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CHAPTER SIX

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

I

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

And Milton collecting all his fibres into impregnable strength
Descended down a Paved work of all kinds of precious stones
Out from the eastern sky; descending down into my Cottage
Garden: clothed in black, severe & silent he descended.

(*Milton*, plate 38, ll. 5–8: E 138)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gleams of fire streak the heavens, and of sulphur the earth, from Fayette
as he lifted his hand;
But silent he stood, till all the officers rush round him like waves
Round the shore of France, in day of the British flag, when heavy cannons
Affright the coasts, and the peasant looks over the sea and wipes a tear;
Over his head the soul of Voltaire shone fiery, and over the army Rousseau
his white cloud
Unfolded, on souls of war-living terrors silent list’ning toward Fayette,
His voice loud inspir’d by liberty, and by spirits of the dead, thus thunder’d.

The Nation’s Assembly command, that the Army remove ten miles from
Paris;

Nor a soldier be seen in road or in field, till the Nation command return.

(*The French Revolution*, ll. 278–86: E 298–9)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In opposition dire, a warlike cloud the myriads stood
In the red air before the Demon; [*seen even by mortal men:*
Who call it Fancy, & shut the gates of sense, & in their chambers,
Sleep like the dead.]

(*America*, cancelled plate C, ll. 20–3: E 59)

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

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

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

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

In *America*, Blake writes:

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

(*America*, plate 3, ll. 6–12: E 52)

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

that if they do not resist the British, they and their descendants would be slaves. But Blake did not have to go to Barlow to encounter such sentiments, as they were commonplaces of pro-American propaganda: in *The American Crisis*, for example, Paine encouraged the Americans to endure the hardships of the Revolution by asking rhetorically, 'What are the inconveniences of a few months to the tributary bondage of ages?'¹⁹ The case for Blake's debt to Barlow would be stronger if verbal or syntactical borrowings could be demonstrated, but there are none. In fact, they use completely different vocabularies: the kneeling and chains that define slavery for Barlow are absent from Blake's more graphic account, which focuses instead on the physical damage inflicted by forced labour and corporal punishment. Barlow's supposed debt to Blake is even more tenuous, hinging entirely on Barlow's addition of a demonic personification of War to *The Columbiad* who reminds Erdman of Blake's depictions of Orc, Albion's Angel and 'Albion's wrathful Prince'. The language they use is similar in places, but ultimately all that links them is their common reliance on imagery of blood, fire, storms, meteors and pestilence, all of which have been associated with war and demons for thousands of years. Erdman's claims that Barlow added something 'precisely at the point' where Blake did, or that a speech in Blake is 'paralleling' a speech in Barlow, implies that the two poems describe the same events in the same order, which they do not – as is obvious from the fact that Erdman draws parallels between a single passage in Barlow and a mass of scenes from various points in *America*.²⁰ In any case, it would be strange for Barlow to have based his personification of the unjust war he saw the British as having inflicted on America partly on Blake's description of the spirit of oppression, and partly on his spirit of revolution. Nor does Erdman explain how Barlow, whom there is no evidence that Blake ever met, could have gained access to one of the tiny handful of copies that Blake printed of *America*, especially given that Barlow had already left London by the time Blake began printing *America* in 1793.²¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fayette beheld the Queen to smile
And wink her lovely eye

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then first I saw him [i.e. Milton] in the Zenith as a falling star,
Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift;
And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, entered there ...

(*Milton*, plate 15, ll. 47–9; E 110)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What do I here before the Judgment? without my Emanation?
 With the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration[?]
 I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!
 He is my Spectre! in my obedience to loose him from my Hells
 To claim the Hells, my Furnaces, I go to Eternal Death.

(*Milton*, plate 14, ll. 28–32: E 108)

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

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

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

But Milton took of the red clay of Succoth, moulding it with care
Between his palms: and filling up the furrows of many years
Beginning at the feet of Urizen, and on the bones
Creating new flesh on the Demon cold, and building him,
As with new clay a Human form in the Valley of Beth Peor.

(*Milton*, plate 19, ll. 10–14: E 112)

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

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

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

Now Albions sleeping humanity began to turn upon his Couch;
Feeling the electric flame of Miltons awful precipitate descent.

(*Milton*, plate 20, ll. 25–6: E 114)

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

Whence is this Shadow terrible? wherefore dost thou refuse
To throw him into the Furnaces! knowest thou not that he
Will unchain Orc? & let loose Satan, Og, Sihon & Anak,
Upon the Body of Albion?

(*Milton*, plate 22, ll. 31–4: E 117)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(*Milton*, plate 2, ll. 16–22: E 96)

These lines rewrite a passage from the opening of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton – having just invoked his muse – writes:

... say first what cause
Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,
Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
From thir Creator, and transgress his Will
For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?
Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?
Th' infernal Serpent ...

