

Paradise Re-Envisioned: William Blake's *Milton* as the Redemption of Selfhood

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As if in answer to the opening invocation of William Wordsworth's *London 1802*, "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour / England hath need of thee... / Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart," William Blake undertook this call of poetic duty by rewriting John Milton in *Milton: A Poem*. That Milton's mission attempted in *Paradise Lost* remained unfulfilled in its prophecy of liberation is evidenced by the inscription on the frontispiece to *Milton*, "To Justify the Ways of God to Men."¹ It is recorded that Milton appeared to Blake, "...as an old man...he came to ask a favor of me. He said he had committed an error in his *Paradise Lost*, which he wanted me to correct," yet, regardless of legend, Blake re-invokes the question of theodicy not to reaffirm Milton's magisterial epic, but to correct the history of Selfhood – the false covering of the immortal spirit forged within the individual and perpetuated by external repressive institutions.² Although Milton had written extensive anti-monarchical, anti-episcopal, and pro-divorce pamphlets, and that these works of the "left hand" embodied Blake's imaginative concept of revolutionary energy, this faculty was relegated to the realm of the diabolic in *Paradise Lost*. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the spread of post-Enlightenment ideas, deism, natural religion, and a catalogue of other contemporaneous social ills, Blake adapts *Paradise Lost* to "Rouze up" the "Young Men of the New Age" to correct a "Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying."³ This paper proposes

¹ Milton, John, *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Hughes, Merritt Y., (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), I.26; hereafter, line references will be provided in the text.

² Crabb Robinson, in Arthur Symons, *William Blake*, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1907), p.295.

³ *Milton: A Poem*, from *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), p.147; hereafter plate and line references will be provided in the text.

that *Milton* is not only a critical adaptation of *Paradise Lost* designed to correct the individual errors of Selfhood demonstrated by England's poet, but, by extension, becomes a universal vision to redeem humanity in the "New Age" where "Painters!...Sculptors! Architects!," such as Blake, "will not cease from Mental Fight" against the degenerative "mind-forg'd manacles" of imaginative oppression (147; i/13). By reading *Paradise Lost* against *Milton* and its introduction, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, one is granted a vision of the self-annihilation necessary to cast off the Selfhood that intervenes between humanity and its divinity; through this purgation, the individual will lift the veil of delusory institutions that preclude the immanent paradise of "Jerusalem / In England's green & pleasant Land" (15-16).

In privileging pure reason as humankind's supreme faculty over "mimic Fancies," the "misjoyning shapes" that palely "imitate" reason (*PL* V.110-11), Milton created a "history" of the restraint of regenerative desire (*MHH*, 5) rather than a prophecy of spiritual liberation. According to Blake, Milton had "mistaken" Urizen for God, the Father is "Destiny," the Son as an enlightenment materialist, "a ratio of the five senses," and the Holy Ghost as "Vacuum," but the flawed yet vital faculty of revolutionary energy is the real Messiah, Milton's "Satan or Tempter" (*MHH*, 6).⁴ This leads Blake to conclude that Milton "wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell" because "he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (*ibid*); but why would Milton be unaware of such authentic and poetic energy? For it was in the state of Selfhood that *Paradise Lost* was composed and which relegated revolutionary energy to the realm of the diabolic, unlike his highly "diabolic" prose works that demonstrated an antagonism towards repressive state apparatuses. Selfhood is the false covering of the immortal spirit, a defense mechanism deriving from repressive "mind-forg'd manacles" within interior personality and perpetuated by exterior institutions; it is opposed to the human center of creativity and individuality, or the universal faculty of the Poetic Genius (*Poetic* in the Greek sense, "making," and *Genius* in the Latin sense, "guiding spirit"). Furthermore, as Selfhood is opposed to central humanity, it pathologically develops into one's Spectre, or the false rational power of the divided man who is no longer empathetic to the other, and as such becomes

⁴ Blake's interpretation of the Holy Trinity relies upon God's ostensible endorsement of Calvinist predestination (to be discussed below) in *Paradise Lost* (III.184-85), the Son's Lockean physicality of the enclosed five senses (VII. 224-31), and the Holy Spirit's conspicuous absence from the main narrative.

one's Satan. Thus *Milton* is the recorded vision of John Milton's fall and redemption through the epic process of Self-Annihilation. By annihilating this Satanic Selfhood within himself, Milton's theodicy of *Paradise Lost* will be regained through Blake's *Milton* and offer a vision of divine humanity in universal harmony.

