knowledge.
2. *Paradise Lost* is not a book that communicates knowledge.
3. Therefore *Paradise Lost* cannot instruct us about the phenomenal world.

It is a wonderful logical trap. If one plays by De Quincey's rules, one can never bring a literary work down into the world of history and politics, or claim that it can or should 'instruct' its readers about such matters; for the moment it enters the same category as 'a parliamentary report' or 'a court calendar', by arguing (for example) that a certain action be taken by a certain parliament, or that a certain court deserves to be brought down, it ceases to be literary, and thus ceases to communicate power. Blake joked that Paine could 'overthrow all the armies of Europe with a small pamphlet'; but a pamphlet cannot overthrow an army except by instructing real people that they must take action against it, and that, De Quincey claims, is the very thing that no true literary work can ever do (Blake's annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, Letter 2, pp. 12–13: E 617). Power comes only with the condition that it is never used in the real world, the world of knowledge: Milton's ghost has the choice between being active and powerless, or powerful and dead. Furthermore, it resolves at a stroke the entire terrifying business of keeping the sublime at arm's length. In De Quincey's terms, the sublime belongs automatically to the literature of power, and can thus exist only in the distant, sealed-off realm of the literary, far from the day-to-day world of knowledge, billiards and parliamentary reports. For a literary work to concern itself with the trivia of contemporary politics would instantly demonstrate that it was not to be feared, as it could not possibly be truly sublime.

In *Imagining the King's Death*, John Barrell has shown how Coleridge, later in life, defended his early radical poetry on the grounds that the very vehemence of its imagination proved that he had never had any intention of translating its sentiments into real political action; a more active radical, he argues, would have written much less imaginatively expressive poetry.[3] Barrell writes:

> [It] is an attempt to take the politics out of the imagination by voiding the imagination of all connection with intention or desire, and so by making poetry, even poetry on political subjects, something which inhabits a quite other universe of discourse from politics itself, one characterized not by conflict but by harmony.[4]

Naturally, one of the first writers to whom Coleridge applied this theory was Milton, and Barrell paraphrases his argument thus: 'both Taylor and Milton imagined the elaborate torture of their political and religious enemies in hell, but because both (merely) imagined it, neither intended it'.[5] By Coleridge's terms, the more outrageously radical Milton poetry looks, the less radical Milton really was. De Quincey's argument runs along similar lines, but it goes further; for whereas Coleridge argues that it is extravagance of imagination that is incompatible with a genuine desire for real political action, De Quincey suggests that such a desire is incompatible with poetic power itself. If Coleridge presents the would-be poet with a choice between engaging with the real world and imaginatively representing that engagement, De Quincey implies that they must choose between engagement with reality and being a true poet at all. In Coleridge's terms, it is only the writer who describes political action in extravagantly imaginative ways who can be safely discounted as not truly political; in De Quincey's terms, any writer whose work 'communicates power' – which is to say, any truly literary writer whatsoever – cannot also be seeking to influence the real world. Furthermore, by targeting 'power' rather than 'imagination', De Quincey had Milton in his sights just as surely as Coleridge had his own younger self; for more than a century's worth of criticism had argued that it was his sublime power that distinguished Milton from all lesser poets. No-one would wish to argue that Milton had not been a poet of exemplary power; and that, by De Quincey's terms, required him to be a poet who was also entirely severed from quotidian reality.

In his 1839 essay on Milton, De Quincey had contrasted him with his near contemporary, Butler. Butler, De Quincey wrote, had belonged to history: he had arisen in response to a specific historical situation, namely 'the ludicrous aspects of the Parliamentary war, and its fighting saints', and if he had not written his *Hudibras* someone else would have written something just as good on the same subject. 'Butler failing, there would have been another Butler, either in the same or some analogous form' ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:436). As Butler is here acting as the anti-Milton, it follows that Milton is everything he is not. Butler was created by his historical circumstances; Milton was an ahistorical, quasi-divine miracle. Butler's poetry was inspired by the political events of his own day, specifically those of the Civil War; ergo, Milton's poetry had nothing to do with the political events of his day, especially not those of the Civil War. Butler belongs to the world of knowledge. Milton belongs to the world of

power, and is thus severed from history, left floating in the distant world of Literature – where in all likelihood he is, in Blake's words, 'unhappy tho' in heaven'.

De Quincey's distinction between the literatures of knowledge and power, and his consequent definition of Literature and the Literary as realms of pure aesthetic experience almost entirely divorced from the everyday worlds of history and real life, were highly influential in the nineteenth century. The very concept of English Literature as an academic subject in its own right, distinct from history, philosophy or linguistics, derives from this formulation and others like it. But it is my contention that the desire for a literature with as few ties to the world of facts and politics as possible grew out of the unnerving experience of the revolutionary years, and specifically out of the encounter with Milton's ghost, and the discovery that the sublime dead may threaten at any moment to lurch terrifyingly back to life. In drawing his distinctions – distinctions no sooner expressed than applied to Milton – Thomas De Quincey, like so many others, was doing his bit to nail shut Milton's opened coffin, in the hope of ensuring that this time John Milton would stay dead.

Notes

Chapter One

1 On Milton's death, see Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 538.

2 On the process by which this occurred, see Nicholas von Maltzahn, 'The Whig Milton, 1667–1700', in David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

3 Stephen Prickett, *England and the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 139.

4 R. D. Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1922), p. 4.

5 William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), p. 115–19.

6 St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 475. To give this figure some context, it should be mentioned that three years earlier the copyright for *Robinson Crusoe* had been sold for £68 and the copyright for *Pilgrim's Progress* for £196.

7 Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Addison', in Donald Greene (ed), *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 675.

8 Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, p. 71.

9 George Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964), pp. 4, 15.

10 Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp. 119–20.

11 Quoted in Marcus Walsh, 'Bentley Our Contemporary', in Ian Small and Marcus Walsh (eds), *The Theory and Practice of Text-editing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 179.

12 John Milton, *An Extract from Milton's Paradise Lost*, ed. John Wesley (London, 1791), Preface. For other contemporary expressions of this view, see Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, pp. 7–12.

13 Quoted in Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America*, pp. 11–12 and Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 163, respectively.

14 For examples of Milton's poetry appearing in anthologies, see Vicesimus Knox, *Elegant Extracts*, 2nd edition (London, 1789), pp. 520–49; Edward Bysshe, *The British Parnassus*, vol. 1 (London, 1714), pp. 3, 5, 15; or William Enfield, *The Speaker*, new edition (London, 1782), pp. 273–83.

15 Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, pp. 70–1.

16 James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980), p. 1096. The shepherd's remark – 'An't please your Lordship, this is a very odd sort of an author' – suggests his knowledge of Milton was minimal.

17 See Ian McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity: A Life of Robert Burns* (London: Flamingo, 1995), pp. 14–25.

18 Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, p. 25.

19 Joseph Wittreich, *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), pp. 44–5.

20 Wittreich, *Feminist Milton*, p. 39.

21 Susanna Blamire, *Poetical Works*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1994), pp. xxi–ii.

22 Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 19.

23 John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 103–4; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 118.

24 Amy Cruse, *The Englishman and His Books in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London: Harrap, 1930), p. 151.

25 See Pat Rogers, 'Classics and Chapbooks', in Isabel Rivers (ed.), *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-century England* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1982), pp. 29–39.

26 St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 73.

27 Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1957), pp. 49–50.

28 The ESTC lists over 100 eighteenth-century editions of both Young's *Night Thoughts* and Thomson's *Seasons*, which were regarded by contemporaries as amongst the most popular poems of the century.

29 William Dodd, *A Familiar Explanation of the Poetical Works of Milton* (London, 1762), Preface.

30 John Milton, *An Extract from Milton's Paradise Lost*, ed. John Wesley, Preface.

31 Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, vol. 1, ed. Donald Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 297.

32 Joseph Spence, 'An Account of the Author', in Stephen Duck, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1736), p. xiv.

33 John Clare, *Sketches in the Life of John Clare*, ed. Edmund Blunden (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), pp. 67, 46.