(*Paradise Lost*, book 1, ll. 28–34: M 6)

On one level, Blake is simply telling the story of what happened to Milton's spirit after death; he spent 100 years walking unhappily around heaven, pondering providence, until moved into action by the bard's song. But the parallel structure of Blake and Milton's lines invites us to compare Blake's Milton with Milton's Adam and Eve. Blake's 'unhappy tho' in heaven' is a response to Milton's 'happy state/favoured of heaven so highly', and thus implicitly questions whether the unfallen Adam and Eve – or, indeed, the unfallen Satan – were as happy as Milton says. Milton's activity in heaven, 'pond'ring the intricate mazes of Providence', is in *Paradise Lost* a favourite activity of the fallen angels in hell, who:

... reasond high
Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate,

Fixt Fate, free Will, Foreknowledge absolute,
And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.
(*Paradise Lost*, book 2, ll. 558–61: M 40)

By attributing this futile demonic pondering to the apparently saved soul of Milton, Blake implies that Milton's version of Christianity is of no more help to him in understanding the universe than that of the demons was in hell. Despite being in heaven, Blake's Milton seems to be in a fallen state of unhappiness and ignorance, casting further doubt on the adequacy of his religious categories of salvation and damnation. Blake's 'What cause at length mov'd Milton to this unexampled deed/A Bard's prophetic song!' mirrors Milton's 'Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?/The infernal serpent ...', calling attention to the parallel between the two falls. Milton, like Adam and Satan, abandons the paradise in which God has placed him and falls into a world of chaos and pain. But Blake makes clear that Milton's self-willed fall from Eternity is an admirable action, a rejection of the religion that places him in heaven and his Emanation in hell, and thus casts doubt on Milton's account of the Fall. Was it really a 'foul revolt' for Adam and Eve to seek knowledge of Good and Evil? Was the serpent really 'infernal' – was it not, in fact, inspired, even 'prophetic'?

When Blake depicts Milton leaving heaven to redeem his Emanation and awaken Albion, his action simultaneously echoes Adam leaving Eden for Eve, Satan falling from heaven for defying God, Satan leaving hell to bring Knowledge of Good and Evil to mankind, and Jesus leaving heaven to redeem humanity. By bringing these together, Blake forces the reader to consider them in a new pattern; not the familiar story of Obedience and Disobedience, which damns Adam and Satan and celebrates Christ, but a new story of the triumph of Love over Law, in which Adam, Satan and Jesus are all heroic figures, because all of them valued love and liberty more than the tyrannical laws that condemned them. Milton's epic had been the supreme expression of the first story; now, in *Milton*, Blake depicts him rejecting it for the second, and in so doing uniting in himself all that is greatest in the human, the satanic, and the divine. Throughout *Milton*, the evil powers combine the worst features of Milton's God and Milton's Satan, and when Milton confronts them he is at once echoing Satan confronting the tyrant God of *Paradise Lost* and Jesus confronting the tyrant Satan of *Paradise Regained*. In these, and other passages, Blake accomplishes the

redemption of Milton that, in the poem, Milton is able to achieve by entering Blake, allowing him to write *Milton* in the first place.

At the climax of Blake's poem, Milton confronts Satan in Blake's garden, 'upon mild Felpham shore' (*Milton*, plate 38, l. 13: E 139). With Satan appear 'Sin on his right hand Death on his left', as if in a purposeful challenge to all those who had criticised Milton for including such ontologically indeterminate beings in his poem at all (*Milton*, plate 39, l. 29: E 140). Facing his greatest creation, Milton acknowledges Satan as his own 'spectre', but refuses to fight against him:

Thy purpose & the purpose of thy Priests & of thy Churches
Is to impress on men the fear of death; to teach
Trembling & fear, terror, constriction; abject selfishness
Mine is to teach Men to despise death & to go on
In fearless majesty annihilating Self, laughing to scorn
Thy Laws & terrors, shaking down thy Synagogues as webs
(*Milton*, plate 38, ll. 37–42: E 139)

