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Epilogue: Milton and the Literature of Power

‘Who and what is Milton?’

Then, on the next page, this time in desperate italics:

‘Who and what was Milton?’

The year is 1839. Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron are dead: drowned, buried, burned, consumed by their various elements. But Milton’s temporal and ontological status remains, it seems, open to doubt. His ghost was a tenacious one, and seemingly incapable of staying away from politics: just the previous year a pamphlet had appeared in London entitled *Areopagitica Secunda, or, Speech of the Shade of John Milton, on Mr Sergeant Talfourd’s Copyright Extension Bill*, in which, as the *Monthly Review* put it, ‘the Shade of John Milton puts forward in strenuous and elegant style the arguments which sergeant Talfourd and others have both in and out of Parliament advanced in support of the Bill in question’.¹ Faced with a man whose loquacity was apparently unimpeded by having been 160 years dead, the writer’s confusion is understandable. Is Milton something that ‘is’ or something that ‘was’ – does he belong to the present or the past? Is he still here, or has he gone at last? And who or what was he – or is he – in any case?

The author of these rather frantic lines was Thomas De Quincey, in an essay on Milton he wrote for *Blackwoods Magazine* (‘Milton’, in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:435–6). Like his old friend Wordsworth, De Quincey was an admirer, even a worshipper, of Milton, and the aim of his essay was to defend Milton against the charges of pedantry and improper mixing of Christian and Classical material levelled against him by Johnson and Addison decades before. (The fact that De Quincey still felt the need to challenge these essays, sixty and 127 years after their respective publications, speaks volumes for their continuing importance – an importance that was largely due to their regular inclusion among the front matter of editions of Milton’s works.) But before he could defend Milton, he felt that he had to *define* Milton. Why? What possible difficulty could there be in determining who or what Milton is or was? The obvious answer to the question would have been something like: ‘Milton was an English poet and polemicist who

lived from 1608 to 1674, best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*. But De Quincey's answer was something else entirely:

Milton is not an author amongst authors, not a poet amongst poets, but a power amongst powers; and the *Paradise Lost* is not a book amongst books, not a poem amongst poems, but a central force amongst forces. ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:436)

Milton, then, turns out not to be a man at all, but a kind of abstract energy. (Possibly De Quincey means to imply that Milton is or was angelic: 'Powers' are, traditionally, the fourth rank of the angelic hierarchy, and appear as such in *Paradise Lost*.) The language of power and force recalls Newtonian physics, suggesting a Milton as impersonal and all-powerful as gravity. De Quincey goes on:

Butler failing, there would have been another Butler, either in the same or in some other form.

But, with regard to Milton and the Miltonic power, the case is far otherwise. If the man had failed, the power would have failed. In that mode of power which he wielded, the function was exhausted in the man – species was identified with the individual – the poetry was incarnated in the poet. ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11: 436–7)

Here De Quincey is clearly thinking of Milton as a Christ figure. He is historically unique: like Christ, but unlike lesser authors such as Butler, there is no-one else who could have taken his place, because he alone possesses 'the Miltonic power' which he requires to fulfil his 'function'. As with Christ's mission, there could be no second chance: 'If the man had failed, the power would have failed'. But the man did not fail, and 'the poetry was incarnated in the poet'. In John Milton, poetry became flesh and dwelt among us; his 'power' exerted a 'force' upon the world, and the world was changed forever.

What is going on here? Why does De Quincey ask such a strange question – 'Who and what is Milton?' – and then give such a strange series of answers? My view is that the question is not as rhetorical as it first seems: as this book has described, there had been a real debate over who and what Milton is or

was. De Quincey asks the question in order to give himself an opportunity to answer it, to say what Milton was – and, perhaps more importantly, what he was not. The purpose of a definition is to include some things and exclude everything else, and if Milton was a force, a power, an angel, an incarnate poem, then he could not also be anything so mundane as a radical political hero. There is nothing strange about De Quincey's rhetorical tactics here: as I have shown, they had been used (with minor variations) for at least a century already. But the direction in which De Quincey took his argument was to have major consequences for the future study of literature.

Milton as angel; Milton as Christ or God; Milton as poetry incarnate; Milton as abstract Power or Force – De Quincey defines Milton in terms of a series of awesome indefinables. Unsurprisingly, he soon finds himself reaching for the language of the sublime:

We may affirm that there is no human composition which can be challenged as constitutionally sublime – sublime equally by its conception and by its execution, or as uniformly sublime from first to last, excepting the *Paradise Lost*. In Milton only, first and last, is the power of the sublime revealed. In Milton only does this great agency blaze and glow as a furnace kept up to a white heat – without intermission and without collapse. ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:437–8)