34 Frank Baker (ed.), *Milton for Methodists* (London: Epworth, 1988), p. viii.

35 Baker, *Milton for Methodists*, p. xiii.

36 Karl Philipp Moritz, *Travels, Chiefly on Foot* (London, 1795), p. 38.

37 For other examples of autodidact eighteenth-century readers interested in poetry – often including Milton's – see Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), pp. 16–22, 39.

38 James Lackington, *Memoirs*, new edition (London, 1792), pp. 170–2.

39 Leigh Hunt, *Essays* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1929), pp. 37, 41, 55.

40 John Aikin, *General Biography*, vol. 7 (London, 1799–1815), p. 113.

41 Anon., *Agatha*, vol. 1 (London, 1796), p. 12.

42 Maria Edgworth, *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), chapter 17, p. 225 and chapter 25, p. 345.

43 For late-eighteenth-century literacy rates, see Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 45.

44 See E. S. Shaffer, 'Milton's Hell', in Lisa Low and Anthony Harding (eds), *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 67.

45 All numbers are drawn from the English Short Title Catalogue. The numbers given here are the number of times each text was reprinted in the eighteenth century, whether independently or as part of a larger collection; thus an edition of Milton's complete poetic works counts as one reprinting of each, and is listed accordingly.

46 Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, p. 9n.

47 John Milton, *Paradise Regain'd. A Poem. In Four Books. To Which Is Added Samson Agonistes. And Poems upon Several Occasions. With a Tractate of Education*, '5th edition' (London, 1713). Tonson's 1707 edition, which also claims to be 'the 5th edition', does not include the *Tractate*.

48 On Hollis, see Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, pp. 40–1, Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America*, p. 34, Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1959), pp. 267–8, and DNB 27:749–50.

49 Wittreich, *Feminist Milton*, p. 70.

50 John Milton, *The Works of John Milton, Historical, Political, and Miscellaneous*, ed. Richard Baron (London, 1753), p. iv.

51 See Francis Blackburne, *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis*, vol. 1 (London, 1780), p. 63.

52 Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, p. 40. Hollis hoped that sleeping on the bed might infuse Akenside with Milton's spirit, allowing him to write odes worthy of Milton.

53 Von Maltzahn, 'The Whig Milton, 1667–1700', p. 229.

54 Nahum Tate, *A Poem, Occasioned by His Majesty's Voyage to Holland* (London, 1691), cited in von Maltzahn, p. 242.

55 On the process by which this came about, see von Maltzahn, 'The Whig Milton, 1667–1700', pp. 229–53.

56 Thomas Newton, 'Dedication', in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, vol. 1 (London, 1749). See also Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, pp. 40–3.

57 Patrick Guthrie, *Candour* (London, 1739), p. 13.

58 Elijah Fenton, 'The Life of Mr. John Milton', in John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1730).

59 Ian Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill, and Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 17; Peter Thomas, *John Wilkes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 110.

60 John Horne Tooke, *The Petition of an Englishman* (London, 1765), p. 24.

61 To Milton's simile 'as safe as in a Senate house', Warton had added the note: 'Not many years after this was written, MILTON'S FRIENDS shewed that the safety of a Senate house was not inviolable. But when the people turn Legislators, what place is safe against the tumults of innovation, and the insults of disobedience.' Horne Tooke replied: 'I believe our new Laureat meant not so

much to cavail at Milton's expression, as to seize an impertinent opportunity of recommending himself to the *powers which be*, by a cowardly insult on the dead and persecuted author's memory, and on the aged, defenceless constitution of his country.' See John Horne Tooke, *The Diversions of Purley* (London, 1786), pp. 179–80. Fittingly enough, when Horne Tooke came to be tried for high treason in 1794, Thomas Erskine would quote Milton's *Areopagitica* in his defence: see Joseph Gurney (ed.), *The Trial of John Horne Tooke*, vol. 1 (London, 1795), p. 444.

62 For examples of their quotations from and allusions to Milton's poetry, see John Wilkes and Charles Churchill, *The North Briton*, vol. 1 (London, 1772), p. 107, vol. 2, p. 2 and vol. 3, p. 194.

63 Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman Tradition*, p. 266.

64 Donald S. Lutz, 'The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-century American Thought', *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984), p. 194.

65 *Boston Gazette*, 12 March 1770, p. 1.

66 Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America*, p. 133.

67 Lydia Schulman, *Paradise Lost and the Rise of the American Republic* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992), p. 118.

68 Tony Davies, 'Borrowed Language: Milton, Jefferson, Mirabeau' and Nicholas von Maltzahn, 'The Whig Milton, 1667–1700', in David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 260–2.

69 Davies, 'Borrowed Language', pp. 265–70.

Chapter Two

1 The anecdote appears to have originated in Alexander Cunningham's *History of Great Britain from the Revolution of 1688 to the Accession of George the First*, vol. 1 (London, 1787), p. 14. Although written in the 1730s, Cunningham's *History* was not published until 1787. The story was repeated by Thomas Warton, in the 2nd edition of his *Poems on Several Occasions*; he gave his source as Thomas Tyers, who had presumably derived it in turn from Cunningham's *History*. See John Milton, *Poems on Several Occasions*, ed. Thomas Warton, 2nd edition (London, 1791), pp. 358–9.

2 John Good, *Studies in the Milton Tradition* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1915), pp. 229–30.

3 John Derry, *William Pitt* (London: Batsford, 1962), pp. 75–7.

4 Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London, 1790), p. 14.

5 Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 14.

6 Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 14.

7 Tony Davies, 'Borrowed Language: Milton, Jefferson, Mirabeau', in David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 269.

8 Mark Noble, *Lives of the English Regicides* (London, 1798), Dedication.

9 Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Milton', in Donald Greene (ed), *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 709.

10 Philip Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, 2nd edition (London, 1790), pp. 11–13. On the disinterment, see also Carol Barton, 'Ill Fare the Hands that Heaved the Stones', *Milton Studies*, 43 (2004), pp. 198–260.

11 Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, p. 14.

12 Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, p. 15.

13 Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, pp. 17–19.

14 Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, pp. 20–1.

15 Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, pp. 24, 29, 44.

16 William Cowper, 'On The Late Indecent Liberties Taken with the Remains of the Great Milton, Anno 1790', ll, pp. 13–20, in *Poems*, vol. 3, eds John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), p. 65.

17 Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, pp. 36–9, 45–8.

18 James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, Esq*. (London, 1825), p. 271.

19 Barton, 'Ill Fare the Hands that Heaved the Stones', p. 210.

20 Davies, Borrowed Language, p. 269.

21 Barton, 'Ill Fare the Hands that Heaved the Stones', p. 218.

22 Warton, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 2nd edition, pp. xxvii–xlii.

23 On Pye, see DNB 45:608–10.

24 David Erdman, *Commerce des Lumières* (Columbia: Missouri UP, 1986), pp. 104–5.

25 William Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 2nd edition, Introduction, ed. Joseph Wittreich (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970), p. viii.

26 Reproduced in Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter* (London: Atlantic, 2006), p. 267.

27 John Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton, with a Life of the Author by William Hayley* (London, 1794–7).

28 Hayley, *Life*, part 2, p. 75 and part 3, p. 218. These passages were pointed out by Joseph Wittreich in 'Domes of Mental Pleasure', *Studies in Philology*, 69 (1972), pp. 103–4.

29 For the history of the affair, see Wittreich's introduction to Hayley's *Life*.

30 Hayley, *Life*, part 2, p. 101.

31 Hayley, *Life*, Introduction, p. vi.

32 Hayley, *Life*, Introduction, p. viii.

33 Phillip Cox, 'Blake, Hayley, and Milton: A Reassessment', in *English Studies*, 75 (1994), p. 439.

34 See John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 589–91.

35 Thomas Newton, 'Life of Milton', in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, vol. 1 (London, 1749), pp. xx–i.

