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Introduction

This is a ghost story.

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

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

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

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

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

The Purpose of This Book

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

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

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

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