Byron quipped that 'the word Miltonic mean[s] sublime'. For De Quincey, the word 'sublime' means 'Miltonic'; Milton is not just the most sublime of poets, he is in fact the *only* truly sublime poet who has ever lived, the alpha and the omega of sublimity: 'In Milton only, first and last, is the power of the sublime revealed'. It was thus necessary for De Quincey, like many a critic before him, to keep the Sublime Milton at a safe distance by placing him on a suitably lofty pedestal. As he put it in his 1832 'portrait' of Milton:

That sanctity which settles on the memory of a great man, ought upon a double motive to be vigilantly sustained by his countrymen; first, out of gratitude to him, as one column of the national grandeur; secondly, with a practical purpose of transmitting unimpaired to posterity the benefit of ennobling models To the benefit of this principle, none amongst the great men of England is better entitled than Milton, whether as respects

his transcendent merit, or the harshness with which his memory has been treated. ('Milton', in *The Gallery of Portraits*: DQ 8:211)

De Quincey wishes to preserve Milton's 'sanctity', to ensure that he remains 'transcendent', a 'column of the national grandeur'. He needs to do this because of 'the harshness with which his memory has been treated': because people keep inconsiderately dragging the transcendent Milton back down into the gutter of history. (De Quincey is probably thinking chiefly of Dr Johnson here, but he would have been no more sympathetic to the radical attempts to claim Milton as a hero of the Revolution.) He is aware that keeping Milton's 'sanctity' intact is a constant struggle, and one that must be 'vigilantly sustained'; for 'the Miltonic power', which should serve the 'practical purpose' of providing 'ennobling models', is always in danger of being harnessed for less exalted ends. De Quincey's 'portrait' was part of that struggle; so was his essay of 1839. But his greatest contribution to it lay back in the 1820s, in the form of his distinction between the Literature of Knowledge and the Literature of Power.

De Quincey outlined this concept several times, but it first appeared in print in his 1823 articles, 'Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected'. There, he wrote:

The word *literature* is a perpetual source of confusion; because it is used in two senses, and those senses liable to be confounded with each other. In a philosophical use of the word, literature is the direct and adequate antithesis of books of knowledge. But in a popular use, it is a mere term of convenience for expressing inclusively the total books in a language. ('Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected', number 3: 'On Languages': DQ 3:69)

According to the OED, the word 'literature' had been used to mean 'literary production as a whole' – what De Quincey calls its 'popular use' – since about 1812. Some sense that 'literature' could also be used to refer specifically to the best examples of literary production was also in the air. De Quincey's 'philosophical' definition of literature as 'the direct and adequate antithesis of books of knowledge', however, was entirely his own invention; no one had hitherto suggested that 'literature' and 'books of knowledge' might in any way be mutually exclusive, an idea that must have seemed bizarre in an age

abounding in scientific and historical literature. Yet De Quincey argues that such a definition is essential if true literature is to be distinguished from 'a parliamentary report, a system of farriery, a treatise on billiards, the court calendar, &c', and all other works 'in which the matter to be communicated is paramount to the manner or form of its communication' ('On Languages': DQ 3:69–70). Such books are not literature but 'anti-literature': 'All that is literature, seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge' ('On Languages': DQ 3:71).

De Quincey claims to derive the idea that the purpose of true literature is the communication of power from Wordsworth, who once stated that a poet 'has to call forth and communicate *power*'; but as he goes on to explain and illustrate his concept of the literature of power it is not Wordsworth but Burke who comes chiefly to mind.² De Quincey's examples – the storm scenes from *King Lear*, the court of Chaos from *Paradise Lost*, some gothic fragments from Wordsworth's poem 'Yew-Trees' – are all classic instances of Burke's terrible sublime, itself very much an aesthetic of power. 'When I am thus suddenly startled into a feeling of the infinity of the world within me', De Quincey writes, 'is this power? Or what may I call it?' ('On Languages': DQ 3:71) Burke, surely, would have replied: 'You may call it the Sublime'.

Having set out his antithesis, De Quincey applies it at once to Milton:

In which class of books does the *Paradise Lost* stand? ... Now, if a man answers, among those which instruct – he lies: for there is no instruction in it, nor could be in any great poem, according to the meaning which the word must bear in this distinction, unless it is meant that it should involve its own antithesis. ('On Languages': DQ 3:70)

I presume that I may justly express the tendency of the *Paradise Lost*, by saying that it communicates power; a pretension far above all communication of knowledge. ('On Languages': DQ 3:71)

In these lines, De Quincey reduces the entire 150-year struggle to keep Milton's ghost in its grave to the simplicity of a couple of syllogisms:

1. A book may communicate power or knowledge, but never both.
2. *Paradise Lost* communicates power.
3. Therefore *Paradise Lost* does not communicate knowledge.

1. All books which instruct their readers about the phenomenal world are books that communicate knowledge.
2. *Paradise Lost* is not a book that communicates knowledge.
3. Therefore *Paradise Lost* cannot instruct us about the phenomenal world.