36 Hayley, *Life*, p. 144.

37 John Milton, *Samson Agonistes* (London, 1797), prefatory 'Life of the Author'.

38 John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1795), Advertisement.

39 DNB 46:886–7.

40 DNB 46:885–6; John Barrell and Jon Mee (eds), *Trials for Treason and Sedition, 1792–1794*, vol. 8 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p. 338.

41 John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1794 [1796]), Dedication.

42 Henry John Todd, 'Life of Milton', in John Milton, *Poetical Works*, vol. 1, ed. Henry John Todd (London, 1801), p. cl.

43 Henry John Todd, 'Life of Milton', p. cxlvii.

44 It was also reprinted, along with the *Tractate of Education*, as an appendix to Francis Blackburne's *Remarks on Johnson's Life of Milton* (London, 1780). This substantial octavo volume, however, hardly qualifies as a pamphlet.

45 Hayley, *Life*, p. vii.

46 There may have been a seventh. Years later, Coleridge claimed to have found 'in a large manufactory a sixpenny pamphlet, containing a selection of inflammatory paragraphs from the prose-writings of Milton' (*The Friend*, vol. 1, essay 11: C 4:1:81). If such a work did exist, no copies of it now appear to survive. But it is equally possible that the book Coleridge saw was one of the pamphlets discussed in this chapter, and as he flicked through it he mistook a complete tract for a collection of extracts.

47 Benjamin Flower, *The French Constitution*, 2nd edition (London, 1792), p. 365n.

48 On Deighton, see DNB 15:695–6. On Dilly, see DNB 16:231–2. On Johnson, see Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). On Ridgway, see Ralph Manogue, 'The Plight of James Ridgway', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 27(3) (1996), pp. 158–65.

49 John Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power* (London, 1791), Dedication.

50 Milton *did* write about 'civil and religious rights', but of Englishmen rather than 'mankind'. See MP 7:356.

51 William Cobbett, *Annals of Blood* (Cambridge, 1797), title page.

52 John Milton, *Areopagitica* (London, 1791), Dedication.

53 Milton, *Areopagitica*, title page.

54 Manogue, 'The Plight of James Ridgway', p. 158.

55 Manogue, 'The Plight of James Ridgway', p. 158; Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, p. 212.

56 Manogue, 'The Plight of James Ridgway', pp. 163, 165.

57 Colonel Titus, *Killing No Murder* (London, 1792), Dedication.

58 John Milton, *The Ready and Easy Way* (London, 1791), Advertisement.

59 Milton, *Ready and Easy Way*, Advertisement.

60 Milton, *Ready and Easy Way*, pp. 1–2.

61 John Milton, *Areopagitica* (London, 1792), Preface.

62 Milton, *Areopagitica*.

63 John Milton, *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* (Edinburgh, 1797), Preface.

64 Milton, *Considerations*, p. 33.

65 On the contemporary concerns over tradesman preachers, see Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), pp. 80–1.

66 On the Edinburgh radical movement, see Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, pp. 147–50 and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 136–8.

67 Thomas Spence (ed.), *Pig's Meat*, vol. 2 (London, 1795), pp. 287–8.

68 Copies are held by the Library of Congress, Cleveland Public Library, the Harvard University Library, the New York Public Library, the University of Texas Library, the Columbia University Library, the University of Illinois Library, the Indiana University Library and the library of the University of South Carolina.

69 On Brand Hollis, see DNB 27:751.

70 Trial of Thomas Paine, in John Barrell and Jon Mee (eds), *Trials for Treason and Sedition, 1792–1794*, vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), pp. 196–7.

71 Barrell and Mee, *Trials*, vol. 1, pp. 196–7.

72 John Toland, *The Life of John Milton*, in Helen Darbishire (ed.), *The Early Lives of Milton* (London: Constable, 1932), p. 180.

73 Barton, 'Ill Fare the Hands that Heaved the Stones', p. 209.

74 Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), p. 587.

75 Cited in Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 26.

76 William Cowper, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), p. 373.

77 Marcia Pointon, *Milton and English Art* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1970), p. 62.

78 Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, chapter III.

79 Louisa Calè, *Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), p. 31.

80 Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, pp. 100–13.

81 Cited in Calè, *Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery*, p. 45.

82 Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1975); Morton D. Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986).

83 Schock, Peter, '*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:* Blake's Myth of Satan and Its Cultural Matrix', *ELH*, 60 (1993), p. 447 and Joanna Southcott, *A Dispute between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Poole: Woodstock Books, 1995).

84 Reproduced in H. T. Dickenson (ed.) *Caricatures and the Constitution 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), p. 155.

85 Robert Southey, *Life of Nelson*, ed. Geoffrey Callender (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1922), p. 49.

Chapter Three

1 Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, vol. 2, ed. Donald Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 587.

2 David Hume, *History of England*, vol. 7 (Edinburgh, 1792), p. 343.

3 Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, eds T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W. W. Pratt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 43.

4 See, for example, *The Devil* (London, 1786), p. 4 and *Paradise Regain'd, or the Battle of Adam and the Fox* (London, 1780), p. 5.

5 See, for example, Rousseau's praise of Sparta in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to D'Alembert and Writings for the Theatre*, eds Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, UP of New England, 2004), p. 349.

6 Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. William Smith (London, 1739), p. 103. New editions of Smith's translation of Longinus were still appearing in the 1790s.

7 David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), pp. 137–9, 214–15; Longinus, *Dionysius Longinus of the Height of Eloquence*, trans. John Hall (London, 1652), Dedication. On Hall, see DNB 24:624–6.

8 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1785), p. 729.

9 Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 62.

10 William Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 2nd edition, ed. Joseph Wittreich (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970), p. 225.

11 Quoted in Lydia Schulman, *Paradise Lost and the Rise of the American Republic* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992), p. 128.

12 See Schulman, *Paradise Lost and the Rise of the American Republic*, pp. 141–50, 169–71.

13 'Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs, in *Common Sense*. Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 22.

14 For examples of the passage's appearance in eighteenth-century anthologies, see *The Art of Poetry on a New Plan: Illustrated with a Great Variety of Examples*, vol. 2 (London, 1762), p. 341, *The Poetical Preceptor* (London, 1777), p. 221 and Edward Bysshe, *British Parnassus*, vol. 1 (London, 1714), p. 238.

15 Schulman, *Paradise Lost and the Rise of the American Republic*, pp. 128–9.

16 Phillip Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 129–30.

17 David Hume, 'On the Immortality of the Soul', in Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (eds), *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 327.

18 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 56 and 226–7.

19 Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 98; Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 32 ff.

20 George Whitefield, 'The Eternity of Hell-torments', in *Sermons on Important Subjects* (London, 1832).

21 Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1959), p. 305.

22 J. G. Robertson, *Milton's Fame on the Continent* (London: Oxford UP, 1908), pp. 20–1 and n. For Wakefield, see Gilbert Wakefield, *A Reply to the Letter of Edmund Burke, Esq., to a Noble Lord*, 3rd edition (London, 1796), p. 6 and *The Spirit of Christianity Compared with the Spirit of the Times in Great Britain* (London, 1794), p. 20. Wakefield appears to have been fond of comparing people to Milton's Satan: after the publication of *The Age of Reason*, he applied the same comparison to Thomas Paine. See Gilbert Wakefield, *Reply to Thomas Paine's Second Part of the Age of Reason* (London, 1795), p. 35.

23 Quoted in Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), p. 66.

24 *Rights of Man*, part 1. Paine, *Political Writings*, p. 72.

25 Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason Part II*, in *Works* (London, 1796), p. 407.

26 As well as being drawn as Don Quixote in many contemporary cartoons, Burke puts in an appearance as the Knight of La Mancha in a spurious continuation to *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, published in 1792. There, he speaks in a mixture of chivalric Romance language and mock-Miltonic bombast – 'Gigantic monster! Leader of witches, crickets, and chimeras dire!' – and would have 'instant prodigies sublime performed' had he not fallen off his horse. See anon., *A Sequel to the Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (London, 1792), p. 151.

27 DNB 31:923; Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London, 1805), pp. 317–18.

28 Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, p. 377.

29 Quoted in Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2006), p. 222.

30 Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, p. 223.