Before proceeding into an analysis of *Milton* as a corrective adaptation of *Paradise Lost*, it is complementary to the discussion of the human divinity to pursue why Milton served as the exemplar of antithetical Selfhood in Blake's vision. After reading Samuel Johnson's "Milton" in *Lives of the English Poets* to prepare for the portrait of Milton commissioned by William Hayley, Blake encountered a Milton characterized by "an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence; a petulant impatience of control and pride disdainful of superiority" (37-38). It is this self-aggrandizing pride typical of Satan in *Paradise Lost* that, as John Howard states in *Blake's Milton: A Study in the Selfhood*, helped Blake envision Milton as "the corrupted guardian of liberty who served the Satanic Cromwell, the warmongering, moralistic Latin secretary" and the "domestic tyrant" that characterizes the forces of evil in his poetry (187). This vision of Milton as the Latin secretary under Cromwell who helped justify the execution of Charles I is even provided in a direct allusion that perverts the Christian Atonement through self-motivated political desire, "Charles calls on Milton for Atonement. Cromwell is ready" (5:39). Continued further, Selfhood in morality is manifest in *Apology for Smectymnus* through Milton's apparent "niceness of nature, an honest haughtiness and self-esteem" (Hughes, 694), while Selfhood in the artistic realm is evident in Johnson's characterization of Milton as "lofty and steady confidence in himself, perhaps not without some contempt of others" (60). This inability to empathize with the other not only redirects spiritual energy towards antagonistic Selfhood, but encloses the self from harmonization with the human divine; for the "true" worship of God is "Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best" for those who "envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God" (*MHH*, 23). Furthermore, Milton's *Aeropagitica*, while arguing for the universal right of free speech, contradicts itself by exempting Roman Catholics from this prerogative even though it requires "many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber, ere the house of God is built" (Patrides, 238), an exclusionary tactic that condemns those who are "true" to their imaginative vocation. Milton also displayed an inclination towards theologically repressive modes of sexuality through his insistence that his second and third wives "be virgins" to spare him from "the gross and

indelicate” predicament of being a “second husband” (Johnson, 79). This patriarchal categorization of the feminine as ontologically virgin, wife, or harlot is a result of both personal insecurity and social construction, a repressive ethic of sexuality that would “catch virgin joy / And brand it with the name of whore: & sell it in the night” amidst “Religious dreams and holy vespers” (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 9/6:11-14) when one should cry out against repressive sexuality, “Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!” (10/7:16).

In the attempt to illustrate the pre-Freudian proverb that “Prisons are built with the stones of Law / Brothels with Bricks of Religion,” Blake most explicitly examines the self-annihilation required for the purgation of Miltonic Selfhood in his preface and invocation to *Milton* (MHH, 8). Although in the preface to *The Reason of Church Government* Milton rejects “Dame Memory and her siren Daughters,” in favor of the Spirit who inspired the biblical prophets (Hughes, 611), in *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s invocations of the Holy Spirit through pagan circumlocutions reveal what Blake considered an excessive deference to warmongering classical models, “Shakespeare & Milton were both curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the sword” (147). Because Blake does “not want either Greek or Roman models,” the poet liberated from Selfhood must “be just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live forever” and transform the repressive Daughters of Memory, or the “Heav’nly Muse” Urania (PL I.6), into the “Daughters of Inspiration” (147). The invocation to *Milton* thus calls upon the “Daughters of Beulah” who descend from the “Portals of [the] Brain” where the “Eternal Great Humanity Divine planted his Paradise” (2.1;8), rendering the Miltonic Eden of remote history recoverable within the mind of the inspired poet, a variation on Raphael’s “Paradise within” that comforts fallen Adam and Eve (PL XII.587). Thus Blake re-envisages Milton’s Christianized adaptation of classical formulas and biblical creation myths by replacing Jehovah with a vision of divine, not fallen, humanity, and refrains from Miltonic Selfhood by representing a subjective vision of Beulah, not the unchangeable divine revelation of absolute truth.

Although the historical Milton is known to have been theologically radical insofar as he rejected the orthodox notion of the Trinity, his view of the Atonement was traditional.⁵ As if in direct response to Adam’s theological inquiry in *Paradise Lost*, “Ah, why should all mankind / For one

⁵ That is, in the sense that God demands the death of man as payment for sin but accepts the sacrifice of Jesus as a substitute, cf. PL III.210-12.

