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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 sublimines, 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 achievements [*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 reconciliation 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 sublimines 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 'Republic 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 eccentric 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, horrors 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, horrors 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 'sublimier 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 'sublimier 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 sublimier 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 night-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,
 Spurn'd them to death by Troops. The bold *Ascalonite*
 Fled from his Lion ramp, old Warriors turn'd
 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.