31 Gilbert Wakefield, *Remarks on the General Orders of the Duke of York to His Army, on July 7, 1794* (London, 1794), p. 22.

32 The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Burke's *Fourth Letter on a Regicide Peace* (written in 1795, although not published until after Burke's death) as containing one of the first appearances of the word 'terrorist' in English.

33 George Mason, *An Essay on Design in Gardening* (London, 1795), p. 201. The saying that 'Tenterden steeple is the cause of Goodwin's Sands' was proverbial; according to local legend, the money (or, in some versions, the stone) that was supposed to go to the maintenance of the sea-wall was diverted to build the church steeple, allowing the inundation that created the Goodwin Sands.

34 Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 206–7.

35 Christopher Smith, *A Quest For Home* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1997), p. 58.

36 Paulson, *Representations of Revolution*, p. 72.

37 Paulson, *Representations of Revolution*, p. 67.

38 For examples of Milton's appearances in contemporary newspapers, see Louisa Calè, *Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), pp. 48–9, 55–6.

39 Adriana Craciun, 'Romantic Satanism and the Rise of Nineteenth-century Women's Poetry', *New Literary History*, 34(4) (2003), p. 703.

40 Craciun, 'Romantic Satanism', pp. 701–2.

41 Anne Grant, *Letters from the Mountains*, vol. 2 (London, 1807), pp. 272–3.

42 Lyndall Gordon, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), pp. 180–2.

43 Quoted in Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790–1827* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 34.

44 On Williams's political career, see Adriana Craciun, *Women Writers of the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 131–7.

45 Quoted in Simon Schama, *Citizens* (London: Folio Society, 2004), p. 614.

46 William Godwin, *Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), book 4, chapter 4, section 2, appendix 1, p. 146.

47 William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, vol. 2, ed. David McCracken (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), chapter 13, p. 188.

48 James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, 1783), pp. 613–14.

49 John Milton, *An Extract from Milton's Paradise Lost*, ed. John Wesley (London, 1791), p. 26.

50 Joseph Wittreich, *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), p. 194.

51 Judges 16:27.

52 *Rights of Man*, part 2. Paine, *Political Works*, p. 220.

53 John Barrell and Jon Mee (eds), *Trials for Treason and Sedition, 1792–1794*, vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), pp. 196–7.

54 Charlotte Smith, *Desmond*, vol. 1, eds Antje Blank and Janet Todd (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), letter 9, p. 73.

55 Smith, *Desmond*, vol. 3, letter 17, p. 349.

56 Smith, *Desmond*, vol. 1, letter 7, p. 55.

57 Smith, *Desmond*, vol. 1, letter 7, p. 55.

58 George Huddesford, *Topsy Turvy*, 3rd edition (London, 1793), p. 20.

59 Anon., *The Times: A Poem* (Dublin, 1796), pp. 11–12.

60 Schama, *Citizens*, p. 598.

61 See Wittreich, *Interpreting Samson Agonistes*, chapter IV.

62 Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, p. 223.

63 Hayley, *Life*, part 3, p. 168.

Chapter Four

1 William Hayley, *An Essay on Epic Poetry*, ed. M. Celeste Williamson (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), epistle 2, p. 31.

2 See, for example, the illustration of Ajax reproduced in William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 621.

3 Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735), p. 26.

4 Hayley, *Essay*, epistle 5, p. 110.

5 Jean Terrasson, *A Critical Dissertation upon Homer's Iliad*, vol. 1 (London, 1722), p. 84; Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 146.

6 See Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue*, pp. 127–31.

7 Hayley, *Essay*, epistle 5, pp. 110–11.

8 DNB 16:1023.

9 DNB 44:859; Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), pp. 771–4.

10 On Blackmore's borrowings from Milton, see R. D. Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1922), pp. 90–3.

11 Among these scriptural epics were Wesley's *History of the New Testament* (1701) and *History of the Old Testament* (1704), Evans's *Prae-existence* (1714), the anonymous *The Last Day* (1720), Newcomb's *Last Judgment* (1723), Roberts's *Judah Restored* (1774), Smith's *Brethren* (1787) and *Israel* (1789), Scott's *Messiah* (1788), Hands's *Death of Amnon* (1789) and Holmes's *Adam and Eve* (1800).

12 Macpherson's *Ossian* dealt with the problem of writing epics in an un-epic age through a double historical displacement; not only did it claim to be a translation of Gaelic oral poetry that had originated in the distant past, it also framed its stories as the songs of Ossian, the last survivor of a heroic race looking mournfully back at the now-vanished age of heroes. See Fiona Stafford, 'Introduction', in James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996), p. vii.

13 See Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 109.

14 William Mason, *Caractacus, A Dramatic Poem* (London, 1759).

15 Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* (London: Oxford UP, 1989), p. 7.

16 Linda Colley, *Britons* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), pp. 148–9.

17 Derry, *William Pitt* (London: Batsford, 1962), pp. 41–3, 49–50.

18 To this list should perhaps be added Helen Maria Williams's 1784 epic, *Peru*. Although less overtly concerned with the American Revolutionary War than the poems of Dwight or Barlow, Williams's celebration of peace-loving Americans resisting invasion by warlike Europeans had obvious resonances with recent events, especially given Williams's own opposition to the American war.

19 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), p. 183.

20 The first reviewers of Southey's *Joan of Arc* criticised it for having been written too quickly, suggesting that such haste implied 'so slight an opinion of (perhaps) the most arduous effort of human invention'. See Smith, *Quest*, p. 115.

21 Colley, *Britons*, p. 150.

22 Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), pp. 137–9, 164–5.

23 Colley, *Britons*, pp. 167–93.

24 Colley, *Britons*, chapter 7.

25 Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, vol. 1, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995), chapter 14, p. 107.

26 James Ogden, *Emmanuel* (London, 1797), pp. 130, 110.

27 James Burges, *Richard I*, vol. 2 (London, 1801), p. 70.

28 James Ogden, *Revolution* (London, 1790), p. 42; James Pye, *Alfred* (London, 1815), pp. 60–1; Richard Cumberland, *Calvary* (London, 1792), pp. 68–9.

29 Sarah Pyke, *Israel*, vol. 1 (London, 1795), p. v, vol. 2, pp. 8, 147–8; Robert Southey, *Joan of Arc* (Bristol, 1796), p. 94.

30 Samuel Wilcocke, *Britannia* (London, 1797), p. 12.

31 John Ogilvie, *Britannia* (London, 1801), pp. 527–34.

32 Hannah Cowley, *The Siege of Acre* (London, 1801), pp. 88, 124.

33 Ogden, *Emmanuel*, p. 63.

34 Walter Savage Landor, *Gebir* (London, 1798), p. 60. It was once commonly asserted that the plot of *Gebir* was inspired by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, but Simon Bainbridge has shown this to be improbable, as Landor began writing it as early as 1796. See Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 32.

35 Ogden, *Emmanuel*, pp. 94–5.

36 Pye, *Alfred,* p. 156.

37 Of all these epics, *The Niliad* is the only one of which I have been unable to locate any surviving copies. My information on it comes only from a mention of it in the *Critical Review* XXV, new arr. (1799), which mocks Hildreth's use of Classical machinery: 'In an epic poem upon a victory so peculiarly attributed to providence, it was injudicious to derive its success from the heathen gods, as, according to the most ancient and orthodox opinions, those deities were the fallen angels. Mr Hildreth has therefore given the glory to the devil' (pp. 354–5).

38 Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 174.

39 Pye, *Alfred,* pp. 156, 66; Ogilvie, *Britannia,* p. 536.

40 Curran, *Poetic Form*, p. 160.

41 Hayley, *Essay*, epistle 3, pp. 64–5.

42 John Marchant, Dedication, in John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1751), pp. v–vi.

43 George Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964), p. 16.

44 DNB 14:618; Curran, *Poetic Form*, p. 164.

Chapter Five

1 Coleridge, letters to Thomas Poole, 21 and 31 March 1800: *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 582, 584.