mans fault thus guiltless be condemned / If guiltless?" (10.822-24) the introductory invocation to *Milton* initiates a critique of Original Sin and, consequently, the Atonement, which corrects Milton's spiritual error as well as rendering immanent a universal method of forgiveness; for it is through the process of self-annihilation that the delusional barriers that obfuscate the true essence of humankind are cast away. After invoking the Daughters of Beulah, the narrator commands, "Tell also of the False Tongue! vegetated / Beneath your land of shadows: of its sacrifices, and / Its offerings" (2:10-12), which directly alludes to a "vegetated" or imaginatively fallen nature of the "False Tongue" inspired by Psalms (120:2-4) that Blake employs for his critique of the doctrine of Original Sin and the consequential sacrifice of the Son in order to redeem humankind. Through the history of church doctrine and Milton's conventional rendering of the Son, Blake witnessed how "Jesus, the image of the Invisible God / Became its prey; a curse, and offering, and an atonement" (2:12-13), but initiates through the rhetorical play of parody a secularization of an abstract act of divine sacrifice. In order to expose the illogical chain of reasoning perpetuated by conventional Christian doctrine, the narrator employs an "If...must...therefore" formula which begins, "If the Guilty should be condemn'd, he must be an Eternal Death / And one must die for another throughout all Eternity" (12/11:17-18), which Blake perceived as a *reductio ad absurdum* philosophy negotiating one death for another, "But must be new created continually moment by moment," threatening to continue *ad infinitum* (20). The concluding "Therefore" rests upon the association of the Calvinist Elect being identified with "the Class of Satan," or in Selfhood, where values of divinity are abstracted beyond the power of the individual (21). H.C. Robinson reported that Blake considered the Atonement in the ordinary Calvinistic sense" a "horrible doctrine; if another pay your debt, I do not forgive it,"⁶ but in the effort to correct an endless chain in the law of retribution from one man to another ("Dye hee [man] or Justice must," *PL* 3.210), *Milton* provides a redemption of Original Sin through self-annihilation rather than the "Druidical" blood sacrifice God demanded before offering the grace of forgiveness, "unless for him...death for death...just th' unjust to save" (210-215), not through the requirement of an abstract verdict, but available for humanity in another context.

As for Blake's portrayal of Milton himself, Milton, "who walkd about in Eternity...pondring the intricate mazes of Providence" (2.16-17), is associated with the fallen angels of *Paradise Lost* who "reason'd high / Of

⁶ Bentley, G.E., Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p.548

Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate...And found no end, in wandering mazes lost" (II.559-61), and wanders in moralistic labyrinths as his Selfhood-breaking imagination does not let him rest peacefully. Furthermore, Blake employs Adam's rhetorical musings to align Milton with a fallen state of humanity as well, "all my evasions vain, / And reasonings, though through Mazes, lead me still to my own conviction" (X.829-31), yet this lapsed power shall be absolved not by the Son, but by Milton when he descends from the Elect in Heaven to undergo self-annihilation. The description of Milton as "Unhappy tho in Heaven, he obey'd, he murmur'd not, he was silent" (2.18), directly echoes Milton's original theme "Of Man's Disobedience" (*PL* I.1), but this is adapted by Blake as his central matter and suggests that Milton was "mistaken" in believing God requires obedience over all. Although the historical Milton is known to have rejected Calvinist predestination of the Elect in *De Doctrina Christina* (first published in 1823, after Blake's final revisions of *Milton*), Blake sought to correct what Milton's God ambiguously decrees, "Some I have chosen of peculiar grace / Elect above all the rest" (III.183-84) while others untouched by conscience will "hard be hard'n'd, blind be blinded even more, / That they may stumble on and deeper fall" (II.199-201). Blake inverts this traditional paradigm through an Elect "who cannot Believe in Eternal Life except by Miracle & a New Birth" while the Reprobate, those such as Blake's Jesus who transgress old codes of Urizenic restraint and obedience in favor of liberating revolutionary desire, "never cease to Believe" in the holiness of the regenerative imagination (*Milton* 25:31).

Yet Blake does not fall into unchangeable categories of divine predestination, for humankind can both fall and liberate themselves between "the pulses of an artery" (3/29:3) without the Atonement. The traditional paradigm of the Elect, Redeemed and Reprobate is developed by Blake further, rendering immanent the individual as intercessor through the process of self-annihilation and the coming of the Last Judgment. Although Milton rejects the Pelagian controversy, which heretically relocated the power of salvation through individual works and faith without redeeming grace, by voicing through the Father that "Man shall not quite be lost, but sav'd who will, / Yet not of will in him, but grace in me / Freely voutsaft" (*PL* III.173-75), Blake adopts this controversy and provides an instruction on how to "Judge then of thy Own Self...What is Eternal & what Changeable? & what Annihilable?" (35/32:30-31). As Milton's epic revolves around the end of the cycle of guilt perpetuated by the Atonement aforementioned and divinely predestined salvation or condemnation, Blake employs the Michael/Adam instructional dialogue of *Paradise Lost* through Hillel/Milton to reveal what

will come to pass not in the distant future, but within mere moments. In the philosophical conversation that follows, Hillel tells Milton that “Satan & Adam are States Created in Twenty-seven Churches / And thou O Milton art a State about to be created” (25-26), for as “States Change: but Individual Identities never change nor cease,” Milton can freely judge himself and annihilate his delusional Satanic-Elect state/class. Rather than “to [God] ow, / All his deliv’rance, and to none but [God]” (*PL* III.181-82) at the end of mortal existence, or wait until the Son “Shall bruise the head of Satan, crush his strength / Defeating Sin and Death, his two main arms” (XII.430-31), Milton will willingly undergo a Last Judgment of his Selfhood. By annihilating the current state within which Milton resides and creating a new state that will encompass the rejection of Selfhood and the reclaiming of his Emanation, Ololon (man’s female counterpart, for Milton composed of a composite of his poems, his sexual impulses, and his three wives and daughters), the “Eternal Humanity Divine” will no longer be divided within itself, but re-harmonize in the final battle between Milton and Satan.