It is a wonderful logical trap. If one plays by De Quincey's rules, one can never bring a literary work down into the world of history and politics, or claim that it can or should 'instruct' its readers about such matters; for the moment it enters the same category as 'a parliamentary report' or 'a court calendar', by arguing (for example) that a certain action be taken by a certain parliament, or that a certain court deserves to be brought down, it ceases to be literary, and thus ceases to communicate power. Blake joked that Paine could 'overthrow all the armies of Europe with a small pamphlet'; but a pamphlet cannot overthrow an army except by instructing real people that they must take action against it, and that, De Quincey claims, is the very thing that no true literary work can ever do (Blake's annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, Letter 2, pp. 12–13: E 617). Power comes only with the condition that it is never used in the real world, the world of knowledge: Milton's ghost has the choice between being active and powerless, or powerful and dead. Furthermore, it resolves at a stroke the entire terrifying business of keeping the sublime at arm's length. In De Quincey's terms, the sublime belongs automatically to the literature of power, and can thus exist only in the distant, sealed-off realm of the literary, far from the day-to-day world of knowledge, billiards and parliamentary reports. For a literary work to concern itself with the trivia of contemporary politics would instantly demonstrate that it was not to be feared, as it could not possibly be truly sublime.

In *Imagining the King's Death*, John Barrell has shown how Coleridge, later in life, defended his early radical poetry on the grounds that the very vehemence of its imagination proved that he had never had any intention of translating its sentiments into real political action; a more active radical, he argues, would have written much less imaginatively expressive poetry.³ Barrell writes:

[It] is an attempt to take the politics out of the imagination by voiding the imagination of all connection with intention or desire, and so by making poetry, even poetry on political subjects, something which inhabits a quite other universe of discourse from politics itself, one characterized not by conflict but by harmony.⁴

Naturally, one of the first writers to whom Coleridge applied this theory was Milton, and Barrell paraphrases his argument thus: 'both Taylor and Milton imagined the elaborate torture of their political and religious enemies in hell, but because both (merely) imagined it, neither intended it'.⁵ By Coleridge's terms, the more outrageously radical Milton poetry looks, the less radical Milton really was. De Quincey's argument runs along similar lines, but it goes further; for whereas Coleridge argues that it is extravagance of imagination that is incompatible with a genuine desire for real political action, De Quincey suggests that such a desire is incompatible with poetic power itself. If Coleridge presents the would-be poet with a choice between engaging with the real world and imaginatively representing that engagement, De Quincey implies that they must choose between engagement with reality and being a true poet at all. In Coleridge's terms, it is only the writer who describes political action in extravagantly imaginative ways who can be safely discounted as not truly political; in De Quincey's terms, any writer whose work 'communicates power' – which is to say, any truly literary writer whatsoever – cannot also be seeking to influence the real world. Furthermore, by targeting 'power' rather than 'imagination', De Quincey had Milton in his sights just as surely as Coleridge had his own younger self; for more than a century's worth of criticism had argued that it was his sublime power that distinguished Milton from all lesser poets. No-one would wish to argue that Milton had not been a poet of exemplary power; and that, by De Quincey's terms, required him to be a poet who was also entirely severed from quotidian reality.

In his 1839 essay on Milton, De Quincey had contrasted him with his near contemporary, Butler. Butler, De Quincey wrote, had belonged to history: he had arisen in response to a specific historical situation, namely 'the ludicrous aspects of the Parliamentary war, and its fighting saints', and if he had not written his *Hudibras* someone else would have written something just as good on the same subject. 'Butler failing, there would have been another Butler, either in the same or some analogous form' ('Milton', in *Blackwoods Magazine* 46, December 1839: DQ 11:436). As Butler is here acting as the anti-Milton, it follows that Milton is everything he is not. Butler was created by his historical circumstances; Milton was an ahistorical, quasi-divine miracle. Butler's poetry was inspired by the political events of his own day, specifically those of the Civil War; ergo, Milton's poetry had nothing to do with the political events of his day, especially not those of the Civil War. Butler belongs to the world of knowledge. Milton belongs to the world of

power, and is thus severed from history, left floating in the distant world of Literature – where in all likelihood he is, in Blake's words, 'unhappy tho' in heaven'.

De Quincey's distinction between the literatures of knowledge and power, and his consequent definition of Literature and the Literary as realms of pure aesthetic experience almost entirely divorced from the everyday worlds of history and real life, were highly influential in the nineteenth century. The very concept of English Literature as an academic subject in its own right, distinct from history, philosophy or linguistics, derives from this formulation and others like it. But it is my contention that the desire for a literature with as few ties to the world of facts and politics as possible grew out of the unnerving experience of the revolutionary years, and specifically out of the encounter with Milton's ghost, and the discovery that the sublime dead may threaten at any moment to lurch terrifyingly back to life. In drawing his distinctions – distinctions no sooner expressed than applied to Milton – Thomas De Quincey, like so many others, was doing his bit to nail shut Milton's opened coffin, in the hope of ensuring that this time John Milton would stay dead.