2 Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth: A Life* (London: Viking, 2000), pp. 157–8.

3 See Peter Kitson, 'Coleridge, Milton, and the Millennium', *Wordsworth Circle*, 18(2) (1987), p. 64.

4 Barker, *Wordsworth*, pp. 203–5.

5 Roe, 'Wordsworth, Milton, and the Politics of Poetic Influence', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 19 (1989), p. 114.

6 My quotations are from the 1805 *Prelude*. In the 1850 *Prelude*, the more religiously minded later Wordsworth explicitly framed the passage as a confession to Milton's spirit: 'O temperate Bard!/Be it confest …' (1850 *Prelude*, book 3, ll, pp. 298–9). He also altered the passage to claim, improbably, that this was the only time in his life he had ever become drunk at all. See William Wordsworth, *The Fourteen-book Prelude*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1985), p. 69.

7 A remark recorded by Henry Crabb Robinson in 1843, cited in Joseph Wittreich (ed.), *The Romantics on Milton* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve UP, 1970), p. 146; 'An Evening Walk' (1794 text), ll, pp. 686–8: William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, ed. James Averill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), p. 153.

8 Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 125.

9 'Prospectus', ll, pp. 12–29. William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), pp. 257–8.

10 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 126.

11 Lee M. Johnson, 'Renaissance Copresences in Romantic Verse', in Mary Henley and W. Speed Hill (eds), *Wrestling with God* (Vancouver: M. E. Henley, 2001), pp. 243–4.

12 'Great Men Have Been among Us', ll, pp. 1–14. William Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), p. 166.

13 See Henry John Todd, vol. 1, p. cxlvii.

14 'London, 1802', ll, pp. 1–14. Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes*, p. 165.

15 F. M. Todd, *Politics and the Poet* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 115.

16 See D. M. G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 357.

17 'It Is Not To Be Thought of That the Flood', ll, pp. 9–13. Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes*, p. 167.

18 Marie-Hélène Huet, 'Performing Arts: Theatricality and the Terror', in James A. W. Heffernan (ed.), *Representing the French Revolution* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992), p. 140.

19 Tony Davies, 'Borrowed Language: Milton, Jefferson, Mirabeau', in David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 269.

20 Letter to Joseph Johnson, 26 December 1792. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2003), pp. 216–17.

21 Simon Schama, *Citizens* (London: Folio Society, 2004), pp. 416–23.

22 Schama, *Citizens*, p. 806.

23 Barker, *Wordsworth*, p. 114.

24 John Ogden, 'The Power of Distance in Wordsworth's Prelude', *PLMA*, 88(2) (1973), p. 258.

25 Barker, *Wordsworth*, pp. 112–13.

26 Barker, *Wordsworth*, pp. 136–7.

27 David Bromwich, *Disowned By Memory* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998), p. 17.

28 Schama, *Citizens*, p. 804.

29 Gregory Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 46.

30 Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism*, p. 34.

31 Huet, 'Performing Arts', pp. 139–41.

32 Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism*, pp. 68–9.

33 Schama, *Citizens*, p. 814.

34 Barker, *Wordsworth*, p. 134; Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), pp. 74–5.

35 'Tintern Abbey', ll, pp. 76–7. William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, eds James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992), p. 118.

36 'Tintern Abbey', ll, pp. 69–73; Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 118.

37 Gill, *William Wordsworth*, pp. 153–4.

38 Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), p. 18.

39 'Tintern Abbey', ll, pp. 71–3; Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 118.

40 'Tintern Abbey', ll, pp. 77–84; Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 118.

41 Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989), pp. 24–5.

42 Liu, *Wordsworth*, pp. 24–31.

43 *Descriptive Sketches* (1793 edition), ll, pp. 792–5. William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches*, ed. Eric Birdsall (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), p. 116.

44 Theresa Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 182.

45 See William Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, vol. 1, eds W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), pp. 32–4 and P 378, 454.

46 *The Borderers*, act 4, scene 2, ll, pp. 127–39, 141–5. William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982), p. 238.

47 Wordsworth, *Borderers*, act 4, scene 2, ll, pp. 156–7 (p. 240); act 2, scene 1, ll, pp. 72–4 (p. 128).

48 Schama, *Citizens*, pp. 760–1.

49 Wordsworth, *Borderers*, act 2, scene 1, ll, pp. 69–71 (p. 128).

50 'Tintern Abbey', ll, pp. 89–100. Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 118.

51 Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics*, p. 61.

52 'The Vale of Esthwaite', l, p. 271. William Wordsworth, *Early Poems and Fragments*, eds Carol Landon and Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997), p. 444.

53 Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism*, p. 206.

54 Zera Fink, 'Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 47 (1948), pp. 107–26. At the very least, Wordsworth read Milton's *Areopagitica* in France; see Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 100.

55 Barker, *Wordsworth*, pp. 228–32.

56 1798–9 *Prelude*, ll, pp. 1–6. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798–9*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1977), p. 43.

57 David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 116–17.

58 See Matthew Biberman, 'The Earth Is All before Me', in Ghislaine McDayter, Guinn Batten and Barry Milligan (eds), *Romantic Generations* (London: Bucknell UP, 2001). However, Simpson has pointed out that in *Paradise Lost* it is Sin who says 'Nor can I miss the way', and that in these lines Wordsworth is positioning himself as much as Satan as Adam (Simpson, p. 119; *Paradise Lost*, book 10, l, p. 262: M 220). This, too, could potentially have been a republican gesture: see Chapter Three, above. Alternatively, Wordsworth may simply have forgotten the line's source; Havens demonstrated long ago that Wordsworth had so much Milton in his head he probably often quoted or alluded to him quite unconsciously, without any special purpose in mind. See Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1922), pp. 607–20.

59 Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination*, p. 31.

60 1850 *Prelude*, book 10, ll, pp. 437–8, 449–50. Wordsworth, *Fourteen-book Prelude*, p. 209.

61 See, for example, William Jewett, '*The Fall of Robespierre* and the Sublime Machinery of Allegory', *ELH*, 63(2) (1996), pp. 428–9.

62 1850 *Prelude*, book 10, ll, pp. 457–8. Wordsworth, *Fourteen-book Prelude*, p. 209.

63 See, for example, pp. P 32, 380, 452.

64 Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 84.

65 'Home at Grasmere', MS B, ll, pp. 923–33. Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, pp. 96–8.

66 Gill, *William Wordsworth*, p. 233.

67 On the natural sublime in the eighteenth century, see Samuel Monk, *The Sublime* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1960) and W. P. Albrecht, *The Sublime Pleasures of Tragedy* (Lawrence: Kansas UP, 1975).

68 'Tintern Abbey', ll, pp. 123–4. Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 119.

69 Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976), pp. 199–200.

70 'Home at Grasmere', MS B, ll, pp. 910–33, 943–52. Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, pp. 96–8.

71 'Home at Grasmere', MS B, ll, pp. 953–5. Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, p. 98.

72 'Home at Grasmere', MS B, ll, pp. 996–1001. Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, p. 102.

73 'Home at Grasmere', MS B, ll, pp. 1014–48. Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, pp. 104–6.

74 Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 15.

75 Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 125.

76 William Hazlitt, 'Mr Wordsworth', in 'The Spirit of the Age': *Works*, vol. 11, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 volumes (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–4), p. 92.

77 Hazlitt, 'On People with One Idea', in 'Table-talk': *Works*, vol. 8, p. 68.

78 Hazlitt, 'On Milton's Sonnets', in 'Table-talk': *Works*, vol. 8, p. 176.

79 'Great Spirits Now on Earth Are Sojourning', ll, pp. 1–4. John Keats, *Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 67. On the process by which the poem reached Wordsworth, see p. 555.

80 Letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818. John Keats, *Letters*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958), pp. 278, 281.

81 Letter to George Keats, 14 October 1818. Keats, *Letters*, p. 396. The property Milton and Sidney had, and their successors lacked, was, of course, sublimity. On Franklin and Washington, Keats wrote: 'They are great Men doubtless but how are they to be compared to those our countrey [*sic*] men Milton and the two Sidneys ... Those Americans are great but they are not sublime'. See Keats, *Letters*, p. 397.