Blake initiates a revolutionary awakening of consciousness of not only Miltonic Selfhood, but the universal phenomenon of institutional oppression found in conventional Christian doctrine when Milton awakens from false-consciousness among the Elect by the Bard’s Song that equates him with Satan. After realizing that the Poetic Genius is the Eternal Divine Humanity, aforementioned in the invocation of the Daughters of Beulah, Milton “took off the robe of the promise, & ungirded himself from the oath of God” (15/14:13), or the “garments of salvation” and the “robe of righteousness” of Isaiah (61:10). In realizing that his assertion of “Eternal Providence” and justification of “the wayes of God to men” (*PL* I.25-26) was rooted in Selfhood, he ontologically identifies himself with Satan, “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” (15/14:30-32). As if literalizing the request to “Return me to my native element” (*PL* VII.15), Milton descends back to earth to reclaim the energy he had poured into his erroneous representation of evil in *Paradise Lost* and correct the history restrained desire. As Mary Lynn Johnson explains in “*Milton and its Contexts*,” the “instantaneous revelation of ‘Truth or Eternity’ could, for Blake, “occur at any time, with the burning up of error ‘the Moment Men cease to behold it’” (241), and it is this moment of previously unfathomable identification that compels Milton to redeem himself immediately. For unlike the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, however, who realizes his ontological fall is irreversible, “Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell” there is a place yet for redemption, but attainable

by the Last Judgment, or the momentous casting off of error obfuscating the immortal spirit that institutionalized Christianity rendered abstract and faintly perceivable.

Now able to identify Satan as his self-hood, Milton provides an exemplarily model for the disobedience he condemned by not only repudiating Satan, but the conventional Christian image of God. In Milton's coming to "discover before Heaven & Hell the Self righteousness / In all its Hypocritic turpitude," Satan attempts to imitate himself further with the conventional God of *Paradise Lost*, "I am God the judge of all, the living & the dead / Fall down therefore and worship me, submit thy supreme / Dictate, to my eternal Will" (43/38:43-44;51-53), an echo of the self-righteous "God-like imitated State" (*PL* II.511). Milton, however, rejects the discourse of rationality and natural religion that led him to contemplate this false god Urizen. By "cast[ing] off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour" (48/41:3), Milton disobediently repudiates Raphael's imperative to faith and works modeled on the rational chain of being in *Paradise Lost*, "one Almighty is, from whom / All things proceed, and up from him return" (V.469-70). Continuing this purgation of false doctrine bred by Selfhood, Milton then casts off the repressive Muse of restrained history, or Urania whom he invokes throughout *Paradise Lost*, "the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration" (48/41:4). This second repudiation is in accordance with Blake's Daughters of Memory, offering subjective vision over unchangeable decree. Furthermore, Milton then casts off the Enlightenment dialectic of the passionate body *contra* rational soul and harmonizes the one as extension of the other by rejecting "Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion's covering" (5) thus providing a model for imaginative regeneration to complete Blake/Milton's personal theodicy and, by extension, combating institutional repression by granting a universal vision of redemption.

Milton for Blake was as Virgil to Dante insofar as Blake echoed Milton's condemnation of "Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War" (147), but Blake believed that Milton's task had remained unfulfilled. Milton's epiphany that moves him from the Elect status in Heaven, "I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!" (15/14.30) reveals that his history of the restraint of desire in *Paradise Lost* was but a "Spectre" (15/14.31), or the product of Selfhood determined to justify selfish desires under false reasoning that ultimately inhibit, rather than unite, humanity and its universal divinity. For it is through this adaptation of *Paradise Lost* that Blake thought he and the spirit of Milton could correct the nations that "still / follow after the detestable Gods of Priam; in pomp of

warlike selfhood, contradicting and blaspheming” (15/14.15-16) and answer England’s call for a poetic liberator. As T.S. Eliot commented on the artistry that posits there is not much difference “between identifying oneself with the Universe and identifying the Universe with oneself,”⁷; this progression of the eternal and divine identity might have been aesthetically inevitable for Blake. As he sought to correct the history of restraint in this imaginative universe through his critical adaptation of *Paradise Lost*, Blake liberated the immanent eternal divine within the very human from the divisions that plague the internal self and the external forces of society.

⁷ “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca” from *Selected Essays*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company Inc., 1950), p.140.

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