Satan stands for the entire Burkean political/aesthetic order: indeed, he literally *embodies* it, for looking within his bosom Blake sees a hell-world of sublime scenery and slave labour, a realm of 'labour with blackend visages among its stupendous ruins' (*Milton*, plate 38, l. 21: E 139). Like all Burkean priests and kings, he inspires obedience through 'the fear of death', enforced by 'laws & terrors'; he maintains his power by remaining, as Milton made him, the master of the terrible sublime. As such, Milton declares his intention to overcome him not by fighting him, but by teaching 'Men to despise death & to go on/In fearless majesty', for once people are immune to the sublime of terror, they will no longer be afraid of Satan, and his power will be at an end. Satan teaches 'constriction' and 'abject selfishness', the latter probably with the emphasis on 'self'; he desires to keep people locked within their own sealed worlds, distanced both from one another and the world outside. Milton is in favour of 'annihilating Self', obliterating the barriers that keep things and people divided. They are the two sides of the sublime: the repressive sublime that enforces divisions, and the revolutionary sublime that tears them down. Satan threatens Milton and demands his submission, attempting to create yet another hierarchy founded on violence and fear; but Milton, refusing to strike down Satan, acknowledges him as part of himself,

renouncing the 'Selfhood' that kept them separate and distinct. If Satan is Milton and vice versa then the entire system of 'Selfhood' and 'selfishness', upon which both Milton's identity as a stable subject and Satan's power as God of this world depend, is revealed as an untenable absurdity.⁴⁵ In obliterating his Selfhood, Milton will also destroy all that is truly satanic about Satan, for no hierarchical system can endure if the judge is also the accused, or the master is also the slave; and in doing so fearlessly, he will demonstrate that the death with which Satan threatens his victims is in fact nothing to be feared, and thereby rob the sublime of terror of its power. Fox writes:

[Milton] will annihilate not Satan but himself. In destroying what can be destroyed in his own being, he will necessarily destroy satanic falsehood. In being unafraid of that destruction he will expose the folly of the satanic priests who rule by fear of death; exposing them will expose the falseness of their god, who thus will cease to be a god. All of this he will accomplish not in battle but in sacrifice.⁴⁶

The words in which Milton describes his sacrifice are important, for Satan and his children are not the only sublime Miltonic characters Blake has in mind here. 'In fearless majesty annihilating Self ... shaking down thy Synagogues as webs': the allusion to Samson is unmistakable. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the figure of Samson, long identified with Milton himself, was frequently used in the 1790s to symbolise the Revolution: a double identification which troubled Milton's conservative admirers, but which suited Blake perfectly in its emphasis on self-obliteration. Thus Blake's Milton, too, is a Samson-figure: indeed, he is much more explicitly Samsonic than Orc is, and in Blake's illustration to *Milton* it seponymous hero is depicted with long hair and bulging muscles. As Blake says, 'the Strong Man represents the human Sublime'; and in this scene, Milton takes on the role of the strong man, Samson, in order to challenge the embodiment of the anti-human, Burkean sublime: Satan, Milton's spectre and the god of this world (*Descriptive Catalogue*, number 5, 'The Ancient Britons', p. 41: E 543). In light of the network of associations that clustered around the figure of Samson in Blake's day, *Milton* becomes more comprehensible. Samson was Britain, bound and sleeping, but ready to wake and tear off its bonds; Samson was the embodiment of anti-aristocratic revolution, pulling down 'the lords and the Philistines'; Samson was the aged

Milton, blind and defeated, but awaiting the call of God to strike one last blow against the followers of Dagon. Samson and Milton were both exemplars of sublimity, the former in his person, and the latter in his poetry; Samson and Milton were both symbols of the English Revolution; Samson and Milton were both types of Christ. When one knows these things, it starts to become clearer why Blake should have depicted a Samsonic, Messianic Milton going to 'Eternal death' in order to awaken Albion to revolution.

Blake is at once the most and least representative example of the Milton-obsession of his age. As I have tried to show over the previous five chapters, everything that Blake did with regard to Milton – rewriting his epics, illustrating his poems, recruiting him for political causes, attempting to take his place – was also being done by many other people at much the same time. However, while he was typical in his decisions to approach Milton in these ways, he was unique in his way of doing so. No-one else took so radical an approach to Milton, facing him on his own terms, challenging him squarely rather than trying to pretend that Milton must have believed the same things as him all along. In his own day, Blake's works were totally unregarded: his poems and paintings found only the tiniest of audiences, and he ended his career still what he had declared himself to be at its beginning, 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness' (*All Religions are One*, sub-title: E 1). But, in an age swarming with would-be heirs to Milton, only Blake confronted and rewrote Milton with the same confidence and energy with which Milton himself had once confronted and rewritten Homer, Virgil and the Bible, and thereby established his claim to be perhaps Milton's truest successor. Later in life, Blake would tell Robinson of his arguments with Milton's spirit, many of which seem to have ended in stalemate: as Blake despairingly reported, 'I tried to convince him he was wrong, but I could not succeed. His tastes are Pagan; his house is Palladian, not Gothic'.⁴⁷ To persuade Milton – or even Milton's ghost – to change his mind about anything was perhaps too great a task even for Blake. But simply by daring to engage with Milton, rather than merely attempting to rebury him, Blake set himself apart from his contemporaries, and displayed that spiritual kinship with his poetic predecessor which had perhaps inspired Milton, all those years before, to love Blake in childhood and show him his face.