82 'To Wordsworth', ll, pp. 7–14. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poems 1804–1817*, eds Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 1989), p. 455.

83 1819 Dedication to *Don Juan*, stanzas 10–11, ll, pp. 73–88. Lord Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 5, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980–93), p. 6.

84 J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), pp. 86–8.

85 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), p. 634.

86 Barker, *Wordsworth*, pp. 448, 544–5.

87 Robert Southey, *A Vision of Judgment* (London, 1821), p. 34. Southey's condemnation of the 'Satanic school' is on pp. xx–i.

88 Cited in Nicholas von Maltzahn, 'The Whig Milton, 1667–1700', in David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 242.

89 'Latitudinarianism', ll, pp. 6–14. William Wordsworth, *Sonnet Sequences and Itinerary Poems, 1820–1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004), p. 189.

90 Barker, *Wordsworth*, p. 687.

91 Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems*, pp. 804–5.

92 'At Vallombrosa', ll, pp. 9–16. Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems*, p. 775.

93 'At Vallombrosa', ll, pp. 17–20. Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems*, pp. 775–6.

94 'Stanzas Composed in the Semplon Pass', ll, pp. 1–2. Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems*, p. 387.

95 Barker, *Wordsworth*, p. 688.

96 Barker, *Wordsworth*, p. 688.

97 'At Vallombrosa', l, p. 29. Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems*, p. 776.

98 'At Vallombrosa', ll, pp. 25–8. Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems*, p. 776.

Chapter Six

1 Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969), pp. 16–18; Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003), pp. 40–1.

2 E 707; G. E. Bentley Jr, *The Stranger from Paradise* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), p. 43.

3 Bentley, *Stranger*, p. 38.

4 David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 3rd edition (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), pp. 34–5.

5 On Blake's involvement in antiquarian circles, see Jason Whittaker, *William Blake and the Myths of Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

6 Bentley, *Stranger*, pp. 203–4.

7 Bentley, *Stranger*, chapter III.

8 See Percy H. Boynton, 'Joel Barlow Advises the Privileged Orders', *New England Quarterly*, 12(3) (1939), p. 479 and James Woodress, *A Yankee's Odyssey* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1958), p. 119.

9 This problem was not lost on contemporary readers. One of Barlow's first reviewers, reading *The Vision of Columbus*, wondered how George Washington would react to 'seeing himself represented as mowing down whole armies like an Amadis or Orlando …'. See Woodress, *A Yankee's Odyssey*, p. 88.

10 Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), pp. 61, 58.

11 Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime*, chapter 2.

12 Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime*, p. 139.

13 G. E. Bentley Jr, *Blake Records* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), p. 310.

14 Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 279.

15 Bentley, *Records*, p. 531.

16 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 216.

17 See Erdman, *Prophet*, pp. 23, 154.

18 Joel Barlow, *The Vision of Columbus* (London, 1787), p. 157.

19 Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis, Number II* (Philadelphia, 1777), p. 21.

20 Erdman, *Prophet*, p. 154.

21 Barlow left England in 1792 and did not return until 1803. See Woodress, *A Yankee's Odyssey*, pp. 130–1, 224.

22 Bentley, *Records*, p. 428.

23 Morton D. Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), p. 1.

24 Vincent De Luca, *Words of Eternity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), p. 42.

25 De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, p. 134; Bentley, *Stranger*, pp. 38–42.

26 Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, ed. W. A. G. Doyle (Wakefield: E. P. Publishing, 1973), p. 93. On Blake's enthusiasm for revolutionary violence, see William Keach, 'Blake, Violence, and Visionary Politics', in James A. W. Heffernan (ed.), *Representing the French Revolution* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992), pp. 24–40 and William Keach, *Arbitrary Power* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), pp. 130–44.

27 See Chapter Three, pp. 57–69, above.

28 On Williams's use of the Satanic sublime, see Chapter Three, pp. 71–4, above.

29 Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, pp. 140–1.

30 Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, p. 131.

31 Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, p. 93.

32 Bentley, *Stranger*, pp. 55–7.

33 Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, p. 132.

34 As Mee has demonstrated, Blake's works usually describe health as resulting from exercise and enjoyment rather than abstinence and restraint. See Jon Mee, 'Bloody Blake', in Steve Clark and David Worrall (eds), *Blake, Nation, and Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 73–80.

35 Louisa Calè, *Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), p. 53.

36 Bentley, *Stranger*, pp. 117–18, 164.

37 Marcia Pointon, *Milton and English Art* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1970), p. 135.

38 Bentley, *Stranger*, p. 222.

39 Irene Taylor, 'Say First! What Mov'd Blake?', in Stuart Curran and Joseph Wittreich (eds), *Blake's Sublime Allegory* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1973), p. 233 and Bentley, *Stranger*, p. 222.

40 John Marchant, Dedication, in John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1751), pp. v–vi.

41 Genesis 3:8.

42 Reproduced in William Blake, *The Complete Illuminated Books*, ed. David Bindman (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 289.

43 William Godwin, *Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), p. 15.

44 'From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming …' (*Areopagitica:* MP 2:549).

45 Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 263.

46 Susan Fox, *Poetic Form in Blake's Milton* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976), p. 163.

47 Bentley, *Records*, p. 427.

Epilogue

1 Anon., *Areopagitica Secunda, or, Speech of the Shade of John Milton, on Mr Sergeant Talfourd's Copyright Extension Bill* (London, 1838); *Monthly Review*, 2(2) (June 1838), p. 303.

2 William Wordsworth, 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface', in Carl Ketcham (ed.), *Shorter Poems 1807–1820* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), p. 655.

3 John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 648–50.

4 Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, p. 651.

5 Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, p. 651.

Bibliography

Places and dates of publication are listed for all texts. Publishers are listed for all texts published after 1850.

Primary Sources

Addison, Joseph and Steele, Richard, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald Bond, 5 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965).
Aikin, John, *General Biography*, 10 volumes (London, 1799–1815).
Anon., *Agatha* (London, 1796).
Anon., *Areopagitica Secunda, or, Speech of the Shade of John Milton, on Mr Sergeant Talfourd's Copyright Extension Bill* (London, 1838).
Anon., *Britain Delivered* (London, 1800).
Anon.,*The Devil* (London, 1786).
Anon., *Paradise Regain'd, or the Battle of Adam and the Fox* (London, 1780).
Anon., ed., *The Poetical Preceptor* (London, 1777).
Anon., *A Sequel to the Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (London, 1792).
Anon., *The Times, a Poem* (Dublin, 1796).
Barlow, Joel, *The Vision of Columbus* (London, 1787).
Barlow, Joel, *The Columbiad* (Philadelphia, 1807).
Barrell, John and Mee, Jon (eds), *Trials for Treason and Sedition, 1792–1794*, 8 volumes (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006).
Beattie, James, *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, 1783).
Blackburne, Francis, *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis*, 2 volumes (London, 1780).
Blackburne, Francis, *Remarks on Johnson's Life of Milton* (London, 1780).
Blackwell, Thomas, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735).
Blake, William, *Complete Poetry and Prose*, revised edition, ed. David Erdman (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).
Blake, William, *Complete Illuminated Books*, ed. David Bindman (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001).
Blamire, Susanna, *Poetical Works*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1994).
Boaden, James, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, Esq*. (London, 1825).
Boston Gazette, 12 March 1770.
Boswell, James, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980).
Burges, James, *Richard the First*, ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York: Garland, 1977).

Burke, Edmund, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford, 9 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981–2000).
Burrell, Sophia, *The Thymbriad* (London, 1794).
Byron, George Gordon, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980–93).
Bysshe, Edward, *The British Parnassus*, 2 volumes (London, 1714).
Clare, John, *Sketches in the Life of John Clare*, ed. Edmund Blunden (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931).
Cobbett, William, *Annals of Blood* (Cambridge, 1797).
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71).
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Complete Works*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 volumes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969–2001).
Cottle, Joseph, *Alfred* (London, 1800).
Cowley, Hannah, *The Siege of Acre* (London, 1801).
Cowper, William, *The Correspondence of William Cowper*, ed. Thomas Wright, 4 volumes (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904).
Cowper, William, *Poems*, eds John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).
Cumberland, Richard, *Calvary* (London, 1792).
Cunningham, Alexander, *The History of Great Britain from the Revolution in 1688 to the Accession of George the First*, 2 volumes (London, 1787).
Darbishire, Helen (ed.), *The Early Lives of Milton* (London: Constable, 1932).
De Quincey, Thomas, *Complete Works*, ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 volumes (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–3).
Deverell, Mary, *Theodora and Didymus* (London, 1784).
Dodd, William, *A Familiar Explanation of the Poetical Works of Milton* (London, 1762).
Duck, Stephen, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1736).
Dwight, Timothy, *The Conquest of Canaan* (London, 1787).
Edgeworth, Maria, *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994).
Enfield, William, *The Speaker*, new edition (London, 1782).
Fenton, Elijah, 'The Life of Mr John Milton', in John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1730).
Flower, Benjamin, *The French Constitution*, 2nd edition (London, 1792).
Godwin, William, *Caleb Williams*, ed. David McCracken (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982).

Godwin, William, *Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993).
Grant, Anne, *Letters from the Mountains*, 3 volumes (London, 1807).
Guthrie, Patrick, *Candour* (London, 1739).
Hands, Elizabeth, *The Death of Amnon* (Coventry, 1789).
Hayley, William, *An Essay on Epic Poetry*, ed. M. Celeste Williamson (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968).
Hayley, William, *Life of Milton*, 2nd edition, ed. Joseph Wittreich (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970).
Hazlitt, William, *Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 volumes (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–4).
Holmes, Ann, *An Epic Poem on Adam and Eve* (Bedale, 1800).
Huddesford, George, *Topsy Turvy*, 3rd edition (London, 1793).
Hume, David, *History of England*, 8 volumes (Edinburgh, 1792).
Hume, David, *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).
Hunt, Leigh, *Essays* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1929).
Johnson, Samuel, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).
Keats, John, *Letters*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958).
Keats, John, *Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978).
Knight, Richard Payne, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London, 1805).
Knox, Vicesimus, *Elegant Extracts*, 2nd edition (London, 1789).
Lackington, James, *Memoirs*, new edition (London, 1792).
Landor, Robert, *Gebir* (London, 1798).
Longinus, *Dionysius Longinus of the Height of Eloquence*, trans. James Hall (London, 1652).
Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. William Smith (London, 1739).
Macpherson, James, *The Poems of Ossian*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996).
Mason, William, *Caractacus, a Dramatic Poem* (London, 1759).
Mason, George, *An Essay on Design in Gardening* (London, 1795).
Milton, John, *Paradise Regain'd. A Poem. In Four Books. To Which Is Added Samson Agonistes. And Poems upon Several Occasions. With a Tractate of Education*, 5th edition (London, 1713).
Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Thomas Newton, 2 volumes (London, 1749).
Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Marchant (London, 1751).
Milton, John, *The Works of John Milton, Historical, Political, and Miscellaneous*, ed. Richard Baron (London, 1753).
Milton, John, *Poems on Several Occasions*, ed. Thomas Warton (London, 1785).

Milton, John, *Areopagitica* (London, 1791).
Milton, John, *An Extract from Milton's Paradise Lost*, ed. John Wesley (London, 1791).
Milton, John, *Poems on Several Occasions*, ed. Thomas Warton, 2nd edition (London, 1791).
Milton, John, *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* (London, 1791).
Milton, John, *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (London, 1791).
Milton, John, *Areopagitica* (London, 1792).
Milton, John, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1794 [1796]).
Milton, John, *The Poetical Works of John Milton, with a Life of the Author by William Hayley* (London, 1794–7).
Milton, John, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1795).
Milton, John, *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* (Edinburgh, 1797).
Milton, John, *Samson Agonistes* (London, 1797).
Milton, John, *Poetical Works*, ed. Henry John Todd, 6 volumes (London, 1801).
Milton, John, *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 volumes (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953–82).
Milton, John, *Poetical Works*, ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford UP, 1958).
Moritz, Karl Philipp, *Travels, Chiefly on Foot, through Several Parts of England, in 1782* (London, 1795).
Neve, Philip, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin* (London, 1790).
Newbury, John (ed.), *The Art of Poetry on a New Plan* (London, 1762).
Noble, Mark, *Lives of the English Regicides* (London, 1798).
Ogden, James, *The Revolution* (London, 1790).
Ogden, James, *Emmanuel* (London, 1797).
Ogilvie, John, *Britannia* (Aberdeen, 1801).
Paine, Thomas, *The American Crisis, Number II* (Philadelphia, 1777).
Paine, Thomas, *Works* (London, 1796).
Paine, Thomas, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).
Price, Richard, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London, 1790).
Pye, Henry James, *Alfred* (London, 1815).
Pyke, Sarah Leigh, *Israel*, 2 volumes (London, 1795).
Reid, Thomas, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1785).

Richardson, Jonathan, *Explanatory Notes and Remarks on Milton's Paradise Lost* (London, 1734).
Scott, Mary, *Messiah* (Bath, 1788).
Scott, Walter, *The Antiquary*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995).
Shakespeare, William, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970).
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *Poems 1804–1817*, eds Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 1989).
Skene, George, *Donald Bane* (London, 1796).
Smith, Charlotte, *Desmond*, eds Antje Black and Janet Todd (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997).
Smith, Elizabeth, *The Brethren* (Birmingham, 1787).
Smith, Elizabeth, *Israel* (Birmingham, 1789).
Southcott, Joanna, *A Dispute between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Poole: Woodstock Books, 1995).
Southey, Robert, *Joan of Arc* (Bristol, 1796).
Southey, Robert, *Thalaba the Destroyer* (London, 1801).
Southey, Robert, *A Vision of Judgment* (London, 1821).
Southey, Robert, *Life of Nelson*, ed. Geoffrey Callender (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1922).
Spence, Thomas, *Pig's Meat*, 2 volumes (London, 1795).
Terrasson, Jean, *A Critical Dissertation upon Homer's Iliad*, 2 volumes (London, 1722).
Titus, Colonel, *Killing No Murder* (London, 1792).
Urban, Sylvanus, 'The Apotheosis of Milton', in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, volumes 8–10 (1738–9).
Wakefield, Gilbert, *The Spirit of Christianity Compared with the Spirit of the Times in Great Britain* (London, 1794).
Wakefield, Gilbert, *Remarks on the General Orders of the Duke of York to His Army, on July 7, 1794* (London, 1794).
Wakefield, Gilbert, *Reply to Thomas Paine's Second Part of the Age of Reason* (London, 1795).
Wakefield, Gilbert, *A Reply to the Letter of Edmund Burke, Esq., to a Noble Lord*, 3rd edition (London, 1796).
Whitefield, George, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (London, 1832).
Wilcocke, Samuel Hull, *Britannia* (London, 1797).
Wilkes, John and Churchill, Charles, *The North Briton*, 4 volumes (London, 1772).

Williams, Helen Maria, *Peru* (London, 1784).
Williams, Helen Maria, *Letters from France*, 2 volumes (New York: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975).
Wollstonecraft, Mary, *Works*, eds Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 volumes (London: Pickering, 1989).
Wollstonecraft, Mary, *Collected Letters*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2003).
Wordsworth, William, *Prose Works*, eds W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).
Wordsworth, William, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977).
Wordsworth, William, *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982).
Wordsworth, William, *Poems in Two Volumes and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983).
Wordsworth, William, *Descriptive Sketches*, ed. Eric Birdsall (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).
Wordsworth, William, *An Evening Walk*, ed. James Averill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).
Wordsworth, William, *The Fourteen-book Prelude*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).
Wordsworth, William, *Shorter Poems, 1807–1820*, ed. Carl Ketcham (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).
Wordsworth, William, *The Thirteen-book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 volumes (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991).
Wordsworth, William, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, eds James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).
Wordsworth, William, *Early Poems and Fragments*, eds Carol Landon and Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997).
Wordsworth, William, *Sonnet Sequences and Itinerary Poems, 1820–1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004).

Select Critical Bibliography

Abrams, M. H., *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1973).
Almond, Phillip, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).
Altick, Richard, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1957).
Armitage, David, Himy, Armand and Skinner, Quentin (eds), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).
Bainbridge, Simon, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

Baker, Frank (ed.), *Milton for the Methodists* (London: Epworth, 1988).
Barker, Juliet, *Wordsworth: A Life* (London: Viking, 2000).
Barrell, John, *Imagining the King's Death* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).
Barton, Carol, '"Ill Fare the Hands that Heaved the Stones": John Milton, a Preliminary Thanatography', *Milton Studies*, 43 (2004).
Bentley Jr, G. E., *The Stranger from Paradise* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001).
Bentley Jr, G. E., *Blake Records*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004).
Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).
Bonwick, Colin, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).
Boynton, Percy H., 'Joel Barlow Advises the Privileged Orders', *New England Quarterly*, 12(3) (1939).
Braithwaite, Helen, *Romanticism, Publishing, and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
Bromwich, David, *Disowned by Memory* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998).
Bronowski, Jacob, *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).
Calè, Louisa, *Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).
Christie, Ian, *Wilkes, Wyvill, and Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1962).
Clark, Steve and Worrall, David (eds), *Blake, Nation, and Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
Colley, Linda, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992).
Cox, Phillip, 'Blake, Hayley, and Milton: A Reassessment', *English Studies*, 75 (1994), pp. 430–41.
Craciun, Adriana, 'Romantic Satanism and the Rise of Nineteenth-century Women's Poetry', *New Literary History*, 34(4) (2003).
Craciun, Adriana, *British Women Writers of the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
Cruse, Amy, *The Englishman and His Books in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London: Harrap, 1930).
Curran, Stuart, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).
Dart, Gregory, *Rousseau, Robespierre, and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).
De Luca, Vincent Arthur, *Words of Eternity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991).
Derry, John, *William Pitt* (London: Batsford, 1962).
Dickinson, H. T. (ed.), *Caricatures and the Constitution 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986).

Erdman, David, *Prophet against Empire,* 3rd edition (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977).Erdman, David, *Commerce des Lumières* (Columbia: Missouri UP, 1986).
Erdman, David, 'Milton! Thou Shouldst be Living', *The Wordsworth Circle*, XIX(1) (1988).
Fink, Zera, 'Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 47 (1948).
Frye, Northrop, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969).
Garrett, Clarke, *Respectable Folly* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1975).
Gatrell, Vic, *City of Laughter* (London: Atlantic, 2006).
Gilchrist, Alexander, *The Life of William Blake*, ed. W. A. G. Doyle (Wakefield: E. P. Publishing, 1973).
Good, John, *Studies in the Milton Tradition* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1915).
Gordon, Lyndall, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Little, Brown, 2005).
Griffin, David, *Regaining Paradise* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986).
Havens, R. D., *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1922).
Heffernan, James (ed.), *Representing the French Revolution* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992).
Hill, Christopher, *The World Turned Upside Down* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).
Hill, Christopher, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber, 1977).
Holstun, James (ed.), *Pamphlet Wars* (London: Frank Cass, 1992).
Jacob, Margaret, *The Radical Enlightenment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).
Keach, William, *Arbitrary Power* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004).
Kelley, Theresa, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1988).
Kelly, Gary, *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790–1827* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).
Kitson, Peter, 'Coleridge, Milton, and the Millennium', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 18(2) (1987).
Knapp, Steven, *Personification and the Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985).
Langford, Paul, *A Polite and Commercial People* (London: Oxford UP, 1989).
Levinson, Marjorie, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986).
Lewalski, Barbara, *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
Liu, Alan, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1981).

Low, Lisa and Harding, Anthony (eds), *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).
Lutz, Donald S., 'The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-century American Thought', *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984).
Mack, Maynard, *Alexander Pope* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985).
Makdisi, Saree, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003).
Manogue, Ralph, 'The Plight of James Ridgway', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 27(3) (1996).
Manuel, Frank, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1959).
Matthew, H. C. G. and Harrison, Brian (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* 60 volumes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).
McDayter, Ghislaine, Batten, Guinn and Milligan, Barry (eds), *Romantic Generations* (London: Bucknell UP, 2001).
McIntyre, Ian, *Dirt and Deity: A Life of Robert Burns* (London: Flamingo, 1995).
Mee, Jon, *Dangerous Enthusiasm* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992).
Mee, Jon, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003).
Monk, Samuel, *The Sublime* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1960).
Newlyn, Lucy, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).
Norbrook, David, *Writing the English Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).
O'Brien, Conor Cruise, *The Great Melody* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992).
Ogden, John, 'The Power of Distance in Wordsworth's Prelude', *PLMA*, 88(2) (1973).
Paley, Morton D., *Energy and the Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970).
Paley, Morton D., *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986).
Paley, Morton D., *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999).
Paulson, Ronald, *Representations of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983).
Pocock, J. G. A., *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975).
Pocock, J. G. A., *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

Pointon, Marcia, *Milton and English Art* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1970).
Prickett, Stephen, *England and the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).
Ricks, Christopher, *Milton's Grand Style* (London: Oxford UP, 1963).
Rivers, Isabel (ed.), *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-century England* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1982).
Robbins, Caroline, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1959).
Robertson, J. G., *Milton's Fame on the Continent* (London: Oxford UP, 1908).
Roe, Nicholas, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).
Roe, Nicholas, 'Wordsworth, Milton, and the Politics of Poetic Influence', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 19 (1989).
Rose, Jonathan, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001).
Rowell, Geoffrey, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).
Schama, Simon, *Citizens* (London: Folio Society, 2004).
Schock, Peter, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Blake's Myth of Satan and Its Cultural Matrix', *ELH*, 60 (1993).
Schulman, Lydia, *Paradise Lost and the Rise of the American Republic* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992).
Scurr, Ruth, *Fatal Purity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2006).
Sensabaugh, George, *That Grand Whig, Milton* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1952).
Sensabaugh, George, 'Milton at the Trial of Thomas Paine', *Notes and Queries*, 200 (1955).
Sensabaugh, George, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964).
Shawcross, John (ed.), *Milton 1628–1731: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).
Shawcross, John (ed.), *Milton 1732–1801: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).
Simpson, David, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
Smith, Christopher, *A Quest for Home* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1997).
Spiegelman, Willard, *Wordsworth's Heroes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
St Clair, William, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).

Sutherland, D. M. G., *The French Revolution and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).
Thomas, Peter, *John Wilkes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).
Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Classes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).
Thompson, E. P., *Witness against the Beast* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).
Todd, F. M., *Politics and the Poet: A Study of Wordsworth* (London: Methuen, 1957).
Trumpener, Katie, *Bardic Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).
Voltaire, 'Essay on Epick Poetry', in Stuart Curran (ed.), *Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic* (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970).
Walsh, Marcus, 'Bentley Our Contemporary', in Ian Small and Marcus Walsh (eds), *The Theory and Practice of Text-editing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).
Weinbrot, Howard, *Britannia's Issue* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).
Weiskel, Thomas, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976).
Whittaker, Jason, *William Blake and the Myths of Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).
Wittreich, Joseph Anthony (ed.), *The Romantics on Milton* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve UP, 1970).
Wittreich, Joseph Anthony, 'Domes of Mental Pleasure: Blake's Epics and Hayley's Epic Theory', *Studies in Philology*, 69(1) (1972).
Wittreich, Joseph Anthony, *Angel of Apocalypse* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1975).
Wittreich, Joseph Anthony, *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986).
Wittreich, Joseph Anthony, *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987).
Woodress, James, *A Yankee's Odyssey* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1958).
Worrall, David, *Radical Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992).
Wu, Duncan, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).

Index